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John NELSON

## Household Altars in Contemporary Japan

### Rectifying Buddhist “Ancestor Worship” with Home Décor and Consumer Choice

In Japan, where organized religion is increasingly viewed with a critical eye, one of the country’s most enduring social and religious traditions—commemorating ancestral spirits—is undergoing rapid change. The highly competitive market for household altars is the source of innovative and sometimes radical concepts that represent a paradigm shift in how families and individuals should interact with ancestral spirits. No longer catering to guidelines from mainstream Buddhist denominations about altar style and function, companies building and marketing contemporary altars (*gendai butsudan*) present a highly-refined product that not only harmonizes with modern interior designs but also emphasizes individual preferences and spirituality in how the altar is conceptualized and used. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper will demonstrate how some of the products, marketing strategies, and key players in this multi-billion yen industry help shape fundamental ideas of religious and ritual practice in contemporary Japanese society.

*Keywords:* Household altar — *butsudan* — ancestor worship — spirituality — *kuyō*

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AS THE Japanese economy continues to recover from its long recession, one of its largest consumer markets—the sale of household Buddhist altars (*butsudan* 仏壇)—is expected to reach around 175,000,000,000 yen (KOBORI 2007).<sup>1</sup> While an impressive amount of money, can this figure be equated in any way with the extent or depth of Buddhist practice and belief in Japan? By looking at recent innovations, new concepts, and changing consumer preferences that have little to do with established Buddhist denominations, this paper will try and complicate easy assumptions about the role and utility of household altars in present-day Japan.

In most retail markets, supply and demand is determined by variables such as consumer confidence, advertising, product familiarity, government regulations, and so on. The market for household altars takes on additional, rather convoluted dynamics. On the one hand, it is characterized and dominated by the predictable factors mentioned above. But it is also shaped in decisive ways through religious traditions, temple affiliations, contemporary news events, and individual beliefs. The sale of *butsudan* is also influenced by aesthetic notions about style and interior design, by individualistic preferences and consumer psychology, and by the power of advertising to synthesize these traditions and inclinations into a unique and easily-recognized product.

The following discussion introduces the marketing strategies and concepts behind one of Japan's most innovative producers and distributors of contemporary household altars. With fifty-four franchise outlets throughout the country, eight showrooms in major urban centers, and a catalog of over one hundred and fifty different styles, the Yagiken corporation 八木研株式会社 epitomizes evolving notions of religious practice that complement rather than hold sway over emerging lifestyle choices. Their catalogs, website pages, and salespeople educate consumers about the memorialization of ancestors and relatives in ways that depart from established religious practice

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1. This figure is based on reports from two industry publications (*gyōkai shinbun* 業界新聞), Kamakura Shinsho 鎌倉新書 and Shūkyō Kōgeisha 宗教工芸社. They report around 350,000 *butsudan* are sold per year, at an average price of 500,000 yen each. This amount converts to roughly \$1.62 billion us dollars.

and progress towards a more individualized, expressive, and eclectic spirituality. In fact, though the company uses the generic term *butsudan* to describe what they sell, we will see how the concept takes on new and surprising referents. Similar to telephones, bicycles, or homes, the correspondence between the word and what it actually signifies may not be readily apparent at first glance.

It is common in the West to associate the tradition of Buddhism with meditation and enlightenment, and to project these assumptions on various regions of the world that are seen as traditionally “Buddhist.” However, as many scholars and commentators have pointed out, this stereotype obscures a longstanding emphasis throughout East Asian Buddhism on venerating one’s ancestors and petitioning their spirits (as well as those of familiar Buddhist bodhisattvas) for health, prosperity, and safety. This practice is usually rendered in English as “ancestor worship,” yet is so culturally varied and religiously diffuse that the term’s convenient use obscures far more than it reveals. Just who qualifies as an ancestor, and what kind of agency (if any) can they exert in the world of the living? Is it really an act of “worship” or would other nouns (such as “veneration, reverence, devotion, respect”) imply less Western and more local conceptions of how living individuals interact with spirits of the departed? Since an entire paper could be addressed to a discussion of this single concept, here I will cut to the chase and replace “worship” with “veneration,” a term less burdened by religious connotations and cultural expectations. Evoking a more ambiguous range of attitudes and practices towards the spirits of the dead makes more anthropological sense because it stays closer to the wide variations and ever-shifting contours of actual belief and practice.

Keeping pace with the speed of social and religious change in East Asia today is a daunting challenge. In the world of Japanese Buddhism alone, religious customs once outlawed (such as clerical marriage) are now mainstream, beliefs once universally held (the Emperor as a protector of the dharma) are now discredited, and practices once condemned (funerals, memorials, and graves for animals) are today not only condoned but also profitable. Until recently, the relationship between a household and a Buddhist temple was characterized by a formalized stability that endured from generation to generation. Most families were registered members of a local temple and paid yearly dues to procure the services of the priest for memorial rituals. Household membership in a temple also incurred certain obligations to maintain the buildings and grounds, to support financially the priest and his family, and the right to use the temple as a kind of community center where social activities dovetailed with religious ones.

However, in the highly urbanized and increasingly impersonal communities of today’s rapidly changing Japan, there is great latitude in the extent to which these traditional relationships are maintained. Some households continue to uphold temple membership as their predecessors once did, but dramatic

demographic shifts from the countryside to urban centers, or from one city to another, have undermined these relationships as well as the economic stability of many temples. As a result, some priests must now seek outside employment or work as administrators at other, sometimes larger temples in the vicinity. A family that has moved away from its village origins and into a city may have nothing to do with a temple in their neighborhood. But when someone in the family falls seriously ill, is near death, or is actually dying, many families will still seek out a Buddhist temple for last rites and a funeral. If following this route, family members are compelled to undergo a crash course in the culture and costs of funerals, mortuary rituals, burial practices, and periodic commemorations that focus on the salvation of the deceased person's spirit.<sup>2</sup>

But it is also possible and increasingly popular to choose a different memorial course, one that does not privilege a Buddhist tradition and its ritual specialists. Instead, a family may opt for the increasingly popular "portrait memorial service" (*shashin-sō* 写真葬) which is predominantly secular and humanistic. We will later encounter several other practices gaining in popularity, all of which can actually benefit an inventive company specializing in contemporary household altars. Unhindered by guidelines imposed by the various Buddhist denominations on how to commemorate departed spirits at the family altar, a company such as Yagiken is like a nimble sailing vessel that can gauge the prevailing winds of society and respond almost immediately with concepts and products that resonate with today's consumer. We will look at the company and its strategies in some detail after a short detour into a rather pithy summary of the history of household altars.<sup>3</sup>

#### *A (Very) Brief History of Household Altars*

Ignorance of or indifference to a family's religious affiliation is a very recent development, as is the relative freedom of individual choice regarding religion in highly-industrialized societies. Until the early 1970s in Japan, the male head of a household (who had survived the war) would have been a person educated in a neo-Confucian ethos of familial loyalty directed towards one's ancestors as well as the Emperor. These bonds, and the emotions that accompanied them, were nurtured in the prewar years through the educational system and popular culture (songs, art, novels, public and religious holidays, weekly magazines, newspapers)

2. ITAMI Jūzo's 1984 film, *Osōshiki*, is a good example of a modern family forced into the stressful, expensive, and uneasy religious culture of funerals. To compensate for their ignorance, they read reference books, watch instructional videos, and defer to the advice and guidance of a professional mortuary specialist.

3. A subsequent paper will explore this history in more depth. There will also be a summary, along with photographs and more data, on the website of the University of San Francisco at <http://www.pacificrim.usfca.edu/research>.

as well as through local Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Largely orchestrated and enforced by the state via the educational system, feelings of fidelity towards one's ancestors was part of an ideology that served to modernize and militarize Japanese society, and justified colonial expansion abroad.

Most families of sufficient economic means at this time had not one but two altars in their homes: the first, called a *kamidana* 神棚, was for those beneficial but ambiguous deities known as *kami* which were associated with pre-Buddhist animism and, beginning around 1870, a reconfiguration of Shinto sponsored by the state. The other altar was the family's *but sudan* 仏壇 that served as both a stage for interacting ritually with one's ancestors and as an extension of the family's membership in a local Buddhist temple. It is important to emphasize great regional variation in how these two altars complemented each other. Rather than think of them representing two different religions, a more accurate perspective sees them drawing upon shared, culturally significant religious resources—shaped by local as well as regional history. Their mutual purpose is to ensure benefits (*goriyaku* 御利益) for this life and to create favorable conditions for exerting control on the spiritual condition of a family's ancestral spirits.

But how did this fairly ubiquitous practice come to pass? Just as the Meiji state encouraged identification with one's fellow citizens in a kind of meta-family, so too did a much earlier version of the state play an important role in promoting the use of household altars. The origins of the practice in Japan are said to go back not to a particular temple or denomination of Buddhism but to an imperial decree issued in the reign of Emperor Tenmu 天武天皇, around 686 CE. When faced with a succession of weird omens—earthquakes (the strongest anyone could remember), strange portents in the sky and in nature (vertical rainbows, sparrows with three legs), and inclement weather (hailstones as big as peaches)—any emperor worthy of his position would react to these messages from the spirit realm and try to forestall the coming calamity. Since both natural and man-made disasters were thought to stem from an imbalance of spiritual forces, religious rituals helped stabilize and control the situation, and thus protected an emperor's fragile rule. In an often cited passage from the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀, Tenmu proclaimed that, “in every house a Buddhist shrine should be provided, and an image of Buddha with Buddhist scriptures placed there. Worship and offerings of food (was to be) made at these shrines.”<sup>4</sup> One of the earliest surviving shrine-altars is the exquisitely lacquered, seventh-century

4. *Nihon Shoki*, 29th chapter, p. 1810. *Japan Historical Text Initiative* <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/JHTI> (accessed 22 June 2007). Although the religion in play here is ostensibly “Buddhist,” we should remember that the “foreign” cult was permitted in early Japan primarily because of its “wondrous powers” to preserve political rule. Kings throughout Asia became “protectors” of the *dharma* (*cakravartin*) which in turn helped to legitimize their rule. See Ives for an excellent discussion of this tradition's impact on Japanese Buddhism in the twentieth century Ives (2002).

*tamamushi-no-zushi* 玉虫厨子, now a national treasure housed at Hōryūji 法隆寺, home to the oldest wooden building in the world. According to Japanese art historian Andrew Watsky, *zushi* refers to “miniature buildings which protected and glorified through adornment the deity (or deceased person) represented within” (WATSKY 2004, 175). In essence, any altar that has an inner compartment belongs to the category *zushi*.

Although the jury is still out on how extensively Tenmu’s imperial decree was put into practice, it served as a precedent for Buddhist halls or chapels to be built on the property of an aristocratic or high-ranking family. But how does this early example translate and feed into more recent notions about the care and veneration of ancestral spirits? One theory, proposed by Takeda Chōshū 竹田聰州 in the early twentieth century, argues there was a gradual movement from an externally located structure (*jibutsudō* 持仏堂) to a room within the home (*butsuma* 仏間) devoted to Buddhist-style ritual and ancestral spirit veneration (Takeda in BOKHOVEN 2005, 159–65). Eventually, the room became multifunctional with the space for rituals more focused and concentrated. Following the *zushi* archetype, the household altar displayed icons from the family’s sectarian affiliation as well as images and artifacts important to family history and clan members.

Another strong influence on this top-down model of *butsudan* development comes from Jōdo Shinshū’s 浄土真宗 emphasis on having an altar that resembles the central place and image of worship in the main temple in Kyoto. Popularized by the priest Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499), Shinshū adherents convened at a believer’s home for prayer meetings. Having a physical place to display a small hanging scroll of the *onenbutsu* お念仏 prayer may have hastened the proliferation of *zushi*-type cabinets that evolved into *butsudan*. Followers of the Nichiren sect may have emulated this custom and likewise placed a hanging scroll in a cabinet with the opening characters that distilled the main prayer of their denomination, the *odaimoku* お題目.

An alternate theory of *butsudan* development stems from the research of folklorist Yanagita Kuniō 柳田國男 in the 1930s and 40s. Yanagita believed the practice of holding rituals that could affect the spiritual situation of one’s ancestors (*senzo kuyō* 先祖供養) had been a part of household religious life in Japan for at least a millennia (YANAGITA 1946). Each region of the country varied of course, but everywhere could be found the elevated “spirit shelves” (*tama-dana* 魂棚, *bondana* 盆棚, *shōrōdana* 精霊棚) devoted to household spirits. Yanagita asserted that the spirit shelves evolved into a discreet piece of furniture that functioned like a stage for displaying statues or icons related to Buddhism (especially the *ihai* 位牌 memorial tablet which was thought to represent the soul of the dead person). A more recent appraisal identifies the

tradition of focusing ancestral rites on the *butsudan* as a cult of belief, or *butsudan shinkō* 仏壇信仰 (Sasaki in BOKHOVEN 2005, 165).<sup>5</sup>

Yanagita does not emphasize how politics played a decisive role in shaping the practice of ancestor memorials. During the years of the rather draconian temple registration system (*terauke seido* 寺請制度) of the Tokugawa regime (1603–1867), it was critical for households to demonstrate their affiliation with Buddhism and thus avoid suspicion that they were practicing Christianity in secret. Having an altar within the home attested in a tangible way to a family's religious conformity with the Buddhist preferences, patrons, and advisors of the Tokugawa regime. Additionally, Yanagita does not dwell on the temple and shrine building boom of the Genroku period 元禄時代 (1688–1704) as historical precedents for an emphasis on Buddhist structures, craftsmanship, and the development of sectarian religious practices within the household. As Japan modernized in the latter part of the nineteenth century, we also need to consider the state's interests in creating a compliant citizen who could transpose loyalty for one's ancestors to a parental emperor figure, thus helping to legitimize Japan's aggressive foreign policies at the time.

Of the two theories, one top-down from Takeda and the other from Yanagita developing at the grassroots level, neither is sufficiently comprehensive to account for the complexity of multiple influences on *butsudan* development. Bokhoven notes in his book-length study of *butsudan* and funerals that there is one more important factor in the development of the household altar: the wandering mendicant or *hijiri* 聖 (BOKHOVEN 2005, 213–19). Part shaman, part priest, and part healer, these rather marginal individuals drifted from village to village, often with a portable altar strapped to their backs. Described as “carrying the Buddha on your back” (*oibotoke* 負い仏), Bokhoven believes that *hijiri* made people aware that something holy and potentially beneficial was both inside and channeled through the altar. Families stood to benefit by having a similar item in their own house, which the *hijiri* would help to align with local religious preferences.

This brief summary has highlighted only the most obvious factors in the development and proliferation of *butsudan*. Many more variables are worthy of study and consideration but must be elided here so that we can return to a focus on contemporary household altars.

5. Choi Kilsung writes that the Korean practice of using *ihai* serves as a channel of communication between the living and the dead. Unlike Japan, however, where the *ihai* serves as the focus of what Sasaki calls the “*butsudan* cult,” the memorial tablet in Korea (and China as well) is considered to be temporary and intermediary. In most cases, it is ceremonially burned after a couple of years, indicating a merging of the proximate dead with the more distant family ancestral spirits (CHOI 1997).

*Functionality of the Altar*

Like the central server of a computer network connecting and channeling information from diverse sources, the authority of the family altar used to embody and encode the teachings of the Buddhist sect with which a family was affiliated. Altars were accessible to each family member, though usually only the head of the household would conduct prayers on Buddhist holidays (such as *obon* お盆 and the equinoxes) and on death-day anniversaries (*meinichi* 命日). His wife (or mother if living) attended to the altar on a day-to-day basis, making sure that offerings, incense, and candles conveyed the family's esteem into the spirit realm. Visitors would often first pay their respects before the altar prior to any casual conversation or business.

As families grew and prospered, altars likewise evolved from simple box-like containers (*zushi*) that could be easily carried to large, extremely heavy wooden cabinets. The largest and most elaborate were usually found in the home of the eldest son. Second and third sons, or branches of the family, also maintained altars although less elaborate in design, smaller in size, and more focused on immediate instead of overall family concerns. With its lotus blossoms (often done in gold leaf), richly embroidered fabrics, or the elevated dais upon which a small statue of the Buddha sat or stood in repose (or where the True Pure Land and Nichiren sects placed hanging scrolls of the *nenbutsu* or *daimoku*, respectively), exalted yet familiar iconographies of paradise were represented via the altar. It directed one's prayers and awareness towards salvation promised by Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren, Rennyo, and other religious leaders through the centuries.

Similar to what occurs in the temple, an altar in the home conveys offerings, petitions, and casual communications to ancestral spirits, keeping them peaceful and benevolent. Because the expectation is to receive benefits in exchange for periodic rituals and ongoing veneration, the altar becomes a sacred portal between the worlds of the living and the dead. It is interactive and user friendly: one's fears, longings, and aspirations can be transferred to the care and intercession of priestly-mediated Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and, of course, the ancestors of one's family. If all goes well and the many variables of veneration are balanced appropriately, a family's ancestral spirits become allies in every endeavor undertaken by members of the household. Alternately, if neglected, ignored, or disrespected, spirits are believed to cause illness, barrenness, inclement weather, impotence, business or agricultural disasters, and untimely death (to name only a few possible afflictions).

The form of the *butsudan* developed commercially through the work of skilled artisans, adapting designs to meet thematic variations determined by sect-specific interpretations of the Buddhist tradition. With all the altar's religious associations and poignant symbolism, it is easy to forget that it is a product that

must be designed, manufactured, and then distributed through established markets and retail outlets. Every single item on the altar—from its main and subordinate images, to its use of color and form to evoke the paradises of the Pure Land or Nirvana, to its array of candles, flowers, incense burners, and icons—is produced in countless workshops throughout the country.<sup>6</sup> Each item is encoded with specific religious or symbolic meanings as well as charged with ritual significance that is generally understood but rarely articulated, even when priests visit the home to offer prayers for the ancestors. If, as the expression goes, the “medium is the message,” then the Buddhist altar broadcasts its subtle meanings to anyone who stands or kneels before it, although the transmission is often on a frequency that most casual or untutored visitors are unable to receive. Since each *butsudan* serves as a kind of satellite of the local temple, few individuals have the time or inclination to comprehend its symbolic and iconographic layers. It is a composite, a *bricolage* really, of so many concepts and diverse ideas that a simplification is essential if one is to gain a degree of intimacy with the practice. Traditional altars provided an equal balance of emotional therapy for the living and religious refuge for the dead. As we will see in a moment, while still acknowledging and promoting the historically religious function of household altars, today’s *butsudan* retailers also promote more spiritual and psychological themes in their designs and advertising. They appeal especially to the search for sanctuary, stability, and empowerment during times of personal loss and rapid social change.

### *The Yagiken Company History*

Established in 1947, the original business model for the Yagi family enterprise had little to do with altars.<sup>7</sup> It was a manufacturing company that produced industrial-strength polishes for machines, hinges, and gears of all sorts. They also made a polish for ball bearings that became popular with gaming (*pachinko*) establishments as well as for keeping the shine on accoutrements used in temples. Devastated during but rebuilt after the war years, the company was small, barely profitable, but more or less stable. In the 1970s, however, the company’s main wholesaler and distributor went bankrupt, providing a painful but ultimately valuable lesson about the vulnerability of being a manufacturer. As the second generation of family members assumed postwar company management, it became apparent there

6. BOKHOVEN notes a rise in *butsudan* production during the years of the Meiji period (2005, 230). He believes there was a dramatic spike in production following the Kanto earthquake of 1923.

7. The following information was distilled from two lengthy interviews with Mr. Ueda Yoshitaka, Yagiken’s director of marketing. Company website pages list only a cursory chronology of development which he expanded considerably in our discussions and subsequent correspondence. I have elected to collapse all the various contributions from Mr. Ueda into a single narrative.

was too much competition and risk for the business to grow as a supplier of polish for an older generation of machines, ones being rendered increasingly obsolete.

Under the leadership of Yagi Taturō 八木達郎, the company converted their factories to begin producing *butsudan*, which they would also market and distribute. Although the Yagi family was a newcomer to the business, the CEO and other executives were familiar with Buddhist and temple-related items because the company produced polishes for the shiny (sometimes gold plated) surfaces found in most temples. In competing with established companies selling *butsudan*, the newly renamed company that was now Yagiken tried to adapt to marketing and pricing patterns created over more than a century. One particularly vexing custom was the matter of pricing. It is still the case when selling altars that a particular model may be priced differently, depending on the region, time of year, and circumstances of the individual client. For example, if a couple came to a showroom and expressed a desire to purchase what will be their first *butsudan*, a savvy salesperson will lower the price because he knows they will also have to buy the five key accessories (*gogusoku* 五具足) that give the altar its functionality: candle holder, flower vase, water or tea bowl, food offering bowl, and incense burner. Add to that purchase a small Buddha statue or, in the case of Nichiren or True Pure Land denominations, a hanging scroll, and the cost can easily go up another hundred thousand yen (\$900 US) or more.

When Yagiken executives decided to specialize in what is called in the industry “furniture-style” (*kaguchō* 家具調) *butsudan* and had created some inventory, the company organized a debut at a ritzy hotel in Tokyo to publicize its products. Out of nearly one hundred altars on display, only three were sold. These were purchased by competitors who wanted a radically new style of altar in their showrooms so as to better highlight the classical elegance of their traditional designs. Reacting quickly to this fiasco, Yagiken began an advertising campaign that, unlike the traditional companies, highlighted how their *butsudan* were never discounted and were priced in a uniform manner throughout the country. Although this move created controversy and cold shoulders within the *butsudan*-selling business, it struck a responsive chord with consumers in large urban areas.

Another change in standard marketing strategy was to avoid producing altar designs that catered to the requirements of specific Buddhist denominations. At first glance, most altars appear to be similar in appearance and function, but a closer examination reveals significant differences between Japan’s major sects in layout, decoration, ornamentation, architecture, colors, iconography, and so on. A standard sales tactic directs potential customers to the altar approved by the family’s denomination, even to the point of hinting that divine retribution (*batchi* 罰, *tatari* 祟り) has been reported for those deviating from the norms. Thus, a family affiliated with the Shingon sect would be pressured to buy an altar in that style even if they preferred for aesthetic or economic reasons the less



FIGURE 1. Katsura model *butsudan* (all photos taken by author).

ostentatious design of a Rinzai Zen altar. Keep in mind that while the altar is primarily for the family, it also serves as a stage for periodic memorial rituals performed by a priest. Should a Shingon priest come to a family's altar and find a design not sanctioned by the denomination, you can be sure that he will mention this and may even feel uneasy about conducting services in front of what he and the sect consider to be an inappropriate venue. The family would then be concerned that, because of the priest's feelings, their ancestral spirits are being ritually shortchanged, or, even worse, that the spirits feel neglected or insulted by a decision that privileged aesthetics or money over their spiritual well-being.

Given the weight of traditional associations, fears, anxieties, and taboos that accompany sect-specific altars, Yagiken decided to emphasize fresh paradigms for both the design and function of *butsudan*. As illustrated by the accompanying photos (FIGS. 1, 2, 3), entirely new styles came into being that harmonized not with Japan's established Buddhist sects but with the cosmopolitan and increasingly Western-style interiors of modern apartments, condominiums, and homes in Japan. So important was this theme that every catalogue's cover from 1997 to 2004 carried the phrase *gendai butsudan no aru ribingu* 現代仏壇のあるリビング (living with contemporary Buddhist altars).<sup>8</sup> There was also a transnational

8. In this context, the word "living" rendered into *katakana* evokes a double meaning. The first and dominant one refers in Japanese to the part of a house commonly known as a "living room," while the second meaning is a direct importation of the English word as an intransitive verb. For the Yagiken slogan, *gendai butsudan no aru ribingu*, both meanings are present and complementary. One's living room is the proper place to display an altar, and one incorporates within their daily life the presence and activities associated with an altar.



FIGURE 2. Danish model *butsudan*.

dynamic at work, as subcontractors in Denmark and Italy produced altars advertised as representing the excellence of furniture from those countries. For the Danish altar (FIG. 2), teak was the featured wood whereas Italian-built models (FIG. 3) were made distinctive through their use of parquetry, a type of wood inlay. Since so many Japanese have traveled to or regard Europe as a wellspring of fashion and style, these product lines could evoke an element of nostalgia for the authenticity, reputation, and quality of European craftsmanship, now on display in a Yagiken household altar.<sup>9</sup>

### Marketing

Just as their designs departed from the traditional and staid, so too have Yagiken marketing concepts charted new territory regarding the meaning of a memorial altar for the contemporary home. Effective advertising plays a crucial role in any product development cycle, and may be the deciding factor in whether a given item is successful in the marketplace or quickly fades to obscurity.

9. Yagiken is fairly unique among sellers of altars nationwide for its unabashed promotion of products made overseas, in Italy and Denmark. A current controversy among traditional *butsudan* retailers are how altars made in and imported from China are hurting the traditional craft in Japan. One nationwide organization has created labels that identify which altars are made in Japan and which are produced overseas (see <http://www.zenshukyo.or.jp/news.html>). One of Kyoto's largest and oldest producers and retailers, Kobori Butsudān 小堀仏壇, has a Chinese-made altar in their workshop in Yamashina so that their craftspeople and visitors can see the variations in quality. From several paces away, there is little difference to the untrained eye. On closer inspection, the excellence of workmanship, level of attention to detail, and meticulous application of lacquer and gold-leaf ornamentation shows the Japanese product is superior.



FIGURE 3. Italian model *butsudan*.

Executives experimented with a number of terms that would help distinguish their products from standard Buddhist altars because, in their opinion, the Yagiken altar *transcended* not only established Buddhist denominations but all organized religion. They believed that the veneration of family ancestors (*senzo sūhai* 先祖崇拜) was fundamental to Japanese culture and society, existing long before the foreign religion of Buddhism made its appearance in 538 CE. They referenced data from a survey of people visiting cemeteries to clean and maintain family graves (*haka mairi* 墓参り) which indicated between seventy to eighty percent did not have strong ties to any Buddhist sect.

As explained during an interview with Mr. Ueda Yoshitaka, Yagiken's chief strategist for the past eight years and director of public relations, the word *butsudan* evokes a dark and rather foreboding atmosphere for many Japanese. Children were told that the family's ancestors, which used the altar as a channel between the spirit world and this one, were constantly watching their actions and would punish them if they did something wrong. It was common practice for accomplishments (such as a good report card, a first pay receipt from a new job, or an award) to be presented on the family *butsudan*. But it was also the case that a wayward child who had done something bad would be hauled before the altar to bow and apologize.

In searching for a term that could dislodge these cultural associations and convey a more affirmative relationship with ancestral spirits, an early contender

was the word *tamashii* 魂 or “soul/spirit,” as discussed in Yanagita KUNIO’s classic *Senzo no hanashi*. According to scholars such as Robert SMITH (1975, 6–7) and UMEHARA Takeshi (1997, 14), the veneration of ancestral spirits (*tamashii* 魂, *reikon* 靈魂, *hotoke* 仏, *mitama* 御霊, *kami* 神 and so on) in Japan can be traced back to the Yayoi period (roughly 300 BCE to 250 CE). Although dead and physically departed, ancestors were never really absent from a family’s life or livelihood. As we saw in the earlier example from the *Nihon shoki*, their spirits were believed to interact with and influence natural phenomena, entrepreneurial endeavors, breeding cycles of animals and humans, occupational success or failure, growing and harvest cycles, even the way fire cooked food and heated the household. With this kind of imputed power, it was important to stay on the good side of these spirits by offering them food, drink, incense, and periodic rituals that would help calm and control their vengeful and vindictive nature.<sup>10</sup> But would any of this cultural background and belief help to sell altars?

On the positive side, the concept of *tamashii* conveyed a sense of ancestral spirits that predated organized religion’s appropriation of these practices and beliefs, an important point Yagiken wanted to emphasize. But the term was considered to be heavily burdened by the potentially dangerous side of the spirit world. As Duncan Williams has shown so brilliantly, all of Japan’s Buddhist denominations promoted these pitfalls along the path to salvation during the Edo period. They also profited handsomely by emphasizing the efficacy of rituals and talismans that would help ease the suffering of spirits of the dead and ward off attacks by demons and hungry ghosts (WILLIAMS 2005). What the Yagiken altar needed was an association with characteristics that were positive and empowering rather than fear-inducing and threatening.

An early example of an attempt to shift the dominant paradigm about altars and spirits came in a Yagiken television commercial aired in 1997. Two elderly male and two female “ghosts” float around the stylish interior of a contemporary home.<sup>11</sup> These are not the fearsome ghosts of Japanese popular culture (*obake* お化け, *yūrei* 幽霊) but angelic ones, complete with white robes and golden haloes. As the four ghosts observe a cute little girl sitting respectfully with hands folded together (*gasshō* 合掌) in front of a Yagiken altar, a silver-haired male ghost begins to act proudly. With its contemporary design, craftsmanship, and quality, the altar glows brighter than other pieces of furniture. The little girl then speaks

10. I have discussed elsewhere how the Japanese state takes advantage of this folk tradition to continue its indirect patronage and support of Yasukuni Shrine, the sanctuary for Japan’s military dead (NELSON 2003). Though overtly Shinto and not Buddhist, the shrine’s ideology and ritual practices draw upon the ancient tradition of placating and controlling potentially angry spirits. By doing so, the shrine justifies its role as a protector of the nation.

11. The word used by Mr. Ueda as well as in the commercial’s video scenario is *gōsuto*, ゴースト.

to the photo on the altar, “Aren’t you happy, Grandpa?” (*Yokatta ne, ojiichan?* よかったね, お祖父ちゃん). As the beaming grandfather ghost swells with pride, an older female ghost sighs wistfully, “Ah, I’m envious!” (*Urayamashii wa!* うらやましいわ!).

The commercial lasted only fifteen seconds, but it conveyed enough information and touched several basic emotions (longing, pride, devotion, envy) that it generated attention from the public and attracted new customers. It also presented the household altar in a benign, empowering, and user-friendly light (even a child can interact with it!). Shortly after this creative commercial began showing, several weekly magazines distributed nationwide profiled Yagiken and its new line of *butsudan*. These brief articles provided, at no cost to the company, additional exposure that resulted in an overnight jump in Yagiken’s market share.

Having given up on *tama* as a central theme applicable to all Yagiken altars, and wanting to capitalize on a higher profile gained after the successful television commercial, a new marketing strategy came into play. In a subtle yet significant paradigm shift, Yagiken would henceforth emphasize not the recipients of rituals conducted at the household altar—the “souls” of the ancestors—but the *ritual process* of interacting with these spirits. The ancestral spirits were still important, of course, but it was the interactivity of ritual that enabled both sides of the relationship to enjoy benefits and peace.

Beginning in 2001, the concept of *kuyō* 供養 entered the spotlight. Common to all Buddhist denominations, the term has broad applicability within Japanese culture because virtually *anything* thought to have depleted its life essence can be memorialized and venerated. For example, there are *kuyō* rituals for the spirits of aborted fetuses, dolls, needles, eels, fish, pets, fishing boats, and harvested trees (to cite only a few examples). Strictly speaking, there is little in the foundational texts of Buddhism that encourages an interaction with the *anima* of objects, animals, or nature. Early Buddhism never denied the existence of these spirits, it simply did not dwell on them, emphasizing instead the exploration of one’s inner nature and an understanding of the causes of human suffering (DORMAN 2006). But as Buddhism spread slowly throughout India and other regions of Asia—China, Tibet, Korea, and eventually Japan—its teachings were adapted to complement standard religious practices in those regions. As a result, a terrifically graphic and provocative array of spirits, demons, ghosts, and saints has gradually been incorporated into Buddhist ritual practices and beliefs. Until very recently, this was widely believed to be the vexing realm one’s soul entered at death. Only through proper rituals over an extended period of time (usually thirty-three years) could sanctuary and eventually salvation be achieved.

For Yagiken marketing executives, *kuyō* evoked just the right combination of the old and the new. They would still use the catchphrase “contemporary Buddhist altars” (*gendai butsudan* 現代仏壇) on the cover of their yearly catalogues and in advertisements, but inside their catalogues was a growing emphasis on

interacting with ancestral spirits via a beautiful piece of furniture that, judging from appearance alone, was most definitely not your standard Buddhist altar. In fact, as I was told by a “sales consultant” at the Yagiken showroom in Kobe, the word *butsudan* is rarely used. The altar is a special place where, regardless of religious affiliation, a conversation could be held with a departed loved one (*ohanashi dekiru basho* お話できる場所) or where you could put your hands together (*te o awaseru basho* 手をあわせる場所) in a gesture that may be interpreted as either prayer or respect. Essays within the product catalogue, most of which are written by Mr. Ueda (sometimes with his own name and other times using pseudonyms), attempt to educate the potential customer about this reconceptualization of the importance of *kuyō*. In his view, the word *butsudan* is too static and fails to evoke a variety of activities central to the interaction between ancestors and descendants.

From 2001 to 2006, the progression of ideas that leads to the key theme of *kuyō* can be traced in the product catalogues. Like the hub of a wheel that supports many spokes, *kuyō* helps center and unify references to freedom of choice, a changing society, Japanese cultural identity, and the redemptive power of memory. In the 2001 catalogue, readers learn about “The Wonderful Randomness of Japan’s Religious Perspectives” (*Eekagensa ga subarashiki waga Nihon* ええかげんさがすばらしき我が日本) where one has the freedom in this polytheistic society to choose religious beliefs from a wide array of deities, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. Buddhism is described by Mr. Ueda as a “strange” religion because it is full of contradictions: one can undergo austerities and practice meditation to gain enlightenment and become a Buddha, but one can also pay money to a priest upon the death of a relative and receive a posthumous name that guarantees the deceased will become a Buddha. The essay concludes with another paradox: even though people may not believe in Buddhism, they still follow standard Buddhist protocol for the disposal of the deceased. They take the body of their loved one to a crematorium then, whether a priest is present or not, the survivors put their hands together, rattle prayer beads, and bow their heads. After the body is cremated, they receive an urn with bones and ashes, as well as a generic spirit tablet (*ihai*). And then what? Ueda asserts that a non-religious family faces a problem because they do not know what to do with their loved one’s spirit tablet and ashes, usually storing them in some inappropriate place and without proper respect.

In another essay, readers are asked rhetorically, “Have Japanese people changed?” (*Nihonjin wa kawatta ka* 日本人は変わったか). The answer is affirmative and focuses on the emergence of a keen aesthetic sense (*biishiki* 美意識) that enables a reexamination of the place of a *butsudan* within the home. Anyone looking for an altar who has a refined appreciation for interior design, harmonious colors, and quality craftsmanship will make a Yagiken *gendai butsudan* their obvious choice. In 2002, readers were instructed that despite an abundance of material wealth, today’s Japanese have forgotten something

important: how to live with a *butsudan*. Having served as a central focus of the home for generations, the altar should not be neglected because it is essential to the formation of the family in Japan. An article in the same issue titled, “Disciplining Children in Front of the Butsudan” (*Butsudan no mae de kodomo o shitsukeru to iu koto* 仏壇の前で子供をしつけるという事) supports this theme by asserting that some of Japan’s current social problems are due to a lack of moral discipline. As we read earlier in Mr. Ueda’s description of why a *butsudan* was intimidating, the piece resonates with tradition by stressing the importance of ancestral intervention as a way to keep children in line. *Kuyō* practices take on a new relevance for both the family and Japanese society as a whole.

Swinging often between essentialized concepts of Japanese culture and contemporary society, the catalogue’s essays often promote an easily grasped synthesis of the two. In the 2003 catalogue, a discussion of *matsuri* turned readers’ attention to the original concept of *matsuru* 祀る (to worship) but without any of the social, historical, or political contexts in which the term was embedded. Instead of adhering to the rules and regulations of a religious sect in the veneration of ancestral spirits, readers were encouraged to be guided by their own feelings. In this sense, an individualized and subjective sense of *kuyō*, ordered upon one’s personal preferences, becomes a consumer choice that resists the domineering “brand loyalty” of mainstream Buddhist denominations.

*Kuyō* took on a more international dimension beginning in the 2004 catalogue. The company refurbished its showrooms nationwide and so created a new look and logo to call attention to the concept of “Gallery Memoria: *Gendai Butsudan*.” Drawing upon the perception of modern art galleries as well-lit, airy, and tastefully designed spaces, the remodeled Yagiken showrooms—predominantly white interiors with stainless steel or wood accents—mirrored these features in promoting the artistic quality and excellence of their products. Highlighted on the cover of the same issue was a photograph of smiling employees of Yagiken’s subcontractor in Denmark. Inside, a new product line emphasizing Danish craftsmanship and design was introduced with phrases like *kyakusenbi* 脚線美. As if evoking loose Scandinavian morality in sexual matters, a comparison is made between the distinctive wooden legs of a free-standing altar and the “shapely legs” of a woman. The Danish designs supplemented Italian-produced altars already for sale, as well as colorful altar accessories (*gogusoku*) of Italian glassworks mentioned earlier.

By 2005, the practice of *kuyō* centered on and enabled by the Yagiken altar is interpreted by film and commercial director Ōbayashi Nobuhiko 大林宣彦 not as a *butsudan* but as a place where you can meet loved ones who have passed away (*shinda hitotachi ni aeru basho* 死んだ人たちに会える場所). In this sense, the altar becomes once again a threshold between the worlds of the living and dead. However, there is no mention of the dire spiritual and psychological hazards, the

physical pollution, and the soul-threatening dangers associated with the other world (*ano yo* あの世). They have all been displaced and muted through the idea of reuniting with one's ancestral spirits via a pleasant and presumably safe place. The same theme is revisited a year later in 2005 in the headline, "In Paradisium: Reclaiming Memories" (*kioku no saisei* 記憶の再生) which is followed by an essay that asserts, "Memories of precious people never fade away" (*taisetsu na hito no omoide wa zettai ni kienai* 大切な人の思い出は絶対に消えない). Implicit within the title and clearly spelled out in the essay is the predictable solution of a family altar to help preserve and protect the memories of one's departed family members.

Finally, the 2006 catalogue elevates and privileges the concept of *kuyō* as a running header on every page there is narrative text. The word appears not in Japanese but in *romaji* spelling, as if (following the curious appeal of the Western alphabet) capital letters will catch a reader's eye yet convey a different semantic content than *kanji* characters. As we will see in a moment, the presence of *romaji* also denotes an internationalization of the concept. Up to this point, the meaning of *kuyō* as shaped by Yagiken product catalogues positions it not as a religious ritual or one dependent on religious interpretations but as a memorial practice conducted by individuals that is fundamental to Japanese cultural identity.<sup>12</sup> But why stop there?

The 2006–2007 catalogue boldly elevates *kuyō* to global significance. It is described as a practice relevant to any person whose culture commemorates the loss of loved ones through some kind of material expression. Mr. Ueda believes the term *kuyō* will, in the future, have the same kind of international presence that *sushi*, *geisha*, or *sumō* commands today. If one only knows where to look, he says, there is a culture of commemorative practices and beliefs similar to *kuyō* already in evidence around the world. After all, he writes in "How the English Recall the Dead Individually" (*Kojin o shinobu eikokujin no bāi* 個人を偲ぶ英国人の場合), ancestral portraiture in England (and in Europe generally) resonates strongly with the way Japanese place photos of their ancestors within or next to the family altar. Additionally, what happened in New York City on 11 September 2001 is another cultural bridge that links human beings around the world

12. Benjamin DORMAN (2006) has pointed out a parallel message in the thought of leading spirit medium, best-selling author, and media personality Hosoki Kazuko. She asserts that ancestor worship is not a religious practice because the historical Buddha and his disciples left no teachings on the subject. Rather, it was Confucius who promoted the veneration of one's ancestors, a practice disseminated throughout China and East Asia generally in the succeeding centuries. Her fundamental position is that memorializing one's ancestors is connected to what it means to be Japanese. Dorman cites several examples from her 2005 book, *Shiawase ni naru tame no senzo no matorikata* 幸せになるための先祖の祀り方 (How to become happy through ancestor worship).

through a “culture of memorialization” (*kuyō bunka* 供養文化) in how they grieve, commemorate loss, and remember the departed.

Backing up this belief in an international culture of commemoration, Yagiken opened a salesroom and gallery in lower Manhattan in the fall of 2005. Although a reader might be skeptical of the market for altars in one of America’s most ethnically diverse cities, Mr. Ueda explained the company wanted to make a statement about their belief in the universality of *kuyō* and, given the timing, see if New Yorkers would respond to this initiative. Since it is unlikely that the sudden appearance of a store selling commemorative altars would attract much attention even in an eclectic place like lower Manhattan, half the interior is devoted to an art gallery. This is a fitting collaboration, as well as evidence of truth in advertising, since the name “Gallery Memoria” summons ideas of art and memory.

In the gallery’s inauguration held on 8 December 2005, the main event was preceded by welcoming speeches and a calligraphy demonstration. Then, a female Caucasian dancer wearing a traditional kimono and Noh-style male and female masks ended her performance by presenting to the audience a banner that read “KUYO IS LOVE.”<sup>13</sup> The Manhattan store’s opening is further discussed on an English-language website—<http://www.memoria-kuyo.com/index.html>—where the main theme is summarized clearly and directly in a large banner headline superimposed on images of Manhattan and Ground Zero: “KUYO IS LOVE. We believe KUYO is a form of love and is the key to world peace.” In smaller text but also on the home page, the reasoning is more apparent: “If many groups connected by KUYO love gather together, a larger group with an even stronger bond of love will be formed. KUYO is love, and if KUYO prevails, peace will prevail on Earth.”

The web page displays photos from the Strawberry Fields John Lennon memorial in Central Park, a Yagiken altar with photos of Princess Dianna and Dodi Al Fayed, and visitors in front of a bleak-looking Ground Zero one year after the destruction of the World Trade Center towers. Although lacking captions, the viewer can easily link all three images and the events they symbolize. Like an electric shock, millions of people around the globe experienced a profound sense of grief and mourning for the tragic loss of these lives. To express their sentiments, an outpouring of flowers, impromptu memorials, and candlelight vigils marked the occasion both at the time and then on a yearly basis. One would hope that the sense of *kuyō* culture and community extolled on the web-

13. When I mentioned this event and the phrase “kuyo is love” to three Buddhist priests (Nichiren, True Pure Land, Pure Land) interviewed separately for another project, their reaction was surprising. I expected disparaging comments about degrading the concept of *kuyō* or removing it from the expertise of the priest, but the response was quite positive. They expressed admiration for the clever way that English words were made to convey a very Japanese sentiment, and thought the phrase itself was a stroke of brilliance.

site is not predicated on tragedies but on an awareness of the fragility of life and inevitability of death shared by people everywhere.

In case visitors to the website are curious about the term, the question “What is KUYO?” is posed (with capital letters in the original) and then answered:

In Japan, we pray to our ancestors in our everyday lives in order to express our appreciation for their gifts as well as for our well being and happiness. We also pray to our ancestors when we lose someone we love. This custom is called KUYO. Prayers are performed at home in front of an altar, typically in the living room. Thus, we maintain contact with our ancestors virtually every hour of the day, every day, reminding ourselves and our children of our roots. Through KUYO, a connection is also made with the realm of the living, which leads us to seek for love and peace.

(<http://www.memoria-kuyo.com/whats.html>, accessed 25 July 2008)

Leaving aside the essentialized and over-general conceptualization of *kuyō* offered here for foreign audiences (it is advertising copy, after all), a New Yorker might be forgiven for thinking the Japanese are both morbidly obsessed with the dead and piously devoted to their memory. Further misunderstandings are guaranteed if they read an article in *New York* magazine (cir. 523,000) published before the store’s opening. After the title, “Ancestor-Worship Chic,” gave the impression that the article would be about fashion, its subtitle, “Do cramped New Yorkers want the spirits of their departed forebears as roommates?” serves to bait the reader but provides no answers (PIKUL 2006). After a brief description of the idea of *butsudan* and an equally brief mention of selling altars in Japan to a declining population, readers learn of a local woman of Japanese ancestry who purchased a small Yagiken altar for her recently deceased father. Just as the title’s provocative question is never addressed directly nor answered obliquely, the author does not explain why she considers *kuyō* to be another “Zen-like affectation” of the city, akin to “yoga and W Hotel lobbies.” Nor is there any discussion of Harvard professor (and respected scholar of Japanese religion) Helen Hardacre’s provocative comment that Yagiken is attempting to Westernize Japanese ancestor worship by “festooning it with crucifixes,” a rather bizarre image referenced neither by the article nor present in any Yagiken design. She is quoted as saying, “the idea of praying to the dead is distinctly heretical to Christians” (PIKUL 2006). Therefore, a reader deduces that the Yagiken initiative in Manhattan is doomed to failure because of the company’s ignorance about these cultural and religious factors.

Allowing for misinterpretation of Professor Hardacre’s comments by the reporter, it seems unlikely that heresy is an issue among New York City’s rank and file Christians regarding culturally-appropriate ways of interacting with the spirits of the dead. Although space prevents only a brief mention here, a num-

ber of ethnographic studies point to rituals, commemorations, prayers, offerings, and designated places where spirits are thought to be present and even intervene in Christian-dominated cultures of the living.<sup>14</sup> Examples are abundant in places like Mexico, Bolivia, Greece, Kenya, or Korea where relationships are ongoing with the spirits of departed relatives. Both Mr. Ueda and two Yagiken salespersons (one in Osaka and one in Kobe) noted that Gallery Memoria showrooms regularly sell altars to Christian clients as well as those unaffiliated with any organized religion.

The Yagiken showroom in New York City may indeed turn out to be unsuccessful commercially, but, according to Mr. Ueda, profit does not seem to be the main point of the endeavor. When we spoke in January 2007, the showroom and gallery had been open for a little over one year but only two altars had been sold, both to Japanese living in the city. He ascribed this fact to minimal or ineffective advertising on the part of the company, as well as a realization that it was still too soon for New Yorkers to be favorably disposed towards new cultural ways of honoring loved ones, whether lost in the 9/11 attacks or in the following years. Despite these disappointing results, the company's CEO was committed to keep the showroom and gallery going in order to continue education and awareness about *kuyō* culture.

### *Stressing Individualism, not Buddhism*

As more of the generation born after the war loses their parents, relatives, and friends—and inch closer to death themselves—there will be a resurgent interest in practices and concepts that provide guidance for this phase of one's life. Mr. Ueda thinks that the postwar generation in Japan was denied essential cultural traditions in favor of so-called “modern” or “democratic” trends favored by a rapidly changing society. Today, he sees this same generation as hungry to reclaim their cultural heritage. What could be more fundamental to Japanese civilization than the practice of *kuyō* to commemorate parents, relatives, and friends?

With this clientele in mind, Yagiken's sophisticated advertisements appeal first to the visual and aesthetic sense of an older, well educated, and urbanized Japanese. These individuals are able to appreciate beautifully-designed furniture that harmonizes with the uncluttered lines and neutral colors of contemporary interior design. Visual appeal is then wedded with and framed around vague ethical, spiritual, and religious associations about the product's multiple functions, none of which can be characterized as distinctively Buddhist. To summarize some of

14. To mention a few of these works in passing would include BRANDES 2006; COMAROFF 1985; DANFORTH 1989; and KENDALL 1988.

the main uses mentioned thus far, a contemporary altar is first and foremost a physical place and beautifully designed object where one can:

- express love for one's family and ancestors
- converse with the departed
- find quiet and solace by putting one's hands together in prayer or contemplation
- discipline the behavior of one's children and thus help make Japanese society a better place
- help to preserve Japanese culture through the practice of *kuyō*
- interact with religious rituals specific to one's faith, or, in the spirit of "freedom of worship" (*jiyū ni matsuru* 自由に祀る), create a more individualized commemorative practice
- enter into a worldwide community of individuals whose commemorative practices in honor of their loved ones helps to create conditions that foster world peace

The 2006–2007 catalogue announces on its inner cover that, "a more sophisticated contemporary *butsudan* has been born" (*sara ni senren sareta gendai butsudan tanjō* さらに洗練された現代仏壇誕生). Interestingly, there is no image of a *butsudan* in the photograph. Instead, we see a small ceramic statue of a bespectacled, brown-robed Catholic monk holding a Bible or hymnal. The figure stands beside a multicolored urn for ashes and bone fragments (*kotsutsubo* 骨壺) designed and produced by the world-renowned Murano glassworks of Venice. The potential client is thus launched into a conceptualization of the *butsudan* that is international, artistic, contemporary, vaguely historical, and most importantly of all, nuanced to individual aesthetic tastes in a non-prescriptive way. Perhaps the "sophistication" of the catchphrase is a synthesis of all these features, as well as a consumer's understanding and appreciation of them.

Has there ever been a Buddhist altar described as a "composition" (*kōsei* 構成) where its design enhances the theme of deep "inner/interior space" on the physical rather than spiritual plane (*tēma wa okuyuki no aru uchūteki kūkan kōsei* テーマは奥行のある宇宙的空間構成)? After living for centuries within the cosmology of Buddhist metaphysics, this advertisement for the "Katsura" line of altars gives the impression that a consumer is more concerned with the spatial layout and form of an altar rather than what it signifies in a Buddhist context. A few pages later, an altar designed and built in Italy is characterized as a place where one can worship as one pleases, with a comfortable feeling and without rules (*kimochiyoku omoidōri ni. Matsurikata ni ruru wa nai* 気持ちよく思いどおりに。祀り方にルールはない). Once again, Yagiken promotes the integrity of subjective preferences over and above those issuing from domestic Buddhist traditions. There is also an explicit resistance in the advertisement's text—wholly supportive of

individual rather than institutional preferences—that would surely raise the eyebrows of any diligent priest.

Although there are many more fascinating catch phrases accompanying product images and promoting new ways of conceptualizing *butsudan* in the catalogue, two closing commentaries help reinforce and expand key themes. An essay by Shina Makoto tells the charming story of how the birthday of his two-year-old daughter was held in front of the family altar (*Butsudan no mae no happi bāsudē* 仏壇の前のハッピーバースデー). The little girl wanted to include her recently deceased grandmother in the festivities, and, since candles could be seen on the altar regularly, she decided this was the appropriate location for the party. Her parents saw no reason to discourage her innocent plan, nor would Yagiken find anything objectionable about using an altar (described earlier as a “place for having a conversation”) for this purpose.

Having the last word, Mr. Ueda notes how funeral and burial customs in Japan are changing dramatically, catering to individual preferences instead of sectarian or religious requirements. He cites first the purchase and preservation of forest groves in Akita prefecture (*jumoku-sō* 樹木葬) that now serve as repositories for cremated ashes and bone fragments. Additionally, the newly popular custom of *temoto kuyō* 手元供養 (<http://www.temoto-kuyo.org>) dispenses with individual graves altogether and stores ashes on or within the family altar. A link is provided in the catalogue and on the Yagiken website to this same registered non-profit organization, indicating support and collaboration. The purchase of individual graves may be in slow decline, but there is no reason why an altar cannot house remains if that is what the consumer desires and the market permits.

Leaving aside changing mortuary practices in society at large, interviews conducted separately with Pure Land, True Pure Land, and Nichiren priests in the Kansai area confirmed there is a growing laxity regarding burial and memorial practices among *danka* 檀家 members. All three religious specialists noted how, during their monthly visitation to *danka* families for the express purpose of offering prayers for ancestral spirits (a practice called *tsukimairi* 月参り, common in the Kansai region), they occasionally perform the ritual in front of a photo and flowers rather than a *butsudan*. Whether due to economic reversals caused by the Hanshin earthquake in 1995 or changing attitudes about commemoration, priests in Kansai usually do not pressure a family to purchase a proper memorial altar. When shown photos from the Yagiken catalogue, each one said they would have no problem with a contemporary design if it would encourage more families to honor the memory (and in some cases, house the cremated remains) of their loved ones in a more appropriate and respectful manner. Conforming to the *butsudan* requirements of their specific traditions was deemed less important than the well-being of the individual spirits. By taking this position, the priests seem to confirm the Yagiken position that household altars can be

domesticated in ways that privilege individual rather than religious predilections yet still honor one's deceased ancestors and relatives.

### *Conclusion*

With eight retail showrooms, two department store affiliates, and fifty-four franchise outlets nationwide, the market presence and influence of the Yagiken corporation may seem small.<sup>15</sup> However, Mr. Ueda points out that Yagiken sales are steadily rising whereas the traditional *butsudan* seller is anxious about declining profits in a market crowded with competitors offering the same basic products. In a post-Aum, post-9/11 world, Yagiken is both riding and contributing to a wave of stylish and innovative concepts that reflect changing attitudes about religion, the afterlife, and individual agency. At the risk of overgeneralizing (based on the way religion has directly affected Japanese social and political events), people are increasingly insistent about following personal preferences instead of deferring to the time-honored practices of a particular Buddhist sect. Yagiken has been successful in discerning the beliefs of its target clientele, and, as we have seen in many of the catchphrases of their catalogues and website pages, is wholly conversant with the growing cultural distinction between the perceived burdens of religion and the beneficial flexibility of spirituality.

Yagiken's marketing not only responds to these general social trends but also astutely enlists them to the company's advantage. Don't want a dark and foreboding piece of furniture in your light and airy home? Yagiken has umpteen models that will elicit the envious sighs of your neighbors and the admiration of your interior designer. Don't want a religious organization telling you how to honor the departed spirits of your loved ones? That's fine with Yagiken: it promotes the pluralism of Japanese religiosity as well as the freedom of the individual to determine "comfortable" ways of interacting with these traditions. No longer believe in the traditional power of spirits, but still want to pay respects to your parents and kinfolk for having made possible your existence? Yagiken's subcontractors in Denmark and Italy have designs that they believe transcend cultural and religious parochialism. Through these and other products, one's practice of *kuyō* resonates with people around the globe wherever memorials are conducted for the spiritual repose of the deceased.

This overview of the Yagiken corporation and its reconfiguration of standard concepts about the household altar and so-called "ancestor worship" in Japan recalls an old Confucian term used in the title. The "rectification of names"

15. Store locations are found in the following cities: Tokyo (3), Yokohama, Osaka, Kobe, Fukuoka, Sapporo. The fifty-four regional franchise outlets are listed on the company's website at <http://www.yagiken.co.jp> (accessed 22 June 2007).

(*zheng ming* 正名) was deemed by Confucius to be one of the most important activities of the sage. If order and stability were to prosper, names had to suit what they referred to, but it was also true that things had to conform with the names they already had. When there was discrepancy between a name and its referent, it was up to the sage (or ruler) to realign the relationship.

If we continue to use the phrase “ancestor worship” in our thinking and teaching about the ritual and casual commemoration of deceased family members, we have to not only problematize the terminology but also propose alternative ways of approaching the array of practices that can be categorized as *kuyō*. Especially important is rectifying these practices with contemporary consumerism, which some see as replacing religion as the dominant belief system of our time. If current trends are any guide, Japan’s religious traditions will find it difficult to escape not only the logic but also the gravitational pull of an increasingly insistent and intrusive market and the preferences of its sophisticated “believers.” Commemorating ancestral spirits in ways that emphasize interior design and consumer preferences rather than established Buddhist traditions is on the cutting edge of altering religious practice and thought in Japan today.

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