

### ***Rites of Passage in Japanese Traditional Culture***

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#### **Abstract**

The paper examines the rites of passage in Japanese traditional culture from the perspective of semiotic method, a study of signs, symbols and significations. Sign systems of traditional customs and rituals ensure transmission of cultural values and information between and within generations. Based on the analyses of concrete elements and symbolic content of life-cycle rituals of Japanese people, we determine the role and functions of rites of passage in traditional Japanese culture, as well as the relation between archaic and modern elements of such rituals, including nowadays changes in perception and interpretation of the meaning of the ceremonies concerning the rites of passage. More precisely we distinguished three aspects of sign content of rites of passage: syntactic (formal relation of signs within a sign system); semantics (symbolic content of signs); pragmatics (relations of the sign to the receiver, interpreter). Results showed that symbols and signs enclosed in life-cycle rituals and related ceremonies not only enable identification of individuals with community, but also serve as an archiving tool for maintenance and continuity of cultural values and cultural-specific knowledge accumulated over the historical development of the whole Japanese society.

Keywords: rites of passage, semiotics, cultural signs, traditional culture.

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## Introduction

「会うは別れの始め」

Meeting is only the beginning of separation  
- Japanese saying

The Rite of Passage ritually marks a person's transition from one status (from one role, phase of life, or social status to another). Classic parts of rites of passage include main three stages as: separation - the first stage of a Rite of Passage in which individuals are removed from their community or status (separation from normal life); liminal – the stage of a ritual, particularly of a Rite of Passage, in which one has passed out of an old status but not yet entered a new one (on threshold) state of between; and reincorporation - the third phase of a rite of passage during which participants are returned to their community with a new status (reincorporation into society with new status) (Van Gennep, 2004).

Different cultures around the world have rites of passage, and they follow a similar patterns corresponding with important events in human life, like birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership and death.

## Research Methodology

We examine Rites of Passage in Japanese traditional culture from the perspective of Semiotic Method. Semiotics is a study of signs, symbols and significations.

The sign systems of traditional customs and rituals, including the Rites of Passage, ensure transmission of cultural values and information between and within generations.

Authors distinguish three aspects of sign content of Rites of Passage: syntactic (formal relation of signs within a sign system); semantics (symbolic content of signs); and pragmatics (relations of the sign to the receiver, interpreter).

「七つまでは神の子」

Before Seven, among the Gods  
-Japanese Saying

## Rite of Birth in Japanese Culture

Japanese people has its unique ritual to welcome children into the world and integrate them into the community. Traditional birth related rituals and customs can be divided into the following components: pre-maternity customs and beliefs; childbirth rites and socialization ceremonies.

### Pre-maternity Customs and Beliefs

Japanese birth related ceremonies are rich of magical and rational components, as praying to the souls of ancestors and the manufacture of amulets, as well as the use of traditional medical knowledge. It is believed that the child begins to live four months before actual birth, i.e. when the soul tamashii appears. That is why even nowadays

the age of Japanese people often counted not from the date of their actual birth, but since the moment of the “invasion of the soul”.

First Celebration that takes place during pregnancy is called Obi-iwai - celebration of the maternity band. During the Edo Period (1603-1867), in which infanticide was common, it was forbidden to practice abortion after the celebration of this ceremony. Usually this ceremony is held on Dog's Day, because dogs are said to have an easy delivery. Rice cakes may also be distributed this day, as an announcement of the expected birth.

### **Childbirth Rites**

Japanese birth customs include the special rites for an easy childbirth that is conducted by praying for O-Jizō-Sama or Jizō-san and Kannon Bodhisattva, asking for an easy delivery and easy child-birth. It is believed that the Ubu-Gami, the God of Birth will bring the tama - the soul of a child at the moment of birth.

In ancient Japan, a special birthing hut - Ubu-ya was constructed within the hamlet and new mothers stayed there for 30 days after giving birth. This custom is rooted on the Folk perception of pollution.

On seventeenth day a new-born Japanese bodies are believed to embody godliness, that is why they are dressed completely white. White colour symbolises clean and untarnished state. After the 17<sup>th</sup> days in age, baby is finally believed to be actual child, rather than gods. When this happens, they make the transition from white attire for different colours.

One of the symbolic rite in Japanese culture is related to the conserving of the umbilical cord. This cord is thought to have a strong link to the well-being of the babies, that is why Japanese parents look after them so carefully.

Birth rites in Japanese culture also include the recuperation stage that constitute an important ritual following the child birth in Japan, when new Japanese mothers often return to their parents' home for a month.

### **Socialisation ceremonies**

First rite of socialization is presented by celebration of O-Sichiya that means a naming ceremony and introduction to the community, and it takes place roughly a week after the new-born enters the world. Once the baby's name is decided, the father will have it handwritten in Japanese calligraphy on the Meimeisho, a so called name certificate. The Meimeisho can be in a different form (scroll, poster and etc.) and it is usually displayed in the house.

Relatives and friends will gather around the whitely dressed newborn and present their gifts or Shugibukuro – a monetary gift in a special envelope. Then the celebratory dinner is served, which compulsorily include two symbolical dishes: Sekihan - a red rice and Tai - sea bream. In Japan, people has been considered that color of red is a lucky color because it associates with the color of the sun, what about the sea bream, the Japanese word for sea bream, tai, sounds similar to the word "mede-tai" (happy, festive, good luck, auspicious). The color of sea bream is also red,

so it has been thought fish of felicity and a necessity for dishes for happy events like naming ceremony. Thus, Naming Ceremony is one of the major celebrations in the life-cycle rites, since the name defines a status of the child in the community of people and is considered to be one of the essential symbols, that distinguish the child from the world of spirits. Therefore, in the first week of its life the child gradually receives the signs of belonging to the social community: first cloth, name and token gifts.

Then follows a Miamairi ceremony - a first Shrine visit, conducted usually a month after the birth, and this rite represents the end of a period when the mother is regarded as polluted. This ceremony is marked with distribution of small gifts of thanks to relatives and neighbours.

Approximately 100 days after the birth, Japanese families conduct a ceremony of *kuizome*, which means a ritual weaning, when the baby is served a taste of the food, having symbolic meaning of long-life, prosperity and well-being.

### **Children's Day**

In ancient Japan people celebrated Boys' day and Girls' Day separately. The Boys' day was called *Tango no Sekku*, and was celebrated on the 5th day of the 5th moon in the lunar calendar or Chinese calendar. After Japan switched to the Gregorian calendar, the date was moved to May 5.

While Girls' Day called Dolls festival - *Hinamatsuri* was celebrated on March 3. In 1948, the government declared this day as a national holiday to celebrate the happiness of all children and to express gratitude toward mothers. Therefore, the holiday was renamed as Children's Day - *Kodomo no Hi*.

This day's celebrations involved the raising of the carp-shaped flags called *koinobori*. Carp is closely related to the Japanese national identity and has a deep meaning. It signifies perseverance, due to the fish's ability to swim upstream, never stop moving, and resist simply "going with the flow." Moreover, according to the ancient Chinese legend a carp that swims upstream becomes a dragon. That is why all Japanese families fly *koinobori* banners in the shape of a carp for each child in their house, especially for boys. Samurai warrior figurines and samurai *kabuto* helmets are also displayed in homes to inspire strength and bravery.

While a separate holiday called *Hinamatsuri* or "Dolls' Day" is celebrated for happiness and development of young girls. Even now, on this day girls still receive dolls that had been passed down to their grandmothers and mothers. A set of ornamental dolls called *hina-ningyo* represent the Emperor, Empress, attendants, and musicians in traditional court dress of the Heian period.

Japanese families generally start to display the dolls in February and take them down immediately after the festival. According to folk beliefs leaving the dolls for a longer period after the end of festival will result in a late marriage for the daughter.

## First Birthday celebration

Japanese culture pays a strong attention to the first Birthday of a child, that marks the learning to make first steps. In ancient Japan it was used to tie to the baby's back a bag of rice to make it fall down, during this day Japanese families also made some predictions on baby's future by making it choose certain object.

「三つ子の魂百まで」

Mitsugo no tamashii hyaku made

The Soul of a Three Year Old Until a Hundred

- Japanese saying

## Shichigosan

Japanese traditional culture has unique celebrations that mark the stage of children's growth and one of the brightest examples of such initiations is Shichigosan. This tradition has more than 300-year history and constitute one of the milestones when the rites of passage were performed. In modern Japan Shichigosan ceremony is officially celebrated on November 15, when children visit the Shrine in traditional kimono for rites of protection and prayers for good fortune.

One can notice that the ceremony Shichigosan, which literally means the ages of 3-5-7 years, present only the odd numbers. According to folk beliefs odd numbers have a sacred meaning and bring good luck based on the yin-yang Chinese philosophy of feminine and masculine force. This ages mark the stage of children's growth.

During the ceremony parents usually ask a nearby shrine to perform a purification rite "Ohararai" and recite a Shinto prayer "Norito" for their children's strong health. The next symbolical rite being held during celebration of Shichigosan is a giving for a child a "chitose ame" – it is a long stick candy given to children celebrating Shichigosan. "Chitose ame" literally means 1,000-year candy and it comes as a pair of white and pink sticks, with symbolical colours indicating good luck, in a paper bag with symbols of longevity and good luck.

It should be noted here that the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of child is considered as particularly significant, which marks the start of new period in child's life. In middle ages, boys of aristocratic families wore hakama for the first time. Later on this ceremony was conducted at the age of 5, when Samurai children were introduced to Daimyo. The 5-year-old boy was called the Hakama-gi and wore the hakama (the male kimono).

The ceremony of Shichigosan also involved the rite of "Kamioki" – leaving hair, when boys and girls start growing out their hair. Folk belief states that diseases entered the body through the hair, and Japanese people would shave their children's hair until they reach 3 years old.

Additionally, Shichigosan ceremony include the rite of "Obotoki" when girls turned 7, parents celebrated the "obotoki" rite, in which their daughters went from using straps to secure their kimono to wearing obi.

Thus, the Shichigosan ceremony marks milestones in Japanese culture when rites of passage were performed for children.

### **Coming of Age Ceremony**

The rite of initiation to adulthood in Japan is called as Coming of the Age ceremony. This adulthood initiation rite had a highest semiotic status in Japanese traditional culture. The earliest official record of Rite of Adulthood – Coming of the Age ceremonies in Japan dates back to the Nara period (710-794 AD). Moreover, in Heian period (794-1185 AD) children were not recognized as officially gendered before they undergone a special ceremony for adulthood: Genpuku for the boys and Mogi for the girls.

### **Ancient Adulthood Rites for Boys**

Adulthood Rites for boys in ancient Japan used to be held around age of 11-15 years old. This initiation rite was called as Genpuku, which is considered to be an important ritual that affected the whole life course of a boy. In ancient times, in the period between early childhood and Genpuku, Japanese boys were called as wakashuu.

Genpuku rite was known as kanrei (cap ceremony) amongst the court nobility of ancient Japan and involved special guidance before initiation rites. Capping ceremony was the main part of Genpuku, which symbolized a ritual clothing ceremony of the child to adulthood wearing. Genpuku rite also involved the visit to the Shrine to be presented with first adult wear.

After Genpuku, Japanese youths were expected to do adult labour, where samurai-class men acquired full warrior status and could fight in open battle. They were offered a samurai helmet and received special hair-style – Sakayaki, symbolizing the ritual offering to Gods.

Thus, Genpuku ceremony consisted of important symbolic element including: adult cloth, new hair style and token gifts, ceremonial court cap – kanmuri in case of initiation of the boys from noble families or samurai helmet, sword and armour in case of samurai family.

Therefore, Genpuku Rite was designed to model necessary qualities and skills in children required in their new adult status.

### **Ancient initiation rites for girls**

Traditional Japanese rites of adulthood for girls was called Mogi that involved certain symbolical ritual elements such as new adult clothing for girls with presenting a token gift as pleated skirt. Girls also blackened their teeth, this rite was called Ohaguro. Initiation rites for girls also included the rite of Hikimayu – removing eyebrows and repainting it in a new make-up. Then girls received a new hairstyle by tying the long hair on a top.

Moreover, girls were taught about new social responsibilities and traditional customs, art and history, as well as the way of being a good wife and mother.

Thus, we can state that main functions of rites of adulthood is to help develop a sense of adult responsibility in children and to help shape responsible and productive community members in an adult society.

### **Coming of the Age in Modern Japan**

In our modern time most of the societies have abandoned the adulthood initiation rites, and symbolical meaning and pragmatic aspect of these rites are being forgotten. Often contemporary transition to adulthood is marked only by the state of reaching of a certain age, that enables a person legally to be regarded as an “adult” person.

For instance, in modern Japan “Coming of Age Ceremony” is officially celebrated on January 15 each year. The ceremony is held primarily at a local level and sponsored by the government. After their 20<sup>th</sup> young Japanese people become officially adults and receives certain legal rights (rites to vote, manage their own life and etc.). This occasion also corresponds with graduation period, thus marking the end of childhood and start of adulthood.

This occasion in contemporary Japan involves wearing of traditional kimono since the Coming of the Age is an opportunity to dress in echo of old traditions: girls wear Furisode, bright kimono with long sleeves, traditionally designed for unmarried women.

Some adults may visit Shinto shrines for purification ceremonies similar to those held for children at 3-5-7.

Contemporary ceremonies of Seijin-no-hi is a result of long-term evolutionary change of Japanese rite of passage ceremonies, that reflect the change of cultural themes and values, as well as the process of historical adaptation of traditional rituals to a modern setting.

In recent years Japanese society have been questioning the relevance and significance of the very concept of Seijin-nio-hi and the society feels concern about the possible loss of the meaning of Coming of the Age, which is meant for helping youths to smoothly change to adult status and become responsible and mature individuals in an adult community. However, despite of the shift of the practices of celebration of the Coming of the Age, it is certain that Seijin-no-hi will remain a significant part of Japanese traditional culture, and initiation rites of new generations of Japanese people into adulthood status by the ceremonies of Seijin-no-hi will continue into the future.

### **Rite of Marriage**

Shinto Wedding represent a traditional religious ceremony of Japanese culture. However, nowadays the wedding ceremony may contain the elements of traditional Shinto style and western elements. In this paper we will particularly focus on traditional rite of marriage according to Shinto belief.

The current Shinto wedding ceremony is considered to be originated during in Taisho period. Shinto style wedding ceremony is full of symbolic elements ordered by



special rite series. Wedding rite starts with *sanshin* ceremony, which literally means procession, when ritual musicians and a Shinto maiden lead the bride and groom and the other wedding participants to the shrine. Then follows the special rite of purification - *shubatsu-no-gi*. At the beginning of the ceremony, a Shinto priest begins the wedding ceremony by the purification ceremony of bride and groom, and all participants; after purification rite the priest announces their marriage to the gods or spirits (*kami*) of the shrine and asks for their blessing, this rite is called as *Norito-soujou*. After the announcement of the marriage, a Shinto maiden dedicates a sacred dance to the *kami* – *Kaguramai*. Wedding ceremony includes also a special symbolical act called *Chikai-no-sakazuki*, when the bride and groom exchanges nuptial cups of the rice wine that was placed before the *kami*. This Japanese ritual is known as "*san-san-kudo*" and has a deep meaning. The rite "*san-san-kudo*" should be performed by the bride and groom and their parents; each of them drinks 3 times of sake from each of 3 cups. The first 3 represent three couples, the bride and groom, and their parents. The second 3 represent three human flaws: hatred, passion, and ignorance. If we look at the semantics of the term "*san-san-kudo*", we can find that "*ku*", or 9 is a number that brings good luck according to folk belief, and "*do*" means deliverance from the three flaws stated above.

Shinto style wedding ceremony then continues by *seishi-soujou*, when the groom reads out the marriage vow in Japanese and the bride and groom make offerings of *tamagushi* to the *kami* (*Tamagushi-hairei*) to vow their marriage. And finally, the young couple exchange of rings - *yubiwa-no-gi* and drinks the rice wine together (*Shinzokuhai-no-gi*) by marking a strong bond between the couple's relatives, they share the rice wine dedicated to the *kami*.

Another symbolical component of the wedding ceremony is a rosary with 21 beads that represent the couple, their families and the Buddha all joined on one string to symbolize the union of the families. Wedding ceremony also involves honoring the parents with offers of flowers, a toast, or a letter expressing their love and gratitude.

Additionally, it is common to decorate the Shrine with origami cranes, that symbolize a longevity and prosperity and usually 1,001 gold origami cranes are folded to bring luck, good fortune, longevity, fidelity, and peace to the marriage.

Moreover, the dressing style of the bride also has a rich symbolical meaning. Traditionally Japanese bride wears two kinds of wedding outfits: the *shiro*, which is a white kimono worn for the ceremony and the *uchikake* kimono which is a patterned brocade worn at the reception. The hair of the bride is worn in a bun with colorful *kanzashi* hair accessories. A white wedding hook called the *tsuno kakushi* finalizes the hair decoration for bride. This *tsuno* horns symbolizes obedience. The bride also carries a tiny purse (*hakoseko*), a small encased sword (*kaiken*), and a fan that is worn in the *obi* belt that represents happiness and a happy future.

The wedding ceremony is followed by a feast, where different foods are served and all have special meanings, for example lobster might be served because red is a lucky color or clams served with both shells symbolize the couple's union.

Thus, we can observe that Japanese traditional wedding ceremony is a complex system of elements that include ritual acts, material objects of culture as well as



folklore. Every act and ritual of the wedding ceremony is rich of symbolical meaning and deep functional meaning devoted to symbolically protect bride and groom as well as motivate certain culturally prescribed behaviour of the newly marriage couple and their relatives. Moreover, the rites of marriage are devoted to the initiation of the bride and groom to the whole society in a new status as a newly formed family unit.

In recent years western style wedding ceremonies have replaced traditional Shinto wedding rites. Most of the contemporary Japanese weddings present a combination of “traditional Japanese” and “Western” wedding elements, and this trend is playing a significant role in constructing modern Japanese cultural identity, by “elaborating multifaceted and highly commercializes” event in the life of modern Japanese people (Edward, 1989).

### **Rite of Eldership**

Rite of Eldership in Japanese society has a very strong traditional value since the elders represent tradition and wisdom of the past, who as such possess the highest status in all societies and act as role models for younger generation. In Japanese folk believe it is considered that elders become Ancestors, who link human and God together, and they are often called upon in times of need.

Japanese rites of eldership and ancestor worship is comprised of several birthday celebrations and mortuary traditions.

In Japan people start to celebrate rite of eldership from ages 60 to 111, where each birthday celebration series are named accordingly, particularly 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday is a Kanreki celebration, the follows 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday – Koki, 77<sup>th</sup> – Kiju, 80<sup>th</sup> – Sanju, 88<sup>th</sup> – Beiju, 90<sup>th</sup> – Satsuju, 99<sup>th</sup> – Hakuju, 111<sup>th</sup> – Jooju.

Kanreki celebration (60<sup>th</sup> Birthday) marks first initiation to eldership. Moreover, it marks an auspicious occasion when two zodiac signs of elder’s birth year – one in the 10-year cycle and the other in the 12-year cycle – converge again. According to Japanese believe, person who reaches the age of kanreki completes a full circle to attain “rebirth”, and during such celebrations one may notice the elderly people’s symbolical baby attire – red vest and red cup, like a new-born baby. In earlier times not many Japanese reached that age.

The series of special birthdays in Japanese tradition initiate people to different stages of old age. Therefore, it can be regarded as rites for eldership that are culturally guided by a society.

We can witness how Japanese people continue to conduct Rites of Eldership even after the death of a certain family member. This is done in a tradition of Ancestor Worship.

### **Rite of Ancestorship**

Ancestor worship is constituted of symbolic rituals as food offerings at the family altar to honor the spirit of ancestors. The offerings may include tea, rice, even flowers. The next important component of Ancestor Worship is invitation of Priest from the

family temple to chant a sutra on the monthly death anniversaries of ancestors. Where the Priest play the role of “semiotic mediator” between the family members and ancestors (Peirce, 1940). Third element of ancestor worship is presented by the visits to a family grave, usually during the religious weeks marked by equinoxes and O-Bon festivals conducted in mid-summer. All these rites and customs are devoted to keep alive the memories of ancestors within a family. It should be noted here that memorial rituals for ancestor worship are highly integrated into Japanese daily life experience and still continues to be an important part of Japanese culture. Thus, memorial rituals play two main functions, as it helps to contribute in revealing and understanding one’s origins, which constitutes a vital component of self-identity, also it helps to cope with the loss of a loved one and to realize the immortality of life as well as mitigate the pain of aging.

Japanese mortuary rites present a well-defined system of strong cultural guidance, where the perception of life is distinguished into three parts, like the life-transient state-afterlife. In Japanese tradition the nearness of death is symbolically marked by the rite of last water – Matsugo no Mizu, in which next of kin wet the lips of the dying person with water. Water symbolism is presented in almost every culture, for instance in Muslim tradition, the final debt of relatives before the dying person is to serve him/her with a drop of cold water (Holy Zam-zam water or pomegranate juice), which quenches one’s thirst. Japanese mortuary tradition includes following rites: a wake, a funeral, a cremation, a bone-picking ceremony, and east flowers. In Japan mortuary rituals continue every 7 days until the 49<sup>th</sup> day after death, and again on the 100<sup>th</sup> day. The 49<sup>th</sup> day ritual is considered as a “turning point”, when it is believed that the spirit of the newly deceased (niibon) becomes a new Buddha (nii-Botoke) (Smith, 1979). This rite is accompanied by special feast. After that follows periodic memorial rituals at the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 33<sup>rd</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> death anniversaries. All these rites are devoted to ensure the right and smooth guidance of the deceased through different stages of spirit-new Buddha-Buddha, and consequently serve as a Rites of Passage to Ancestorhood.

Social changes in modern Japanese society has its impacts on traditional ancestor worships and mortuary tradition of Japanese people as well as those who practice them, due to the fact that Japanese traditional family system has gone through many transformations. Therefore, nowadays we can observe certain concerns in Japanese society about the possibility of diminishing the tradition of posthumous care because of great decrease of three-generation family system in Japanese society, which is considered to be the key condition for preserving an ancestral worship. In addition, a growing number of people without patrilineal descendants also strengthen these social concerns. As it is known that the tradition of caring for the dead is closely connected to the Japanese ie system, however, we should note that the crucial role of family in ancestor worship has a political origin. Namely, the Meiji Civil Code (1898) specified the rule of succession by the eldest son, and the son stayed with his parents to form three-generation family. The Civil Code also prescribed that ancestral rites, including altar and family grave be a part of ie which should be passed from generation to generation.

Despite those changes and growing concerns Japanese people continue to strongly preserve and culturally guide Rites of Ancestorship.

## Conclusion

「門前の小僧習わぬ経を読む」  
The environment makes our characters

*-Japanese saying*

In essence, the system of belief in symbolical death and re-birth is common for any culture, that share four main universal rites and rituals, including Japan: birth that signify the entrance to the life; coming of age that marks the adulthood; marriage that signify the entrance into a new life with a partner and finally, death that marks the stage when people enter the afterlife with the belief of re-birth. All these elements of Rites of Passage supply Japanese culture with a meaning and possess a significant place in Japanese society. In addition, initiation rites themselves possess an archetypical structure, for the same underlying patterns and procedures.

A question arises: What is the role of Rites of Passage in Ethnic identity as a whole and why people continue to follow these rites and rituals from generation to generation?

Here would be our answer: an ethnic identity is a fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group as well as attitudes and fillings with regard to that membership. We state that individuals confront their ethnicity for the first time through Rites of Passage and Life-cycle ceremonies and related holidays. Moreover, symbols and signs enclosed in Rites of Passage and related ceremonies not only enable identification of individuals with community, but also serve as an archiving tool for maintenance and continuity of cultural values and cultural-specific knowledge accumulated over the historical development of the whole Japanese society.

Thus, the Rites of Passage with its culturally prescribed elements ensure a certain degree of persistence of core cultural values and beliefs. A sense of ethnic identity tends to increase with age and older group of society serve as main repositories of culture and cultural knowledge.

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