

Altared States: Exploring the Legacy of Japanese American *Butsudan* Practice¹

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Scene One: On a remote Hawaiian plantation, a Japanese picture bride—young and alone—receives a precious gift from her husband: a small *obutsudan*. The wife is touched by her husband's gesture, and as a photo of her parents is carefully placed next to the modest shrine, the couple bows in appreciation.

Scene Two: Three sisters return to their home in Stockton, California after the war. After having been interned in Rohwer, Arkansas, they arrive to find their property looted and vandalized. Despite the obvious destruction, they find the family's *obutsudan* intact. The sisters take a moment before the altar to remember their parents and the precious bond that links them one to the other, as they gather the resolve to go forward.

Scene Three: A small shrine sits on top of an old dresser at the end of the narrow hallway. Although the young girl does not understand the full significance of her grandmother's *obutsudan*, she does comprehend that it is a special place where Obachan ponders Amida Buddha and brings her memories, gratitude, and hope.

THESE THREE SCENES FORM an arc of memory that spans three generations of Japanese Americans. The first two are re-creations of Issei and Nisei life taken from Kayo Hatta's 1995 film, *Picture Bride*, and Philip Kan Gotanda's play, *Sisters Matsumoto*, respectively. These artists' symbolic use of the shrine speaks of its significance not only for Issei pioneers and their Nisei progeny, but also as something that is deeply embedded in the cultural memory of Japanese Americans.

The third scene is a personal recollection. Looking back on my own experience, the lives of my Issei grandmothers present a compelling dilemma about the "spiritual center" of Japanese American life. The temple, although important,² was certainly not the primary locus from

which they drew spiritual strength. If any “place” was significant, it would have to have been my grandmothers’ *obutsudans*,³ or home altars, to which they were highly committed.

The majority of first generation Japanese Americans or Issei who migrated from Japan to the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were Jōdo Shin Buddhists. As they became more settled, Jōdo Shin ministers were sent to America to attend to the religious needs of these burgeoning communities. Local associations were formed and temples eventually built.⁴ But homage to Amida Buddha did not take place solely within the confines of the church. Outside the temple walls, the *butsudan* functioned as a small altar that provided a dedicated space for devotion within the home. These shrines were built by individuals, or for those who were able to afford it, commissioned from local carpenters or purchased from Japan.

The *butsudan* also provided a site for ancestor veneration and held the Buddhist name placards or *hōmyō* of deceased family members, as well as the family death register. Loved ones who recently passed away were memorialized with photographs placed before the shrine. *Obutsudan* practice consisted of not only *gassho* (meditation/thanksgiving/chanting), but also the offering of incense and food (rice cakes, *manju*, tangerines) to Amida Buddha and in commemoration of the ancestors.

At the family’s request, a minister would visit the household and come before the *butsudan* to perform certain rites. But the adults of the household would attend to the day-to-day rituals (maintenance of the *butsudan*, *gassho*, offering), and children would occasionally participate when they were allowed to place food before the altar. These rituals were done without much fuss and were a part of everyday life.

While *butsudan* practice was an integral feature of Issei religious life, it seems to hold increasingly less significance for subsequent generations of Japanese Americans. As Jōdo Shin Buddhists adapted their religious worldview to American standards, participation in temple-centered activities became the measure of religious devotion, and the demands of modern life chipped away the time set aside for home-based rituals. Although there have been attempts by the BCA to reinvigorate interest in *obutsudan* practice, these efforts have not been met with overwhelming success.

From where I stand now, the *obutsudan* appears as a familiar yet distant phenomenon—an object made precious because of my religious and cultural past. However, to view the *butsudan* so nostalgically precludes us from investigating the spiritual legacy of this most significant practice. The questions that drive this study are linked to discovering such a legacy: How do different generations of Japanese Americans relate to the *butsudan*? Has *butsudan* practice had any influence on the religious sensibility and spiritual outlook of Japanese Americans today? What can

we say about these practitioners' spirituality and their relationship to the institutionalized church/temple? If Sansei, Yonsei, and Gosei maintain their own altars, how do they compare with their parent's, grandparents', and great-grandparents'? In other words, how have different generations altered the practice to fit their own needs and circumstances?

Since this research represents a first step in a larger project, I decided to start local and speak with individuals who I knew had some type of shrine in their homes. At the time, I assumed that each of my subjects grew up within or had some affiliation with the Buddhist Church—usually the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). I attempted to interview individuals who came from different age groups (Issei, Nisei, Sansei) to see how the practice had been carried on from generation to generation—what elements of the practice had changed, which ones had endured, how each of these individuals negotiated the practice as well as their affiliation with the larger social institutions of the temple and the BCA. I sought out altars that differed greatly from one another, but expected continuity in the meaning that the altar and altar practice held for these individuals. What I discovered was surprisingly rich and diverse.

ELEMENTS AND INTERACTIONS

Before I examine particular case studies, it is first necessary to get a sense of what *butsudan* practice entails—its primary elements and interactions. Here, I will not be examining the family altar in detail, nor reviewing the symbolic meaning of its ritual adornments. Masao Kodani and Russell Hamada provide an excellent overview and useful descriptions of the family altar in their publication, *Traditions of Jodoshinshu Hongwanji-ha*.⁵ As their presentation suggests, the *obutsudan* boasts a complex architecture that utilizes three-dimensional space to encourage spiritual insight. First of all, the central image of reverence—*myōgō*, picture or statue of Amida Buddha—finds its place on the highest tier of the shrine; in simpler versions of *butsudan*, this image still enjoys an elevated position in relation to the other ritual objects and usually in relation to the practitioner. As such, Amida Buddha calls upon the practitioner to focus and *reflect*; it “serves as a mirror to see [one’s] true self and to fully awaken one’s religious consciousness.”⁶ Secondly, the flowers and the candle that respectively adorn each side of Buddha/*myōgō* remind the practitioner of the two states of her existence: the impermanence of this life and the elemental truth of Amida’s wisdom and compassion. Finally, there are the photos, flowers, and offerings that are placed before the *butsudan*, outside of its walls. While the adornments that reside within the altar are fairly standard, dictated by the larger institutional tradition, the ones that surround the *butsudan* itself are highly personal. As such, the shrine’s spati-

ality seems to suggest that the particular path by which the practitioner enters into a higher understanding of her existence is through the particularities of her everyday life. Indeed, the *butsudan*, by its very design, encourages the devotee to make a series of associations (impermanence and Truth) and reciprocal exchanges (rice offering as both an expression of gratitude and in recognition of our own need for Amida's sustenance) that are meant to help her recognize the profound co-existence of the sacred and the mundane.

Undoubtedly, an awareness of these details may help heighten one's experience of the *butsudan*. However, I would argue only the most knowledgeable of practitioners possess such an understanding. This is not to say that the practice of those who do not understand the symbolism of the shrine's adornments is any less significant; while she may not fully comprehend the altar's symbolism, she has usually developed a highly functional sense of its meaning. In respect for such practitioners, I would like to offer an alternative framework.⁷

There are three main *elements of butsudan practice* (see diagram): the individual, the family network or ancestors, and the larger tradition (Buddhism). These are meant to refer to not only physical objects that occupy the shrine space, but also to particular historical narratives, myths, and stories within the cognitive space of the practitioner.

First of all, the individual brings his life story and the events that he finds most significant to the altar space. Second, there are the lives of deceased family members and ancestral network represented by photographs, the family death register, and *hōmyō* cards. Jonathan Z. Smith writes about the relation between the individual and the ancestors in the following way:

The transformation of the ancestor is an event that bars, forever, direct access to his particular person. Yet through this very process of metamorphosis, through being displaced from his 'self' and being enplaced in an 'other'—in an object, person, or mark—the ancestor achieves permanence. He becomes forever accessible, primarily through modes of memorialization.⁸

While the deceased are no longer with us, ritualized objects ensure their memory and help us continually recall the significance of their lives. Third, there are the narratives of the larger tradition—Buddhism in general and Shin Buddhism in particular—that give shape to our faith. These are embodied in the statues and images of the Buddha or *myōgō*.⁹

All three elements "condense within themselves two forms of temporality—...the 'then' and the 'now'—and are thus freed from specific historical location....a time sequence...is transposed into a spatial sequence."¹⁰ The "now" is represented by the individual's presence in front

Elements of Butsudan Practice

Individual

Ancestors

hōmyō cards
family death register
photographs

Larger Tradition(s)

statues or painted
images of Amida
Buddha and the
patriarchs, written
scrolls (*myōgō*)

now



then

Interactions of butsudan practice

(re)creative
shrine construction

actual construction
installation
emplacement of objects
arrangement

(re)orienting
shrine maintenance

adornments
candles/candle holders
flowers/vase
incense burner
bell
food/food holders

acts
gassho (thanks and reverence)
meditation (attention and remembrance)
chanting/reciting the nembutsu
(*namoamidabutsu*)
expressing personal appeals and concerns
food and gift offerings



of the home shrine. The “then” is encapsulated in the ritual objects within the *butsudan* (ancestor’s name, image of the Buddha). Hence, in the household ritual space of the *butsudan* the duality between “then” and “now” is radically bridged melding together the different narratives through the shrine’s material objects.

Connections between these objects are further articulated through particular *interactions* (of *butsudan practice*). I have divided these into two types: (re)creative and (re)orienting. These interactions are associated with shrine construction and shrine maintenance, respectively. As the individual participates in the active configuration of the shrine, she does so in oftentimes highly particular ways. The practitioner forges her own creative energies and desires into the *butsudan* through actual construction and arrangement. The shrine comes to physically embody these acts of (re)creation. (Re)creative interactions for a Jōdo Shin practitioner who possesses a conventional *butsudan* are minimal since the organization of the altar is already laid out. Yet, they are still worth noting since it is often through these interactions that the same practitioner develops his own unique sense of practice and makes the shrine space his own.

(Re)orienting interactions are achieved through the shrine’s maintenance. The adornments call forth certain relationships between the individual and the shrine’s main figures (i.e., ancestors, Buddha). Traditionally, each adornment has a unique significance: the incense speaks of purification; the candle, wisdom and compassion through enlightenment; the flowers, impermanence and beauty; the bell, announcement; and the food vessel/offering, gratitude and compassion.¹¹ Although the accessories possess these dominant meanings, their significance and function can vary a great deal from practitioner to practitioner.

These adornments assist the practitioner in particular acts associated with the altar. The individual comes before the *butsudan* to give thanks, meditate, remember, focus, contemplate, offer, and communicate. These acts establish a relationship between the individual and that which is enshrined. I hesitate here to say that the relationship is *necessarily* between the individual and Amida Buddha or between the individual and her ancestors; such a schema is too simplistic. Oftentimes, these acts allow the practitioner the occasion to think through everyday happenings and events within different frames of reference (suffering, connectedness, compassion, etc.) and ethically, culturally, socially, and spiritually reorient him/herself. This (re)orientation helps the practitioner reframe the events of his everyday life.

The *butsudan* or home altar allows the individual a means by which to make sense, make significant, and make good one’s life through a ritual space and practice. It calls forth the individual to work out one’s personal story in relation to the narrative and mythic frameworks of one’s ancestors and the larger religious tradition.¹²

A SLICE OF CONTEMPORARY
JAPANESE AMERICAN HOME SHRINE PRACTICE¹³

Thus far, I have talked about the *obutsudan* in more formal terms. Now, I would like to provide several case studies that demonstrate the concrete realities of the practice. The following four vignettes offer representative examples of contemporary Japanese home shrine practice. Again, in my pursuit of understanding the *legacy* of the practice among Japanese Americans, I did not limit my study to individuals who possessed more standard *obutsudans*, but also interviewed ones who had constructed more unconventional altar sites.

Mrs. Hamamoto

Mrs. Hamamoto did not want to meet in person (explaining that she has become quite a recluse and does not even go to temple anymore), but was willing to talk over the phone. She comes from a prominent Jōdo Shin family that boasts several BCA ministers and has lived her whole life in and around “the church.” Her current *butsudan* was inherited from her mother who used to keep the altar in a special room (*butsuma*), but it now resides in Mrs. Hamamoto’s bedroom. The family *butsudan*, which was used before she received her mother’s, was housed in the living room and actually was portable enough for her husband to carry around with him on his ministerial duties. She decided to put her mother’s *butsudan*—which is larger and a little older than her previous one—in the bedroom because it is quiet and allows her to meditate before she goes to sleep.

At the beginning of our interview, Mrs. Hamamoto stressed that Jōdo Shin is “really in the heart” and not necessarily tied to any altar or ritual. This said, however, the *butsudan* is still a “reminder of all the teachings.” She said, “It’s nice to have a place where you can think about things and reflect...transcend a little bit.”

For Mrs. Hamamoto the *butsudan* is quite useful in another way: it contains the *hōmyō* cards of deceased family members. She often refers to these to recall the exact date of her husband’s death, which she admits she has a hard time remembering. For her the *hōmyō* drawer or family dimension of the *butsudan* is not only practical, but also allows one to remember that one is “connected to ancestors and to descendants. It reminds one that one is not alone and must be responsible to others.”

In these ways, the *butsudan*, for Mrs. Hamamoto, functions as a space that offers broad reflection about life and how that life is lived out as a Buddhist. “Life is not simply the ordinary...eat, sleep, and fight, but there’s something transcendent about it.” Being reminded of this in relation to the Buddha’s teaching and in relation to others (ancestors *and* descendants) helps “root.”

The *butsudan* represents a space to which Mrs. Hamamoto can come and (re)orient herself in relation to a Buddhist worldview. The opportunity to look back upon the events of the day, realize suffering, interconnectedness, and hope, and give thanks helps her put her life in perspective. She accomplishes this by reflecting upon Amida Buddha in relation to the concrete realities of her own life and her family. Although Mrs. Hamamoto does not consider the *butsudan* sacred, her home altar and the rituals associated with it act as a physical and spiritual reminder of a larger framework by which the “ordinary” and “everyday” gain significance, meaning, and direction.

Edith and Akira Okada

Edith and Akira Okada, a Nisei couple, obtained their *butsudan* about ten years ago when their son, Steve, was working towards the Boy Scout Sangha Award.¹⁴ One of the requirements for the Sangha Award is to understand the *butsudan*, maintain or “take care” of the altar, and perform small services before it. Besides this practical incentive, the Okadas felt that they should have a *butsudan* for their home “since we go to church and it was better to get one.” A man was selling *butsudan*-s at the church so they purchased one from him—handcrafted in natural wood—for about a hundred dollars. Throughout the interview, Mrs. Okada expressed her dissatisfaction with their purchase. She now wishes she had bought a more traditional *butsudan* of black lacquer with gold trim.

The *butsudan* was closed, as it is most of the time according to Mrs. Okada. Surrounded by pots of artificial and dried flowers, with their daughter’s pink fuzzy slippers and boxes shoved under the cabinet on which it was placed, the shrine appeared as simply another knickknack in their home. (Of course, when I asked to take pictures of the altar, they insisted on clearing much of the clutter away.)

I asked Mr. and Mrs. Okada about their experiences with their parents’ *butsudan*-s. Mrs. Okada’s mother had a *butsudan* especially commissioned about ten years after internment, and she devoutly maintained the altar. Her father and siblings did not seem to interact with the *butsudan* in such a regular fashion. The *butsudan* was just something that was always there, a natural part of the household. Mrs. Okada remembers food and fresh flowers in front of the altar; edible gifts (such as *manju*—sweet bean cakes) were also brought before the *butsudan* before the family partook of them.

In Mr. Okada’s case, his father actually built their *obutsudan*. It was constructed from wood and adorned with black and gold paint. It was maintained regularly, and the first rice of the day was always set before the shrine. He vaguely recalls that the rice offering was supposed to be eaten by family members, but oftentimes was not because of the hot Central Valley weather (which would make the rice spoil quickly).

Mr. and Mrs. Okada have been highly active in their local temple. Mrs. Okada served as the Church's treasurer; she was part of the Fujinkai (Buddhist Women's Association) and once served as a Sunday school teacher. Mr. Okada attended church for eight years. However, because of age and ailing health, both have stopped going to temple on regular basis.

In the Okada's case, the *butsudan* seems to be something they feel is important to have: it symbolizes their commitment to the BCA and to Jōdo Shinshū. But beyond this symbolic connection, it does not appear to hold much significance. Ritual interaction is minimal, if not totally absent. Rather, ownership is what is important as a committed expression of affiliation. It seems as if they have yet to fully integrate their own personal narratives and the memories of their parents' religious practice with their possession of the altar. Rather, the continuity between these elements is expressed and supported most strongly through their relation to the institution of the church.

Another couple I interviewed had purchased their *butsudan* a few years ago in order to hold *hoji* or memorial services in their home. The husband remarked, "You know as you get older, you think about these things more." This couple is about a decade older than the Okadas. It will be interesting to see if the Okadas' *butsudan* will hold greater significance as they age.

Helen Kitayama

Helen's home shrine is most interesting. It sits atop a bookshelf in the open kitchen area. There are old photographs of her and her husband's parents, as well as an assortment of small objects—dolls, stones, and bells. On the right side are two photographs of her deceased father—one a headshot, the other a picture of him performing Noh drama. On this side, one also finds a small bronze Buddha, an Ojizōsan figure (creatures that look after the unborn), and an Amaru Indian doll. Above this assortment of objects hangs a sculpted head of Amida Buddha. On the left side of the shrine, one finds an old photo of her husband Min's family. Next to it on the far left are smooth black stones and an assortment of Japanese bells. On the wall above is a small abstract print of an angel. Between the two sides is a vase, which holds a handsome piece of dried acorn branch that shades the entire shelf.

Helen, a late-issue Nisei, is an artist by profession, and her altar reflects her improvisational style: every object that is a part of her shrine has been carefully selected and placed, but this often happens quite spontaneously. For instance, the Amaru doll on her father's side comes from her experiences with the Amaru tribe in South America, with whom she feels a deep spiritual connection. The angel print above Min's side of the family and the sculpture of the Buddha above her own accurately reflect their respective

religious backgrounds; he grew up in a Protestant Christian household, whereas her family is Jōdo Shin Buddhist. Although many elements endure, the act of (re)creation is a very important aspect of Helen's home altar as she places, replaces, takes away, and rearranges. This strong creative dimension is also witnessed by the fact that Helen is not sure if she would reconstruct the same shrine if she were to move: an altar must arise spontaneously in relation to the physical space and her own spiritual state.

Helen speaks of shrines that have emerged within her household and without, e.g., she created one during her recent visit to Japan. She explains the spiritual outlook that informs this ritual:

It's not about religion, but [a] need to be close to and incorporated in your life—an ongoingness—it's a way of keeping you connected, and it's a way some of us need to be fed...to realize that I can't exist by myself—I need that kind of spirit coming from other things—so it's people, things, and nature.

Helen's interactions with her shrine offer a viable means of (re)creation. Her altar is woven together by invisible threads that link her family, religious sensibilities and expressions, and her own experiences which make these connections meaningful. The narratives expressed through the shrine are fluid and unfold in an improvisational process that is a blend of willfulness and chance. Although her childhood was conventionally Buddhist, her approach to shrine practice is not. But there is something carried over in her renovation of the practice. She remarks:

So it's about spirituality that gets connected through the inner place of, soul of a person as opposed to a mind of a person...that's talking about what get transferred and translated...and the legacies are really much more of an internal thing than something that necessarily follows from a ritual, *but* the ritual becomes part of that internal thing.

Helen's words seem to mirror those of Kodani and Hamada, who describe the function of the *butsudan's* adornments in the following manner:

Adornments are essentially only symbols or external emblems of Ultimate Truth or Reality. This Truth is ineffable. It is void of taste, color, or thought. But yet, these adornments are relative expressions of Truth and are a means to bring us closer in understanding Truth as the Wisdom and Compassion of Amida Buddha.¹⁵

While Helen's (re)creative ritual may depart a great deal from traditional *obutsudan* practice, it is still informed by a similar sensibility that values inner reflection and reemphasizes the interconnectedness of life.

Fumiko Wong

Fumiko, a Japanese / Chinese American in her early thirties, has a small shrine to her cat (Gumby) on the mantel of her fireplace. The shrine consists of an incense burner, bell (*rin*), and a photo of Gumby hand-crafted on fine paper into an altarpiece. Fumiko made the altar when her cat died. She admits embarrassment over the fact that a picture of her cat adorns her shrine, and not a photo of her deceased grandmother, but she explains that Gumby (and brother Pokey) had been faithful pets, whose companionship had outlived many of her actual human relationships.

Fumiko's shrine becomes the occasion to retell the story of Gumby's demise and how she went through a range of emotions after his death (guilt, anger, grief, etc.). She spontaneously set up the altar, and its construction served as an act of healing. When she first installed the shrine, her and son Wil would burn incense, ring the bell, and bow. She explained to Wil that the ritual was a time to remember Gumby, and he seemed attuned to this.

Fumiko's background is most interesting. Before I interviewed her, I had always assumed that she had grown up Buddhist since the adornments of her altar—the bell and incense burner—were traditionally inspired. I found out that Fumiko actually was raised in a liberal Christian household; she attended an Episcopal church until she was about eleven or twelve, and her parents have been active in the congregation for over thirty years. Her break from Christianity occurred when she felt that she could no longer live by the tenets of her faith and her church. A significant event was the bombings by "revolutionaries" in the early seventies: her pastor asked the congregation to pray for the bombing victims, but Fumiko felt this totally ignored the other side of the picture. (At the time, Angela Davis was a revolutionary hero of hers.)

Throughout her education, Fumiko learned of the abuses of Christianity, which further alienated her from her Christian upbringing. Now, she prefers to involve her own son in Buddhist rituals and events (e.g., festivals, temples) that she feels resonate more deeply with her own religious outlook.

Fumiko's shrine, like Helen's, draws a great deal of its significance from the (re)creative process. But the (re)orienting function is also present as she participates in the shrine-centered rituals with Wil. Her altar not only (re)orients as it helps in a healing process and allows Fumiko to share her spiritual sensibility with her son, but also serves as a means to work out the relationships she has with her own family (e.g., grandmother) and

continually fashion her own religious path from the various religious traditions to which she has been exposed. In speaking with her, one comes to see her committed struggle to bring her own life in tune with the lives of those close to her and the larger social forces that shape her world.

CONCLUSION

Each of these examples demonstrates the wide variety of contemporary *butsudan* and home shrine practice among Japanese Americans. In Mrs. Hamamoto's case, where one has a strong religious institutional affiliation, the interaction with the shrine serves primarily to (re)orient. In the cases of Fumiko and Helen, who feel more alienated from the institutions of the larger tradition(s), the home shrine offers an occasion for (re)creation. Although for the Okadas the shrine does not seem to fulfill either function, their case is instructive because it compels us to consider ways in which *obutsudan* practice is not simply a matter of religious (re)orientation or spiritual (re)creation, but rather how the shrine as a material object becomes a marker of a Japanese American Buddhist identity.¹⁶ Collectively, these examples also suggest that individuals do not necessarily interact with their altars on a steady and regular basis but rather age and critical events greatly influence one's practice.

While Fumiko's and Helen's improvisational altars may share interesting and undeniable connections with their traditional predecessors, they are also significantly different as well. Each woman has chosen to fashion her shrine in highly personalized ways, with limited regard to traditional practice. One could argue that their altars are equally informed by a California "New Age" influence as they are by their Japanese American *butsudan* practice. While Fumiko's and Helen's emphasis on personal spirituality and their highly individualized quest for religious connection fit comfortably within American "seeker" spirituality,¹⁷ the embrace of (re)creative, improvisational shrine practice (and the concomitant waning interest in conventional *obutsudan* practice) is further buttressed by the unique pressures of their Asian American identity. On the one hand, the religious consciousness of many Japanese Americans, who grew up with little or no access to *butsudan* practice, is informed by a Western suspicion of home-based rituals, especially those that are institutionally linked to a non-Judeo-Christian religion. On the other hand, the Japanese Americans who I interviewed often did not feel "Japanese" enough to claim the practice as their own. Plagued by a high standard of religious and cultural authenticity, they felt they did not possess the "right knowledge" to engage in proper *butsudan* practice and expressed anxieties about their abilities to pass on the tradition.

The root of these unfounded views stem from a racist perspective—one that defines religion in its own terms (Judeo-Christian, church-based) and views a hybrid Japanese American identity as fundamentally inauthentic. While the Buddhist Churches of America seeks to ameliorate this situation by educating its members and American society about Buddhist thought and practice, they, too, sometimes fall prey to such biases. Such is the case when one considers the discussion of death and ancestors in BCA literature. Death is, of course, implied in the ancestor component of the *butsudan*. The BCA, realizing the “negative” impressions created by such an emphasis, continually attempts to place more stress on the Buddha rather than on the ancestors to counter this view. In one piece of literature, the author writes:

Portraits of our deceased loved ones are often placed in or around the shrines. I understand the reasons for this practice, but it can contribute to perpetuating the image of Buddhism as a religion for the dead and the after-life. So, I prefer to place portraits of the deceased farther away from the shrine, and certainly not within the shrine itself so as to block our view of Amida Buddha. I have come across youths who found the Buddhist shrine “creepy.” This perception must be changed!¹⁸

Although this perception is obviously real especially given the way death is viewed in the Judeo-Christian society in which we live,¹⁹ my research suggests the opposite solution: encourage the ancestors (and descendants) to remain a lively part of *butsudan* practice. In almost every case, the ancestor dimension allowed the practitioner an access or means by which to better comprehend and understand the abstract tenets of Buddhism. The ancestor’s presence symbolizes a structured narrative that mediates between the individual’s own personal story and Buddhist doctrine. This intermingling constructs a “channel” through which home shrine practice becomes more reflexive and real.²⁰

Meaning and significance are words that are often invoked when speaking about the role religion and spirituality plays in people’s lives. In this paper, I demonstrate how a particular ritual tradition enacts such meaning and significance for contemporary Japanese Americans through the elements of self, ancestors, and the larger tradition that materialize within the shrine space. The individual interacts with the *butsudan* or home shrine interchanging spatial and temporal relations in order to (re)create and (re)orient him/herself.

I also have hinted at the linkages between more conventional, institutionally sanctioned *butsudan* practice (Mrs. Hamamoto, the Okadas) and what can be viewed as secondary, “improvisational” forms (Helen Kitayama, Fumiko Wong). By including the latter and bringing them into

conversation with more conventional examples, we are able to discern a connection between the two—the influence of the larger tradition, as well as the continuity that the improvisational forms provide. In the past, the *obutsudan* offered a valuable spiritual resource for Japanese American Jōdo Shin practitioners; today, it is still able to serve as a potent means by which Japanese American Sansei, Yonsei, and Gosei may be able to fruitfully embrace their Buddhist heritage and construct their own “spiritual home.”

NOTES

1. Portions of this paper have been presented at the following conferences: The Twelfth Annual Conference of the Association for Asian American Studies (Oakland, California, 1995); The Asian and Pacific Americans & Religion Research Initiative Conference, "Revealing the Sacred in Asian America: Theories and Methods" (Santa Barbara, California, 2000); and "Japanese Buddhism in the United States: Shared Issues, Common Themes" (Los Angeles, California, 2003). The author would like to thank the following individuals for their feedback and support: Rudiger V. Busto, Elizabeth Goodstein, Helen Hardacre, David Kyuman Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, David Matsumoto, Sandra S. Oh, Young Mi Angela Pak, Richard Payne, Paul Spickard, and Desmond Smith.
2. The relationship of Japanese American women to the religious institution of the temple can be recognized through their participation in the National Federation of Buddhist Women's Association, local *Fujinkai* groups (Buddhist women's associations), Buddhist Dharma schools, music development, and as church members who generally attend services and support BCA organizations. The extent of such participation of Issei, Nisei, and ensuing generations of Japanese American women in BCA churches needs to be explored.
3. The 'o-' prefix in the Japanese language is used to denote an honorific relationship to the signified. *Butsudan* (without the prefix) is usually employed in academic studies of Japanese Buddhist altar practice (see David Reid, *New Wine: The Cultural Shaping of Japanese Christianity* [Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991]; H. Byron Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*, 3rd ed. [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982]). However, I will be using both the prefixed and non-prefixed versions to mark my multiple commitments to the practice.
4. For a history of Jōdo Shin in the U.S., see Tetsuden Kashima, *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987); and *Buddhist Churches of America: 75 Year History*, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: Norbart, 1974).
5. Masao Kodani and Russell Hamada, "The Family Altar (*Obutsudan*)," in *Traditions of Jodoshinshu Hongwanji-ha* (Los Angeles: Pureland Publications, 1995), pp. 64–71. See also: *Jodo Shinshu Handbook for Laymen* (a translation of *Jinsei No Toi*), 2nd ed. (Kyoto, Japan: Hongwanji International Center, 1983).
6. Kodani and Hamada, p. 64.

7. Presenting such a framework first is misleading, for I did not go into the study “armed,” so to speak, with a theoretical configuration. Rather, the framework emerged through reflection upon the home shrine practice of the various practitioners whom I interviewed.

8. Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 112.

9. Most *butsudan*-s only include the central figure of the Buddha, but more elaborate versions also contain images of Shinran Shonin and Rennyō Shonin.

10. Smith, p. 113.

11. For more extensive descriptions of these adornments, see Kodani and Hamada.

12. For a compelling alternative framework, see Kate Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women’s Altars* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999). Turner speaks about the “generative and regenerative powers” these altars hold that is much in line with the (re)creative function of which I speak.

13. All names have been changed.

14. See Phillip Karl Eidmann, *Young People’s Introduction to Buddhism: A Sangha Award Studybook for Shin Buddhist Scouts* (San Francisco, CA: Buddhist Churches of America), p. 132. The Boy Scout Sangha Award program was officially established in 1956 in order to “give the scouts of Buddhist faith a practical guidance in achieving the spiritual pledge made in the Scout Oath and Law, thereby developing a boy whose views and actions in life would stem from the highest Buddhist thoughts” (*BCA 75 Year History*, p. 100). “The Award is presented by the temple to a Buddhist Scout in recognition of his spiritual growth as shown by his fulfilling the Award requirements” (p. 129).

15. Kodani and Hamada, p. 66.

16. Here, the shrine participates in what Herbert Gans calls “symbolic religiosity”—the consumption of ethno-religious symbols for the purposes of securing a particular identity. These symbols are abstracted from their original cultural context and become substitutes or “stand-ins” for actual practices and ways of life. See Herbert J. Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religiosity: Towards a Comparison of Ethnic and Religious Acculturation,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17-4 (1994): pp. 577–575; and “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 (1979): pp. 1–19.

17. According to Wade Clark Roof, such spirituality is distinguished from previous generations’ patterns of belief by the following characteristics: (1) the reemergence of spirituality, (2) religious and cultural pluralism, (3)

multilayered belief and practices, and (4) transformed selves (*A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* [San Francisco: Harper, 1993], see esp. pp. 241–262). See also Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (New Haven: Princeton, 1999). For a discussion of GenX spirituality, which shares notable features with its Boomer forerunner, see Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

18. Ken Tanaka, *Parents Sharing the Nembutsu Teachings with Their Young Children* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1995), p. 20.

19. The ambivalence toward the ancestor dimension of the *butsudn* can perhaps be traced to a number of interlinking influences and causes: (1) competing worldviews (Shinto versus Jōdo Shin Buddhism), (2) the view of death and the deceased in U.S. society, (3) the dominant understanding of “religion” that embraces a “world religions” framework and views syncretic practices that err from this framework as “less pure.” Another reason is linked to the language that is available to talk about this religious phenomenon. In his discussion of terminology, Jonathan Huoi Xung Lee writes: “I have preferred to use the term ‘veneration’ and not ‘worship’ in my discussion of ‘ancestral veneration.’ I consciously did this because ‘worship’ connotes a Christian-centric bias, as well as a tone of judgment. ‘Veneration’ is a better, more respectful way of illustrating the rituals and beliefs in ancestral veneration. It is a sign of love and commitment on the part of living to remember and care for the spirits of the dead” (“Ancestral Veneration in Vietnamese Spiritualities,” *Review of Vietnamese Studies* 3-1 [2003]: p. 14).

20. See Jane Naomi Iwamura, “Homage to Ancestors: Exploring the Horizons of Asian American Religious Identity,” *Amerasia Journal* 22-1 (1996): pp. 162–167.