

## *Molding of a Rite of Passage in Urban Japan: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*

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This article focuses on the Japanese childhood ritual of Shichigosan and its changes over the last two centuries. The transformation of Japanese society has affected traditional customs to a great extent, including rites of passage. Social and economic processes such as urbanization, the rise of a consumer lifestyle and the proliferation of commercial services influenced the shifting trends regarding the ritual that constitutes the case study of this article. Evidence of commercialization of the celebration and the presence of consumption are often categorized as negative indicators, implying a potential loss of ‘authenticity’. The discussion attempts to re-interpret the role of consumption practices, arguing that these can be viewed in more positive terms and indeed have a legitimate place within the creation of a ritual experience in modern urban contexts.

**Keywords:** ritual, consumption, commercialization, urbanization, social change

In the highly industrialized and urbanized society of contemporary Japan, the childhood ritual called Shichigosan is observed within the midst of a dense consumer culture. This ritual has roots in a pre-urban past when it was previously observed in various forms by children between the ages of two and seven. Today it is celebrated by children of three, five and seven years of age. These age restrictions are reflected in the name of the ritual itself, as Shichigosan<sup>1</sup> indicates the three numbers, literally Seven-Five-Three.<sup>2</sup> The actual date of the ritual is November 15<sup>th</sup> but the single elements of the celebration can take place on different days.<sup>3</sup> Typically, the celebration consists of worshipping in a Shinto shrine (or in Buddhist temple), a visit to a professional photo studio or a family feast in a restaurant. One of the most characteristic marks of the ritual is the festive clothing worn by the children, which is most often a traditional Japanese ceremonial dress. The formal professional photographs taken of the children dressed in elegant festive attire later occupy an important place in family photo albums.

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<sup>1</sup> The name, Shichigosan entered everyday use only around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before this period, a number of different names were in use to indicate the series of rituals that differed greatly by regions not only in name, but also in pattern.

<sup>2</sup> Today it is typically observed for three and seven years old girls, and five years old boys (at times boys of three as well).

<sup>3</sup> The date of the celebration varies in different parts of the country. In many regions the event was held on the fifteenth of the lunar month which was believed to be an auspicious day. Today parents take their children to shrines on the closest weekend either before or after the 15<sup>th</sup> of November.

Today, the Shichigosan celebration is one of the most popular ceremonial events in Japanese households. It provides an interesting example of a pre-urban traditional practice that has flourished in a highly urbanized and developed consumer culture. I argue that in spite of its commercialized aspects — or perhaps because of them — contemporary Shichigosan is a meaningful event for most families in present-day Japan. In this article I will analyze the historical process that produced the present ritual form and its meaning, and during which consumption has become an integral part of the ritual pattern.<sup>4</sup> I will investigate the effects that urban space and evolving urban lifestyle have had on the ritual. Phenomena such as commercialization and the ever-changing consumer lifestyle will be examined in relation to the alterations that occurred within the ritual during the discussed era. The individual actor in my description will appear not strictly as an observer of a ritual but also as a modern consumer.

It has been argued that the pervasive character of the market in modern industrial societies exercise a strong impact on rituals.<sup>5</sup> In the case of childhood rites in Japan, the commodification of childrearing (Creighton 1994; Kondō 1999) and the effects of the media have been listed among the main factors that influence today's ritual occasions celebrated by the Japanese family (Shintani et al. 2003; Ishii 2009). Also, several studies noted that in recent decades contemporary Western as well as non-Western industrialized societies have witnessed a revival of ritualism.<sup>6</sup> In a survey conducted within a Japanese childrearing circle in the early 2000s, Shintani et al found that young mothers observe rituals connected to children in a higher number than the generation of grandmothers used to do several decades earlier (Shintani et al. 2003). The authors argue that the revival and popularity of rituals are mainly due to the effects that commodification of childrearing and magazine reading have had on mothers in contemporary Japan (ibid 30). Discussions concerning the effects of the market on rituals often directly or indirectly imply that commercialization somehow contaminates and undermines the 'authentic' value or the essence of ritual occasions. The emergence of consumption, in particular conspicuous consumption, in the context of a ritual is often perceived by social commentators and critics as a threat. This threatening nature of

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<sup>4</sup> The present study is based on the research that I have undertaken for my doctoral dissertation.

<sup>5</sup> For examples in the Western context see the studies by Schmidt 1995 and by Pleck 2000 among others. For case studies in the Japanese context see Edwards 1989; Goldstein-Gidoni 1997; Ishii 2009.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion see Moore and Myerhoff 1977; Boissevain 1992; Berghaus 1998 and Grimes 2002.

consumption, or even the mere presence of advertisements, is seen as a threat to the 'sacredness' of ritual, as if consumption would have the potential to trivialize and somehow to contaminate the experience (Belk et al. 1989: 24).

I argue that consumption represents a meaningful act within the celebration and that its presence in the ritual practice has its legitimacy. Accordingly, I propose to view commercialization together with consumption as two aspects of an interactive process in which the ritual's meaning is created between observers-consumers on one end and the market on the other end. An analysis of this process can clarify some of the pertinent questions of the role rituals have in highly urbanized modern societies. This can further elucidate the various aspects of creating the ritual experience in the urban space as well as the role of consumption practices within this act.

## **Methodology**

While traditional rites of passage in rural settings have a rich literature stemming from folklore studies in Japan,<sup>7</sup> the subject of contemporary forms of rites of passage is an understudied theme in the scholarly literature.<sup>8</sup> For the history of the ritual in urban environments, I undertook an analysis of print media in the form of an extensive survey of articles of major newspapers in Tokyo covering the period from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. This section of data proved very useful since virtually no research had been done on the urban development of the ritual during this particular period.<sup>9</sup> I also examined articles in periodicals and for more recent data I turned to online sources (newspaper database, webpages of commercial activities, blogs etc.). In Japan it is principally the media that produces opinion polls and surveys on popular observances such as Shichigosan. The results of these surveys are then published and used to inform readers on changing trends and customs regarding celebration manners. Additionally, I examined publicity material and

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<sup>7</sup> See among others Yanagida 1935 1949; Ōtō 1968; Yagi 2001; Miyata 2007a, 2007b.

<sup>8</sup> Exceptions to this are represented by studies on weddings and funerals and other works on local rural versions of rites of passage. In English language see for example see Edwards 1989; Goldstein-Gidoni 1997; Robert Smith's *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan* (1974); Hikaru Suzuki's *The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan* (2001).

<sup>9</sup> Exceptions to this are represented by the studies of Kenji Ishii and Yūko Taguchi (Ishii 2009; Taguchi 2011).

websites of photo studios, rental shops, clothing retail shops, restaurants, entertainment parks, hotels, travel agencies and gift shops, all actively involved in the celebration of the ritual.

Another important part of my data comes from field trips in 2009 and 2010 during which I interviewed employees of institutions involved in the organization of Shichigosan. These were semi-guided interviews with priests and employees of two major shrines in Tokyo (Meiji and Hie shrines), and with employees of photo, beauty and rental studios. Unstructured interviews were done with families that experienced Shichigosan first-hand, as well as with families planning to perform the ritual in the near future.

### **Historical origins of Shichigosan**

Even though exact data on observance rates are not available, indirect data suggests that Shichigosan is among the four most popular rituals observed by contemporary Japanese families.<sup>10</sup> Families with small children dedicate great care and time to the preparation of the event. The ritual has a significant presence in magazines, on the Internet, in advertisements of several business activities, as well as in shop windows and shelves. While the ritual has numerous local versions with their own distinct path of development, in this paper I will focus on the urban context, with an emphasis on the Tokyo area. By doing so, I will pay less attention to other aspects such as the continuity of traditional patterns in non-urban areas of Japan. Shichigosan has its predecessors in various ritual observances that were associated in the past to certain ages seen as milestones in the child's life. Accordingly, the ritual is conventionally categorized in the literature under the heading, rites of passage. The category of 'rites of passage' has been first described as such by the French scholar, Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work published in 1909, *The Rites of Passage* (van Gennep 1960). The term labels rituals that mark important thresholds or transitions in human life which are often perceived by the community as moments of crisis. A number of theorists built on and further developed van Gennep's approach.<sup>11</sup> Among the most influential, Victor Turner drew attention to the liminal and transcendental aspects of the transition and broadened the applicability of van Gennep's theory to modern societies (Turner 1969).

Any social form is necessarily conditioned by socio-cultural factors of the given period. Past, pre-urban patterns of Shichigosan were determined by the traditional, close-knit

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<sup>10</sup> These data come from surveys conducted by Japanese governmental, academic and other private institutions on observance rates of various traditional and modern celebrations.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of authors and theories see for example Bell 2009.

community life typical to rural Japan until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Customs and ritual observances were informed largely by a cosmology based on the transition of the human soul. Later when folklore research undertook the work of studying the spiritual and material world of the Japanese village, it placed the rituals into the interpretative framework defined by this cosmology. Accordingly, rites of passage were explained as assuming the role of safeguarding the human soul during the phases of its transition between the earth and the spirit world of the afterlife. The transition periods between two stages, in particular those divided by the death or birth line, were perceived as unsafe. In this perspective, early childhood rites of passage were intended to symbolically strengthen the bonds of the child's soul to the human community during a period when these bonds were perceived as still lacking stability and firmness (Onozawa 1999; Itabashi 2007). Another important role of these rites was to establish a connection to the local tutelary deity (*ujigami*) by integrating the child as a new member into the parishioner community (Ōtō 1983; Suzuki 1998).

While this cosmology might have continued to inform ritual practice until quite recently, new meanings and functions started to appear in relation to Shichigosan in the urban environment of Tokyo of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Functions such as the integration into the local community, both with regards to a social as well as spiritual dimension, began to gradually diminish in the urban form of the ritual. The focus of the ritual shifted from the community to the family, a trend that can be observed in the evolution of other traditional rituals, too.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Shichigosan, the great variety of ritual patterns and names that characterized single areas of Japan, have gradually undergone unification. The particular socio-economic conditions and the politics adopted by the period's political authority, the Tokugawa clan (1603-1867) brought about an unprecedented urbanization in Japan (Kornhauser 1976; Francks 2009). This development produced an urban culture which gave rise to numerous customs still found in present-day Japan. Many of the characteristics that the ritual assumed in this particular historical period remained salient features of its contemporary pattern: emphasis on display of assets (among them one's dress and accessories), aesthetic and fashion awareness, and visiting a popular shrine. Generally, in the urban setting of the capital Edo (old name of Tokyo), focus was placed on the display of economic status since it was through economic means that social status came to be expressed by urban dwellers. The political context of the period deprived a large group of urbanites, especially merchants, of

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<sup>12</sup> Similar changes affected the ritual culture in other industrialized societies. See for example the historical account of North American festivities in Schmidt 1995 and Pleck 2000.

factual political power and thus, the display of economic assets became an important instrument to enhance status (Lindsey 2007). As a result, events that provided occasions for public display grew in importance. Public festivals such as fairs became popular and the emerging urban pattern of Shichigosan fit well in this context. The ritual form began to include a showy procession of family members (and often servants) that accompanied the child to the shrine. The shrine to be visited transitioned from the tutelary shrine of the family to the town's famous Shinto shrine, where the effect of public visibility was enhanced. In brief, the flourishing urban merchant society of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries gave its peculiar imprint to the celebration, and the form that came into being would soon spread in the following century to the rest of Japan.

### **Affirmation of the urban pattern**

After the political changes of 1868, Japan underwent large-scale industrialization and modernization.<sup>13</sup> Industrial growth, wider access to goods, and the development of advertizing industry all contributed to the popularization of the urbanized form of Shichigosan. Its commercialization proceeded hand in hand with the developing media, publicity and textile industries. Up until World War II, the urban pattern of Shichigosan was mainly limited to Tokyo, but within two decades it spread to every part of the country. Newspaper articles reporting on the ritual during this period elucidate the development of Shichigosan's form and meaning within the urban context.

The two dailies I analyzed, *Yomiuri Shinbun* and *Asahi Shinbun*, acquired a large readership not only in Tokyo but also in other parts of Japan soon after their first publications in the 1870s. Reflecting urban society and its lifestyle, they exercised a strong impact and helped shape the everyday views and life of people throughout the country. The topics that were covered with greatest frequency regarding Shichigosan included: commentaries and advice on practical matters such as the choice of adequate festive clothing, preparation of the festive meal; explanation of the historical origins of the custom; reports on the actual observance (appearing mostly on the day following the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, the official date of celebration) and others. Photos featuring families and children at Shichigosan published

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<sup>13</sup> In 1855 Japan was forced by foreign authorities to reopen its borders and to end its policy of seclusion. This resulted in the fall of the Tokugawa clan and the restoration of the imperial rule which officially starts in 1868. An extensive modernization and industrialization started afterwards and this brought about enormous changes in the political and social structure of the country.

alongside articles rose in number during the 1920s and 1930s as the result of improving photographic technology.

It is not possible to discuss in detail all results of this analysis, therefore I limit myself to highlight some of the most important outcomes. In general, it can be established that while in the first two decades (1880s and 1890s) an average of one-two article per year concerning Shichigosan appeared in the two dailies, starting from the 1900s this number grew to six per year. Similar trends can be discerned from advertisements which grew in number during the 1920s-1930s, reaching a peak of 16-19 adverts on goods related to the celebration of Shichigosan in 1934-1936. Whereas in 18<sup>th</sup> century Tokyo the ritual was mostly observed by well-standing merchant and samurai families, the ritual now enjoyed a growing popularity among all segments of the Tokyo population, which can be demonstrated by the slowly increasing media coverage of the event.

This development must be viewed against the background of the general socio-economic changes of the period. The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of industrial mass production in Japan. Goods became increasingly available to a wider sphere of the population. Large department stores, such as Mitsukoshi, were established and they were soon regarded as symbols of the modern lifestyle (Tipton 2008).<sup>14</sup> Latest trends in fashion and new technological innovations regarding housework were all prominently displayed in department stores, which greatly influenced the consuming public. The importance of festive attire in the celebration of Shichigosan was exploited by the textile industry and retail sector. As living standards rose and mass-produced goods became cheaper, more families were able to purchase new festive clothing for both mother and child.

The 1920s and 1930s are sometimes described as the beginning of hedonistic consumption in Japan, which means that consumption started not only to fulfill needs but also to provide pleasure and recreation (Clammer 1997). The first advertisements for the Shichigosan festive dress appeared in newspapers as early as the 1910s-1920s. Some of the major department stores launched special Shichigosan sales of festive outfits and accessories and these sales were advertised far in advance of the official date of the celebration. The most important department store, Mitsukoshi, built a whole marketing strategy on childrearing issues and as part of this initiative set up thematic exhibitions on childrearing items. Jones argues that these exhibitions can be seen as the first examples of modern marketing and as

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<sup>14</sup> On the role of department stores in the social life of the Japanese see among others the studies of Creighton 1992 and Francks 2009.

platforms to introduce the public into the material culture of modernity (Jones 2010:97). Generally speaking, the child and childrearing began to grow in importance for the marketplace and the celebration of Shichigosan is viewed as an important milestone within this development.

During the interwar period the word ‘fashion’ (*ryūkō*) started to appear with more frequency in articles reporting on trends in the Shichigosan dress style. Shichigosan dress in this period meant principally the Japanese kimono, although, the impact of Western culture on Japanese clothing habits grew in this time. It was in the interwar years that the notion of *preparing for* the celebration of Shichigosan first emerged. While earlier articles commenting on the celebration appeared mostly on the day following the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, now advertisements and articles targeting Shichigosan observers started to be published much earlier, days or even weeks prior to the official date. Today, the preparative phase, during which the family members plan all that is needed for the celebration, is emphasized both by actor-observers and the commercial sector. A thorough and timely preparation, from collecting information to purchasing the desired services and goods, is thought to be decisive for the successful outcome of the ritual event.

The emergence of commercial photography in the 1930s is another major factor. Advertisements of photo studios targeting families planning the Shichigosan ritual began to appear in newspapers as early as 1937. The most innovative photo studios started to offer bundled Shichigosan services, which included photography shoots combined with beauty salon and dress assistance, establishing a pattern that would later spread throughout the country. The popularization of these services was interrupted by the war, but afterwards in the 1960s and 1970s, photographs and services provided by professional studios became an integral part of the celebration.

### **The proliferation of services for Shichigosan**

The diffusion of the urban pattern of Shichigosan throughout the country in the postwar decades was fueled by rapid urbanization as well as standardization of a lifestyle divided between the urban and rural areas in Japan. The processes of social transformation, initiated in the prewar period and interrupted by the Second World War, soon restarted after the end of the war. The standards of living raised steadily and urban lifestyles spread quickly throughout the country. The dissemination of this particular lifestyle was amplified by the development of mass media, which was a prevalently urban-dominated media (Clammer 1997). The 1960s



also marked the era when Japanese capitalism entered the stage of mass consumption and the production-oriented economy gradually transformed into full-blown consumer capitalism (Vogel 1963). Consumption gradually became a salient feature of urban life. Francks's study on the history of consumption in Japan shows that among the factors that made this quick transformation possible was that consumption had played an important role in Japan's economy during the previous two centuries (Francks 2009).

The rapid and intense changes also affected celebration patterns, especially in urban areas. Changes in housing conditions, in the family structure and economic situation of the population as a whole all influenced the way important events in an individual's life were perceived and celebrated. The value system of the Japanese, particularly regarding the family, underwent a significant transformation. The size of the average Japanese family shrank and the lifestyle changed completely with respect to the traditional extended family model typical to pre-war rural settings. The 1960s-1970s witnessed the rise of the commercial service sector which, according to Marilyn Ivy, was closely linked to the trend that saw culture as something to be received passively, i.e. in the form of services (Ivy 1993:252). It was in this period that new services were introduced also to the Shichigosan celebration. The professional photographic service, the rental of the festive dress, professional assistance with dressing and beauty service have become standard parts of the Shichigosan packs offered by several commercial agents.<sup>15</sup>



Image 1: Showing the kimono for three years old girls; available for rent at a rental studio in a department store

<sup>15</sup> The traditional Japanese outfit, the kimono was by this time relegated to the ceremonial use. Today most mothers do not feel familiar with this garment and they usually need a help when putting it on.

The rising popularity of photo studios changed the entire celebration. The studio session, during which highly stylized photos are produced by professionals, has since been detached from the rest of the celebration, becoming an event in its own right. The production and preparation of the photo requires a significant time investment. The clothing is selected, the child is dressed, then adorned with make-up and other accessories, with his/her hair arranged by a professional hair dresser. It is a lengthy procedure and therefore it is advisable, if not necessary, to arrange this session well in advance — usually taking place on a different day from the one of the shrine visit and the festive family meal.<sup>16</sup>

The power photographs can have on the way memories are preserved has been noted in previous literature (Sontag 1979; Bordieau 1990). Photographs emerge as a tangible link that connects the family's present and past. In Shichigosan, the highly stylized photos add to the value of the celebration. The family album is often the place where distant relatives, grandparents, cousins make their appearance in the life of the family. Sontag also points to the fact that family albums are often the only place where the family still appears as an extended family (Sontag 1979:8-9). In contemporary Japan the diminishing number of extended families increase the symbolic importance of photo albums for the family members. The Shichigosan photo of the child is often sent by mail (or email) to relatives that could not partake in the celebration. Accordingly, the photo adopts the function to reestablish or/and reinforce kin relations. In brief, today the photo occupies a central place in the symbolic construction of the ritual's meaning. It is the object through which the family can create its own imagery and reaffirm its identity as a unit. Its significance is highlighted by the stylized and elaborate professional photographs, which on the other hand, also reflect specific aesthetic values characteristic to Japanese culture.

As for tendencies regarding expenditure levels related to the celebration, according to a survey targeting families observing Shichigosan undertaken by a professional female school, in 1977 the majority of families spent sums not exceeding 100 000 Yen.<sup>17</sup> Although, it is important to note that the percentage of those who spent more than this figure reached

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<sup>16</sup> Today, more than 80% of families turn to professional studios for their Shichigosan photographs (source: surveys of the Mikihouse website, 2010 and of the magazine *COMO*, 2010, September).

<sup>17</sup> 250 mothers were asked questions related mostly to their children's festive dress, its style, price and way of acquisition (purchase, rental, inheriting) (*Shūkan Yomiuri* 1977, December 3).

almost 40%.<sup>18</sup> Income levels had considerably risen by this time but this sum can still be considered surprisingly high in the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> In 1980, major department stores in Osaka and Tokyo reached a peak in their sales of Shichigosan-related items.<sup>20</sup> In the department store of Daimaru in Tokyo, the profits from the Shichigosan sale arrived at 100 million Yen in total, which was two thirds more than the sale figures of the previous year. From the early 1980s, all major department stores were installing special corners for the exhibition of Shichigosan outfits. The income pouring into photo studios during the month of Shichigosan (November) often helped balance poor sales figures from the rest of the year.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of convenient packages combining services of shrines and photo studios offered increased affordability to many families happy to celebrate in an appropriate way but without the necessity of exaggerated spending.

### **The effects of changing views on child and family structure**

In the postwar period, the market's development around Shichigosan was evolving in close connection to the rise of the market revolving around the child in general. This development was due to the changes that occurred in views regarding children. Children have traditionally been assigned high value in Japan (Hendry 1986: 34). On one hand, children were valued as labor force for their contribution to the household's economic activities, essential in the traditional agricultural way of life. On the other hand, children were also seen as potential successors of the family, which was an extended-type of household (so called *ie*) typical to pre-war Japan (Iijima 1991). The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, saw a shift in values attributed to children. Jones argues in his study that it was in this period that a modern concept of childhood emerged which placed the child into the center of the family's world (Jones 2010: 125). The child was transformed into the central figure of the modern family ideal and this altered patterns of childrearing in a significant way.

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<sup>18</sup> The expenditure was calculated from the sum spent for the festive dress of the child. 17% of families spent between 100 000 and 150 000 Yen for the festive dress, and 23% spent over 200 000 Yen.

<sup>19</sup> In 1977 a town employee earned around 280 000 Yen.

<sup>20</sup> Weekly Shūkan Gendai 1980, November 20.

<sup>21</sup> Information by the Japanese Association of Photograph Culture, quoted in the weekly Shūkan Gendai (1980, November 11).

In the decades after World War II, the child's schooling garnered increasing importance in the families' value system (Dore 1958). By the end of the 1960s, costs related to the education of children, and to childrearing in general, came to occupy a large share of family budgets (White 1987; Tsuru 2005). The rising costs of childrearing started to influence birth rate levels since families felt they were not able to provide financially for more than one-two children (Yoshizumi 1995: 4).<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the growing affluence of average Japanese families, the declining birth rate and the spread of consumer life brought about new patterns of indulgence. Spending on the child has become socially accepted as well as desired. A number of terms invented by the media highlights this phenomenon, such as the expression, 'five-pocket child' (sometimes called also 'six-pocket') which describes the child – one with few siblings in the family – as spoiled with gifts and affection by all adults of the wider family (parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles) (Creighton 1994).<sup>23</sup>

In association with this development, the child's 'consumer value' increased (Kondō 1999). Expenditure levels of goods and services related to childrearing grew substantially in the 1980s. This was the period when the effects of the declining birth rate began to be perceived. Between 1981 and 1999, the average annual expenditure on a child within the family doubled (growing from 164,000 Yen to 378,000 Yen) whereas the birth rate fell from 0.89 (in 1981) to 0.54 (in 1999).<sup>24</sup> The children's market has since become one of the most lucrative (Creighton 1994). As a result, the number of magazines and services linked to childrearing grew enormously. By the 2000s, these magazines have become the main source of information on childrearing issues for women who – due to the atomization of the family – lacked the network of female relatives that used to provide information on childrearing in the past (Shintani et al. 2003: 30-33).

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<sup>22</sup> The total fertility has never risen above 2.0 since 1973, and it has continuously decreased since then. In 2010, it arrived at 1.3 (Source: [www.mhlw.go.jp](http://www.mhlw.go.jp), access: 2011, January 20).

<sup>23</sup> Another example is the term *ichiji gōkashugi* that could be translated as 'luxurious one-child-ism'. The phenomenon is comparable to the situation in China where the one-child policy of the government, launched to control population growth, brought about the so called 'Little Emperor' syndrome referring to excessive forms of indulgence with which Chinese children are treated by family.

<sup>24</sup> General Affair Department, Sōmuchō, Survey on household economy (source: [www.sumitomotrust.co.jp](http://www.sumitomotrust.co.jp), accessed 2011, October 10).

The social phenomena described above are reflected in trends regarding the celebration of Shichigosan. Magazines, print and online, play an active role in the dissemination of information on the celebration. They promote Shichigosan as a major event in the life of the child and family. Personal accounts of families with celebration experience from preceding years, advice from experts for fashion and etiquette specialists as well as reports on new services and products are regularly published. In this way they provide an important source of information for those who are planning the event. Magazines play out a two-fold function: First, they introduce new services, goods and commercial opportunities, thus playing an important role in the promotion of new trends. Second, by publishing a large number of personal accounts of individual families (these accounts are only formally edited), the editors offer a platform where mothers — the main organizers of the event — can share their experience of the celebration. On the other hand, with continuously decreasing or stagnating birth rates, the market needs to compete for children in lesser numbers and accordingly, there is a perceived competitiveness in the market.

This trend has affected also religious institutions involved in the celebration of the Shichigosan ritual. As already mentioned above, the religious institutions traditionally involved in the celebration are Shinto shrines and to a much lesser degree, Buddhist temples, the two principal religious institutions in Japan. While Shichigosan traditionally belongs to the domain of Shinto, there are several Buddhist temples that are actively involved in the celebration.<sup>25</sup> This especially occurs in temples which have a reputation of safeguarding fertility related events.<sup>26</sup> After the separation of religion from the state defined by the 1947 Constitution, all religious institutions in Japan needed to cover their financial needs independently and therefore they needed to seek support in alternative ways. The number of worshippers thus became crucial as their contributions in the form of offerings and fees paid for the rites represented a major income source for these institutions (Nelson 1997).<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, major shrines and temples adopted diverse and multi-fold strategies in their

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<sup>25</sup> In the Japanese religious context single ritual events are not always strictly appropriated by one or another religion.

<sup>26</sup> One such example is Nakayama-dera in the Kansai region, described in the study by Reader and Tanabe, a Buddhist temple that capitalizes greatly from Shichigosan (Reader and Tanabe 1998:206-207).

<sup>27</sup> A significant number of rites (wedding rite, Shichigosan, baby's first shrine visit) are offered and conducted by Shinto and Buddhist priests for the worshippers for a fee.

endeavor to attract more visitors.<sup>28</sup> Shichigosan occupies an important place in these efforts. In the 1980s when the drop in child births brought about a decline in the number of visitors for Shichigosan observance, many shrines decided to set up their own Shichigosan service packages. Today, major shrines throughout the country offer special Shichigosan plans that are not dissimilar from those provided by commercial institutions such as photo studios or rental shops. The shrine visit continues to play an integral role in the Shichigosan celebration, although the other complementary services included in these packages (rental of dress, professional photo service) enhance the attractiveness of the shrine in the eyes of the observer-families, and simultaneously enhance the shrine's income. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that the role of the shrines (and temples) are not primarily as service providers, but as institutions that represent a physical and symbolical structure that is recognizable for most Japanese. On one hand, these institutions are associated with cultural traditions and hence, represent continuity with the past. On the other hand, they offer a symbolic framework to petition for spiritual guidance for the wellbeing of offspring. This instrument is traditionally regarded and perceived by most Japanese, more or less consciously, as sufficiently effective and acceptable.



Image 2: Assistant in the dress rental shop at the Meiji Shrine (Tokyo) welcoming families. Viewing and selecting children's costumes for the approaching Shichigosan celebration.

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<sup>28</sup> The involvement of religious institutions in commercial activities has never been seen as something improper in Japan. Both Buddhism and Shinto, historically catered for several this worldly needs of the population (see on this theme also Reader and Tanabe 1998).

### **Diversification and individualization of celebration patterns**

The latest developments in Shichigosan celebration patterns could be best characterized by the term ‘diversification’. New types of services and goods continue to be invented by market actors in order to satisfy clients’ needs. Photo studios, department stores, hotels, rental shops together with major shrines and temples promote their own Shichigosan sets which include complex set of services for more affordable prices. Publicity leaflets for these packages often arrive directly at the homes of families with small children. In the recent decade, along with standard service packs, extravagant options began to appear as well. Vacations to Hawaii, photographing in a studio imitating the atmosphere of Hollywood, celebrations in amusement parks (such as Disneyland) are but few examples of the excessive options available to be combined with the celebration of Shichigosan.

The development towards a multiplicity of celebration options and a diversification of services is congruent with ongoing changes taking place in contemporary Japanese society. Needs, desires, lifestyle and values are becoming more diverse and less conformed in Japan today. Plurality is acknowledged as one of the salient characteristics of modern Japanese family life. The market is reacting to this demand by reflecting the desire of individuals as well as individual families to differentiate themselves. The variety of celebration options for Shichigosan means that none of the existing patterns are labeled as the only acceptable or proper. Socially accepted patterns of Shichigosan today make it possible to accommodate the needs of particular families and offer space for the expression of individuality in the form of personal preferences.

Women’s role in the ritual must be addressed, as well. Mothers are the principal organizers and promoters of the Shichigosan celebration. The factors underlying this development are manifold. The first is connected to the place that Japanese women occupy in the modern family. Another includes the increasing importance of the preparative and planning phase of the Shichigosan celebration over the last few decades. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the division of labor in Japanese families gave Japanese women the control over the household as well as childrearing.<sup>29</sup> Decisions over the daily running of household, childrearing and education fell to women and it is their preferences and demands that represent the main motivating force for most of consumption that takes place within the family (Kuraishi 1990; Clammer 1997). The implications of these developments can be

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<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this subject see Hendry 1986; Imamura 1987; Lock 1988 and White 2002.

observed in the celebration pattern of Shichigosan. Today, the performance of Shichigosan requires a number of goods and services purchased on the market (dress, accessories, family meal, photo and beauty assistance etc.). Organizing and selecting options between the available services and goods requires a sufficient amount of research and a corresponding period of planning. The aim, as declared by most mothers, is to organize a highly successful celebration; one that is memorable and pleasant to all family members. In order to do so, mothers must become skilled organizers and also 'informed consumers'. Indeed, magazines and web sites all emphasize the importance of early preparation, underlining that the secret of a successful Shichigosan is an early start to planning. Mothers are encouraged to set up detailed schedules and they are guided by samples of calendars provided by magazines where lists of things to do, to decide, and to prepare, are inserted into tables divided by months and weeks.

Today Japanese women hold a central role in the construction of family life not solely on the physical level, but also on the symbolical level (Skov and Moeran 1995). Celebrations such as Shichigosan, connected to the first years of the child's life, acquire importance as milestones of the most intense phase of the childrearing period. These are the years when the family as a unit is affirmed and which represent the most tiresome period in mothers' lives. The celebration contributes to the symbolical construction of the family as an emotional entity. Moreover, for mothers it can represent an occasion when the fruits of the mother's labor performed thus far can be rendered visible and potentially rewarded.

## **Conclusion**

Rituals, even those claimed to have roots in the distant past, are never static events as they reflect changes in the social as well as economic context of the examined culture. Ritual, as any social phenomenon, needs to be congruent with the everyday life of its actors in order to be capable of fulfilling the needs of individuals and therefore it cannot be excluded from the stream of changes taking place within society. It has to interact in an ongoing process with its social reality. It is undisputable that the contemporary urban pattern of Shichigosan diverges in many aspects from the old rural forms. In the pre-modern society, the form of a ritual observance and its meaning were largely defined by the value system and cosmology of the traditionally organized society as well as by social class belonging. Customs and rules by which to abide were strictly delineated for all its members. With regard to the situation in present-day Japan, Ishii argues that these rules are missing and consequently, individuals find



themselves lost in the multiplicity of possible interpretations which are offered mainly by the marketplace (Ishii 2009: 190-203). I suggest, however, that a more constructive perspective should be considered when analyzing contemporary conditions.

Roots of many of the salient features of Shichigosan that characterize its present form can be found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century urban setting of Tokyo. The pattern that developed in that period offered sufficient space for the expression of the emerging urban culture. In the subsequent decades and centuries, when an elaborated consumer culture gradually developed in Japan, the urban pattern underwent further expansion. The impact of the marketplace increased and this affected ritual culture in general. However, this impact cannot be seen as occurring in a one-way process. Consumption is not solely an economic behavior, for it is embedded in the social, religious, and historical context of the given culture (Sahlins 1972; Douglas and Isherwood 1984; Miller 1987).<sup>30</sup> The innovative activity of the market is often a response to emerging needs from the side of the consumer, while at other times it can even precede them and make previously unimagined goods and services desirable. However, in each case the introduction and institution of new customs by the market is conditioned by the acceptance of a wide segment of the individual members of society. This acceptance is determined by cultural factors and must be congruent with existing values.

In the case of Shichigosan, its postwar development was encouraged by social phenomena such as the transforming structure of the Japanese family, changing views on children, declining birth rates along with changes in the overall lifestyle that brought the Japanese family to seek new ways of identity affirmation, unity and harmony. Celebrations such as Shichigosan can be excellent instruments by which these aims are at least partly achieved. One of the most important functions of family rituals lies in their ability to contribute to a symbolic constitution as well as reconfirmation of values to which the family wishes to adhere. Besides, the case of Shichigosan shows us that consumption practices can be viewed as an integral part in the process through which 'ritual experience' is created. Due to the variety of choices for goods, services and celebration patterns available to the observers, consumption becomes an interactive process between consumer-observer and marketplace/media. Consumption, with its variability, diversity and plurality can thus be interpreted as providing a platform where the creative and innovative part of molding the

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<sup>30</sup> More recent studies indicate that consumption and consumer behavior have a ritual dimension too and hence its symbolic aspects need to be taken into account (Rook 1985; Belk et al 1989).

ritual experience by the actor-observer can take place. While diversification of options to celebrate a ritual appears principally in the form of products and services made available and/or invented by the marketplace, consumption patterns act as a vehicle through which to express individual choices and personal preferences. Single families are thus enabled to interpret a personalized method to celebrate, thus rendering Shichigosan congruent with the needs of the modern individual as well as giving space to reconsider or reaffirm ideas about family, values, and aesthetic standards.

Finally, the study of a ritual can be useful and constructive in a number of ways. It can be regarded as a platform where the dynamics of social life in a particular cultural context can be observed. In the course of my work, Shichigosan unfolded as a shared platform on which basic social values, views on children and family life, as well as personal preferences emerged through expression. Whereas the commercial activities of the involved institutions profit from the event, it is in the families' hand that the ritual's meaning is created and shaped. Shichigosan today represents a valid and efficient instrument to which the Japanese family can turn to for a symbolic expression as well as an affirmation of its identity and image as a family. The celebration can be effectively used to express values and associated imagery in a manner that harmonizes with the priorities of contemporary Japanese society.

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