Some Japanese Religious Sources Of Nikkei Values

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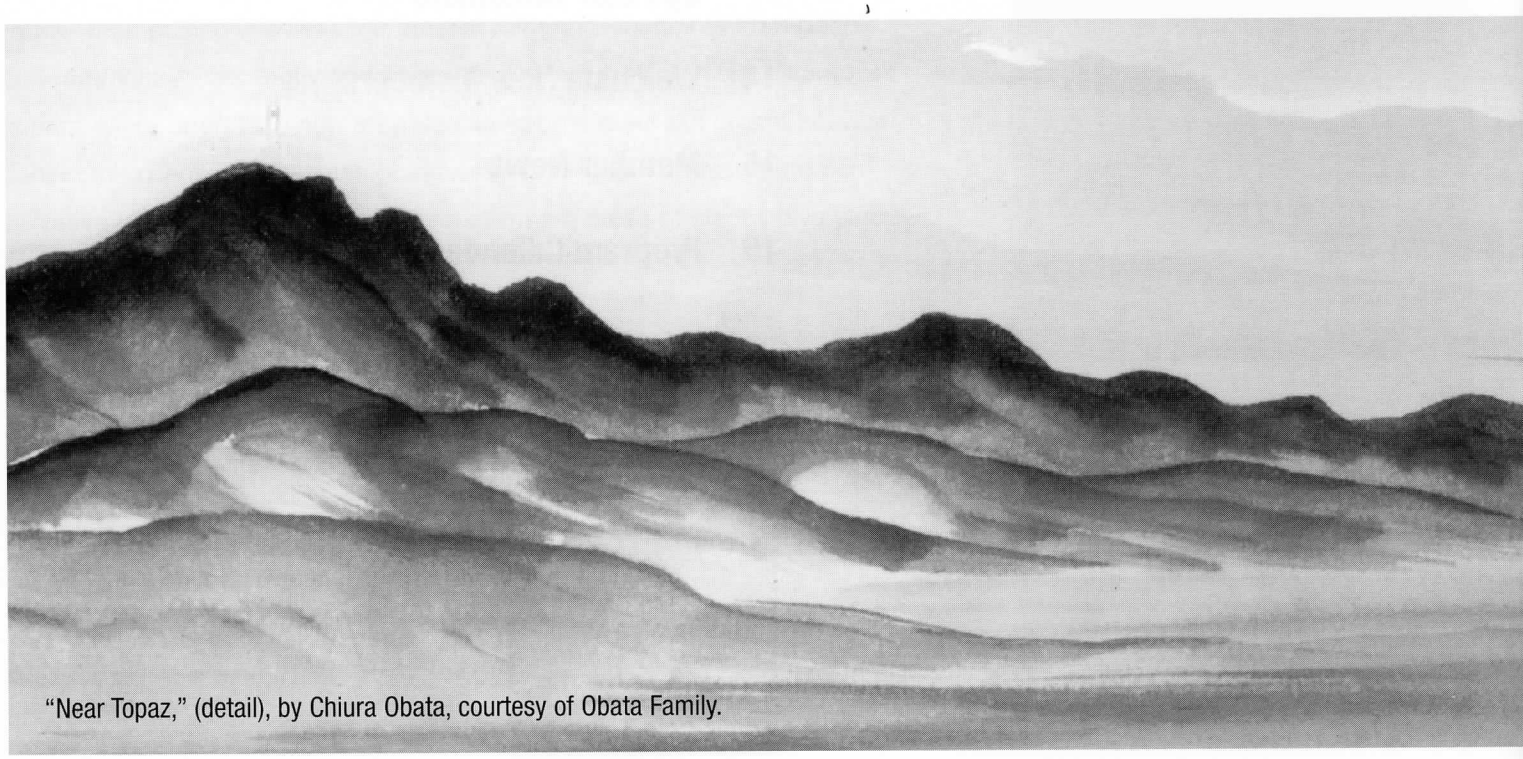
A previous issue of Nikkei Heritage (vol. XII, No. 1, winter 2000) featured articles on Nikkei values—their contrast with Euro-American values, their impact upon individual and family behavior, and their persistence over several generations. Some of the core Nikkei values discussed were *enryo* (restraint), *gaman* (endure), *haji* (shame), *on* (favor, obligation), *shikata ga nai* (it can't be helped).

We now examine the religious sources of *Nikkei* values and their historical origins. Japan provides an interesting laboratory to investigate religion and values. Periodically, the Japanese government takes a national census. A portion of the census report deals with "religion." When the figures are added up for Shinto (religious traditions centered on indigenous deities and places of worship) and Buddhism, they exceed the total population of Japan. How is this possible? Paradoxically, when the average person is asked to what religion they belong, a frequent reply is *mushukyo* or "no religion." How are we to account for these responses?

One reason is found in the word "religion" (*shukyo*) which literally means " teaching of the sects." This word was developed in the nineteenth century to translate the European concept of "religion." As such, it smacks of what we call "organized religion," connected with temples, churches, synagogues and mosques: in other words, institutions. Historically, Japanese families have their names registered with a Buddhist temple, a carry-over of a government requirement from 250 years of the Tokugawa period. Indeed, family registration was primarily a means by which government exerted its control over the population.

Great Traditions vs. Little Traditions

Students of religion make a distinction between "great tradition(s)" and "little tradition(s)." Great traditions refer to organized, structured, institutional religions—especially "world religions" such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Little traditions refer to folk traditions and values that have developed within tribal-clan, extended family-household and community contexts. Religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Shinto and Taoism originated from little traditions, becoming "world religions" when they were transplanted outside of their ethnic boundaries and trans-regional, trans-cultural elements became dominant.



"Near Topaz," (detail), by Chiura Obata, courtesy of Obata Family.

Little traditions or folk traditions focus on rules for daily household and social life. They identify stages of life with accompanying rites of initiation or passage such as birth, acceptance into family, adulthood, marriage or death. These traditions identify family rites and observances for purification, preparation for family roles, support for ancestors and so forth. They also identify actions for protection or what we moderns call superstitions, such as charms and rites for protection from extraordinary events and spiritual forces. Their primary aim is to protect family, communal and social life, to give order and direction and to provide "deliverance" or "salvation" from disasters, oppression, suffering and despair in daily and communal life.

Values that have formed and continue to impact the Nikkei, such as those mentioned above, have their roots in folk, family and communal support. These include concepts of tribe or clan (*uji*), household (*ie*), extended family and group (*dozoku*) and village (*mura*) or city ward (*machi*). The Issei, imbued in these Old World traditions, attempted to preserve and transmit them to their children in their New World.

Encounter

Values develop and are transformed over time. Circumstances, geography, climate and cultural interactions play very important roles in this process. For the Japanese, an island people, the sense of encounter with other peoples and cultures has been profound. The sensibility of "inside and outside" (*uchi to soto*) functions as a powerful metaphor of this encounter and confrontation: my family–your family, our village–your village, my business–your business, our country–your country, us–them.

Another sensibility is that of the intimacy among all things: the close interrelationship among all things, whether they be natural phenomena, flora and fauna, the human and the spiritual world. This comes from an early Japanese awareness that everything is animated by spirit (*seirei or shorei*). Most, if not all, "primitive" and non-literate cultures have expressed this awareness. Japanese culture has retained this sense of an interconnectedness of all things rather than a sense of discontinuity and individuality of things characteristic of Anglo-European culture(s).

Kami

In a fascinating way the Japanese sense of intimacy and continuity is reflected in their understanding of *kami*, referring to anything that is "above, superior, unusual or awe-inspiring." For example, words that are read *kami* or have *kami* as a part of them are: 1) above, over; 2) hair (on the head); 3) paper on which text is stored (writing); 4) the lord of a domain or one who protects; 5) deity; 6) lightning (*kaminari*-sound of *kami*). Each of these words refers to something beyond and/or above. There is a definite sense of hierarchy.

A great variety of things, living or inanimate, can be acknowledged as *kami*. What we moderns call objects of nature can be designated as *kami*, especially if they exhibit or inspire a sense of the unusual or awe. It is common in Japan to have water—springs, streams, wells—rocks, mountains, trees and forests "set apart" or designated as sacred expressions of *kami*. Foxes, badgers, bears, cranes, turtles, dogs and cats are messengers of deities. Since agriculture, especially rice production, is such a vital part of Japanese culture, the spirit of rice and the deity of the rice paddy

are honored in special ways. All aspects of farming and production have their respective deities. *Kami* include spirits of place. They protect and nourish locations, areas, homes, villages and boundaries. Spirits of the living and dead are seen as *kami*. The spirits of particularly dynamic and charismatic individuals are believed to range beyond their physical locations to influence for good or ill. Strong emotion is believed to send the spirit of a person beyond him-or-herself.

Ancestor Veneration

Veneration of ancestors is such a fundamental part of Japanese values that it has profoundly impacted the qualities of all other notions of deity and established religious traditions. For example, here in San Francisco, the Buddhist Church has its major annual fundraising event in July. A central attraction is the *bon-odori* (dance of *O-bon*), which is now seen as an example of Japanese folk dance. *O-bon*, however, is a traditional seasonal household and village/district ritual held during the seventh lunar month, ranging anywhere from the first through the twentieth of the month, when ancestral spirits are welcomed back home in a reciprocal act of comfort and blessing. Newly-departed spirits, spirits who have "passed on" into the other world during the preceding twelve months, are still "wild" and unsettled. They need to be pacified and comforted in order that this spiritual power may be beneficent and not dangerous.

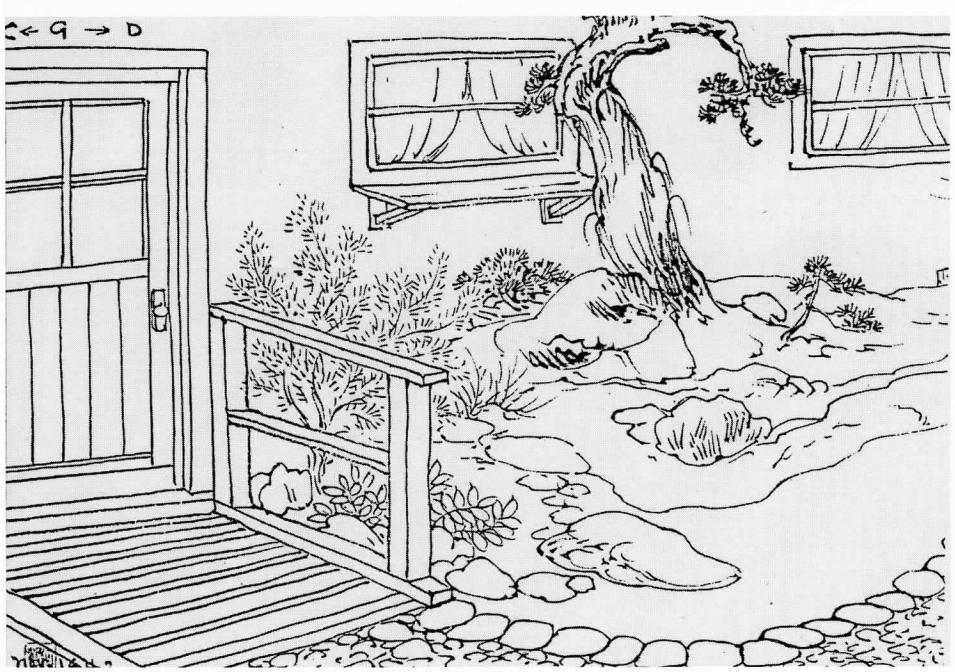
The Buddhist practice in Japan of honoring the departed with the recitation of Dharma texts and family gatherings on certain death anniversary dates, such as the first, third, seventh, 13th, 17th, 23rd, 27th, 33rd (and/or 50th), is a clear example of the Japanese value of continuing to maintain a mutual relationship between the living and the dead. During the 33 or 50 years following death, the spirits of the departed are believed to require the reverence of the living in order that they may be calmed and pacified. As a consequence, the living are assured of receiving the departed's blessing and protection. Following the final rite of the 33rd or 50th death anniversary, the spirit of the departed is believed to be permanently "freed" or merged into and enshrined with the household ancestral spirit(s) who eternally watch over and protect their descendants.

Over the centuries the season of *O-bon*, as well as the season of the New Year, became occasions for branch families (*bunke*) to visit the chief house (*honke*) to honor their ancestors and to renew their familial ties of loyalty and responsibility. The Confucian value of filial piety ("honor your mother and father") resonated well with the Japanese sensibility that included both "this" world and the "next."

Confucian Values

During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), neo-Confucian teaching provided an intellectual foundation for its samurai bureaucracy as well as social stability. Built on the "Five Relationships" of 1) ruler-subject, 2) father-son, 3) husband-wife, 4) elder-younger brother and 5) friend-friend, society and social interaction were the focus of Chinese Confucian ethics. At the apex of Confucian values, filial piety was the first of all virtues by which relationships were to be measured. In Japan, the value of filial piety continued to be the bond that held society together. However, the vertical, hierarchical value of superior to inferior (*joge*) with wider social meanings, was inextricably wedded to this primary notion of filial respect and veneration. From the twelfth century, when warrior society began to dominate Japan, the feudal values of loyalty and service to one's lord and in return, the lord's care and protection of the vassal, increasingly became the primary pattern for all social relationships.

The values of the majority of the Issei generation that came to the U.S. during the Meiji and Taisho eras (1868-1926) were strongly colored by the Confucian values of the previous 250 years of Tokugawa Japan. Thus, basic *Nikkei* values were nurtured in Japanese folk traditions developed in the course of centuries and overlaid with Tokugawa neo-Confucian interpretation. These influences still permeate our sensibilities and interrelations even as they are being transformed in a new cultural setting.



Drawing made in Topaz, 1943, by Chiura Obata, courtesy of Obata Family.

Nikkei gardens expressed the concept of "*shorei*," even in the camps.

Resources:

1. Davis, Winston, "Japanese Religion and Society: Paradigms of Structure and Change."
2. Fuji Masao, "Maintenance and Change in Japanese Traditional Funerals and Death-related Behavior," Japanese Journal of Religious Studies.
3. Miyake Hitos, "Nihon shiikyo no kozo."
4. Sakada Toshio, "Nihonjin no dotoku taikei" (The Moral System of the Japanese), Seikatsu to dotoku shuzoku (Conventions of Life and Morality), vol. 5 of Kokumin seikatsu-shi kenkyu (Studies in the History of Life-styles of the Japanese).