

Religious Significance of *Sake* in Japan

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Introduction

Alcoholic drinks have a long history and it is believed that alcohol has been used since the age of Gods. In all major religions alcohol is used in various rituals and offered to the Gods in various forms. Description of alcohol or liquors can be traced in many religious books. In many civilizations there are specific Gods who are worshiped as the God of alcoholic beverages. *Dionysos*¹ was worshiped in Greek civilization, while *Bacchus*² and *Liber*³ in Roman civilizations. *Mbaba Mwana Waresa*, a Zulu Goddess, *Ninkasi*,⁴ a Goddess in Sumerian civilization are such mythological figures, who are worshiped as the Gods or Goddess of alcoholic beverages and wine.

Alcohol is the most celebrated drink in Japan and seems deeply rooted in Japanese culture and tradition. It is believed that Japan has adopted the Chinese writing script for writing in its earlier stage of civilization. The Chinese character 酒, which is used for the word *Sake* in Japanese language, is used for rice wine in Chinese language. It has various pronunciations as *Sake*, *Shu* etc. The Japanese *Sake* which is also called *Nihonshu* 日本酒⁵, is mostly prepared from wet rice and usually translated as rice wine in English.

However, in modern Japan, the term *Sake* 酒 or *Osake* お酒 generally refers to all kinds of alcoholic beverages which includes various alcoholic drinks such as beer, wine and whisky and so on.

In case of Japan the very first description of *Sake* or rice wine is given in the *Book of Wei* in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*,⁶ a third century Chinese text describes the custom of drinking and dancing of Japanese people during funerals. Following narrates that there were such traditions in ancient Japan.

大昔から日本民族のあいだで行われた酒造りは、『三国志』卷三十のなかに見いだすことができる。それによると「人性酒を嗜む」とあり、また喪に際では、よそからきた人たちが「歌舞飲酒」をする風習のあったことがわかる。⁷

(*Ōmukashi kara nihon minzoku no aida de okonawareta sakezukuri wa, (sankokushi) maki sanjū no naka ni miidasu koto ga dekiru. Sore ni yoru to (jinseishu o nomu) to ari, mata mo ni sai shite wa, yosokara kita hitotachi ga (kabuinshu) o suru fūshū no atta koto ga wakaru.*)

The origin of *Sake* is deeply rooted in Japanese mythology. Many at times, it has also been observed that a particular deity prepared a special kind of *Sake* for some specific reasons.

Various examples can be seen in historical accounts of Japan, which are *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihonshoki* 日本書紀. The legend of storm Gods *Susano O no Mikoto* 須佐之男命, who rescued a young girl from a huge eight headed snake, called *Yamata no Orochi* 八岐大蛇. He prepared a very strong kind of *Sake* known as, *Yashioori-*

¹ *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses*, Michael Jordan, Second Edition, p. 94

² *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses*, Michael Jordan, Second, p. 59

³ *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses*, Michael Jordan, Second, p. 191

⁴ *Drink: A Cultural History of Alcohol*, Gately, Iain, pp.7

⁵ *Nihonshu*, Japanese rice wine.

⁶ *Sakezukuri no Rekishi*, Yunoki Manabu, p. 13

⁷ *Sakezukuri no Rekishi*, Yunoki Manabu, p. 13

no-sake, brewed and pressed eight times and made it strong enough to make the serpent drunk. He served it to *Yamata no Orochi* in eight pots and when the serpent got drunk and lost its consciousness, the storm Gods cut off its eight heads and rescued the girl⁸.

There is another story in *Nihonshoki* which describes about a very special and delicious kind of *Sake* called *Ama no Tamuzake* (アマノタムザケ)⁹. This *Sake* was prepared from rice by a Goddess called *Konohana Sakuya no Hime*¹⁰.

Religious Significance of *Sake*

Sake has been playing a significant role in the worship of Gods and in other religious ceremonies since the ancient times. If we go through the history of *Sake*, we find that it was China which started brewing *Sake*; however, the mass production of *Sake* started in Japan. *Sake* is not merely a beverage, but it represents Japanese culture, society and religion or in other words, it represents the spirit of Japan. It is an integral part of religion in Japan and it is closely associated with various Japanese religious rituals, ceremonies and social events. There are Gods, Shrines and festivals, which show the importance of *Sake* in Japan. The importance of *Sake* can be understood from the fact that 1st October is declared as the official *Sake Day* 日本酒の日 in Japan¹¹.

However, during the Meiji period, Japan went through a series of changes as it came in the contact with the west. There were changes in every field of Japanese society and Japan was getting ready to enter into a new era of science and technology¹². These revolutions brought many changes in Japan and new rules and laws were introduced during the *Meiji Restoration*. These changes also affected the society, traditions and religion of Japan. In case of *Sake* a new license system was introduced not only for the commercial manufacturing of *Sake* but even in shrines and temples.

(Earlier almost every shrine and temple was producing sake, but now there are only forty-three such shrines, which are known for brewing and selling Sake¹³.)

Japanese people have a special kind of reverence towards *Sake*. In Japanese language, prefix *O* or *Go* is used to show respect towards person or things. For example, Japanese word for money is *Kane* 金 but usually the word *Okane* お金 is used. Another prominent example is for the word temple. The Japanese word for temple is *Tera* 寺 however they refer it as *Otera* お寺. Similarly, the prefix *O* is used with *Sake* and is referred as *Osake*.

Sake plays a vital role in Japanese ceremonies, especially in Buddhist and Shinto ceremonies and rituals. Earlier *Sake* was been brewed in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples for specific religious usages. Apart from above - mentioned examples, *Sake* is also used as an offering to Gods and in purification of temples. It also has a distinguished place in Shinto prayers and chants. Words such as *Mike* (御飯, meal), *Miki* (御酒, *Sake*) and *Mikigami* (御餅, rice cake) are opening words while offering to deities¹⁴. Here the word *Miki* indicates *Sake*.

⁸ <https://craftsakeworld.jp/en/sake-kojiki-susanoo-2/>

⁹ *Ama no Tamuzake*: It was a special kind of *Sake* or rice wine, which *Konohana no Sakuya Hime* had prepared to offer the Gods for the safe birth of her babies and for protecting her image before his husband *Ninigi no Mikoto*.

¹⁰ *Konohana no Sakuya Hime*: a mythological figure, which appears in *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. She was the wife of *Ninigi no Mikoto*.

¹¹ *Sakezukuri no Rekishi*, Yunoki Manabu, p. 03

¹² https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_meiji.htm

¹³ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 40

¹⁴ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 20

御飯、御酒、御餅を始めて種々の物....¹⁵

(*Mike, miki, mikigami o hajimete shuju no mono....*)

The above -mentioned lines of a *Norito* 祝詞¹⁶chanted by a Shinto priest also show the importance of *Sake* as he started the offerings begin with the word *Miki* or *Sake*. Here the word *Miki* 御酒 is used for *Sake*, however, according to the etymology of this word, the word *Miki* can also be pronounced *Osake*. If we read ancient texts of Japan, such as *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, we find that *Sake* prepared for religious purposes was usually called *Miki*.

Sake: Gods and Shrines

Japan is one of the highly developed countries in the world and bullet trains, robots and super advanced technologies are considered as main feature of Japan. However, Japan has a very rich traditional society, with variety of rituals and festivals (*Matsuri*). These rituals and festivals mainly belong to the Shinto religion, which is considered to be the oldest existing religion of Japan and even, once declared as the state religion of Japan during the Meiji period¹⁷. It is an indigenous religion, with beliefs and traditions enlightening the path to ‘the way of the Gods’. The word Shinto is a combination of two *Kanji*¹⁸ (pictographs), which denote Gods (*Shin* or *Kami*, = Gods) and path (*Tou* or *Michi* = path) respectively. Shinto believes in nature worship and has many Gods and deities, suited with various purposes such as harvest Gods, deities of mountains and rivers, Gods for forest and animals and so on.

In Shinto there are Gods, who are worshiped as Gods of *Sake* brewing. They are believed to be the protector of *Sake* brewers or Gods for manufacturing of delicious *Sake*. Among these Gods *Matsuomyojin*¹⁹松尾明神 is a widely known deity of *Sake* brewing. *Saka Shrine* (佐香神社)²⁰ in Shimane prefecture is attributed to *Matsuomyojin*. *Bicchu Kagura* 備中神樂²¹is a folk performing art, which is mostly popular around western part of Okayama prefecture, Japan. This *Kagura* performance is usually performed during the festivals of *Ujigami* 氏神²²local deities or *Koujin* 荒神,²³the protector deities. This art form narrates various legends of deities and myths of Japan. A particular *Kagura* describes that, in the legend of *Yamata no Orochi*, *Susano o no Mikoto* requested *Matsuomyojin* to brew the *Sake*.²⁴

Oyamazumi no Mikoto (オオヤマズミノミコト), who is also known as *Saketoki no Kami* (サケトキノカミ) and *Konohanasakuyahime no Mikoto* (コノサクヤヒメノミコト), known as *Saketoke no Kami*(サケトケノカミ). These two are also worshiped as Gods of *Sake* in *Umemiya Shrine* or *Umemiya Jinja* 梅山神社²⁵, which is

¹⁵ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 20

¹⁶ *Norito* (祝詞): A ritual prayer offered to a Shinto Gods or deity.

¹⁷ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzake Noritake, p. 18

¹⁸ *Kanji*: The Chinese pictograpgical script that Japan has adopted as a written language.

¹⁹ *Matsuomyojin*: A deity, who is worshiped as a Gods of *Sake*. He is enshrined in *Saka Jinja*.

²⁰ *Saka Jinja*: A Shinto shrine, located in Shimane prefecture, Japan. This shrine is also known as *Matsuo Jinja* or *Matsu* shrine.

²¹ *Bicchu Kagura*: A performing folk dance art. It is popular around westerns part of Okayama prefecture, Japan. This *Kagura* performance is usually performed during the festivals of local deities.

²² *Ujigami*: *Ujigami* are local guardian deities in Shinto religion, who are believed to be the protector of respective area or shrines.

²³ *Koujin*: *Koujin*, usually called as *Sambo koujin*, a fire Gods in Shinto religion.

²⁴ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 72

²⁵ *Umemiya Shrine* or *Umemiya Jinja*: A Shinto shrine, located in the eastern part of *Matsuo Jinja*. It is attributed to *Saketoke no Kami* to *Saketoki no Kami*.

located in the eastern part of *Matsuo Grand Shrine* 松尾大社²⁶ in *Arashiyama* prefecture, Kyoto, Japan. *Konohanasakuya Hime* is regarded as the daughter of *Oyamazumi no Mikoto*. The legend about these two deities is given in *Nihonshoki*. According to a story from *Nihonshoki*, *Konohanasakuya Hime* prepared *Sake* and offered to the Gods for the safe birth of her babies. Sometimes it is believed that *Oyamazumi no Mikoto*, the father of *Konohanasakuya no Hime*, prepared *Sake* and offered to the Gods. Therefore, these two are regarded as Gods of *Sake* brewing.

The Gods in *Miwa Shrine* 大神神社 or 三輪神社²⁷, *Omononushi no Kami*, is also worshiped as Gods of *Sake*. A legend from *Nihonshoki*, describes about the *Miwa Jinja* and its deity, *Omononushi no Kami*. The legend talks about the reign of *Emperor Sujin*, who worshiped the Gods, *Omononushi no Kami* on Mt. *Miwa* for saving his kingdom from plague. And *Omononushi no Kami* is regarded as the main Gods of *Miwa Shrine*, who is considered as the Gods of *Sake* since ancient times. And following quotation says that the Gods of *Miwa Shrine* is *Omononushi no Mikoto*.

大神神社の主祭神は、大物主命である。²⁸

(*Miwa jinja no shusajin wa, Ōmononushi no Mikoto de aru.*)

There are descriptions, indicating that in ancient times, *Miki* or *Shinshu* was called *Miwa* and this word *Miwa* was written in different Kanji as compared to *Miki*, therefore the meanings may have differed accordingly. It is believed that *Shinshu* was prepared from the water of *Miwa River*²⁹; therefore *Shinshu* (神酒) or *Omiki* in called *Miwa*. The following quotation explains earlier *Miki (Sake)* was prepared with the water of *Miwa*, running in *Tosa* region.

もつとも、一方で『土佐国風土記』あたりには、「神酒をミワというのは、土佐の三輪川の水を用いて醸したから」というお国自慢的な記事もある。³⁰

(*Mottomo, ippō de [Tosakuni Fudoki] Atari ni wa, / shinshu o miwa to iu no wa, Tosa no Miwa gawa no mizu o mochiite kamoshita kara / to iu Okuni jimantekina kiji mo aru.*)

In various historical texts of Japan, such as *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, we find that there are two different types of *Kanji*, with the same pronunciation e.i.御酒 and 神酒, first one can be read as *Miki* and *Osake* and the later one is read as *Miki* or *Shinshu*. There is a little difference in the connotation of the later one, it seems more special or divine as the *Kanji*, which is used for the later one indicates the God and a verse given in *Nihonshoki* makes it clearer. The following lines narrates that *Emperor Sujin* says, that this *Miki (Sake)*, is prepared by the creator of Japan.

この御酒は、わが御酒ならず、大和なす、大物主の醸し神酒 いくひさしくひさしく。³¹

(*Kono miki wa, wa ga miki narazu Yamato nasu Oomononushi no kamoshi miki iku hisashiku hisashiku.*)

In the above -mentioned lines we can see that the *Miki* is written in a *Kanji*, which can be simply read as *Osake*, however the later one is written in a way, which can also be read as *Miki* or *Shinshu*. *Kanji*, which is used for the

²⁶ *Matuo Grand Shrine* (Matuo Taisha): A Shinto shrine attributed to Matsuomyou Jin a deity, worshiped as a Gods of *Sake*.

²⁷ *Miwa Shrine*: A Shinto shrine, usually known as Omiwa Jinja. It is located in Sakurai city in Japan, near Mt. *Miwa*.

²⁸ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 77

²⁹ *Miwa River*: A river flowing in Nara prefecture of Japan.

³⁰ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 76

³¹ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 76

later one is the same Kanji, for *Kami* or Shinto Gods and the above -mentioned verse also mentions that the *Sake* was prepared by *Ōmononushi*, Gods who created *Yamato*.

Apart from these above -mentioned shrines, there are other shrines also, which are well known for brewing and selling *Sake*, for occasions such as wedding ceremonies, *Obon Matsuri* (*Bon Festival*)³² and rituals such as *Seijinshiki*³³ (Coming of age ceremony) or New Year parties etc. *Izumo Taisha* 出雲大社 which is usually known as *Izumo* Grand Shrine in Shimane prefecture, *Ise Jingu* 伊勢神宮 in Mie Prefecture and *Nakoshi Yama Jinja* 莫越山神社, located in Chiba prefecture, are the principal shrines, which produce *Sake*.

Kobiragata Tanmangu 小平渴天満宮 in Fukushima prefecture, *Shiragawa Hachimangu* 白川八幡宮 in Gifu prefecture, *Uwase Jinja* (宇波西神社) Fukui Prefecture, *Ame no Hikagehime Jinja* 天日陰比咩神社 in Ishikawa prefecture and *Kumano Jinja* 熊野神社 in Aichi prefecture are other such shrines known for *Sake* brewing³⁴.

Sake: Matsuri (Festivals)

Sake brewing is one of the major rituals of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan since the ancient times. These shrines and temples, had been brewing *Sake* using traditional method until the introduction of a new law during the Meiji Restoration. In earlier periods these religious institutions were using simple and traditional ways for brewing and preserving *Sake*. There were specialist brewers known as *Sakabito* 掌酒, *Sake* brewers, who had special knowledge in preserving. These *Sakabito* were given special responsibilities. As there were no such scientific techniques of *Sake* brewing during earlier periods, *Sakabito* was given important roles in the rituals of the shrines. The major reason behind this was general belief, that a *Matsuri* is incomplete and unsuccessful without some delicious *Sake*.

Osake, which was brewed in Shinto shrines since ancient times can be mainly divided into two types. First type being *Seishu* 清酒 and the second is *Nigorizake* 濁り酒³⁵. These two are specially prepared in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples as an offering to the Gods. Special pots, have also been used for offering *Sake* to the Gods in shrines and temples. *Seishu* is offered in an earthen pot which is called *Hotogi*³⁶ and *Nigorizake* is offered in a wooden pot, called as *Wakimono*³⁷.

There are many temples in Japan where the *Sake* festival is celebrated. Brewing and drinking *Sake* in a ritualistic way is the main attraction of these festivals. Earlier, in the ancient records of shrines and temples, there were instructions that every *Matsuri* will start with *Sake* brewing.³⁸ Though there were other things during the *Matsuri*, such as decorations or other preparations but *Sake* brewing was considered the most important part of a festival.

酒造りは祭りでの大役だったのである。³⁹

(*Sakezukuri wa matsuri deno taiyaku datta no de aru.*)

³² *Obon Matsuri*: A Buddhist ceremony to honour the spirits of one's ancestors. It is celebrated on different dates according to the regions, *Shichigatsu Bon*, *Hachigatsu Bon* and *Kyu Bon*. It is well known for its traditional dance, the *Bon Odori*.

³³ <https://www.nippon.com/en/features/jg00064/>

³⁴ https://yamato-umazake.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/NaraSakeLeaflet_en.pdf

³⁵ <https://www.office.kobe-u.ac.jp/ipep/materials/EuropeanCenterSymposium/3-2.pdf>

³⁶ *Hotogi*: An earthen pot for offering *Seishu* to Gods and deities in Shinto shrines.

³⁷ *Wakimono*: A wooden pot for offering *Nigorizake* to the Gods and deities in Shinto shrines.

³⁸ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 64

³⁹ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 66

The autumn festival of *Tamarihachiman Shrine* 田万里八幡神社⁴⁰ is one of such examples. In this festival traditionally prepared *Sake* is filled in a thick bamboo tube and offered to the Gods. *Sake* festivals are usually known as *Amazake Matsuri* 甘酒祭り or *Doburoku Matsuri* 濁酒祭り. These festivals are a mode to convey the traditional and ancient ways of preparing *Sake* to new generation. Autumn festival 秋祭り in *Hizen region* in Okayama Prefecture and *Dosojin Festival* 道祖神祭り⁴¹ of *Minamiazumi region* in Nagano Prefecture are such festivals. During these festivals *Amazake* is prepared in tradition ways in many of the houses of these regions.

Sake as an Offering

All shrines and temples are different from each other according to their respective rituals and ceremonies and; in each region they have their special way to perform them. However, the only thing that can be commonly seen in both, the Shinto shrines and Buddhist temple.

Sake always has a significant place in both small- and large-scale ceremonies and is used in almost every mode of worships ranging from happiness and prosperity to safety purposes in Japan. For example, before cutting a big cedar tree, a wood cutter pours a cup *Sake* in its roots and stems to show his gratitude towards the tree, as in Shinto it is believed that there is a spirit in every tree.⁴²

The very first example of offering *Sake* to the Gods is mentioned in *Nihonshoki*. In the myth of *Ninigi no Mikoto* and his wife *Konohanasakuya no Hime*, there is a description of *Ama no tamuzake*, which *Konohanasakuya no Hime* prepared and offered to the Gods as a gratitude for the safe birth of her three babies. The example given below, narrates that *Konohanasakuya no Hime*, prepared *Sake* to offer the Goddess *Kamuatakashitsu*.

その時かむあたかしつ姫の占いによって定めた神聖な田を名付けて真田といった。その田の
稲であまのたむざけを醸して神と供薦した⁴³。

(*Sono toki, Kamu Atakashitsu Hime no uranai ni yotte sadameta shinseina ta o nazukete Sanada to itta.*
Sono ta no ine de Ama no Tamuzake o kamosite kami to kyosen shita.)

Another description of offering *Sake* to the Gods is given in the fifth chapter of *Nihonshoki*, which describes about the reign of tenth emperor of Japan emperor *Sujin* 崇神天皇⁴⁴. According to the story recorded in fifth chapter of *Nihonshoki*, after *Emperor Kaika*, his second son *Sujin* became the emperor. During the fifth year of his reign epidemic struck in his kingdom and half of the population died. This tragic condition led to peasant rebellion during his reign. Various rituals were performed before the *Amaterasu* (the sun Goddess) and other deities, but nothing worked.

In the seventh year of emperor *Sujin*'s reign, a special ritual was performed and the emperor visited the plain of *Kami-asaji* or *Kamu-asaji-ga-hara*⁴⁵ 神浅茅原, and invoked the eighty deities of *Kami-asaji*. During these rituals, *Yamato-to-to-hi-momoso-hime* 倭迹迹日百襲姫命 an aunt of emperor *Sujin* were possessed by a God, who

⁴⁰ *Tamarihachiman Shrine*: A Shinto shrine, situated in Takehara city in Hiroshima prefecture, Japan.

⁴¹ *Dosojin Festival*: *Dosojin* is a fire Gods and in his regards, fire festivals are celebrated in Japan. *Nozawa Fire Festival* is very popular in Japan.

⁴² <http://japanshrinesandtemples.blogspot.in/2015/04/sake-rituals-festivals.html> , 16/06/2015, 06:20pm

⁴³ *Nihonshoki*, *Nihonkoten Bungakuzenshu*, p. 144

⁴⁴ *Sujin Tenno* or Emperor *Sujin*: According to *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, *Sujin Tenno* or Emperor *Sujin* was the tenth emperor of Japan. He was the second son of Emperor *Kaika*.

⁴⁵ *Kami-asaji* or *Kamu-asaji-ga-hara*: A city in Nara Prefecture, which is known as *Sakurai* city.

introduced himself as *Omononushi no Kami*⁴⁶, the Gods of Yamato State.⁴⁷ *Omononushi no Kami* told the emperor that his land will be pacified, if he performs special rituals and venerates him. The emperor performed all the rituals but nothing changed, then he was told to search for a person named *Ōtataneko* 太田田根子 and declare him the head priest. The emperor performed all the rituals and did everything that was asked by the deity and venerated him, which led the kingdom to a better condition and the land was pacified.

To show his gratitude toward the deity, the emperor appointed people of Takahashi village as *Sakabito* 掌酒⁴⁸ for serving *Sake* to the deity. These people prepared *Sake* and offered it to the deity and later to the emperor.

These two examples show *Sake* has been offered to the Shinto Gods and deities since the age of Gods in Japan and this custom continues till date. In Shinto shrines during the *Matsuri* (Shinto festivals), *Sake* is offered to the Gods who is called *Omiki* or *ShinShu* お神酒 and it is believed to be pure and virtuous as the spiritual powers of Gods are believed to be there. Offerings that are called *Shinsen* 神饌⁴⁹, consisting of things from sea, mountain, fields and *Sake*, are offered to the Gods.

This *Omiki* or *Sake* is drunk during the *Naorai*⁵⁰ 直会 *Communion with the Kami* (Gods), which is the closing ceremony of the festival. During *Naorai*, *Sake* is served in a special type of wooden cup 杓 made of Japanese cypress for combination of aroma and taste. This ceremony usually happens after any major festivals and turns into a celebration among the organizers and the high priests. At the end of the festivals, the donators and organizers receive *Omiki* as a gift from the Shrine.

During the *Meiji Restoration*⁵¹ of 1868, Shinto was announced as the state religion. Various rules and regulations were introduced regarding the practices being held in Shinto Shrines and Buddhist temples under the codes of *Shinbutsu Bunri Mei*⁵² 神仏分離令. These regulations also affected the offerings of shrines and temples, however the only thing that could not get affected by these regulations was the use of *Sake* in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples.

Shinbutsu Bunri Mei was an order from the Meiji court to separate the Shinto from Buddhism. Therefore, Separation of *Kami* (Shinto Gods and deities) from Buddha and separation of *Jinja* (Shinto Shrines) from *Otera* (Buddhist temples) also took place. This new law affected even the offerings to Gods and fixed the articles which could be offered to the Gods and deities.

A special set of objects was selected for special rituals and ceremonies in shrines and temples. Two criteria were prepared for the offerings used during the rituals and festivals.

神饌にかぎっていと、たとえば、祭りや社格によって若干のちがいがあるが、大別すると二通りの形式が基準となつた。

⁴⁶ *Ōmononushi no Kami*: A Shinto deity, who is worshiped in Omiwa shrine. According to the Japanese myths of Kojiki and Nihonshoki; he was the main deity of Yamato.

⁴⁷ Yamato State: Japan was known as Yamato in the ancient times.

⁴⁸ *Sakabito*: *Sakabito* are special kinds of, who are appointed to serve *Sake* to the Gods.

⁴⁹ *The Essentials of Shinto, An Analytical Guide To Principal Teachings*, Stuart D.B. Picken, pp. 177

⁵⁰, *The Essentials of Shinto, An Analytical Guide To Principal Teachings*, Stuart D.B. Picken, pp. 179

⁵¹ Meiji Restoration: Meiji Restoration, also called as Meiji Ishin is a chain of events, which occurred in 1868. This restoration was the renewal of practical imperial rule in Japan.

⁵² *Shinbutsu Bunri Mei*: *Shinbutsu Bunri Mei* was an imperial law, which was passed during Meiji Restoration. This law was passed to separate Shinto from Buddhism. Under this law, Shinto was announced as State Religion of Japan.

(*Shinsen ni kagitte iu to, tatoeba, matsuri ya shakaku ni yotte jakkan no chigai ga aru ga, daibetsu suru to ni douri no keishiki ga kijun to natta.*)

List 1. 和稻、荒稻、酒、餅、海魚、川魚、野鳥、水鳥、海菜、野菜、菓子、塩水

(*Sum rice, wild rice, liquor, rice cake, saltwater fish, river fish, wild bird, waterfowl, sea greens, vegetables, cake and salt water*)

List 2. 和稻、荒稻、酒、海魚、海菜 (昆布や海藻、野菜、菓子、塩水⁵³)

(*Sum rice, wild rice, liquor, saltwater fish, sea greens (kombu and seaweed, vegetables, cake and salt water)*)

The new law affected the original form of offerings and consequently raw articles such as fish, vegetables, wild birds, waterfowls and seaweeds among others became main offerings during the rituals in shrines and temples. However, it could not affect the position of the *Sake* on the family altars and temples, which shows the importance of *Sake* in religious and ritualistic uses.

If we see the above -mentioned chart of offerings, we find that the articles which were selected for offering to the Gods by the rules of *Shinbutsubunri Mei* are mostly raw uncooked things. Following excerpt given below says that the list of offering would be prepared on the basis of some people who believed that the Gods (*Kami Sama*) would like to have offerings which are raw and impure.

日本の神様は、生きものが好きなんだ」という人がある⁵⁴。

Nihon no kamisama wa, ikimono ga suki nanda to iu hito ga aru.

The new law tried to change the earlier custom of offering prepared food, and cooked rice, green tea and other confections, which were the usual offerings to the deities in a house. A set of articles, full of raw things was decided as an offering to the Gods. These articles were prepared according to a standard which was based on imperial rituals and the ways of *Ise Shinto*. However, it could not affect the place of *Sake*.

それは、宮中儀礼や伊勢神道のあり方を基にして基準化をはかったものなのである⁵⁵。

Sore wa, kyuchugirei ya Ise Shinto no arikata o moto ni site kijunka o hakatta mono nano de aru.

しかし、ここで問題なのは、明治になって生饌が主流化するなかで、酒だけはその地位を失わないで残った、という事実である。酒はどこまでも神饌の中心的な存在なのだ。

(*Shikahsi, kokode monda na nowa, Meiji ni natte seisen ga shuryuka suru naka de, Sake dake ha sono chii wo ushinawanaide nokotta, to iu jujitsu de aru. Sake ha doko made mo shinsen no chushintekina sonzai na no da.*)

The passage above from the book *Sake no Nihonbunka*, written by *Kanzaki Noritake*, accentuates the changes that occurred during the *Meiji Restoration* (however, *Sake* has retained its prime position as an important offering).

***Sake* as Purifier**

⁵³ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 18-19

⁵⁴ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, p. 19

⁵⁵ *Sake no Nihonbunka*, Kanzaki Noritake, pp. 19

Sake is used as a purifier in different kinds of rituals, most prominently this in birth and death ceremonies in Japan. There are concepts of impurity, *Kegare* 穢れ⁵⁶ and *Sin Tsumi* 罪⁵⁷ in Shinto religion, which can be pollution, sickness or disaster. This impurity may occur due to certain action, situation or unavoidable circumstances such as child birth, diseases etc., and must be removed by purification rituals or exorcism that are known as *O-Harai* 袂い. *Sake*, water and salt etc. are used as main agents for performing these purification rituals.

Misogi Shusho (みそぎしゅほ)⁵⁸ is a special form of purification in which rituals are performed under the waterfall. Sometimes the participants only drink the water from the waterfall instead of plunging in it. During the purification ritual, *Sake* is poured in to the fall. This form of purification is also used in some martial arts, especially in *Aikido*. *Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America*⁵⁹ is well known for this ritual⁶⁰. *Jichinsai*⁶¹ (地鎮祭、ground breaking ceremony) is another form of purification. This ritual is performed for the safety and progress of work before starting a new construction. In this ceremony the ground is purified with *Sake*.⁶²

Sake has been used in all the Buddhist ceremonies and rituals from wedding ceremonies to *Ōbon Matsuri*. In Japanese Buddhism, there is a special term *Hannya To* (船若湯), translated as “the water of wisdom” and this term is used for *Sake*.

“Water of wisdom”, A term for alcohol, used by Japanese Buddhist monks, implying that drinking this very special water will open up to the wisdom of Buddha.”⁶³

Conclusion

Thus, we can say that, *Sake* has a strong hold in Japanese society and culture and works like a sacred element, boosting the roots of religious faiths, social bonds and harmony. In the form of an offering, it is connected with the beliefs and traditions of Japanese society. *Sake* festivals, which are celebrated with great zeal, can be seen as an effort to revitalize and preserve the old Japanese customs and to some extent it can be seen as an effort to bind Japanese people with religion.

In the form of a social drink, it works like a social cohesive, which smoothens the relationships and provides a platform for a seamless interaction within the Japanese society. Japanese people, who are well known for their hard work and strict time management, are usually considered introverts and it seems that *Sake* provides them a kind of opportunity to open their hearts and express oneself.

It is an important part of daily life in Japan helping the Japanese people to relax and it serves as a social support for essential bonding between individuals as well. When a non- Japanese person starts interacting with the Japanese society, a term that appears very often is *Nomikai* 飲み会⁶⁴, which means a social gathering on the table

⁵⁶ *Kegare*: *Kegare* is a concept of being polluted in Shinto religion. There are various causes of *Kegare* such as death, child birth, diseases etc.

⁵⁷ *Tsumi*: *Tsumi* is a Japanese term, usually translated as Sin in English. It indicates about breaking of some social, religious or moral rules.

⁵⁸ *The Essentials of Shinto, An Analytical Guide To Principal Teachings*, Stuart D.B. Picken, pp. 174

⁵⁹ *Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America*: A Shinto shrine in America. It was erected in 1987.

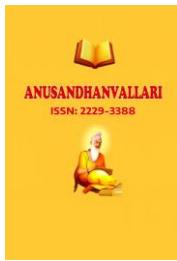
⁶⁰ <http://tsubakishrine.org/misogishuho/index.html> , 05/07/2015, 04:27pm.

⁶¹ *Jichisai*: A ground breaking ceremony, before starting a new construction works.

⁶² <http://japaneshrinestemples.blogspot.in/2015/04/sake-rituals-festivals.html> , 16/06/2015, 06:20pm

⁶³ <http://avery.morrow.name/blog/2010/10/politically-incorrect-glossary-of-japanese-buddhism/> 13/07/2015, 02:25am

⁶⁴ *Nomikai*: *Nomikai* is a Japanese term, which means a social gathering on the table of alcoholic beverages to interact with each other or celebrate something.



of alcoholic beverages to interact with each other, to celebrate and to strengthen the social bonding among colleagues, co-workers, juniors and seniors, and teachers and students. In this paper, I will try to through some light on the religious, social and cultural importance of *Sake* in Japan.

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