

**Stony Brook University  
The Graduate School**

**Doctoral Defense Announcement**

**Abstract**

Ritual and Social Change: A Japanese Example

University School Festivals

By

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As social change occurs new constructions of power emerge, economic relationships may change or the composition of domestic arrangements may come under extreme pressure to adjust to new demands for labor (Robertson 1991). Rituals are often affected as they suggest new systems of beliefs and understandings about these changes (Schnell 1999, Bestor 1989, and Reischauer 1988). Contemporary rituals may be invented or old ones rediscovered with new meanings ascribed (Holy 1996). In the most basic terms the practice of rituals reflects the current - sometimes immediate - state of a society (Geertz 1957) by providing a forum within which participants recreate their identities and, by extension, social norms.

This dissertation examines the practice of Japanese university level ritual activities in order to demonstrate this general principle. Furthermore, the data presented adds support to the proposition that Japanese society is in the midst of a shift away from many of the characteristics that have long been identified as essential to "Japaneseness." As Miyanaga (1990) suggested, sections of Japanese society have operated at the fringes generating new modes of thought or, as she characterizes them, "a creative edge." Though interesting, I disagree with Miyanaga's assertion that such innovation is a recent phenomenon occurring only at the fringes of society and instead believe social creativeness is embedded in all societies. In this dissertation, I demonstrate one area where it is evident.

I begin with Geertz's (1957) reconstruction of ritual as both a mirror of societies' ideals and an expression of its tension to examine Japanese university school festivals as they fit within the yearly cycle of other university level rituals. I suggest that the university school festival is a ritual event that has shifted in its focus and practice, reflecting changes in Japanese society. Such changes demonstrate the shifts occurring in the manner Japanese society is organized and highlights the flexibility inherent in the rituals as a result of their mode of practice.

The examples presented here demonstrate that while rituals both guide and are guided by the participants, it is clear that those rituals that allow for the greatest number of interpretations foster greater participation in a society. Following Schnell's (1995) example, I also conclude that ritual actions are often political in nature. Therefore, as Japanese society moves from social and hierarchical ideals to egalitarian and individualistic ones, associated rituals will emerge and gain support.

**Date:** March 26, 2007

**Time:** 10:30 AM

**Place:** N501

**Program:** IDPAS

**Dissertation Advisor:** William Arens Ph.D.