

Ritual practices and daily rituals: an introduction to the anthropology of Japan

Course overview

The role of ritual practices in a country that has more than one festival on any given day of the year cannot be denied. It is a highly significant one that has pervaded the everyday life, where many gestures have acquired a ritual meaning, be it social or sacred. The present course aims to offer an overview of contemporary Japanese society with a focus on sacred rituals (related to religious practices) and profane rituals, those daily practices that have gained ritual characteristics: cyclic repetition in a pre-determined space, with pre-determined participants, roles, and activities.

Course goals

The students will become familiar with general concepts related to anthropology and ritual studies, and they will be able to apply them to contemporary Japanese society. They will be able to differentiate between universal and culture-specific aspects, and use this knowledge to analyze both sacred and daily practices.

Grading criteria

Class participation 10%

Response papers (2 papers, 800-1000 words each) 20%

Midterm 20%

Ethnography report (presentation 20% + paper 30%)

- The response papers are based on the readings indicate in the syllabus. Students may choose, but the response paper must be submitted by the deadline indicated in the syllabus (deadlines differ depending on the reading).
- The midterm includes questions from topics covered during weeks 1~6.
- The ethnography report is based on participant observation + academic research. The topic should be chosen by the midterm the latest. Oral presentations will be given during the last week of the course, and the written report (approx. 4000 words) will be submitted during exam week.

Textbook: Joy Hendry—*Understanding Japanese Society*, Routledge 2015

Class schedule (2 classes/week)

Jan 16 & 17 Class overview. Introduction to anthropology and ritual studies. Japanese mythology

Textbook: Chapter 1. Sources of Japanese identity: historical and mythological foundations of Japan

Reading: "Seeing the World" (Joy Hendry—*An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Palgrave 2016)

Takeshi Matsumae—"The Heavenly Rock-Grotto Myth and the Chinkon Ceremony" (text to be distributed by the instructor)

Jan 23 & 24 Encounters with the Other. Social structure and social practices

Textbook: Chapter 3. Socialisation and classification

Reading: Gavin James Campbell—"Mortification, Mockery, and Dissembling: Western Adventures in Japanese Etiquette" (Jan Bardsley & Laura Miller—*Manners and Mischief. Gender, Power, and Etiquette in Japan*, University of California Press 2011)

Jan 30 Community and daily practices

Textbook: Chapter 4. Community and neighborhood

Reading: Kenji Hashimoto & Jackie Miyasaka—"Class Structure in Contemporary Japan" Kalman D. Applbaum—"Marriage with the Proper Stranger: Arranged Marriage in Metropolitan Japan" (texts to be distributed by the instructor)

Fieldtrip to a matsuri

Feb 7 & 13 Ritual Japan. Shrine and temple, religious syncretism

Textbook: Chapter 7. Religious influences

Reading: John K. Nelson—*A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*, University of Washington Press 2000 (Kindle edition available; response paper based on one chapter)

Febr 14 & 20 Ascetic practices in contemporary Japan

Textbook: Chapter 7

Reading: Carmen Tamas—"Purification, Ecstasy and Enlightenment: Asceticism within the Nichiren Sect" (text to be distributed by the instructor)

Febr 21 & Mar 6 Purification rituals and practices

Reading: Carmen Tamas—"The Ritual Significance of Purification Practices in Japan" Hitomi Tomomura—"Birth-giving and Avoidance Taboo: Women's Body versus the Historiography of "Ubuya"" (texts to be distributed by the instructor; response paper based on the article by H. Tomomura)

Mar 12 & 13 Review & midterm

Mar 26 & 27 Festivals and rituals

Reading: Herbert Plutschow—"The Structure of the Festival" (*Matsuri: The Festivals of Japan*, Routledge 1996)

Textbook: Chapter 8. Ritual and the life cycle

Reading: Herbert Plutschow—"What are Matsuri" (*Matsuri: The Festivals of Japan*, Routledge 1996)

Apr 2 & 3 Rituals and daily practices

Textbook: Chapter 8.

Reading: Emiko Namihira—"Pollution in the Folk Belief System" (text to be distributed by the instructor)

Joy Hendry—"Humidity, hygiene, or ritual care: some thoughts on wrapping as a social phenomenon" (Eyal Ben Ari, Brian Moeran, James Valentine—*Unwrapping Japan. Society and culture in an anthropological perspective*, Routledge 2011)

Apr 9 & 10 Theater as entertainment and sacred practice

Textbook: Chapter 10. Arts, entertainment and leisure

Reading: Annegret Bergmann—"From Pleasure to Leisure. Attempts at Decommmercialization of Japanese Popular Theater" (Sepp Linhart & Sabine Frühstück—*The Culture of Japan as Seen through Its Leisure*, State of New York University Press 1998)

April—fieldtrip to a theater in Umeda (the date to be decided later)

Apr 16 & 17 Sacred performances. Review (+ Japanese theater performance in Umeda, Osaka; the date to be decided according to the school calendar)

Textbook: Chapter 10.

Reference: Benito Ortolani—*The Japanese Theatre. From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism*, Princeton University Press 1995

Apr 23 & 24 Ethnography reports. Presentations

May 7 Comments and discussion