The Present Situation of Studies on Ancestor Worship
in Sociology

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It goes without saying that the studies of ancestor worship in sociology have been
carried out as part of the clarification of the “Ie” (family). “Ie” and ancestor worship
of kin have been dealt with as a symbolical expression of the social structural charac-
teristics of “Ie”. Who the ancestors are, the character of ancestral spirits, the function
of ancestor worship, and variations on these, have been described. YANAGITA Kunio and
ARUGA Kizemon were pioneers in conceiving ancestor worship as one of the strategic
points for clarification of the structural characteristics of Japanese society. The demand
for eternal continuation of the family line through the generations has linked the
founder of the family and the head of the family and his wife of each generation
to the ancestors, so establishing a social unity centering around the ancestors. However,
in the situation where ancestor worship and worship of the dead exist in a state of
confusion, many problems remain unsolved; for example, how to understand the aspects
relating to worship of the dead, and how to position the phenomenon of curses.

After the high economic growth period, Japanese society changed not only quantita-
tively, but also qualitatively. With the infiltration of the revised Civil Code, it was
forecast that ancestor worship would decline. However, the actual ratio of those prac-
ticing ancestor worship showed an increasing trend. Since the latter half of the 1960s,
the real state of changes in family ancestor worship has been clarified, in an attempt
to approach the characteristics of modern Japanese families which maintain the tradition
of “Ie”. This research is being developed based on the works of MORIYAMA Kiyomi
and others. As can be seen in the fact that these characteristics are variously discussed,
—for example, Memorialism suggested by R. Smith, physical communications by
Takahashi Hiroko, Non-Family Ancestors by MORIYAMA Kiyomi, and related ancestor
worship by KÔMOTO Mitsugi,— the concept has not yet been fixed. On the other
hand, questions have been posed from the field of ethnology concerning the point of
view that understands the “Ie” only as a direct-line family system.

Various actual examples of ancestor worship have been brought up, in which the
question of how ancestor worship in the modern age should be positioned has arisen.
New religious movements, which emphasize the importance of ancestor worship and
preach ancestral curses, have become quite widespread. If we take this into considera-
tion, it can be said that we are being urged to reconsider our understanding of ancestor
worship as inseparable from the “Ie”.

31