

Chapter 5

THE CHALLENGE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN JAPAN

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Ancestor worship in Japan has a long and illustrious history and is firmly rooted in the traditional religions of Shintoism and Buddhism. This together with the Japanese cosmology has had a significant influence in ensuring that the rituals associated with ancestor worship are firmly entrenched in the religion and culture of the Japanese people. The socio-cultural components of ancestor ritual have ensured that these practices are inextricably intertwined with Japanese identity and consciousness. As a result, Japanese Christians face an existential crisis when faced with conversion to Christianity. This tension will be explored in detail in this chapter with specific reference to the significance of these practices in terms of the social and moral functions ascribed to them and the religious implications for Japanese Christians.

The following questions need to be addressed:

- How has ancestor worship in Japan been affected by traditional indigenous religions?
- What is understood in terms of the Japanese concept of what constitutes ancestors?
- What rites are performed for ancestors as individuals and as collectives?
- What are the religious implications of the Japanese conceptions of the living and the dead and the Japanese distinction between human beings and divinities?
- How have the early Protestant churches dealt with the problems faced by missionaries in Japan and how does it differ from the Roman Catholic solution to the dilemma?

This chapter will attempt to provide a profile of the nature of ancestor worship in Japan and how it relates to Japanese cosmology with the ensuing implications for the Protestant and Catholic religions. It will also attempt to provide an appropriate Biblical perspective on the matter.

5.2 THE CORNERSTONE OF JAPANESE CULTURE

The Japanese people are a deeply religious nation. This is evident from the JEM statistics which indicate that many Japanese appear to belong to more than one religion. Kisala et al (2002:108) states that most Japanese have a relatively eclectic religiosity which means that they may belong to more than one of the major religions in different

periods of their lives. He also points out that nearly 90% of Japanese observe the custom of annual visits to ancestral graves and 75% have either a Buddhist or Shinto altar in their homes. This implies that the Japanese religiosity is essentially polytheistic. This leads one to ask how Christians in Japan deal with this multi-layered religious society and how ancestor worship is viewed in modern Japan.

In spite of Christianity having a 450 year-old history in Japan, the number of Christians in the country still constitutes only 1% of the Japanese population. Shibata (1991: 247) and Park (2002:1) both point out that although Japan is one of the most developed countries in the modern world and that it has received approximately 3 500 missionaries, there are still very few converts. This is borne out by the statistics of Japan Evangelical Mission (JEM) which indicate that the number of people who claim to be part of an organised religion exceeds the Japanese population.²¹ Of the 127 million people in Japan 220 million indicated that they belong to a religious group (i.e. clearly a case of many Japanese belonging to more than one religion). Of the 220 million people, 205 million indicated that they belong to Buddhism and Shintoism (a staggering 90%), while 1.5 million (a mere 1%) have claimed to be Christian.

The logical question which arises is why is it that in spite of such a long history and numerous missionaries has Christianity not been able to secure a stronger foothold in Japan? In an attempt to provide an explanation for this phenomenon Mullins (2004:61) states that missionaries in Japan faced a fundamental clash with the indigenous religiosity and values of the Japanese nation, more pertinently the beliefs and practices concerning ancestors and spirits of the dead.

As discussed in other chapters, we know that this is not unique to Japan. Missionaries in Korea and Africa have had to grapple with basically the same problem. In all these countries ancestor worship constituted a significant barrier to the church's mission.

In spite of the fact that Japan, like Korea, is a modernised and urbanised country and that the family structure has been modified extensively, ancestor rites and the appropriate care of the dead remains a dominant factor in contemporary Japanese society. When it became clear that Japan was intent on modernising its economy and society, many visitors to these islands thought that ancestral beliefs and practices would soon become obsolete. Yet, today we know that the grip of ancestral beliefs has not loosened. Scholars like Earhart (1989:133), Hoshino and Takeda (1993:174-75) agree that the significance of the ancestors has not diminished and that it will probably remain at the core of Japanese religion for the foreseeable future. Ancestor worship constitutes the cornerstone of emotional and psychological stability in Japan.

This represented a significant barrier to Christian missions in Japan. As a result, missionaries had to reassess and revise their mission strategies.

Lee, HG (2002:3) pointed out that the poor results of missionaries in Japan can more than likely be ascribed to the lack of understanding missionaries had of Japanese

²¹ http://www.kjem.com/index.php?view=B&C=29&id=5225&menu=m2&sid_t=1154416732&bmode=view 5/23/2006

culture. He argues that unless missionaries take cognisance of the Japanese socio-cultural identity and approach their missionary work among the Japanese people according to that paradigm they are doomed to fail.

As already stated ancestor worship forms one of the fundamental principles of Japanese culture and identity. It is important to know that this phenomenon appears to have remained intact in spite of changes in environment and socio-economic circumstances, e.g. urbanisation and modernisation. Thus Kato (1977:41) states that ancestor rituals in modern Japan have all but lost their psychological influence but continues to play a significant role in the Japanese identity. Most Japanese will revert to ancestor worship in times of crisis – perhaps as a means of staying in touch with the roots of their socio-cultural identity as a people.

One of the reasons for this may be that ancestor worship has not been peculiar to a particular organised religion. Shibata (1979:62) argues that for most Japanese ancestor worship is a fundamental element of any organised religion to which they may affiliate themselves. Although it is not recognised as a religion in itself, when the Japanese people think of “ancestor veneration” (*sosen suhai*) they hear “religion”. In essence then, ancestor worship can be regarded as the traditional fundamental religion of the Japanese people and any religion which does not incorporate this element would not be accepted in their daily life.

Japanese consciousness is firmly rooted in the notion of ancestor worship. This is evidenced by a well-known NHK survey of Japanese religious consciousness (Yoron 1999) which was conducted in May 1998. The results of the survey indicated that 76% of the people who responded to the survey, 35% indicated that they had a religion as a basis for their faith, whereas 56% indicated that they did not have a definite religion on which their faith was based. Furthermore, 90% of the respondents indicated that they kept *hatsmode* (the visit to Shinto shrines on New Year’s Day) or *Bosan* (annual visits to the graves). They also indicated that they memorialised their deceased loved ones on Buddhist holidays like *bon*, *higan*, *hoji*.

The survey also enquired whether they had altars (*kamidana*²²) and/or memorial tablets (*butsudan*) in their homes which are associated with ancestor rituals. 55% Of the respondents indicated that they have altars (exclusively: 9%) and tablets (exclusively: 16%) in their homes. 20% Of the respondents indicated that they have neither in their homes. That was irrespective of religious affiliation.

Traditionally, memorial tablets of their departed family members are kept in the Buddhist altar in the family home. In addition to this, they generally visit the graves of their ancestors at certain times of the year. What makes the phenomenon of ancestor worship unique in Japan is that it is devoid of an organised religious structure and has become an integral part of the moral, cultural and social fibre of the people over centuries, which explains why these rituals have survived. Even atheists have no qualms about

²² *Kamidana*: Shinto family altar in memory of remote ancestors and other *kami*.

Butsudan: Buddhist family altar in memory of more recently deceased family members and other deceased kin.

worshipping their ancestors. From this, it appears that ancestor worship is essentially a significant facet of the Japanese cultural identity rather than a religious phenomenon.

5.2.1 Ancestor worship and Japanese Christians

In his analysis of the above-mentioned survey Kumoro (2003:66) says that it reflects the position of mainly non-Christian Japanese. He also claims that the majority of Christians do not subscribe to the practices and rituals associated with ancestor worship. He asserts that the Protestant Church in Japan holds a very negative view of ancestral rites.

However, Reid's study (1991) indicates that approximately 25% of all Protestant Japanese Christians have Buddhist altars in their homes. He found that Japanese Christians attend church, read the Bible and pray irrespective of whether they have ancestral ancestors in their homes. Reid found that among some Christians, the Christian and Buddhist beliefs appear to exist parallel to each other and are not necessarily juxtaposed. The extent to which some Christians adhere to the rituals (e.g. thinking about the dead (*bon* and *higan*), maintain a *kami* (altar), keep Buddhist mortuary tablets, sutras, memorial photographs, visits to ancestral graves, etc) varies and sets them apart as two distinct groups. Christians who have remnants and features of ancestor rituals in their homes tend to participate more readily in the rituals associated with ancestor worship than Christians who do not keep altars and other accoutrements of ancestor worship in their homes.

Reid (1989:259-283) questions whether or not Protestant Christianity has been changed as a result of its contact with Japanese culture. In his exposition of the history of Protestant Christianity in Japan, he postulates that the form of Christianity which was introduced to Japan was essentially puritanical and initially fenced itself off against anything associated with ancestor rites aside from the funeral. Mainline Protestantism in Japan however changed as times passed. Although the Protestant Church still holds a negative view of ancestor worship, there is a tacit acknowledgement of the deeply seated spiritual longing of the people. The church was therefore forced to come to a renewed understanding of the phenomenon of ancestor worship.

5.2.2 Theories on the origins of Japanese ancestor worship

Berentsen (1985:10-11) points out that there are divergent views among scholars on the origins of ancestor worship in Japan and whether or not it can be construed as a unique Japanese phenomenon. Some scholars believe that it may have filtered through to Japan from China together with Buddhism in the seventh century AD while others believe that it may be a synthesis of indigenous, Buddhist and Confucian beliefs, while yet others believe that it is a phenomenon indigenous to Japan (Revon 2001:455-457).

Hall (1915:153) argues that Japanese ancestor worship is essentially a Chinese import. He asserts that it was evident in Teijo's reverence for the ancestors and states that the practice slowly spread through the upper classes. He also argues that it is likely to be of Chinese origin because there is little evidence that Japanese people

practiced ancestor worship in the early centuries of their history as a people. Aston (2005:45-47) appears to be in agreement and he argues that primitive Shinto (the old native religion of Japan) had no cult of ancestor worship.

There are however other scholars whose views directly oppose that of Hall and Aston. For example, Hearn (2006) believes that ancestor worship is indigenous to Japan and an intrinsic part of Shinto. According to Hearn (2006:28-29) the family cult is to be considered the first in evolutionary order and therefore the real religion of Japan is essentially ancestor worship. Strong supporters of this view were evident in the Shinto revivalists of the Kokugaku School in the 18th and 19th centuries (Revon 2001:456).

Revon (2001) on the other hand tends to straddle these two extremes. His theory appears to be borne out by modern Japanology and Japanese folklore. He points out that after the significant influence of Chinese culture in the seventh century, ancestor worship in Japan appeared to be essentially Buddhist in nature and was therefore conceptualised in Buddhist terms. The fact that Buddhist ancestor worship spread rapidly and was adopted universally also made it the perfect vehicle for basic elements in indigenous Japanese thought. This is evident in the research of Japanese folklorists after the war (Yanagida 1970:4). Buddhism was assimilated in terms of ancestor worship but eventually became a Buddhist mock-up of Japanese indigenous beliefs (Takeda 1975: 214-215).

Berentsen (1985:11) have asserted that although ancestor worship has been affected by some other traditional religions in Japan, it was indigenous to Japan in the first place.

The origins of ancestor worship pose some pertinent questions which influence the views of Japanese churches.

5.3 THE RELIGIOUS PHASES OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The Japanese are essentially a religious people. Ryu (1992:17) points out that there are more than 800 millions of gods in Japan and historically Japanese religions emanated from animism and naturalism.

In Japan, ancestor worship and the practices associated with the ancestors and the dead are commonly considered to be folk religion, as Hori (1994:18) points out. Hori considers folk religion to be the relatively stable substructure of Japanese religion. Miyake (In Mullins 1998:130) further argues that the frame of reference which folk religion has provided constituted the paradigm which enabled other religions to make inroads in Japanese society. The significant point here is that only those religions which accepted the paradigm of the folk religion was readily accepted and were able to exert an influence on the people in their daily lives.

If ancestor worship is an integral part of folk religion one needs to explore the origins of these practices and how ancestor worship has been influenced by other religions in Japan.

Buddhism and Shintoism are generally believed to be the major traditional religions in Japan. Some scholars tend to include Confucianism and even New Religions under the umbrella of traditional religions in Japan.

Fukada (1984:2) argues that the notion of death and ancestor worship in Japan is essentially rooted in Buddhist thought and facilitated by the mystical elements of Shinto tradition. Similarly, Shibata (1991:247) points out that ancestor worship in Japan is closely associated with Buddhism and Shintoism which explains why it was a significant obstacle to Christian missions. The question which arises is how ancestor worship became syncretised with other religions to arrive at the unique Japanese variation.

5.3.1 Ancestor worship affected by indigenous folk beliefs

Berentsen's study (1985:11) states that ancestor worship became the primary vehicle for the acceptance of Buddhism in Japan, due to a combination of the basic features of Japanese thought and the fundamentals of Buddhism. The current form of ancestor worship in Japan is essentially a Buddhist version of indigenous Japanese thought (Takeda 1975:214-21; Watanabe 1975:119-120).

Prior to the introduction of Buddhism in Japan, it is very difficult to establish the nature and content of ancestor worship mainly because of the lack written records (Smith 1974:6). The *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) of 712 A.D and the *Nihon-shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) of 720 A.D does not refer to ancestor worship directly. Takeda Choshu (1975:137) does argue that although it is not mentioned directly, it is at the epicenter of the chronicles. He argues that it is evident from the cosmology which can be derived from the texts. In these texts, the sovereignty of the emperor is derived from the sovereignty of his ancestor. This is further evidenced by the fact that the position of the emperor (and by implication the ruling family) is represented in the form of the sun goddess (the primordial ancestor) which clearly denotes the centrality of ancestor worship at the time.

According to Berentsen (1985:12) the ancient Japanese people understood the spirit to survive the death of the body and to continue a separate existence. This spirit of the dead was to be feared, cared for, and worshipped with utmost attention and courteousness. If this is done, they believe that it is possible to develop into an ancestral spirit which is known as a *kami* (minor deity) (Smith 1974:6-7; Watanabe 1964:62-63). Similar to the Korean thought, these ancestral spirits are believed to assume a protective role and continue to interact with the living family members for this purpose (Yanagida 1970:50-69).

During its early stage ancestor worship was inextricably linked to the institutions of the household (the *ie*) and the clan (the *uji*). Hori (1962:133) argues that these two concepts, the ancestor and the household may be considered the two fundamental elements in Japanese religion and consciousness. Takeda (1975:134) remarks that the principles of the *ie*-structure have been a fundamental part of Japanese cosmology in each period of its history. By implication, ancestor worship which is closely linked to the *ie*-structure has been a part of Japanese culture since time immemorial. This intimate

relationship between the clan and ancestor worship is further evident in the pre-Buddhist era in the synthesis of ancestral deities and tutelary clan gods (*ujigami*) (Smith 1974:7-12). Clearly then, the fundamentals of ancestor worship pre-existed the Buddhist era and Buddhist thought in Japan.

The traditional Japanese belief in the immortality of the soul which gradually develops into an ancestral spirit, interaction between the dead and the living members of the family, and the close relationship between these religious practices and the structure of the household and clan makes it understandable that Buddhism found fertile ground in Japan. The Buddhist notion of memorial rites and ancestor worship was therefore attractive and understandable to the Japanese (Takeda 1975:145).

5.3.2 Ancestor worship in Japanese Shintoism

Fumie (1996:4) considers original Shinto (literally meaning “the way of God”) to be the earliest and only indigenous religion in Japan. Some scholars (Piryns 1985:30; Reischauer 1988:207-208) points out that primal Shinto was based on the animistic veneration of natural phenomena (e.g. the sun, mountains, trees, water, etc). Primal Shinto was not really concerned about afterlife and rather focused on the veneration of nature spirits and worship, purity and everyday family life. To this day Japanese follow Shinto rituals to celebrate significant events in their lives such as weddings, baptisms, the well-being of children, the construction of houses and buildings, etc. (Breen 2003:250).

Reid (1991:7-16) also refers to the influence Shinto had on Japanese history. He argues that there are two points of view when considering Japanese culture. The first considers Shintoism as an entity which unified the Japanese ideals with that of the Shinto divinities (*kami*) and attained oneness and unity in society. The second view acknowledges that there are different classes of divinities, for example clan *kami* (associated with rites for the ancestors) (also Enns 2001:57) and charismatic *kami* (associated with local shrines). Reid therefore postulates that the Japanese history falls into four distinct periods, namely: (a) Shinto Period (pre-6th century), (b) Shinto-Buddhist Period (538-1549), (c) Shinto-Buddhist-Christian Period I (1549-1802), and (d) Shinto-Buddhist-Christian Period II (1802-present). From this classification it is evident that Shinto is considered to be the foundation of Japanese culture and religion.

According to Komuro (2003:63-64), in his article “Christianity and ancestor worship in Japan”, indigenous religion of Japan was formalised and named Shinto in the 6th Century, i.e. after the other religions had been introduced into the country. Komuro therefore considers Shinto to be a set of indigenous, loosely organised religious practices, creeds, and attitudes at a communal level. He also points out that it only became the official state religion of Japan in 1868 (till 1945).

The typical ancestral divinity according to traditional Shintoism (Ma 2003:172) was called *Uji gami*. *Uji gami* was both the representative of all the ancestral spirits and the collection of them. Once an ancestor dies his or her spirit loses its individuality and joins *Uji gami*. Today the emperor is *the Uji gami*, representing and uniting all ancestral spirits.

During the Kofun period (300-710 CE), numerous small kingdoms were unified by the Yamato clan. The imperial lineage descended from this clan. The emperor played an important role during this period in establishing Shintoism as national cult. He acted as chief Shinto priest in all court rituals (including the annual rice planting and harvesting ceremonies). This formalised form of Shintoism expanded and each local clan had its own shrine or shrines. From the 10th century onwards, Shintoism developed into a coherent religious system of myths, rituals, priests, and shrines.

The Edo period (1603-1868) saw the emergence of a nationalistic movement which yearned for the return to the roots of Japanese identity, imperial rule and Shintoism as the only religion in Japan. This led to the Meiji Restoration in 1868 which toppled the military shogunate and reinstated the emperor. Once the Meiji imperial rule had been instated, Shinto was proclaimed as the state religion and the emperor proclaimed a god. During this time, Shinto shrines received governmental support and Shinto tenets were taught in schools throughout Japan until the end of World War II (Francis & Nakajima 1991:16-17). After the war, the emperor denied his divinity but this had little effect on the Japanese populace who lacked an appreciation for the difference between God and kami. The emperor is still a figure of veritably divine authority (Komuro 2003: 64).

5.3.3 The process of Japanised Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhist missionaries travelled from India to China from where it spread to Korea and Japan. The Buddhism that arrived in Japan in 538 was already syncretised with Confucianism. In Japan it played much the same role as that of Christianity in Northern Europe. In the process of becoming Japanised, it syncretised with indigenous concepts and ideals (including Shinto elements). It became the vehicle which transmitted a whole new culture and cosmology (Reischauer 1988:206; Enns 2001:60).

Mahayana Buddhism concerns itself with what happens after death and the salvation of the individual. As a result of these religious tenets, the Japanese people came to see ancestor worship in a new light and accepted many of the rituals associated with Buddhism. Many rituals celebrated today are concerned with ancestor worship and afterlife (e.g. at the time of the vernal and the autumnal equinox and the *obon* festival in the summer). *Obon* (the Festival of Souls) is of particular significance for the Japanese people during which a variety of foods are offered to the spirits of ancestors, and their repose is prayed for. People who have moved to the cities return home on these occasions. People in *yukata* (light cotton kimono) gather for outdoor dances known as *bon-odori*. For many Japanese, summer would not be summer without a *bon-odori* (Fumie 1996:5).

5.3.3.1 The Taika reform

As Berentsen (1985:13) describes, the Taika reform of 645 AD can be considered the ultimate point of Buddhist and Confucian influence (from China) upon Japan. Hori (1968:86) states that after the Taika reform Japanese Buddhism became the spiritual principle of the imperial system and the foundation of the great family system of the time. As a result, ancestor worship became one of its most significant functions (Hori

1994:86). The Taika reform instituted standard burial rituals and practices. Masses for the dead were introduced (Tamamuro 1974:94-95; Hori 1994: 182-183).

It is interesting to note that the introduction of the family altar, or *butsudan*, was also a result of the Buddhist slant in the religious activities of the people. Its original function was that of a temporary dedication to the recently deceased (Takatori & Hashimoto 1975:150-151). There were other elements of Buddhism as well which permeated ancestor worship, such as the construction of Buddhist images, erection of temples, copying of sutras etc., with the expressed purpose of serving the well-being of the dead (Piryns 1985:31; Takeda 1975:594).

Clans and families erected their own clan-temples (*ujidera*) in service of their ancestors. This custom proved to be extremely important for the development of Buddhism in Japan, and consequently became a symbol of the synthesis of ancestor worship and Japanese Buddhism. The *ujidera* became the Buddhist equivalent of the indigenous *ujigami* (Berentsen 1985:13).

Berentsen (1985:14) states that the Bon festival (or Festival of the Dead) points to another early association of Buddhism with ancestor worship. This festival (*Nihon-shoki*) is entirely focused on ancestor worship built upon a sutra known in Japanese as the *Urabon-kyo*, which provides the basis for the necessity of caring for the ancestors through prayers and offerings refers to the festival (also Smith 1974:15). In 606 the Empress Suiko (554-628) ordered that it be observed in all the temples in Japan.

The Bon festival was at that time already an eclectic mix of Central Asian Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist and Confucian elements. The Japanese merely added their indigenous beliefs and practices. The festival spread among the common people and by the end of the 12th Century was universally observed and replaced the native mid-summer festival (Smith 1974:17).

5.3.3.2 The Kamakura era (1185-1333)

According to Berentsen (1985:14) during the Kamakura era (1185-1333) ancestor worship in the form of funeral services and masses for the dead became intrinsically linked to the clan temple. The funeral services and masses for the dead which were marked by *nenbutsu*²³ spread rapidly with the Jodo sect of Honen. According to Tamamuro (1974:113-120) funerals for commoners were mostly like this.

The founders of True Pure Land Buddhism (Jodo-shinshu or only Shinshu) rejected the common practice of offering food and chanting of *nenbutsu* for the salvation of the dead as having a sullyng influence on Buddhism. However, during this period all Buddhist sects flourished to the extent to which they accommodated these basic elements of the old popular folk beliefs which centred on funerals and masses for the dead – with the clear affiliation to ancestor worship (Tamamuro 1974:129).

²³ *Nenbutsu*: Chant in praise of the bodhisatva Amida.

5.3.3.3 *The Tokugawa shogunate*

During the Tokugawa era (1603-1868) the government banned Christian religion from Japan. Tokugawa Ieyasu issued an edict on January 27, 1614 which stated that Japan was the land of Shinto gods and Buddha. He claimed that the *Kirishitan* (Christians) have not only come to trade but have also been disseminating an evil law in an effort to overthrow right doctrine and to bring about a change of government in Japan. Thus Christianity was banned (Berentsen 1985:15).

The only way to counter the influence of the Christian missionaries was to introduce a form of totalitarian control. The Tokugawa regime required effective supervision to ensure its religious orthodoxy. For this purpose they decided to use the numerous Buddhist temples and priests. This was known as the *Danka* system. Ieyasu's edict was accompanied by a set of 15 rules (*Danka seido*) to guide the priests in their supervisory role. Buddhist temples received state patronage in return for administering the *Danka seido*. Funerals and burial masses could not take place without involving the temples and the priests. It also required all residents of an area to notify the local temple of births, marriages, and deaths. Persons who fail to attend and observe the various ancestral rites were to be investigated and reported. Mullins (1998a:7-8) points out that priests issued certificates annually to certify that the bearer was not a member of the Christian religion but an active member and regular attendee of the temple.

This system required households to register as parishioners and supporters of the local temple. This ensured that the Tokugawa was able to enforce by law a formal and compulsory relationship between the household and the Buddhist temple.

As a result, each citizen was considered to be a Buddhist, even though for some it was not of their own volition. As Buddhists, they were expected to defer all functions relating to ancestor worship to the temple, for example funerals, memorial services for the dead and maintenance of burial places. A failure to comply was considered to be an act of treason (Smith 1974:22-23).

The system was met with resistance. The *Kirishitans* were effectively silenced, but the abuse of the system as a means to intimidate the people elicited severe criticism from Confucianists and scholars of the School of National Learning. As a result, many of these individuals severed their ties with Buddhism entirely (Smith 1974:24-25; Tamamuro 1974:274).

As a result of this protest against the enforcement of Buddhism, Confucianists and Shintoists developed their own burial practices and structures (Tamamuro 1974:283). It is important to note that resistance was not directed against ancestor worship but against the Buddhist religion taking over what were considered to be Confucian and Shinto. Under the scholars of the *Kokugaku* School, Shinto and Confucian ideas merged to constitute a powerful religious and political anti-Buddhist and anti-Tokugawa movement.

5.3.4 Influence of Confucianism

As noted in Chapter 4, Confucianism is not so much a religion as it is an ethical code and even ideology. However, it exerted a powerful influence on Japanese cosmology and religion. Fumie (1996:5) says that Confucianism contributed greatly to Japanese moral code which emphasises personal virtue, justice, and devotion to the family including the ancestral spirits. The tenets of filial piety and submission to the emperor or superiors reflect Confucian influence as well.

Kisala et al (2002:111) refers to certain Confucian and neo-Confucian texts as sources which expound the element of ancestor worship in Japanese religion. Confucianism entered Japan via Korea in the 5th Century. The neo-Confucian revival reached Japan in the 13th and 14th Centuries ironically primarily through Zen monks who upon their return from studies in China began to make their monasteries centres for Chinese studies.

Confucian and neo-Confucian teachings were popularised in the early modern period through the efforts of travelling teachers. This movement had a considerable influence on religious thought in the modern period.

Komuro (2003) argues that Confucianism nonetheless played a significant role in shoring up the Tokugawa shogunate. Confucius had developed a philosophical, ethical, and political system of thought which also contained religious elements. Confucius believed that the ideal, harmonious, hierarchical society could be achieved through the moral example set by the leaders, adherence to proper rituals, and appropriate individual behaviour rather than by law enforcement.

Another virtue which Confucianism expounded was that of loyalty. This loyalty is particularly evident in a 14th Century heroic tale of a warrior's loyalty to his lord which was more important than the virtue of filial piety. This loyalty became a dominant theme of Japanese Confucianism and later became adopted into the value system of the Japanese samurai (warrior) class. In Tokugawa's time, intellectual leaders attempted to pattern society on the Confucian ideal of attaining social harmony through a hierarchical social system which spanned four levels: samurai, peasant, artisan, and merchant (Komuro 2003:63).

Francis & Nakajima (1991:18-19) state that Confucian loyalty was partly instrumental in effecting the Meiji restoration of 1868. It further contributed to nationalistic unity by means of a synthesis of Confucianism, Shinto and the imperial ideology. A practical example of this synthesis was the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 which was implemented in Japan and its Asian colonies of Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria and China. The Rescript emphasised the Shinto tradition of the Imperial lineage and the Confucian notion of a subject's loyalty to the emperor.

In this regard, some scholars (Hendry 2003:33; Komuro 2003:63; Ma 2003:172; Smith 1974:31; Takeda 1975:201-208) argue that ancestor worship played a crucial role in the development of Japanese imperial ideology in that it amplified the notion that the emperor was a descendant of the original ancestors of the Japanese people. Berentsen (1985:17) argues that the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 in the Meiji

era formalised these notions and ensured that it reached the Japanese populace. This is borne out by Maxey (1985:21) who states that by placing emphasis on loyalty, harmony, and lines of obedience in the family it provided a rational matrix for Japanese ancestral rites and its meaning within the national framework.

Although there exists some controversy about the origins of ancestor worship in Japan, it is credible that major influences came from China since the Japanese engage in ancestor worship with much the same fervour as the Chinese. It is also credible that it may have originated from the worship of guardian gods who were not only ancestors but also considered to be manifest in nature. These guardian gods are fundamental tenet of Shintoism. Therefore, Takashi Maeda (1975:3-13) argues that the fear of the dead which is prevalent in uncivilised regions eventually weakens and is replaced by a yearning for the dead as the culture of these people evolves.

5.3.5 Influence of new religious sects

Mullins (1998a:132) claims that ancestor worship was further influenced by new religious sects which developed in the post-war period. Traditional practices declined as a result of urbanisation which removed family members from the rural community. This contributed to the rapid growth of “new religions” after the war. Although these so-called new religions claimed to have new gods, revelations and rituals, they were essentially just revitalised forms of the traditional folk religions. Berentsen (1985:21) refers to Rissho and Seicho (Rissho 1972:20-24) as typical examples of this. Risshō Kōseikai for instance made deliberate changes to ancestor worship in order to make it more relevant to the new society and culture, especially with regard to modern individualism and equality of the sexes.

Rissho (1972:23) points out that the traditional *ie* setting of ancestor worship gave it a slant in favour of the paternalistic and feudal structures of the household. It centered around the patrilineal ancestors and negated the ancestors of the wife, Risshō Kōseikai extended worship to both the paternal and maternal families.

Hardacre's research (1984) revealed that both Reiyūkai and Kurozumikyō stress ancestor worship in some form. Earhart's study (1989:172-190) of Gedatsu-Kai on the other hand, revealed that they had provided new and innovative means of restoring and maintaining harmonious relations with the dead, such as the *amacha* memorial ritual and the mediumistic technique of *gohō shugyō*.

This is probably the main reason why these religions were successful in Japan: the fact that they took cognisance of the ancestors and the spirits of the dead while adapting to the needs and realities of the modern Japanese population. These religions address their members' concerns about the ancestors and turn malevolent spirits into protective ones. Thus Hardacre (1984:106) argues that by changing the focus of ancestor cult, i.e. from patrilineal ancestors only to both sides of the family, it became more congruent and relevant to the modern nuclear family. Young (1989:31) recounts another example of how the new religions have adapted the traditions to meet the needs of the

modern Japanese family: some Buddhist sects have made provision for the spirits of *mizuko* (aborted and stillborn children).

Thus we may conclude that Japanese ancestor worship originated from traditional religion and was formalised under the tenets of Shintoism. The syncretistic fusion of Shintoism and Buddhism consolidated ancestor worship even further. Ancestor worship started as folk belief and developed into a basic frame for the socio-cultural and political structure of Japanese society.

5.4 JAPANESE ANCESTRAL RITES

We will now explore the nature of Japanese ancestral rites in terms of the individual and the community.

Mullins (1998a:168) states that most Japanese participate in annual religious events and rituals which are associated with Buddhist and Shinto traditions. Therefore, Mullins argues that Japanese pluralism should be considered a syncretistic system of layered obligations which tends to stand in conflict with Christianity because of its claim to be the only true religion. As a result, Mullins asserts that the fact that most Japanese have been integrated into the system of a household (Buddhist) and communal (Shinto) religious obligations, makes it exceedingly difficult for them to make a personal commitment to the Christian religion.

Sugata (1992:365) mentions that most Japanese homes have two altars, one for Buddhism and the other for Shinto rituals. He does acknowledge that this appears to be on the decline in urban areas as a result in the change of circumstances as a result of the urbanisation process.

Mullins (1998a:137) provides a valuable description of the ancestral rites practiced by most Japanese. He states that the appropriate care and respect for the dead involves not only participating in a number of rituals during the funeral but also the performance of annual festivals and memorial rites during a period of many years. Cyclical rites such as those performed at the spring and autumn equinoxes (*higan* and *obon*) which involves the return of the spirit to the home, is also required. During these times the family celebrates the welcoming and send-off of the ancestral spirits which involves visiting the household grave.

Cyclical rites are generally conducted over a 33 year period which includes services on the 7th and 14th day following a death, and the first anniversary of the death and subsequent years in line with the Buddhist tradition. Such anniversaries are often observed by means of rituals before the family altar.

For the purpose of this study, we will focus on some of the actual ritual practices. Although this study acknowledges the fact that these practices vary significantly, the scope of the study does not require an account of all of these. Instead, we will be focusing on the individual and collective rites once we have ascertained what constitutes the Japanese notion of an “ancestor”.

5.4.1 The concept of ancestors

The logical question which arises is what an ancestor is in the Japanese context? The definitions which have been attached to the term are varied but as Ooms (1967:242-243) states, the term is used rather loosely and it is generally accepted that ancestor worship involves more than the mere worship of ancestors.

Hirai's definition (1968:43) states that an ancestor denotes the one who is the founder of *ie* ("household" understood in its broadest meaning) or the parents to successive generations of *ie*, particularly the parents of the current generation. Berentsen (1985:24) remarks that the difference which Hirai draws between the strictest meaning of the term and the looser understanding of the term reflects the Japanese conception and use of the term. This is similar to Ariga (1969:357-381) (and Smith 1974:8) who distinguishes between lineal ancestors (ancestor I) and ancestor of origin (ancestor II). In his explanation of the term Ariga defines ancestor as the founder of *ie* and his descendants who have carried *ie* from one generation to the next. Ancestor II on the other hand denotes the person from whom the founder is believed to have originated. Interestingly enough, as Ariga (1969:361) points out, ancestor II served essentially as basis and guarantor for the founder of *ie* while ancestor II need not necessarily have been genealogically related to ancestor I. In many instances ancestor II was in fact fictitious and served to enhance the position of the *ie* founder.

Takeda (1975:87) states that the importance of the founder of the *ie* cannot be over-emphasised since the basis of ancestor worship resides in the value of the *ie* founder. Therefore, Takeda points out that the real meaning of *sosen/senzo* (ancestor) does not lie in the person but in his status as being worthy of worship as an *ie* founder. This appears to be borne out by Smith's study (1974:163) which found that ancestors of the house were reckoned from the founder and therefore each branch house considered the original founder of the *ie* to be the senior ancestor.

Clearly then, as Berentsen (1985:25) argues, the identity of the ancestors is not to be defined merely on the basis of social structures and relationships but also has a particular qualitative implication. The actual status of ancestor is not reached at death but involves a process of development which proceeds in three stages from a spirit of the dead (*shrei*) to that of an ancestral spirit (*sorei*).

Smith (1974:41) describes these periods. The first period in the process spans the 49 days following the death of the family member. This is understood to be a period of uncertainty for the dead and at this time the tablet for the deceased person is placed separately in front of the *butsudan*. Only on the 49th day is the tablet raised to the family altar which symbolises an elevation in the status of the dead. Once this happens, the soul is believed to enter the second stage and may be referred to as *niisenzo* (new ancestor). At this stage, the soul is believed to be subject to change and growth over the years and the final stage is not reached before *tomuraiage* (the 33rd anniversary after death).

Once it reaches this stage, the spirit loses its individuality and joins the supra-individual, collective, anonymous group of ancestors of preceding generations. It then be-

comes a fully-fledged *sorei* (ancestral spirit), and is not subject to further growth. It is believed to be part of a transcendent, ultimate, holy and protective being. At this stage, the individual tablet is removed from the altar, brought to the temple, and replaced at the *butsudan* with a tablet symbolising the collective group of the household's ancestors through generations (Takeda 1975:100-105).

Takeda (1975:232-235) argues that the term "ancestor" should not be used indiscriminately to include all the dead. There does exist a term which denotes all the dead, namely *hotoke* which is the Japanese equivalent for "buddha". This term more than likely originated from the popular misinterpretation of the Buddhist doctrine, the expression to become *hotoke* in the minds of the people simply came to mean to die (Takeda 1975:232-235). Therefore, when people refer to their *hotoke*, they include all spirits enshrined in their family altar irrespective of their actual position and progress toward ancestor-hood. It is important to note, as Smith (1974:41) points out, that one should distinguish between *hotoke* and *muen-botoke*, buddhas without attachment or affiliation. Within the *muen-botoke* there may be different categories, but none of them will follow the normal course to ancestorhood because they are not remembered or cared for by their offspring (either because they have none or because they are neglected) (Ooms 1967:254).

5.4.2 Ancestral rites

The ancestral rites for individuals are rather elaborate and start with the funeral and subsequent masses aimed at helping the soul to come to rest. Berentson (1985:33) describes the typical rituals which follow the death of a family member. At the end of the funeral, incense is offered by family members and all who are present at the funeral service.

Once the service has been completed, the coffin is taken to the crematorium from which the family will collect the ashes in an urn the following morning. The remains are not interred immediately, but taken home and placed in the temporary altar for the purpose of the imminent ceremonies. As Beardsley et al (1959:342) points out, once the ceremonies have taken place, the ashes are interred and the burial may or may not involve a religious ceremony.

The burial represents the end of the funeral, but the funeral is the first in a series of many rites for the deceased individual. The funeral is succeeded by memorial services or masses known as *hoji hoyo* or *butsuji* -ceremonies which may be considered periodic repetitions of the funeral ceremonies according to Dore (1999:429).

Ooms (1967:233) describes the ceremonies which follow the funeral as divided into two stages which correspond with the stages in the development of the spirit of the dead, namely those performed up to the 49th day after the death (*imiake*) and those performed until the 33rd or 50th anniversary (*tomuratage* or *nenki*). According to Ooms (1967) ceremonies are performed daily for the first 49 days in certain areas. However, the 7th, 14th and subsequent intervals are more commonly observed as the so-called 7x7 *hoji* rites after which the frequency of the rites are drastically reduced. Aside from

the 7x7 pattern of rites, periodic rites on the 100th day after the death are sometimes added on the 1st, 3rd, 7th, and 13th anniversaries which eventually culminates in the *tomuratage* on the 33rd anniversary. Therefore, it comprises a set of 13 *hoji* or *butsuji* masses for the deceased individual (often referred to as the “13-masses pattern”).

Berentson (1985:34) points out that this is not universal custom. In fact Smith (1974: 95) states that it varies from family to family. Irrespective of the pattern of the rites, the ceremonies are of great significance for the family.

Families usually invite close friends and kin for the ceremony. In the case of the first 7x7 it is performed in front of the temporary altar. *Nenki* may later be performed in front of the *butsudan*, or a separate altar may again be set up in the *tokonoma* for this purpose. If a separate altar in the *tokonoma* is used, the tablet for the person in question will be taken from the *butsudan* together with food offerings, incense, and other paraphernalia and placed at the separate altar.

During these ceremonies, a priest of the family temple leads the ceremony and may deliver a sermon. The ceremony usually ends with a meal prepared for all relatives and friends in attendance. A visit to the cemetery may be included during which sutras are read and offerings are left at the grave.

Once the *nenki* end at the *tomuraige*, it is believed to mark a turning point in the process of the individual spirit of the dead. This is usually symbolised by removing the tablet of the individual from the *butsudan* and disposing of it in some or other way (Smith 1974:97-98).

Berentson (1985:35) points out that there is a difference between the *hoji*-ceremonies which are performed for the individual ancestors and those which are performed for the collective ancestors, namely the fact that the latter are supposed to be performed on a daily basis. Of course these ancestors are not addressed individually.

Daily rituals are purely domestic matters and there is no priest or temple required. Daily rituals or offerings at the *butsudan* are generally made in the mornings and evenings, but some families offer them once daily. These rituals are usually performed before the family sits down to a meal. According to Smith (1974:118) incense sticks are lit and offerings of rice and tea or water are made. Ooms (1967:241) says that praying, talking, reporting and giving thanks are all part of these daily rituals. Any member of the family may at any time go before the *butsudan* for this purpose. He also states that the most common form of an individual partaking in daily ancestor worship is a brief formal bow with palms together. The actual situation and the circumstances of the family and the individual will dictate which form of address is to be used when addressing the ancestors.

5.4.3 Ancestral rites and festivals

Berentson (1985:36) mentions annual and semi-annual rites and festivals during which domestic rites and temple festivals are interwoven with ancestor worship. The Bon festival, New Year Festival and Higan festivals which are held at the spring and autumn

equinoxes, are good examples of this. Of these seasonal holidays, Bon is undoubtedly the most significant in terms of ancestor worship.

The *Bon festival* is an intricate blend of different traditions and therefore has some rather conflicting elements. In this regard Inoguchi (1965:217-218) theorises that the dual nature of the Bon is partly ascribed to the fact that Buddhism married an old Japanese ancestor festival which previously focused on the joyous rendezvous of the living with their ancestors, with the Buddhist Bon festival with the salvation of souls as its primary focus²⁴. This duality is still very evident in the festivals today. In most places it is celebrated from 13 – 15 August.

In his discussion of Bon, Hendry (2003:32) argues that preparations for the festival are made prior to the 13th, for example the family grave is cleaned, flowers are left at the grave and incense may be burned. In some cases a path may be cleared and lights or torches may be lit to guide the ancestors home. At the family home the *butsudan* is cleaned, decorated and special Bon lanterns are hung around the altar and at the entrance. In some cases a special altar */shorodana* may be set up in the *tokonoma* in preparation for the Bon rites.

On the day of the 13th, flowers, incense, and food offerings are brought to the collective ancestral tablets which may be placed on the *shorodana*. The Bon lanterns are lit and a welcome fire is lit at the entrance. In many instances, family members go to the grave in the afternoon to meet the ancestors. During the evening the family gather in the home and the ancestors are addressed as if they are present (Berentson 1985:37).

The next day marks the climax of the Bon festival. On this day, the family will visit the grave and temple again. In the evening they gather in front of the tablets to make offerings and chant sutras.

On the 15th the ancestors are believed to return to their resting place and the farewell is celebrated in different ways. In some cases a farewell fire is lit at the entrance, similar to the welcoming fire which greeted the ancestors at their arrival and the family may visit the grave again to see the ancestors off. This farewell is marked by the reading of sutras and formal greetings which may be translated: “Come back again next year.”

During the Bon festival some spirits are given special attention, for example the spirit of a family member who died since the previous Bon festival and who is now supposedly celebrating its first Bon as an ancestral spirit. Smith (1974:102-103) also points out that in some cases rites are conducted for this *shirei* at a special altar in which the priest may play a more prominent role than the others. At the following Bon festival, the *shirei* will not be treated separately but will be considered part of the group of ancestors

Another group of spirits which Berentson (1985:38) mentions as receiving special attention are the *Muenbotoke* who are believed to be spirits who have no descendants or

²⁴ According to Yamaguchi (1985:45) some of the ancestors are suffering in hell by hanging upside down. The Bon festival and rituals is also aimed at their consolation and/or salvation.

who are neglected. A special altar is erected outside the family home for these “hungry spirits”.

The *New Year festival* (Shogatsu) is not generally accepted as an ancestral festival as Yanagida (1970:50-69) points out. Nevertheless, the ancestral tablets are removed from the butsudān and taken to the tokonoma for the New Year’s ceremonies. Smith (1974:98-99) argues that the ancestors are included in the New Year celebrations, in fact that Shogatsu was originally an ancestor festival. Hendry (2003:32) however states that the New Year festival is done to renew the family ties that imply ties with the ancestors.

On the other hand, the *Higan ceremonies* which are celebrated at the equinoxes are undeniably focused on the ancestors. The term *higan* denotes the action of leaving the circle of transmigration and reaching the shores of Nirvana which therefore points to the main purpose of the festival: To effect the birth of the dead in Amida’s Western Paradise (Tamamuro 1974:205).

There is some controversy and difference of opinion on who is actually included in the Higan celebrations. Ooms’ study (1967:240) showed that in Nagasawa Higan is considered to be primarily aimed at reuniting the family members and an opportunity for the family to visit the grave. During this time the grave is cleaned but not decorated and no rites are performed at the family altar. Beardsley’s study (1959:455) found the opposite to be true in Nijike where memorial tablets of the ancestors are removed from the butsudān and taken to the tokonoma and honoured in a ceremony not unlike the *hoji*. Once again, the emphasis is placed on Higan as a family ancestral festival.

5.5 IE SYSTEM

The influence of ancestor worship in the family structure is evident. This chapter has shown that it is crucial to the social and religious consciousness of the clan and has been a catalyst in the fostering of national unity and morality. The question now arises whether or not ancestor worship has played a significant role in the wider social context.

In this respect Hendry (2003:34) argues that the *ie* system is a fundamental part of ancestor worship and that it plays a crucial role in the cosmology, ethics and morality of the Japanese people. We therefore need to gain an understanding of the social and ethical features of ancestor worship as Hirai (1968:43) suggests. This is borne out by Takeda’s statement (1975:126) that one cannot fully comprehend the significance of ancestor worship in the Japanese context without taking cognisance of the social and religious significance of the *ie* lineage concept. Understanding the *ie* system is also crucial in order to understand Japanese culture in general.

5.5.1 *ie* system as the incessant entity

Fumie (1996:5) defines the concept of *ie* as the “stem family” which Lebra (1984:20) defines as “a vertically composite form of nuclear families, one from each generation”

and Johnson considers it to be “a series of first sons, their wives and minor children” (Johnson 1964: 839).

It is important to note that the term *le* also denotes the household which includes all the residents who each have their own role in ensuring that it is maintained. According to Funie, this co-residential and functional dimension of *le* is what sets it apart from the notion of a family. In this respect, Lebra highlights the duality of the *le* concept where neither the genealogical nor the functional view of the *le* can be negated. Therefore, the genealogical principle focuses on the legitimacy of succession (in other words the patrilineal order) where the functional notion considers mainly the economic or occupational continuity and day-to-day operation of the *le* unit (Lebra 1984:21).

There appears to be no English equivalent which accurately denotes the meaning of the term *le*. In some respects the term “family” loosely denotes the notion of the household. In some contexts, “family” can denote a genealogical succession of generations as in European aristocracy, but as Berentsen (1985:22) states, the word “family” has several other shades of meaning. Hendry (2003:26) considers “house” to be a better translation, because *le* may also signify a building, and the English term does again have a connotation of continuity, as in the expression, “House of Windsor”.

The notion of the “family system” was described in an attempt to explain the Japanese behaviour and cosmology in a comparative context. In truth, the notion of a “family” does not reflect the Japanese understanding of the term. As Hendry (2003:26) argues, that in terms of Japanese ideology it is better to use the indigenous term *le*.

Takeda (1975:14-15) refers to another Japanese term for the family namely: *Kazoku*. He points out that there is a significant difference between the two notions. *Kazoku* is a general concept used for the ultimate unit of social life for which most peoples have their equivalents. He points out that *le*, on the other hand, is a peculiar Japanese concept, which denotes *kazoku* in a fixed system. According to Takeda *Kazoku* is a nuclear family of one generation (starting with a marriage and ending with a death) while *le* is a multigeneration, everlasting entity, established by the ancestors and transmitted through the generations. He therefore concludes that *le* is essentially a fixed system and an everlasting entity which is of the greatest significance in terms of ancestor worship.

5.5.2 Ethic characteristic of *le*

Berentsen (1991:252-253) and Henry (2003:27) agree that Japanese ancestor cult does not have its own moral code but it nevertheless has significant ethical implications. Over many centuries it has been closely linked with Confucianism which provided practical ethical principles which included filial piety. Therefore, the ancestor cult has intrinsic ethical implications which extend to the *le* and the social significance of moral conduct.

In the Japanese cosmology, the family’s harmony as a unit supersedes that of the individual. Therefore, whether or not the interests of the family are served or not (including the living and the dead) is the touchstone on which moral and immoral conduct

is gauged. Considering that the ancestors are considered to be living members of the family unit, maintaining harmony with the ancestral spirits is of penultimate significance.

Furthermore, intrinsic to ancestor notion is the notion of expressing gratitude to the ancestors for acts of benevolence towards the family and the obligation lies heavily on the individual to repay this by his/her conduct.

5.5.3 Religious constitution of *Ie*

Henry (2003:26) argues that the living members of *Ie* includes the individual members of a particular house whether they are present or not. In other words, the membership encompasses all those who went before – the ancestors who as individuals have now faded from the memory of the current generation and the descendants who are yet to be born.

The butsudān where the memory of the ancestors is preserved serves as the charter for the continuity of *Ie* in the house. As soon as a member of a house dies, a tablet is made which carries the name which is given to him/her posthumously by the Buddhist priest who officiates at the funeral. The tablet is kept in the butsudān. These altars are still found in most houses which are accorded the responsibility to care for the departed ancestors and by implication the family grave. Offerings are made on a regular basis and special memorial services are held for the care of the soul as discussed previously. These continue until the soul is said to become part of the general or collective group of ancestors. Hendry (2003:31) points out that some believe that the *senzo* becomes a Shinto deity once all the Buddhist rites have been completed. There is another notion that these ancestors merge into a single spiritual entity from which the souls of young babies are drawn upon birth.

It stands to reason then that the Buddhist altar represents the continuity and existence of *Ie*. In some cases visiting members of the house will greet the ancestors first before they acknowledge their living relatives.

5.5.4 The relevance of *Ie* in modern Japan

Modernisation and urbanisation has brought about significant changes in Japanese community. As a result, families who reside in cities are no longer directly subjected to the physical *Ie* system which has been handed down from one generation to the next. Hendry (2003:34) points out that it is not unusual for an elderly parent to move in with a son or daughter in modern Japan (instead of the latter living with the parents in the familial home). Thus the concept of the familial home and structures of authority are subverted.

Hendry (2003:25) states that the post-war era and the age of industrialisation and urbanisation has changed the Japanese family structure significantly. As a result of urbanisation individuals have left their traditional ancestral homes for the cities. Their ties with the traditional temple have been severed. Modern Japanese live as smaller nuclear family units. Therefore, Morioka (1975:105) states that in many cases contact

with the family temple has become virtually non-existent. Urban priests are not effective in locating and reaching out to newcomers.

Hendry (2003:26) highlights the difference in the post-war period to that of the traditional *Ie*-structure in the pre-war era as being a definite move to smaller nuclear family units.

This New Civil Code which was drafted during the Allied occupation of Japan played an important part in this development. According to this policy *Ie* was abolished as a legal unit and was to be replaced by a nuclear family. A new nuclear family was to be registered at the marriage. According to this system, all the children have equal rights to inheritance and are to share the responsibility of taking care of their parents. Henry (2003:26) quotes the laws which were drafted according to the Constitution of 1947 which clearly state that "With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes" (Article 24).

This was obviously a radical departure from the traditional *Ie* system and therefore the vestiges of *Ie* system would not disappear overnight. The notion of *Ie* is still very much alive in Japanese cosmology in spite of urbanisation and modernisation. The question arises, why is this so?

One of the main reasons for the persistence of the tenets of the *Ie* system in spite of it having been abolished by law lies in the values which it propagated. According to anthropologist Takami Kuwayama (2001:24) the ideas and philosophy of the *Ie* system has not lost its appeal because it still addresses the principles and virtues central to the Japanese morality and cosmology.

Another reason for this may be found in Berentsen's discussion of Article 730. This article in the new law appears to contain a tentative approval for the old customs and traditions of ancestor worship. Article 897 which is mentioned above, indicated that the customs and practices of ancestor worship were no longer mandatory but optional. Article 730 on the other hand points out that family members should help one another which could imply that the practices are still desirable.

Hendry (2003:30) suggests that the fact that the NCC appears to extol Western values rather than traditionally Japanese values, may be another reason why the *Ie* system has survived in modern Japan. Some Japanese consider these values to be contradictory to traditional Japanese values and as a result many Japanese have attained a form of compromise to cope with these discrepancies. This appears to be supported by Fumie's research (1996:5) which pointed out that notwithstanding the change in family structures to the nuclear family (as opposed to the three generation families of the past) the majority of Japanese still practice a co-residency living arrangement with their elderly parents.

5.6 ANCESTRAL RITES: RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

When one considers the religious implications of ancestral rites it is important to bear in mind that Japanese ancestor worship does not constitute a consistent religious system per se. The religious implications of ancestor worship particularly pertaining to death and the afterlife tends to present us with seemingly contradictory ideas. These contradictions and inconsistencies can be ascribed to the fact that these rituals have their roots in numerous different religions. In the Japanese context some of the beliefs which originated from indigenous folk religion continue to exist although they are in direct opposition to some of the Buddhist tenets because of the synthesis the Japanese have achieved. These beliefs are more ideological and traditional than inherently religious. In this regard Bollinger (2000:94) notes that in Buddhism ancestral tablets were not used and the spirit of the dead was not believed to reside in them. Considering the complex nature of ancestor worship in Japan, one needs to explore the religious implications of ancestor worship in respect of life and death in general.

5.6.1 The living and the dead

When one considers the religious implications of ancestor worship it is evident that death is not considered to be an ending in itself but rather a portal to a new form of being in the afterlife. Berentsen(1983:9) in his exploration of the missiological aspects of ancestor worship points out that the various aspects of ancestor rituals reflect a significant feeling of closeness and continuity which Hori (1962:136) describes as an unbreakable spiritual bond which provides a plausible answer for the Japanese people's quest for permanence and eternity.

Clearly then the major premise of ancestor worship is that the spirit survives the body after death as Dore (1999:325) points out. The notion of the spirit's progress and growth is of particular interest to us. In this regard Tsuboi (1970:13-20) likens the process to that of a child who develops from birth to adulthood. Similarly, the spirit is believed to develop through similar stages from a dead spirit (*shirei*) to mature ancestorhood (*sorei*). He highlights the *imiake* (the so-called main change) on the 49th day after death – when the soul has completed its stay in purgatory (*chūin*), and the final memorial rite (*tomuraiage*) at the 33rd or 50th anniversary, which marks the decisive turning point between the period of growth towards ancestorhood and the state of ancestorhood itself as the most important stages. Once the soul reaches this stage it is conceived of as a supra-individual, unlimited, abstract being which may easily be identified with a specific *kami* or Buddha (Takeda 1975:105). Berentsen (1983:9) argues one can consider it to have been integrated with the popular interpretation of nirvana and the attainment of buddhahood (*jōbutsu*), also the point where the status of *hotoke* (good spirit) as accorded to the dead. At the same time the soul is believed to be on its way to ancestorhood.

Berentsen argues that the concept of rebirth appears to be primarily related to this process of growth which the soul is believed to undergo after death. Watanabe (1975: 119) points out that one also needs to consider the notion of the transfer of merits (*ekō*, *tsuizen ekō*) from the living to the dead. The process presupposes that the living will

perform the appropriate rites for the dead which will enable the soul to complete the process. Therefore, as Takeda (1975) points out the masses for the dead (*tsuizen kuyō*) are a means to gain merits on behalf of the *jōbutsu* of the departed. The corollary is therefore that if the family neglects these rites and masses, the shirei will not only not attain *sorei* status but it will be doomed to a miserable existence and may bring harm to the living (Watanabe 1975:119). It stands to reason then, that ancestor worship is further based on the premise that the dead are dependent upon the living for their well-being in the afterlife.

A further premise which underlies ancestor worship is the notion that the dead possess supernatural powers which enable them to exert an influence on the lives of the living. Therefore the dead may turn into vengeful and malevolent spirits or protective benefactors (Maeda 1965:56-69). The option of which role the ancestor spirit will assume depends heavily on the extent to which the living observe ancestral rituals and pay their respects to the spirits of the dead. Thus the daily prayer for protection and guidance are offered before the butsudān. This lends credibility to Berentsen's argument (1983:11) that the ancestral rites provide a vehicle for the living to intervene in the fate of the dead to further their salvation and the corollary is that if this is done, the dead will intervene in the fate of the living – therefore creating a circle of interdependence.

5.6.2 Human beings and divinities

The fact that the ancestral spirits are worshipped and petitioned for guidance and protection implies that they are endowed with supra-human powers and therefore their protective powers may be considered to parallel those of the kami who are worshipped at the kamidana. The kami are worshipped as tutelary gods of the house – similar to the role of the ancestors. According to Ariga (1969:375-377) they are in command and in many respects resemble what other religions would conceive of as deities (also Berentsen 1983:11).

Smith (1974:97-98) argues that the ritual that has to do with the transfer of the ancestral tablet from the bustudan to the shrine of the tutelary gods (kamidana) at *tomuraiage* and the removal of the name it was given posthumously, makes it clear. In this regard, Ariga (1969:361) draws a parallel in reverse between the growth of the dead to full equality in the world of kami to the traditional practice of conceiving of a kami as the ultimate ancestral spirit of the house. From the one perspective kami is seen in terms of origin, from the other, in terms of destination (Berentsen 1983:11-12).

It stands to reason that a clear understanding of the ancestral rites cannot be achieved without taking cognisance of the wider religious context. One of the basic principles of traditional Japanese religiosity is that there is a fundamental continuity between the human and divine. When seen in such a context, it is evident that these rites are embedded in a cosmic-monistic setting. The notion of continuity of and progress from the human to the divine is a major tenet of the universal notion of cosmic oneness.

Berentsen (1983) argues that the circle of interdependence between the living and the dead adds to the notion of cosmic continuity and apparently accounts for the notion that the ancestors are entitled to be worshipped. The element of religious homage is undeniable. Therefore, Berentsen (1985:261) argues that although ancestor worship is considered to have been thoroughly integrated into the life of the Japanese people in historical, religious and sociological terms, the practices exceed any sociological category. Consequently, this study holds the opinion that irrespective of how social structures may change, ancestor rituals and related beliefs will remain, unless these fundamental existential beliefs change.

5.7 ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND JAPANESE CHRISTIANITY

5.7.1 The response of early Protestant missionaries

Komuro (2003:60) mentions that Francis Xavier, who was the first missionary to reach Japan from the West, recognised that ancestor worship was the cornerstone of faith and the cement which held blood ties together in Japan. He realised that the penultimate concern of the Japanese was to ensure the salvation of the dead and more pertinently to save relatives from condemnation to hell. Consequently, missionaries were faced with the problem of how to deal with the issue of the salvation of the already dead. Xavier realised that he could not reconcile it with the theology of Christianity, but the fact that he acknowledged this need and concern was his contribution to Western attempts to understand Japanese religiosity.

The Japanese responded to Christianity in the 16th century much as they do today. Japanese who wish to convert to Christianity still find it very complex and problematic since they wish to be entombed eventually in the family grave which is usually Buddhist in nature. The Japanese people have a deep-seated desire to be buried with their kin in the hope that they will be together and reconciled after death.

According to Mullins (1998a:135-137) early Protestant missionaries tended to emphasise the disparity between the Christian faith and Japanese beliefs and practices regarding the dead. Most early missionaries held the view that these traditional beliefs had to make way for the Gospel and the true religion of Christianity. They further expounded the teaching that there is no hope for salvation for those who do not believe in Christ. Thus Kazuo Yagi (1988:30) outlines the “normative” missionary view as one in which human destiny is sealed after death – the soul is either sent to heaven or hell. It is too late to pray for the dead since their destiny has been determined for eternity. The second implication is the implicit alienation of the heaven-bound Japanese Christian from his non-Christian kinsmen who are inevitably doomed to hell. Given the fact that the individual is not given the same prominence as the well-being of the clan or house, this proved to be a major existential crisis for the Japanese who wished to accept Christ. As a result, Christianity was perceived to provide no comfort or hope for the larger extended family and to isolate the Japanese Christian from his or her kinsmen.

This was further emphasised by the demand for purity and abstinence from rituals. The first generation of Christians in Japan were under enormous pressure to comply with the iconoclastic policies of the missionaries. As a result many individuals who had converted to Christianity found themselves ostracised because of their abstinence from rituals.

5.7.2 Japanese Indigenous Churches' memorialism

5.7.2.1 Christianity and the existential crisis it held for Japanese Christians

Mullins (1998a:138) concluded that the Christian religion which held out no hope for salvation of the ancestors and which prohibited descendants from showing respect for the ancestors was no religion at all in the eyes of most Japanese. It broke the circle of continuity and posed a significant cosmological crisis because it appeared to entail eternal separation and alienation between the living and their dead. As a result, many Japanese Christians still perceive a gap in Protestant theology as far as the ancestors and relations between the living and the dead are concerned (Ohara 1992:257). In other words, the Christian faith did not appear to address these fundamental issues which are pertinent to the Japanese worldview.

In response to this, a number of indigenous movements which developed in the 1930s and 1940s attempted to bridge the gap between the Bible and Japanese folk religious concerns. Some of these groups such as the Glorious Gospel Christian Church, the Spirit of Jesus Church, the Original Gospel, and the Holy Ecclesia of Jesus were considered to be unfortunate examples of syncretism and to constitute a deviation from normative Christianity. These indigenous leaders, nevertheless, regard their views as Biblical and an extension of the Christian faith.

Ikegami (1991:66-67) points out that although they have sought to find a synthesis between their Christian faith and traditional practices, these churches did not disagree fundamentally with the missionary teachings on the native ancestor worship (as nothing more than idol worship). In fact, the Spirit of Jesus Church actively assists members in disposing of the altars, tablets and amulets. They consider the ancestor worship to be in violation of the second commandment which cautions against worshipping false gods. In spite of this symbolic rejection of traditional practices, the Spirit of Jesus Church does not neglect the ancestors.

5.7.2.2 Memorial services within Japanese churches

According to Mullins (1998a:143) memorial services are common in the churches and non-church movement. There appears to be no set rituals for these memorial services and the practices vary significantly. While some individuals opt for family services in the home, others participate in the memorial services of the church or non-church group to which they belong.

Many indigenous church movements permit their members to maintain a traditional Buddhist altar in the home. An example of this is the Christ Heart Church which per-

ceives no conflict between the Christian faith and ancestor worship. On the contrary, they encourage their members to show respect for traditional customs. Participation in Buddhist ancestor rituals with non-Christian family members are not perceived as acts of lapsing or apostasy. The Holy Ecclesia of Jesus, on the other hand, encourages its members to maintain a Christian family altar as an alternative to the traditional Buddhist altar for prayer and worship. They have replaced memorial tablets with small wooden crosses which have the spiritual names of the deceased family members inscribed on them. This is clearly an attempt to Christianise the Buddhist convention of giving a Buddhist name posthumously to the deceased. By doing this, the Holy Ecclesia of Jesus believe that they are providing concrete and visible means for members to show non-Christian relatives that they still have respect for the dead (Mullins 1998a:144).

However, it is important to note that not only indigenous movements adapted Christian practices to ancestral rituals. Mullins (1998a:144) refers to the findings and conclusions of David Reid, Nishiyama Shigeru, David Doerner and Berentsen in this regard:

David Reid found that the United Church of Christ in Japan has adapted Christian practices to indigenous ancestral rituals. Similarly, Nishiyama Shigeru's study of the Anglican Church indicated that the ancestor worship served to transform the practice of Christianity. David Doerner's survey of a Roman Catholic parish also showed that they had made numerous accommodations for the indigenous beliefs and practices for the dead. Berentsen argued that the Roman Catholic Church has a more natural inclination to assimilate elements of the ancestor worship than other Protestant denominations, mainly because of its tradition and practice of offering liturgical prayers and Holy Mass for the dead.

The point is that in spite of the churches having made numerous accommodations for these rituals, they have failed to address the underlying theological questions relating to ancestors and the dead.

5.7.3 Indigenous churches' concern for the dead

Mullins (2004:71) argues that the Japanese indigenous Christian movements' interpretation of the New Testament must be considered against the backdrop of their spiritualistic worldview which is similar in nature to the cosmology of traditional Japanese folk religion. Their main concern is spiritual salvation and the interdependence between this physical reality and the spirit realm.

As a result Sugita (1961:53-55), the founder of the Glorious Gospel Christian Church, encouraged his followers to pray on behalf of the ancestors because he stated that the Gospel of Christ could reach them in the afterlife. There is no foundation for this belief in Scripture that those whom we pray for will be saved, neither does the Bible instruct Christians to pray for the dead.

In attempt to answer this Sugita (1961:53-55) claims that God expressed his paternal concern for mankind when he sent his Son to die for the sins of the world. He believes that it is inconceivable that this redemption only applies to those who have had the opportunity to encounter the Gospel over the past two thousand years. He cites

Peter's claim that Christ descended into hell and preached to the imprisoned spirits as a clear indication that God cares for the dead as well as the living. He therefore concludes that Christians ought to pray for the spirits of the dead, but should not automatically assume that each person prayed for will necessarily be saved.

Mullins (1998b:55-56) further mentions the concept of communal salvation and the notion of familial solidarity which give form to the Japanese conception of the salvation of the dead. When one considers Paul and Silas' words to the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31) from a Japanese cultural perspective and take the words, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household," at their literal meaning it appears to provide grounds to include present and past members of the household. It also appears to underscore the notion of interdependence. This is further supported by the notion that the actions of one will be to the credit of the other. Some Japanese Christians have attempted to illustrate this by referring to the fact that Abraham was called by God and became a source of blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis. 12: 1-2). Thus an individual's salvation in Christ can become the source of blessing to others, both the living and the dead.

Mullins (2004:72) further relates the concern many Japanese Christians have about the salvation of their ancestors and a fear of possible misfortune which they may suffer at the hands of malevolent spirits. These concerns are deeply entrenched in the Japanese psyche and firmly rooted in Japanese history as Hori (1994:72-73) states. Given these issues, Mullins feels that missionary theology provided little solace for the troubled Japanese who found themselves in an existential crisis. This highlights the need for pastoral care in the Japanese context which is seriously lacking in the Practical Theology curricula of Japanese seminaries.

5.8 CONCLUSION

From the discussion it is evident that in spite of the controversy regarding the origins of ancestor worship, it remains a significant part of the Japanese consciousness and cosmology. Although ancestor worship does not constitute a religion in itself it has become entrenched in the Japanese socio-cultural mindset. It was also strengthened by syncretising with principles espoused by Confucianism and Buddhism. This is similar to the way in which it has permeated the Korean cosmology and how the traditions manifest themselves in organised religion.

The religious aspect of ancestor worship is undeniable. As mentioned in the exposition on ancestor worship in Korea where it also manifested socially and culturally, it is intrinsically religious in that it implies a form of worship and divine appellation for protection and guidance.

As with Korea and Africa, ancestor worship in Japan proved to be a significant obstacle for the Christian church – more pertinently the Protestant churches. The Roman Catholic Church displayed a more accommodating attitude and has readily assimilated the traditions and Christianised them in an attempt to make the religion more accessible to the Japanese people.



What has been obvious from this chapter is that it would be foolish to ignore the issues and the implications it has for the Japanese people and their notion of salvation. Instead of negating the needs of the Japanese, one should take cognisance of it and use pastoral support to address their needs and help them realign their cosmology with the theology of the Gospel.

Consequently, we need to now turn to the Biblical view of ancestor worship in order to formulate an appropriate response to these phenomena. Chapter 6 will explore the Biblical issues related to ancestor beliefs.