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A STUDY OF *KYARA* IN JAPANESE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE: *SHŪKYŌ ASOBI* AT KANDA MYOJIN AND RYOHOJI TEMPLE

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Abstract

Kyara is a ubiquitous, multi-functional category of mascots in Japan, embraced and consumed by people of all walks of life. Although an element of Japanese popular culture, they are also infused in certain religious spaces. This study investigates the reasons behind the infusion of *kyara* in certain religious spaces in Japan, and examines the impact it has on the practice of religion in those spaces.

The literature on *kyara* is concentrated on its functionality, possible origin and probable reason for consumption and the major reasons stated behind *kyaras* amalgamation in religious spaces include consumption, globalization and secularization only.

With the help of textual analysis and ethnographic research, this study tries to investigate other possible explanations of the incorporation of *kyara* into religious spaces. This could be the long existing tradition of Japanese religion that combines secular elements of play and entertainment with that of the sacred elements of religion, and diminishes the sharp contrast between the two. This aspect shows that such a conflation is not just a desperate measure taken by religious spaces because of the constraints of a contemporary society weighed down by the forces of consumerism and secularization but also a continuation of a tradition especially from the Edo era in a regularly renovating fashion.

The study further investigates the impact in the practice of religion in those religious spaces where *kyara* is infused. In doing so, it utilizes *shūkyō asobi* (playful religion) as a theoretical framework and applies it in the case study of Kanda Myōjin in Kanda, Tokyo, and Ryōhōji temple in Hachioji, Tokyo. The result is the determination of religion being re-created in these spaces. Religion in these spaces is practiced in a diversified and renewed way, thus opposing the secularization theory that suggests a diminishing role of religion in contemporary society.

Methodology: The methodology used for the study is a combination of textual

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analysis and ethnographic research. It is s qualitative study including open-ended interviews, questionnaires and participation observation.

Finding: This research shows that the reason behind the infusion of *kyara* in religious spaces in Japan is not just consumerism, globalization and secularization but the continuation of traditional aspects of its indigenous religion with a modern manifestation where the differences between sacred/profane and religious/secular are not very stark. The research further shows that religious spaces in Japan where *kyara* is infused becomes places of religion and entertainment where the category of religion is reinvented and recreated critiquing the secularization theory.

Research limitation: This limitation of the research is that due to the author's limited knowledge in the Japanese language extensive references to articles and books written in Japanese weren't made. However, due to the contemporary nature of the topic, highly relevant sources in English could be found, that could suitably be used in the study. Also since the author is proficient in spoken Japanese, interviews could be held without too many hurdles.

Practical Implication: This research can aim to enhance the understanding of the category of religion in contemporary Japan. The infusion of popular culture elements into religion that might seem bizarre and excessively consumerist tendency of commodifying religion in Japan can be viewed from a different perspective since the understanding of religion itself in Japan is different from that of the western and sematic perspective.

Originality/Value: The study is significant since academic work on the use of *kyara* in certain religious spaces in Japan and its impact on the practice of religion in those spaces is inadequate. The scholarly works available present only the vantage point of consumerism, globalization and secularization. This study provides an alternative reason for the infusion of *kyara* in certain religious spaces in Japan and attempts to further the critique of the secularization theory in Japan.

Keywords: Popular culture, *Kyara, shūkyō asobi* (playful religion), secularization theory, re-creation of religion

Research Type: Research paper