Customs[1] as the "Religion" of *seken* (the World)

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Abstract

The Japanese critic Naoki Sato argues that the majority of Japanese people are followers of a "religion" called *seken-kyo* ("religion of *seken* or the World"). This "*seken-kyo*" has a certain structure different from "personal faith," that one might first imagine with the term *shukyo* ("religion") in Japanese these days. While "religion" as a translated term presupposes the conscious, subjective, and voluntary faith of the individual, *seken-kyo* presupposes the customs and practices of *seken* to which each individual belongs; the individual follows those rules unconsciously, passively, and compulsively. In this sense, *seken-kyo* can be regarded as an "identical religious group" to which J. Wach refers. In an identical religious group, there is no "doctrine," but instead, the sharing of "rituals" is emphasized. When a certain way of life is inherited by a certain group, "customs" are created. When such "customs" are implemented jointly with the meaning of social integration, a variety of rituals become traditions as customs. In pre-modern Japan, religion (a "specifically religious group" to which Wach refers) and custom were in a complementary relationship, and the distinction between both of them was not clear. In the modern era, however, the two of them were strictly distinguished, and the "religious" nature of some practices was denied as "magic and superstition," while others were hidden. This situation cannot be ignored when we consider the freedom of "religion" in modern Japan. Thus, we need to reexamine the dynamic relationships between "religion as faith" and "religion as custom."

和文要旨

批評家・佐藤直樹は、日本人の大多数が「世間教」という宗教の信者であると主張している。この「世間教」は、現代日本語で「宗教（しゅうきょう）」という語から連想される「個人的信仰」とは異なる構造をもつ。「宗教」という翻訳語は、意識的・主体的・自発的な個人の信仰を前提とするが、「世間教」は、個人が所属する世間の慣習や実践を前提とし、その規範には無意識的・受動的・強制的に従う。この意味で、「世間教」は、J. ワッハがいう「同一宗教集団（identical religious group）」とみなすことができる。この集団には「教義」はなく、共有されるのは「儀礼」である。ある生活様式が特定の集団によって継承されると「慣習」が生まれ、社会統合の意味を伴って共同実施されると、それらの儀礼は慣習として伝統化される。近世日本では、宗教（ワッハのいう「特定宗教集団」）

[1] I use the term "customs" in a heuristic sense.

と慣習は相補的関係にあり、その区別は曖昧だった。しかし近代になると両者は厳密に区別され、一部の実践は「呪術や迷信」として宗教性を否定され、他のものは隠蔽された。このことは、近代日本における「宗教の自由」を考える上で無視できない。したがって「信仰としての宗教」と「慣習としての宗教」の動的関係を再検討する必要がある。

In his 2022 book "*Seken-kyo*" and the Deep Consciousness of the Japanese People, Naoki Sato proposed the concept of *Seken-kyo* ("Religion of *seken*"), which regards four implicit rules—unconsciously practiced by Japanese—as a form of "religion" (Sato 2022:112‐143):

1. Reciprocity: The rule of reciprocity that maintains human relationships through the obligation of giving gifts and returning favors.

2. Hierarchy: The rule of hierarchy that strongly emphasizes rank based on age and social status.

3. Conformity: The rule of suppressing individuals from standing out, functioning as the pressure of conformity—the idea that "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down."

4. Magical Thinking: The rule of making decisions based on old notions such as auspicious or inauspicious days and concepts of impurity (*kegare* ケガレ).

In Japanese, the term "religion" (*shukyo* 宗教) usually means consciously and voluntarily held belief. By contrast, *Seken-kyo* operates unconsciously and under social compulsion, thus differing from the Western concept of "religion."

The Japanese word *seken* (世間) has no direct one-to-one equivalent in English. It is often translated as "society," but while the English word "society" often refers to structured systems or institutions, *seken* carries strong nuances of social expectations, public appearance, and interpersonal relationships. Thus, the term often means the opinions, evaluations, and awareness of others in one's community or the broader social sphere.

Émile Durkheim defined religion as "a system of beliefs and practices that serves social integration." From this perspective, *Seken-kyo* functions as a religion in Japan, not by unifying society as a whole but by regulating *jinkan* (人-間 human) relations within each community. In this sense, each person belongs to a particular *Seken-kyo*. Although many Japanese claim to be non-religious, Sato argues they are in fact followers of *Seken-kyo*, which often restricts autonomy through conformity and excludes religions based on individual belief.

Nevertheless, the tension between *Seken-kyo* and individual faith is not uniquely Japanese. Joachim Wach classified religious communities into two types: "an identity of social and religious groupings" and "specifically religious group" (Wach 1944 :57). The latter are bound together firmly by faith grounded in explicit doctrine. The former, however, are naturally occurring communities such as families or villages, where religious functions are integrated into daily life. *Seken* corresponds to the former category—"an identity of social and religious groupings"—which do not have explicit

doctrines but emphasize the sharing of rituals. Within a community that maintains a consistent lifestyle, customs are handed down across generations, and through collective practice that promotes social integration, they are institutionalized as traditions. Rites of passage such as weddings, funerals, and annual festivals are inherited by kin and local communities; they regulate individual behavior and strengthen group cohesion.

Yoshitsugu Sawai contrasts "personal religious faith" with "religion as everyday custom," while Nobutaka Inoue likewise distinguishes "religion as conscious faith" from "religion as custom," noting that the latter predominates in Japan (Sawai 2021: 61-63; Inoue 2002: 27). Custom, as a socially sanctioned mode of life, often concerning deities, Buddhas, and the afterlife, is called folk religion (*minzoku shūkyō* 民俗宗教). Such practices have endured by adapting institutional religions to daily routines, and conversely, institutional religions could take root only by adjusting themselves to folk religion (Kaneko 1997:191).

In religious studies, "religion as custom" is often framed as primal religion: forms predating institutional systems, inseparable from life and centered on nature worship, ancestor veneration, and magical practice. Faith here is sustained not by doctrine but by communal lifestyle, ritual, and transmission. This overlaps with Joachim Wach's "religious groups identical with social groups."

According to Michael Pye, Shinto in prehistoric times was a "primal religion" tied to nature, ancestors, and the cycles of the seasons. Later, through contact with Chinese culture and Buddhism, it acquired the name and self-consciousness of "Shinto" and was reorganized as an "adjusted primal religion" (Pye 1996:4). At the level of popular life, Japanese folk religion and popular beliefs retained primal-religion structures at their foundation, even while undergoing syncretism with institutionalized Shinto and Buddhism. As seen in mountain worship, rice-field deities, ancestor rites, and annual festivals such as Bon, New Year, and *Setsubun* (節分), these foundations are still alive in the culture of everyday life. They are intertwined with *Seken-kyo* norms and continue to sustain the religiosity of individuals and local communities.

Pye further argues that in today's highly secularized Japan, a "new primal religion" has emerged (Pye 1996:6). This is not Shinto alone but a "religious complex" involving Buddhism, new religions, and folk beliefs, which together support life-cycle rituals, ancestor worship, and everyday petitions. In this context, there are no institutional organizations or theological thinkers. Rather, petitions such as for "traffic safety" or "family well-being" are shared in the form of social rituals. These practices overlap with the implicit rules of *Seken-kyo*, thereby manifesting religiosity in daily life.

Zenji Koishikawa argues that when popular beliefs, superstitions, magical practices, and social customs shape communities and individuals, they should be treated as "customs." In premodern Japan, religion and custom complemented one another (Koishikawa 2019:171). For example, sexuality and marriage were governed by local custom rather than Buddhism, yet Buddhism addressed issues of life, illness, and death precisely through its deep entanglement with such customs. Unlike medieval

Christian Europe, where one religion formed a "sacred canopy," Buddhism, oriented toward transcendence, remained largely passive toward secular matters.

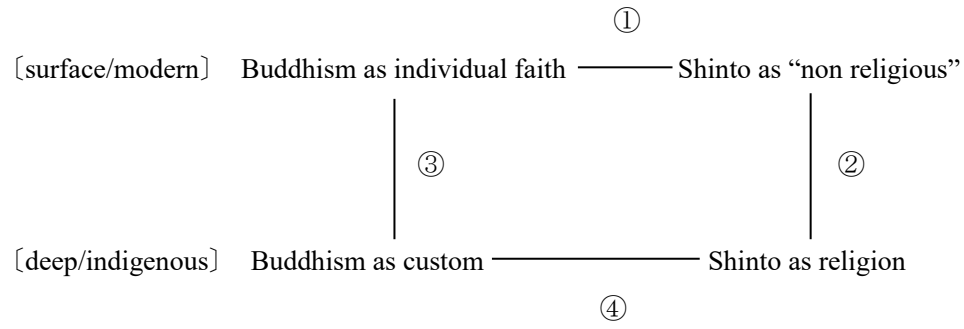
Modernization disrupted the coexistence of religion and custom. Two key events symbolized this:

1. The Meiji government's Shinto-Buddhist separation, aiming to make Shinto a state religion.

2. Government and media campaigns to eradicate "superstitions."

The state religion project collapsed under Western pressure and Buddhist resistance, but Shinto was redefined as "non-religious" national morality. Mokurai Shimaji of Jōdo Shinshū opposed state control through the Daikyōin policy. Advocating religious freedom, he argued that Shinto was not true religion but ancestor-based tradition (Nose 1992). According to Fumihiko Sueki (2011), this distinction produced a "Shinto-Buddhist complementarity": Buddhism as "religion of individual faith," Shinto as "rites of the state" (①).

Sueki also notes complementary relations within each tradition: between state Shinto and local festival Shinto (②), and between Buddhism as personal faith and Buddhism as folk practice supported by funerals and parishioner systems (③). At the everyday level, Shinto and Buddhism formed a unified set (④), effectively hidden from the category of "religion."



Even after State Shinto ended, this structure persisted. The Supreme Court, for instance, ruled that Shinto ground-breaking ceremonies (*jichinsai* 地鎮祭) were "customary" rather than religious (Kuroda 1979). From the 1960s this view shaped Japanese cultural identity, and recent nationalism has reinforced it.

In Japan, the boundary between "religion" and "custom" has never been clear; rather, it has been artificially drawn since modern times. This separation was strongly shaped by the influence of government and media, yet the role of religious studies cannot be ignored either. Customs persist precisely because they are deeply rooted in daily life and play essential roles in society. Religion, historically, has drawn nourishment from these customs in order to develop.

Michio Araki contrasted "the religion of the elites" with "folk religion," pointing out that while the former is a highly institutionalized form of religion, alongside it there has always flowed "a strong undercurrent of folk religion that, at times in close connection with institutional religions and at times

almost independently of them, has supported the religious life of the common people" (Araki 2001:228). Religion and custom are not a simple binary opposition; rather, as people's lives change, customs also change, and the religious needs of the populace evolve. For this reason, it is necessary to rethink the relationship between "religion" and "custom" in a more dynamic way. Doing so reveals that contemporary Japanese understandings of religion have been formed in deep connection with everyday life.

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