VERSITA

HUMAN AFFAIRS *22*, 196–213, 2012
DOI: 10.2478/s13374-012-0017-0

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IN POSTWAR JAPAN: THE CASE OF A RITE OF PASSAGE

MELINDA PAPP

Abstract: This paper focuses on a specific aspect of a Japanese rite of passage called Shichigosan. Although its origins go back to premodern Japan, its contemporary pattern truly reflects the modern living conditions of the Japanese. Today the ritual is one of the most popular family celebrations. Commercialization has significantly influenced the pattern of celebration in the postwar period and as a result, consumption practices have become inherent parts of the ritual. The paper examines this development from a historical perspective. Furthermore, it discusses the process through which consumption practices contribute to the event's significance, not diminishing but rather enhancing its importance in the observers' eyes. Conspicuous consumption thus becomes a creative two-directional process, one which is sustained by families' aspirations and desires, and one which is informed by forces emanating from the commercial sector and from the media.
Keywords: Japan, rite of passage, consumption, history

The present study will deal with a specific case of conspicuous consumption within a specific area, that of ceremonial occasions[1]. The celebration that constitutes the case study is a Japanese rite of passage observed in the first years of childhood. The article gives an overview of the historical development of consumption practices concerning this ritual and it identifies the principal sectors where consumption takes place. The main scope of the study is to elucidate the process through which certain forms of conspicuous consumption became an inherent part of the ritual and the way they contributed to the enhancement of the value attached to the ritual in contemporary Japanese society. The paper will also address the socio-economic background of these processes.

Theories on consumption

Consumption together with commodification is one of the main social forces that have been shaping social change in almost every modern society over the last two centuries. Nevertheless, consumption as an individual research topic appeared on the agenda of social

[1] In the paper terms such as rite, ritual, celebration, ceremonial event or occasion will be used interchangeably with no difference in meaning.

science scholars, economists, anthropologists, and sociologists only quite recently. The first scholar to make consumption his subject of study was Thorstein Veblen, who had already studied the social implications of consumption practices by the end of the nineteenth century (Veblen 1899 in Trigg 2001, 1-3). Veblen focused on the emerging class of the new rich in England and depicted some of the behavioral characteristics of this class, defined as the leisure class. He was the first to theorize the relation between individuals' preferences and their social position, and introduced the term "conspicuous consumption" into the terminology of the social sciences. The main focus of Veblen's study was the upper class but suggestions were made about applying this theory to the other strata of the social class scale as well. Veblen argued that the emulation of the higher social classes by lower classes was a major force of consumption and that there is a lasting correspondence between a given set of objects and social position. While consumption has long been seen, especially under the influence of Marxist theories, to constitute the practices and choices forced and imposed upon us by economic systems, the social aspects of consumption, studied by Veblen, were reconsidered only in the 1970s by economic anthropologists. Since then, however, consumption patterns and practices have been the focal point of studies from several social science disciplines.

In the 1970s systematic research on consumption was begun. Sahlins analyzed types of exchange in relation to the typologies of social relation between actors. Sahlins situated consumption practices in cultural contexts and underlined the importance of their function in defining human needs (Carrier 2002, 218-221). He looked at consumption as a means by which social classifications can be expressed and reproduced. In 1979, Douglas and Isherwood published their work *The World of Goods*, in which they criticized existing theories on consumption that viewed its practices solely in terms of their economically rational aspects. The authors argued that consumption had a multilayered role in societies and that it also entailed a creative mode of action. It almost always represented values shared by individuals. The objects become symbols to which consumers can attribute major or minor importance depending on the individual's perception (Douglas, Isherwood 1984).

Bourdieu's sociological analysis added an important aspect to the study of consumption. His work on taste analyzed data from different social classes in 1970s' France and drew a relationship between individuals' possessions and the social space these individuals occupy (Bourdieu 1984). While links between Veblen and Bourdieu's approaches have been noted in the relevant literature (Trigg 2001), Bourdieu stressed the importance of the process in which recurrent decision making takes place in order to create distinctive styles, which help the consumer to adopt distinctive positions in social relationships (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2005, 215-6). The key term for Bourdieu is "distinction", and it is defined as an opposition between those choices of objects and tastes which are dictated by necessity, and those which are free. He defined this type of distinction as decisive in the perpetuation of differences between rich and poor, i.e. dismissing the primary importance of differences that are generated culturally.

In recent decades, scholars came to define consumption as the main driving force of industrial societies. Not only that, consumption came to be seen as a social practice through which individuals express the notion of self and acquire personal satisfaction, adding a psychological dimension to consumption. Social science scholars point out that consumption has non-rational and ethical content. Rational motives as well as hedonistic motivations and individual desires lie behind consumption choices. McCracken emphasizes the problem of

change in relation to cultural categories (McCracken 1986). He views consumer goods as important agents of change and continuity arguing that in times of change, the symbolic role of commodities can be used to mitigate the disruptive effects of cultural disorder. Miller looks at consumption through objects that offer individuals a means for self-expression and self-realization (Miller 1987). His theory demonstrates how goods produced by the impersonal mode of industrial mass production are appropriated and personalized by consumers. Thus a need for a dialectical process of communication arises between the production agents and the consumer; a process in which one must continuously interact with the other and in which producers, retailers and marketers need to adjust their products and the way in which products are marketed to the consumer.

The influential work, *The Social Life of Things*, written by the anthropologist Appadurai, added a new perspective to the study of objects and consumption (Appadurai 1986). The status of goods, defined through their "social biographies" can mutate after being involved in the process of social exchange within and between cultures. Appadurai (2006, 113-5) argues that objects, through the act of consumption, become involved in a world of fantasy and it is through this and through the emotion of nostalgia that contemporary consumers find pleasure in consumption. Appadurai also underlines the importance of understanding the ephemeral character of consumption as well as the fact that consumers often find joy and pleasure in this transiency. The ephemeral or transient feature can be found in many aspects of consumption, starting with rapidly changing fashion and trends, the short lifetime of products, the seasonal character of many commodities and customs, and the eternal search for novelty.

Recently, the attention of scholars has turned towards the processes that connect patterns of consumption to other social phenomena, such as the globalization of markets, poverty, differences between rich and poor countries, and power relations. Comparative approaches in diverse cultural contexts have also been receiving growing attention (Goy-Yamamoto 2004). Consumption studied as process of action, interaction, choices, symbolism and discourse is viewed as being embedded in a complexity of social and economic contests. The most recent trends in consumption studies focus on the ways in which people attach meanings to the objects they consume taking into account that objects often already come with meanings that can significantly affect consumers.

Consumption theories and the study of rituals

A number of the works introduced include important insights into the relation between consumption and ritual. Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption has been used to describe acts of ritual destruction, such as forms of potlatch among Native Americans of North America, where the specifics of the local economy necessitated a redistribution and even destruction of resources (Kingsolver 2002, 445). This kind of redistribution took place on ritual occasions, such as weddings or funerals. By excessive gift-giving the donor showed off his wealth and simultaneously reaffirmed his social position under conditions of dramatic social transformation such as the one brought about by colonialism. Conspicuous consumption together with ritual destruction of accumulated wealth is also interpreted as an attempt to replace the impersonality of the commodification process with disdain for material possession (Luetchford 2005, 400-401). Consumption and commodity in ritual have also been discussed

with regard to the gift-exchange that often represents an important part of ceremonial occasions. Studies in gift-exchange constitute a vast theme in the anthropological literature.

In the last decade important works have been published on rituals. While classical anthropological research focused on consumption in rituals mainly in non-industrialized societies, recent studies demonstrate the relevance of this analytical framework in industrialized societies as well. Douglas and Isherwood (1984) point to the "cultural" aspect of goods; their work examines the ability of goods to create a terrain for distinguishing between ranks of events. As there is a clear connection between determinate goods, levels of consumption, and social classes, the quality of goods utilized for the creation of a determinate ritual experience can help to distinguish between everyday life and festive occasions. Goods, but also services, that are used only rarely, highlight the extraordinary character of the occasion. Objects involved in the ritual experience such as food and drink, decorative items, clothing, accessories stand for "high rank" products which mark the special importance of the event, and separate everyday common events from extraordinary, "low frequency" events (Douglas, Isherwood 1984, 127). Goods used during rituals, also called ritual artifacts, accompany rituals and communicate specific meanings loaded with symbolism. Appadurai (2006, 97-98) further develops this notion when he links rites of passage to consumption and to periodicity of accumulation and distribution. As an important case he mentions Christmas gift-giving where the coordination of the accumulation and distribution of goods is in direct relation to the successful outcome of the event.

The fields of consumer studies and marketing research, and in particular consumer behaviour research, have also contributed significantly to a further understanding of consumption practices with regard to rituals in industrialized societies. Consumer behaviour scholars study both ritualized activities (for example grooming), and ceremonial occasions (Christmas or graduation ceremonies). The main object of their study is the consumer and it is from his/her perspective that the relevance of consumption patterns to ritual experience is analyzed. Rook's study of grooming proposes an approach that takes into account the ritualized and symbolic behavior of consumers in its complexity, both in extraordinary events (ceremonies and life-cycle rituals), and in everyday ritualized acts (Rook 1985). Rook defines rituals as a "marketplace product" and he points to the influence that market forces exercise on the "vitality" of rituals. Rituals "like most marketplace products are subject to life cycle forces" (Rook 1985, 255). Another aspect of rituals is highlighted in Belk's study, which analyzes the sacred dimensions of consumer behaviour (Belk et al. 1989). Here the role of consumption in contemporary society is interpreted in terms of its ability to act as a vehicle for experiencing the sacred (Belk et al. 1989, 1). Within this perspective, the authors argue that while religious rituals have been undergoing gradual secularization in contemporary industrialized societies, the secularization of what once used to be the domain of the sacred, opens up the way to the sacralization of the secular spheres of life, see for example the sacralization of science, nationalistic movements, and symbols. In the context of modern societies, places such as department stores become "public cathedrals" of consumer culture, stages of extravagant display, and as such they give consumers a feeling of sacredness and evoke desires for luxury and consumption (Belk et al. 1989, 8-10). Rituals and festivities help us to experience the sacredness of "time"; they occur cyclically during the calendar year and during the life-course (weddings, graduations, birthdays). Sacred time is characterized

by features that help to separate ordinary and profane time from special and sacred time. The authors thus propose an analytical framework for the study of the domains of sacred consumption and define six major categories: place, time, tangible and intangible things, persons, and experiences.

Historical approaches to the study of rituals in industrial societies have also produced interesting findings. The historical approach can be very useful in understanding some of the implications that evolving patterns of consumption can have on the development of ritual forms and meanings in modern societies. Elizabeth Pleck's work on family rituals in North America (including Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter and rites of passage) describes the growth in family celebrations in the North American context in the course of the last three centuries (Pleck 2000). She identifies the early nineteenth century as the period when family rituals came to be centred around consumerism, social standing, display of status, and wealth. The new forms of celebrations were distinguished by a commercial and "sentimental" style. Pleck calls the phenomenon that sees this development as the "rise of the sentimentalized occasion" (2000, 1-5). Consumerism became one of the forces, together with religiosity, nationalism and popular culture that significantly shaped rituals observed in the family circle. Pleck underlines, however, that the escalation of lavish family feasts and gifts cannot be explained as being simply driven by the market. Goods and services are consciously used by actors to shape individual and group identity, provide status and even bestow a sense of the sacred, to refer to Belk's definition (Belk 1989, Pleck 2000, 54-58). As goods acquired symbolical meanings attached to family ideals, affection, and solidarity, they started to play an important role in the marketplace too, which should not be undervalued when the relation between contemporary celebrations and the market is examined (Pleck 2000, 248-249).

In a similar vein, Leigh Eric Schmidt examined the marketplace as an important arena for planning and observing celebrations within the American calendar (1995). The author defines the evolving world of consumption, the start of which he places in late eighteenth century England, as a democratic world where luxury, fashion combined with self-fulfillment "subverted the fixedness of hierarchy" (1995, 33). The shaping of rituals within the sphere of the marketplace is seen by the author as part of cultural creativity, as well as of a dynamic interplay between cultural production and consumption.

Japan and postwar consumption

Whereas the political and economic conditions that gave rise to the development of a consumer society were already present in Japan in the first half of the twentieth century, the disastrous WWII and the preceding years of war economy had thrown back Japan's industrial production and the processes of social transformation that initiated earlier. However, after 1955, due to positive internal and foreign circumstances, the economic growth of the country assumed an unprecedented speed. The standards of living steadily increased and the lifestyle of urban centres spread quickly throughout the countryside due to the industrialization and urbanization of rural areas. The 1960s also marked the era when Japanese capitalism entered the stage of mass consumption, gradually transforming from a thus far production-oriented economy into consumer capitalism (Clammer 1997). As Francks argues in her work on the history of consumption in Japan, this quick transformation was also possible because

consumption had played an important role in Japan's economy since at least the eighteenth century (Francks 2009).[2] Researchers who undertook surveys in metropolitan areas of Japan during the postwar decades found evident signs of a consumer culture forming (Dore 1958, Vogel 1963). Average families attached growing importance to the possession of selected material items, such as electrical devices (the refrigerator, electric fan). These objects were often perceived as signs of economic status. In the 1950s, under urbanization and fast developing economic growth, consumer goods and in particular the ability to participate in consumption were becoming the main indicators of "middle class" status. The development of the means of mass communication contributed to the gradual homogenization of the differences that had so far divided urban and rural standards of living. By the end of the 1950s, 70 per cent of the Japanese considered themselves to belong to the "middle classes" (Tipton 2008, 179) and thanks to the fast developing economic growth and rising incomes, this middle-class life style was identified increasingly with a consumer life style. The general indicators showed that consumption expenditure per person was continuously growing[3] and Japan soon entered the era of mass consumption (Francks 2009, 159). Francks has demonstrated how the domestic consumer market contributed to Japan's unprecedented economic growth and stimulated production and investments by Japanese firms (2009, 146-176).

Currently, consumption plays a crucial role in understanding contemporary Japanese society. Clammer argues that consumption is a crucial force in the establishment of social networks and thus in the creation of communities (Clammer 2000). He views consumption as a means through which "symbolic competition between households … takes place" (Clammer 2000, 253). The ways in which the extraordinary character and the degree of display are expressed are being continuously modified and closely follow changes to the socio-economic character of society. Adjustments to value orientations, improving or deteriorating living standards, the transformation of family structure as well as the economic development of the market all have an effect on consumption practices, as well as on the evolution of celebration patterns.

A childhood rite of passage, Shichigosan

The subject of my research is a rite of passage[4] called Shichigosan, observed in Japan by children of three, five and seven years of age. The origins of the celebration go back to a series of rituals that used to be observed in premodern Japan during the first years after the birth of the child. Prior to 1868, when political decisions led to intense and

[2] The particular socio-political and cultural setting of the Tokugawa era (1600-1867) significantly contributed to the readiness with which postwar Japanese society adopted the principles of the consumer-oriented economy as well as consumption culture.

[3] For detailed data on real per capita consumption expenditure see Francks 2009, appendix—Tables 2 and 4.

[4] Rites of passage as such were defined for the first time by the French anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep in 1909. He noted that almost all cultures in the world observe rites to mark the individual's (or entire group's) passage from one life stage to the other. Major transitions in life, such as birth, coming-of-age, marriage, death represent moments of crisis and these rites serve to accompany the individual through these stages (Gennep 2004).

rapid modernization in Japan, a large number of rites of passage were observed in the period stretching from birth to puberty. These rites were an integral part of the traditional cosmology that saw human life as a stage in a cycle through which the soul proceeded, from birth to death, from death to the realm of spirits, and then again to rebirth (Iijima 1991). This cosmology and its impact on ritual culture in Japan has been the recurrent subject of ethnographic analyses in Japanese folklore studies, and some of these traditionally observed rites attained distinctive characteristics under the specific socio-economic conditions of urban society during the feudal era, called the Tokugawa period (1600-1867), and to a greater degree later, in the course of the modernization and industrialization of Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The present study examines the history of one ritual, the Shichigosan, mentioned earlier, during a well-defined period, beginning with the decades following the end of WWII until the present day. The reason for choosing this particular celebration is because Shichigosan, although enjoying enormous popularity among contemporary Japanese families, is also surrounded by intense commercialization. My argument is that the ritual's meaning is constructed through an interaction between observers/families and actors in the marketplace in an ongoing and creative process of mutual support and impact.

These days Shichigosan is a celebration observed within the family. It takes place during the month of November[5] of the year in which the child reaches 3, 5 and 7 years of age.[6] Interpretations on the origins of these particular numbers are not clear and theories diverge as to the explanation.[7] The celebration is a complex event consisting of a number of activities, several of which necessitate lengthy planning, preparation and rely on services provided by specific commercial sectors. The celebration's main elements are a visit to a religious institution (a shrine or temple) for a brief prayer for the good health and happiness of the child; a family meal in a restaurant; photographs in a professional studio usually done prior to the day of the shrine visit. The main formal event of the celebration is visiting and praying at a Shinto shrine, while the other parts of the event, the family meal and in particular the visit to a professional photographic studio are among the highlights of the celebration. Since the 1970s, photographic studios have provided an elaborate service to families wishing to have a professionally produced photo of their child in Shichigosan costume. The child's festive attire is an important symbol of the celebration as it usually consists of a traditional Japanese kimono and accompanying accessories. The celebration is also seen as the only, and therefore unique, occasion for Japanese children to experience wearing the traditional dress otherwise known only from photos and film. Besides, the festive attire of the child also represents a major cost in the celebration expenses.[8]

---

[5] The traditional date of the celebration is 15 November; however, today families out of practical considerations choose a convenient Saturday or Sunday during the month of November to celebrate.

[6] To be more precise it is celebrated when girls are three and seven years old, and boys are five (sometimes also three) years old.

[7] In the interest of space it is not possible to list here all the theories. Most of them are based on ancient beliefs, probably of Chinese origin. The philosophical system of yin and yang is considered one possible explanation for the three numbers expressed in terms of age.

[8] The Japanese attire (kimono plus several other traditional style garments) is costly. Families either purchase it or hire it.

While the origins of the celebration are close to customs inherent in the traditional community life that characterized Japan until the nineteenth century, its modern development is more connected to the rise of phenomena such as urbanization, mass consumption, and the rise of consumerism[9] in postwar Japanese society. Shichigosan, in the form it is known today, came into being around the end of the eighteenth century in Tokyo (at that time still bearing its old name, Edo). In other regions early childhood rites of passage were observed according to local customs. They had no name and the numerous local variations merged together. During subsequent periods, with the modernization and urbanization of Japan at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these old local patterns gradually became obsolete, and similar to other local traditional customs, they slowly disappeared. Meanwhile, in the interwar period the Shichigosan ritual pattern that evolved in the Tokyo area was enjoying growing popularity. In the first decades after the end of WWII, the pattern started to spread out from Tokyo to other regions of Japan. By the 1970s, it had reached all parts of the country and today the celebration enjoys enormous popularity among families with small children. During this process of popularization in the postwar decades, the ritual, adapting to the changing values of the Japanese family, was enriched by new elements. With economic growth and intense urbanization affluence as well as rising consumption levels in society, the celebration's commercial aspects grew in importance. The commercialization of certain aspects of the celebration, such as the marketing of children's festive clothing and the trend that saw parents invest increasing care as well as financial resources into the preparations for the celebration were among the most evident signs of this development.

Major changes in a ritual's form and meaning almost always imply a shift in cultural values, and more generally, a change in the broader social environment. Indeed, between 1950 and 1960, the economic conditions for Japanese families improved rapidly and this resulted in a growing level of consumption not only in everyday goods, but also in leisure and child-care. In a survey in a Tokyo ward in 1951, the sociologist Dore found that even families with low incomes tended to spend considerable sums on children (Dore 1951, 62). This trend was also supported by an important transformation in views on children in the society (Hara, Minagawa 1996). Prior to the modernization, in traditional communities children were seen as important assets especially with regard to continuing the family line in the traditional Japanese household system (called *ie*). They provided much appreciated and needed help in the form of physical labor in the household economy. Though, with the altered living conditions brought about by the industrialization and urbanization, the family structure underwent significant changes as well and children started to be viewed in a very different way. Educating one's offspring began to be valued socially and children were expected to work not in relation to the household economy, but in relation to school achievements. In the 1970s and 1980s onwards, views concerning children underwent another important transformation as a result of the falling birth rate.

[9] The phenomenon of "consumerism" is interpreted as a distilled form of consumption in which the act of consumption itself becomes an experience (Moeran, Skov 1993). It is described as pervading the entire society and thus as comparable to culture. Women, being closely connected to the market as well as being the main managers of the family's budget, play an ambivalent but crucial role in it.

The rise in commercial activities during the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s together with the growing advertising industry also affected the manner in which traditional and newly adopted celebrations were observed. In Shichigosan department stores exercised a strong impact on development at the time. Department stores were seen as conveyers of modernity even back in the decades of the prewar period. These commercial centres, acting as leisure centers and as educators in consumption as well, purveyed novelties, desirable life styles, and new commodities (Francks 2009, 160). In the 1950s, famous department stores, among them the Mitsukoshi, displayed mannequins with the latest models of Shichigosan festive clothing. In 1953, the first fashion shows with children modelling festive Shichigosan "shrine visit" clothing were set up. The start date of these promotional activities moved to an earlier time (prior to the traditional date for celebrating of 15 November) in order to allow sufficient time for parents to search for and purchase the desired outfit for the celebration. Today, campaigns are launched through a variety commercial activities as early as in May and June, i.e. 5-6 months prior to the date of the actual event.

Consumption and commercialization in the ritual

In the 1950s, the Shichigosan festive outfits on display in Mitsukoshi were still beyond the reach of most families, but the shows and models could be watched, and at the same time they generated desires. In the decade between 1960 and 1970, the Shichigosan festive clothing worn by children for the occasion became more luxurious and extravagant. High-quality materials appeared and famous retail shops commissioned orders for Shichigosan costume collections from kimono designers (Kiyomizu 2005). Trend setters influenced the fashionable kimono style for the year.

As for the festive meal, the celebration of Shichigosan has always involved a feast for family members and close friends. While in the past this feast was held in the private sphere of the family home, from the late 1960s on, going out to some of the many available restaurants grew in popularity in the towns. The custom of eating out has been part of Japanese urban culture since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see also Francks 2009), but in the years of the economic bubble it grew into a leisure activity affordable to all Japanese in both urban and rural areas. Furthermore, changes in housing conditions made it impossible for many families to organize festive meals in the home.[10] On the other hand, grand hotels in cities—which had already discovered that ceremonial occasions such as weddings were a source of income at the beginning of the twentieth century—now included the celebration of Shichigosan among their services and provided special Shichigosan meals in their indoor restaurants.[11]

During the 1970s, the press closely followed the ritual's development. Results of surveys conducted by professional girls' schools with an interest in the textile and clothing industry

[10] Modern housing conditions with their limitations on space, in particular in urban areas, made organizing a festive meal for more people in the family home difficult.

[11] Around 1964, numerous luxurious hotels were built to celebrate the Olympic Games in Tokyo. After the end of the games, these hotels sought new opportunities to increase their profits. Ceremonial occasions had already been established as an opportunity for commercial exploitation. A large majority of weddings in towns were organized in grand hotels by this time.

were regularly published in major newspapers and journals. According to a study published in 1977, the majority of families celebrating (60 per cent) opted to purchase festive attire for the child to celebrate Shichigosan (*Weekly Yomiuri* 3/12/1977). Whereas today the majority of families rely on dress hire shops specializing in Shichigosan children's clothing, these figures indicate that in 1977 the number of specialized hire shops was probably still low. According to the same survey, 17 per cent of families spent between 100 000 and 150 000 yen on festive dress, and 23 per cent spent more than 200 000 yen. In 1977, a town employee earned around 280 000 yen, and this means that the cost of the festive dress represented a fairly high sum for most families. There were additional expenses regarding the celebration: the cost of the festive meal, the photography, and gifts. Not counting the cost of the dress, these items amounted to an extra 45 000 yen. In 1977, the sum that families spent on Shichigosan was around 173 000 yen. Nonetheless, the amount that Japanese families were willing to sacrifice for the event, slowly rose in the years that followed. According to Kyoto's oldest traditional textile association, in spite of the prices, exclusive high-quality Shichigosan dresses enjoyed growing popularity among families (*Weekly Gendai* 20/11/1980).[12] In 1980, major department stores in Osaka and Tokyo saw sales of Shichigosan-related items reach a peak. In November of 1980, the *Weekly Gendai* published an article that analyzed the latest trends in Shichigosan sales (20/11/1980). Shop managers confirmed that even luxurious kimonos as costing as much as 4 or 500 000 yen attracted customers. In the department store of Daimaru in Tokyo, the profits from Shichigosan sales reached 100 million yen in total, two thirds more than the same sales figures for the previous year. Other department stores too expected a 70 per cent increase that year. The rise in prices can only partly explain the increased profits. Another explanation had to do with the fact that in 1980 children of the so-called baby boom generation reached one of the three Shichigosan ages, i.e. 3, 5 and 7. The baby boom reached its last peak in 1973, after which the birth rate started to decline slowly but steadily showing a trend that would not change until the present day. However, in 1980 there were approximately 3 million children of Shichigosan-age in Japan[13], and it can be estimated that on average half of them actually observed the ritual. Related industries and commercial activities apparently did their best to ride the wave of the last baby boom generation and to squeeze out the most from the occasion.

The confection industry also increased its share. The month of November, the period of the ritual's celebration, was the fourth busiest period in the calendar year for sweet sellers. The earnings from the sale of *chitoseame*, the traditional Shichigosan sweet[14], represent an important source of income for the sector. In 1979 Funiya, which with its 50 per cent share of the market was one of the most important sweet sellers in Japan at the time, claimed an income of 2 or 300 million yen from the sale of *chitoseame*. Including the cakes and other sweets bought for the celebration (consumed and distributed by relatives and friends),

[12] A kimono for a seven year old girl cost around 200 000 yen, and including all necessary accessories (sash, handbag etc.) the sum easily reached 300 000 yen.

[13] Statistics from the Ministry of Health.

[14] *Chitoseame* is a white sweet with a peculiar long narrow shape. It comes festively packed. The sweet is produced and sold solely to celebrate Shichigosan during the month of November. Children receive the sweet in gifts, and photos usually feature them holding it.

the total income reached 300 million yen for the entire sweet industry (*Weekly Gendai* 1980/11/20).

Professional photo services for the celebration of Shichigosan emerged on a mass scale during the 1970s. Visiting a photo studio for the occasion of the celebration became fashionable in this period. Children dressed in their Shichigosan ceremonial outfit were photographed by a professional photographer and the photo acquired an important place in the family photo album. November soon became the month when photo studios all around Japan were making their highest profits. The income received during this month often balanced out red sales figures from the rest of the year.[15] In order to attract more clients, studios started to collaborate with popular shrines and started to offer special packages combining the services of the shrines with those of the photo studios. During this time the business sector introduced new services to families planning celebrations for Shichigosan. The development of the so-called "Shichigosan industry" coincided with the period when the service industry started to claim an increasingly important share of Japan's national economy. According to Marilyn Ivy, this development was closely linked to the trend in which culture started to be regarded by the Japanese as something to be received passively, i.e. in the form of services (Ivy 1993, 252). The service industry also created packages of services for Shichigosan and these soon gained in popularity. From the beginning of the 1980s, all major department stores provided competitively priced Shichigosan packages: photo services, hairdressing, and kimono assistance.[16] The emergence of Shichigosan packages was probably also a response to a trend that saw an unprecedented increase in the price of Shichigosan outfits and services around the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. The convenient packages offered prices that were affordable to most families, who in turn, could celebrate appropriately, but without having to spend vast sums of money. On the other hand, advertising campaigns and new services contributed to an "escalation" of styles in which to celebrate Shichigosan. Terms such as fashion-izing, Shichigosan-boom, Shichigosan-fever, frequently appeared in the press of the time illustrating that journalists themselves were aware of this trend. Families who often spent exorbitant sums were described by the media as foolish, silly or vain. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Japanese families seemed to back the popularization of Shichigosan, even though the majority of them opted for the more convenient "Shichigosan packages".

Apart from the growing affluence of the average Japanese family, the development of styles in which to celebrate Shichigosan was also affected by social phenomena, such as the "commodification" of childrearing. The socio-economic conditions behind this phenomenon included the sharp decline in the birth rate between the 1970s and 1980s. This was the period when a specific children-oriented market was emerging. A consumer lifestyle and the lower number of children per family have "helped transform the children's market into one of the most lucrative" (Creighton 1994, 78). In the course of nearly twenty years, between 1981 and 1999, average annual expenditure on a child within the family doubled, growing from

[15] Japanese Association of Photograph Culture quoted in *Weekly Gendai* (*Shūkan Gendai* 1980/Nov/11).

[16] Putting on a traditional Japanese kimono is no easy task for most young mothers today. It requires experience and expertise, which young women lack, and hence professional assistance is usually sought.

164 000 yen to 378 000 yen.[17] By contrast, in the same period the birth rate fell from 0.89 (in 1981) to 0.54 (in 1999). The 1990s also witnessed a major shift in Japanese values. This was the decade when the generation of the so-called "new human breed" (*shinjinrui*) reached the age of marriage. The term, "new human breed", was adopted to depict the generation of those Japanese that had grown up in the years of the bubble economy, and hence were surrounded by material affluence and had not experienced hardship. Their values were very different from those of the generation of their parents who were characterized by "work-holism" and self-sacrifice. A more relaxed attitude towards work and an increased leisure consciousness was typical of the new generation (Goy-Yamamoto 2004, 274) and they indulged their own children in the same way they that they themselves had been.

In the last two decades, packages comprising several Shichigosan services, have become more professionalized and even more popular. Today, photo studios, department stores, hotels as well as major shrines[18] all offer their own packages. These packages include the essential components of a Shichigosan event: the shrine purification ritual[19], the hiring of the festive dress for the child, hairdressing and kimono assistance, professional photo service, small gift items, and sometimes meals. Information leaflets advertising these services are sent directly to the homes of families with small children. Magazines, addressing young mothers, publish special issues providing a wide range of information on the celebration. Department stores and retail shops selling festive outfits launch their special Shichigosan sale as early as in July/August. Prices range from 780 000 yen for the most expensive outfit to 30 000 yen for a simple kimono. Including accessories the total cost for a sumptuous traditional festive outfit can reach 1 500 000 yen. Apart from the cost of the child's festive dress, the photo service is the most expensive part of the event. In recent years, major studios offer their own range of festive outfits, usually available for the photo service only. The photo service has become separate from the day of the actual celebration (it usually takes place prior to the ceremonial event) and thus, the dress hired from the photo studio serves solely for the moment of photography (and is not taken away, as is commonly the case with dress hire shops which require that the dress be returned once the whole celebration is over). Mothers cheerfully confess on the pages of magazines that they end up spending much more than planned for the Shichigosan photographs of their children.

---

[17] General Affair Department survey on household economy (Sōmuchō 'Kakei chōsa') (www.sumitomotrust.co.jp accessed 10/10/2011).

[18] Shinto shrines (and Buddhist temples) are often commercial activities in Japan. They need to cover much of their expenses through the income they receive from the services they provide to the public. Among the services and goods Shinto shrines offer are weddings, purification rites and prayers, amulets. Major shrines have associated business activities that offer professional services comparable to other common business activities in particular for weddings and the celebration of Shichigosan.

[19] In Japan a visit to a Shinto shrine for a special occasion commonly consists of a rather simple individual prayer. Though, those who wish to do so can apply for a more elaborate rite provided by those specializing in religion, priests and assistants. In Shinto shrines these comprise purification rituals for several purposes, one of which may be Shichigosan. There is a fee for a purification ritual and visitors must submit a formal request for the ritual.

The media and the ritual

Media analysts have pointed out the extent to which the media exercise influence not only over the perception of rituals, but on their practice too. These days enthronement rites and royal weddings are broadcast on television and radio and often millions of people participate in them, albeit passively. The television takes over some of the functions of the ritual, and at the same time it alters the ritual itself. In the Japanese context, Fujitani analyzed major public ceremonies, such as the funeral of the emperor Hirohito or the marriage ceremony of the Crown Prince Naruhito (Fujitani 1992). Fujitani's study demonstrates that television, and the media in general, can significantly alter and shape ritual culture, ritual practice as well as personal perceptions of the ritual experience. The press and electronic media can also add new elements to rituals, be they traditional, re-invented or newly created. Bell underlines the mythologizing effect the media has when it creates narratives and involves spectators in the creation of an emotionally loaded experience (Bell 2009, 245). In brief, the media often suggest new cultural ideas and/or interpretations of existing ones by affecting individuals' imaginary.

Since the 1980s, Japan has been characterized as an information society, i.e. one that is media saturated and has a vast advertising industry. Information is available through a variety of sources, such as magazines, the internet and advertising, which in turn serve as stimuli for further consumption of goods and services, generating and promoting new trends, lifestyles and leisure activities. Clammer defines the role of the media in Japan as the "mediating link" which enables popular culture to merge with the mainstream (Clammer 1997, 19). In other words, many of the current socio-cultural changes are mediated and disseminated through the media, and then appropriated by consumers. The media's influence on social life in Japan also embraces ritual culture. It actively shapes the festive calendar and also alters celebration patterns. On one hand, the media actively partake in defining readers' (or spectators') perceptions of "what is aesthetically desirable and stylistically correct" (Van de Port 2006, 144)[20] and modify the aesthetic tastes and standards of magazines readers (Moeran 1995).

The media, including magazines, actively shape the meanings and patterns of contemporary ceremonial occasions. Not only are new services and goods displayed on the pages of magazines, but new patterns and new interpretations are suggested as well. The kind of information the editors decide to highlight in the articles, the way a certain theme is treated, all affect readers' perceptions and imagination. In the case of Shichigosan, magazines and newspapers have significantly influenced the course of the celebration's development during the last century. Firstly, reports on the celebration have regularly appeared in national newspapers since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Reports and photos illustrating the celebration majorly contributed to the diffusion of the urban Shichigosan pattern, typical of the Tokyo area, throughout Japan. Secondly, starting in the 1970s, magazine editors recognized that life-cycle and seasonal rituals represented potential instruments for widening readership. A book edited by Moeran and Skov presents several examples from female magazines where cultural themes or cultural predilections

[20] Van de Port's analysis refers to television as the authorizing agent that significantly helps lend greater prominence to a religious event. Though, the press may also work in a similar way.

have been effectively used by Japanese editors to raise advertising sales and to attract a wider readership (Moeran, Skov 1995). Daniels pointed to the relation that exists between certain cultural categories, such as for example the sensitivity of the Japanese towards nature and towards the changing of seasons, and domestic consumption (Daniels 2009, 172). However, as Moeran points out, it is important to underline that the influence the press exercises upon its readers is far from unidirectional. Japanese readers do have a voice and their aesthetic demands and expectations are indeed taken into consideration when editors design and select the content of articles and advertisements (Moeran 1995, 123).

A large number of Shichigosan related themes appear in magazines focusing on young mothers, i.e. mothers of children of Shichigosan age (7, 5 and 3 years old). In general, the number of magazines, (also services and goods) linked to childrearing has increased enormously in the last two decades. Besides the changing views on children, including the increasing amount of attention paid by parents and grandparents to children (caused partly by the falling number of children per family), the need for these kinds of magazines is also explained by the fact that the press and electronic media have overtaken the role of disseminating information on child-rearing among the contemporary generation of mothers. With a shrinking kin network and overall impoverished human relations due to urban living conditions, most women today turn first of all to magazines when they need advice and information regarding their children. It can be said that in the present day magazines strongly influence mothers' views and practices, including those related to the family's celebrations. Some believe that the media can also be regarded as partly responsible for the intensified "commodification of childrearing" taking place in recent years (Shintani et al. 2003, 25).

Today, magazines present Shichigosan as a major event in the life of the child and its family. Those that address mothers of young children in particular regularly publish reports on the celebration, give advice, publish personal accounts of individual mothers and present new related services and goods. They launch special issues on the topic prior to the date of the event, usually in August and September. In 2009, Japan's major childrearing magazine, *COMO*, published a special Shichigosan supplement with 36 pages covering all imaginable aspects of the celebration. Another childrearing magazine, *Sesame*, in 2009 issued a similar 20-page supplement, and yet another one, *Akasugi*, with 10 pages. Childrearing magazines are not the only periodicals to deal with topics relating to Shichigosan. There are also magazines focusing on traditional Japanese clothing (the kimono), which publish Shichigosan specials during the autumn period approaching the traditional date of the celebration (November). Furthermore, these magazines conduct regular surveys on Shichigosan among their readers and their results are published on the pages of the magazines. In the last few years, every September *COMO* has published an extensive report informing readers on the latest trends and fashions in Shichigosan celebrations. In addition, statistical data from the survey are always accompanied by personal accounts by families that experienced Shichigosan the previous year. These accounts usually include a thorough description of the celebration, with a detailed time schedule regarding the planning of the event, costs and other important details. Furthermore, etiquette specialists are requested to give their advice on appropriate celebration conduct, while fashion experts discuss the appropriate dress code and latest fashion in ceremonial dress. Magazines also give lists of recommended restaurants, of popular Shinto shrines coupled with detailed descriptions of

the venues and services. This information is very useful to readers who are planning their own Shichigosan event. Readers (mainly mothers) use these magazines as their main source of information in designing a successful ceremonial event. The first-hand experience of other families helps them make the right decisions regarding the numerous details of the celebration. In this way magazines play a two-fold function: first, they act as information centres in an age where shrinking personal networks often fail to disseminate the needed information on issues regarding childrearing. Second, by providing space for personal accounts by mothers (which are mostly left relatively unedited and with little comment on the part of the magazine), they offer a space in which the public can share their experiences. Thus, readers may have the feeling that they are participating in a virtual community in much the same sense that Clammer defines the role of consumption in creating social networks and shared community (Clammer 2000). Ultimately, readers' impressions that the magazine is here for them and not vice versa are confirmed.

The magazines also contribute to the legitimization of the ritual's authenticity. Articles providing information about the historical origins of the ritual are published repeatedly. Every year approximately the same key information is provided: a brief note on the meaning of the three historical age rites[21] underlying the origins of contemporary Shichigosan; the association of ritual with traditional dress code; and an explanation of the significance of the shrine visit. Apart from providing interesting information to readers—who usually have little knowledge about the historical interpretations of the ritual—references to the history give Shichigosan patina and create a sense of continuity with the past. Moreover, even the most "untraditional" ways of celebrating can be vested with the notion of tradition. By linking Shichigosan to traditional customs from Japan's past, a sense of legitimacy is created that puts a veil over the fact that the social context that gave rise to the historical forms of these rituals has now undergone complete transformation. On the other hand, in this way print (and electronic) media play on the modern Japanese quest for nostalgia and authenticity, which adds another dimension to the overall meaning the contemporary Japanese family attaches to the Shichigosan celebration. Historical associations and recommendations about cultural traditions are smartly combined with modern themes in media articles, and thus no tension is felt between elements representing "tradition" (such as the traditional dress code) and elements inherent in modern life conditions, such as consumption and commercialization.

Conclusions

Rituals, even those depicted as being traditional, are never static events; they reflect changes in the social as well as the economic context of the given culture. They are cultural phenomena and as such they cannot remain excluded from the stream of changes taking place within the particular society. Similarly, consumers' choices reflect the nature of consumption in a given historical moment with regards to the method of celebration too. Undoubtedly, the kimono industry, the retail and service sector, hand in hand with the media (print and electronic) sector in Japan, have had a strong interest in making the ritual of

[21] The names of the three traditional rites of passage originally making up the Shichigosan ritual are *kamioki*, *hakamagi* and *obitoki*.

Shichigosan a profitable activity. On the other hand, the commercialization of the celebration contributed greatly to its popularization and perpetuation in postwar Japanese society. Other cultural customs too, such as the extensive practice of gift-giving, were influenced by the commercial sector. In addition, the festive calendar of the Japanese today has been enriched by completely new festivities, such as Christmas, Valentine's Day and so on. Nevertheless, as Ishii and Edwards rightly pointed out, not all attempts by the commercial sector to popularize festive events or new celebration patterns have proved successful in postwar Japan (Ishii 2009, 46-56, Edwards 1989). The institution of new rituals as well as the popularization of "traditional" but often half-forgotten customs are almost always conditioned by acceptance by the society, i.e. by a sufficient proportion of individuals. The manipulation of cultural traits and predilections by the market is rarely a one-way process. Social and cultural factors specific to the given society influence this process and affects customers' choices.

The contemporary pattern of the Shichigosan celebration grew out of historical development typical of the urban merchant class during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Japan. At the same time, until the end of the WWII, its popularity was limited to a well-defined area, around Tokyo. In the postwar decades that followed, the celebration proved capable of facing the overall changes that affected Japanese society. It successfully responded to and assimilated the changing demands of the family, in general, and of the individual, in particular. As consumer culture has come to play an extremely important role in the social life of the modern Japanese, it has also started to influence ritual practice and the culture of celebrations by claiming a greater space within ritual practice. Shichigosan is an example of the process through which these forces found their expression within a specific celebration. The presence and the nature of consumption in contemporary methods of celebration should not be seen as diminishing the meaning and significance that these events came to represent for the actors. Consumption is an inherent part of the process through which "ritual experience" is being forged. Through conspicuous consumption, actors not only highlight the significance of the event, but they can also express their own interpretation of it.

The last two decades in Japan have witnessed an increasing individualization together with a diversification of consumers' choices. These trends are also reflected in Shichigosan celebration patterns since the market offers a multiplicity of services and options to families. Factors such as the personal convenience and preference of individual families are now determining the organization of Shichigosan. Conspicuous consumption then becomes a two-directional process, one which is sustained by families' aspirations and desires and one which is informed with media depictions of the ritual, which may be more or less conformant with reality. Due to multiple choices that are available to observers/consumers, the creation of the ritual experience becomes an active rather than a passive act. It can be seen as a truly creative process and it satisfies the demands of both the individual and the family.

References

Appadurai, A. (1986). *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appadurai, A. (2006/1996). *Modernità in Polvere*. (Modernity at Large.) Roma: Meltemi.

Barnard, A., Spencer, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bell, C. (2009). *Ritual. Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, K., Sherry, J. (1989). The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research 15*, 1-38.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Carrier, J. G. (2002). Exchange. In A.Barnard, J.Spencer (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology,* pp. 218-221. London and New York: Routledge.

Carrier, J. G. (Ed.). (2005). *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*. Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar.

Colloredo-Mansfeld, R. (2005). Consumption. In J. G. Carrier (Ed.). *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology,* pp. 210-225. Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar.

Douglas, M., Isherwood, B. (1984/1979). *Il mondo delle cose*. (The World of Goods). Il Mulino: Intersezioni.

Clammer, J. (1997). *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Clammer, J. (2000). *Consumption and Material Culture in Contemporary Japan*. London: Kegan Paul.

Creighton, M. R. (1992). The Depato: Merchandising the West while Selling Japaneseness. In Joseph J. Tobin (Ed.). *Re-Made in Japan. Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*, pp. 42-57. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Daniels, I. (2009). Seasonal and Commercial Rhythms of Domestic Consumption: A Japanese Case of Study. In E. Shove, F. Trentmann, R. Wilk (Eds.). *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, pp. 171-188). Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers.

Dore, R. (1958). *City Life in Japan: A Study of a Tokyo Ward*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Edwards, W. (1989). *Modern Japan through its Weddings. Gender, Person, and Society in Rituals Portrayal*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Francks, P. (2009). *The Japanese Consumer. An Alternative Economic History of Modern Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fujitani, T. (1992). Electronic Pageantry and Japan's "Symbolic Emperor". *The Journal of Asian Studies 51*, 824-850.

Gennep, van A. (2004/1909). *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge Library Editions.

Gordon, A. (Ed.). (1993). *Postwar Japan as History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goy-Yamamoto, A. M. (2004). Japanese Youth Consumption. A Cultural and a Social (R)Evolution Crossing Borders. *Asia Europe Journal 2*, 271-282.

Hara, H., Minagawa, M. (1996). From Productive Dependents to Precious Guests: Historical Changes in Japanese Children. In D.W. Schwalb, B.J. Schwalb (Eds.). *Japanese Childrearing,* pp. 9-30. New York, London: The Guilford Press.

Iijima, Y. (1991). *Kodomo no Minzokugaku*. (The Folklore of the Child.) Tokyo: Shinyōsha.

Ishii, K. (2009). *Nihonjin no ichinen to isshō. Kawariyuku nihonjin no shinsei*. (The Year and the Life of the Japanese. The Changing Heart and Mind of the Japanese). Tokyo: Shunjusha.

Ivy, M. (1993). Formation of Mass Culture. In A. Gordon (Ed.). *Postwar Japan as History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kingsolver, A. E. (2002). Power. In A.Barnard, J.Spencer (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 445-448. London and New York: Routledge.

Kiyomizu, T. (2005). Shichigosan fukusō chōsa. (Survey on Shichigosan Dress.) *Shiruku Jōhō,* 26-31.

Luetchford, P. (2005). Economic Anthropology and Ethics. In J.G. Carrier (Ed.). *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology,* pp. 390-404. Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar.

McCracken, G. (1986). Culture and Consumption. A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods. *The Journal of Consumer Research 13,* 71-84.

Miller, D. (Ed.). (1993). *Unwrapping Christmas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moeran, B., Skov, L. (1993). Cinderella Christmas: Kitsch, Consumerism, and Youth in Japan. In D. Miller (Ed.). *Unwrapping Christmas*, pp. 105-133. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moeran, B. (1995). Reading Japanese in *Katei Gahō*: the Art of Being an Upperclass Woman. In L. Skov, B. Moeran (Eds.). *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, pp. 111-142. Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press.

Pleck, E. H. (2000). *Celebrating the Family. Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press.

Rook, D. W. (1985). The Ritual Dimension of Consumer Behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research 12*, 251-264.

Schmidt, L. E. (1995). *Consumer Rites. The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Shintani, T., Namihira, E., Yukawa, Y. (Eds.). (2003). *Kurashi no naka no minzokugaku 3. Isshō*. (Folklore in Everyday Life. 3. The Life-Cycle). Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

Shove, E., Trentmann, F., Wilk, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*. Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers.

Schwalb, D. W., Schwalb, B. J. (Eds.). (1996). *Japanese Childrearing*. New York, London: The Guilford Press.

Skov, L., Moeran, B. (Eds.). (1995). *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*. Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press.

Tipton, E. K. (2008/2002). *Modern Japan. A Social and Political History*. Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies. London, New York: Routledge.

Tobin, J. J. (Ed.). (1992). *Re-Made in Japan. Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Van de Port, M. (2006). Visualizing the Sacred. (Bahian Candomblé). *American Ethnologist 33,* 444-461.

Vogel, E. (1963). *Japan's New Middle Class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Department of Japanese Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
Eötvös Loránd University – ELTE,
Egyetem tér 1-3,
Budapest, 1053,
Hungary
E-mail: papp.melinda@btk.elte.hu