A Synchronic Analysis of Bon Festivals in Sugashima, Mie Prefecture

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This paper aims to analyze synchronically the series of annual Bon ceremonies as they are performed for the purpose of honoring the dead in Sugashima (Toba City, Mie Prefecture) between July 31 and August 31. My specific concern is to clarify the structure of the Bon ceremonies as a unified whole, in so doing to find out the distinctive features of Sugashima ancestors, who are as vital members of the community as the living members are.

The Sugashima Bon festivals may be divided into at least 24 independent rites, which could be grouped roughly into the following four stages: "preparation", "welcome", "entertainment", and "seeing off". Even so, these four stages cannot be clearly separated from each other. In order to investigate the characteristics and the meaning of each of these Bon rituals, the author arranged the 24 Bon rituals in terms of the following five elements: (1) object of rite, (2) place of rite, (3) social attributes of participants, (4) attire of participants, and (5) ceremonial act.

The Bon rituals also can be divided into the following three categories: (1) events organized by the community centering around the temple, (2) events participated by the whole village but without the participation of the temple, (3) events performed by each ie (household) independently yet simultaneously throughout the village.

Some of the findings of the paper are:
1) Ancestral spirits can be classified into the newly deceased (shinno), ancestors in general, war dead (senshisha), successive resident chief priests of the temple, and the unfortunate spirits who failed to leave the descendants of their own (muen). Among these, the war dead and, in particular, the newly deceased enjoy individual recognition and are treated in a most elaborate manner.
2) It can be seen from the ritual acts that the ancestral spirits take quite different characteristics according to the place where a particular rite takes place. Significant differences are observed among the spirits associated with umebaka or burial ground; mairibaka or the memorial tomb; the main hall (hondo) of the temple; segakidana or the temporary altar specifically elected outside the temple during the Bon; butsudan or the Buddhist altar in each family; and seashore.
3) Certain ritual acts tend to be grouped in a cluster and be repeated at specific "scences", suggesting that basic character of ancestors differ according to the scene.