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Ordinary Religion, Extraordinary Anthropology

The Contributions of Peter Knecht

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For many years, Peter Knecht diligently worked in Nagoya, Japan, as a professor of anthropology for Nanzan University, as the editor of *Asian Folklore Studies,* and as a researcher for the Nanzan Anthropological Institute, where he served as director from 1996 to 2004. His effort and dedication as a professor led to more than a few of his students becoming professional anthropologists, and his editorial work brought to the world numerous groundbreaking studies.

Because of his background, Knecht is often seen as a successor of Wilhelm Schmidt, who was the first to propose the establishment of the Nanzan Anthropological Institute and who belonged to the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), with which Knecht is also affiliated. In fact, many students who have studied anthropological theories will know Knecht's name from his articles on cultural diffusionism for introductory books on anthropological theory (e.g., Knecht 1984, 1985a, 2006b). However, Knecht is not a cultural diffusionist but an anthropologist who is always keen on new anthropological theories. Through such theoretical interests, his own scholarship has made significant contributions to anthropology and is worthy of an in-depth examination.

In this short survey, however, I will only be able to briefly introduce some of his many publications over a thirty-five-year period. The survey is intended to introduce the wide range of his work on topics such as society and religion in Hanayama Village, Ise pilgrimage, Christianity and the Church, new religions in Japan, and shamanism in northeastern Japan and China. Some of his research, such as discussions on the ambivalent power of women in religion (Knecht 1975b) and of goddesses in myths (1975a), and some of his recent research, such as that on insects in Japanese culture (Knecht et al., 2000, 2001), and on an examination of the concept *gaijin* seen from the perspective of an anthropologist (2006a), can only be mentioned in the bibliography. It is important to note that this survey is not meant to commemorate his entire career. Indeed, such a survey would be premature as he continues to vigorously engage in research and writing projects.

HANAYAMA VILLAGE

Rather than engage in lofty theoretical debates, KNECHT has tended to focus his work on concrete data related to Japan, particularly religion. He has had, for example, a long-term interest in festivals (*matsuri*) spanning from an early article on the Tenjin Festival in changing Japanese society (1971) to a recent article on the Hanamatsuri Festival, which is legally protected as an Intangible Cultural Property (2006d). Evidence of Knecht's commitment to understanding Japan in specific detail is his studies of Hanayama Village, in the mountains of Miyagi prefecture. Knecht began his fieldwork in Hanayama in 1972 when he was a graduate student at the University of Tokyo. Like other villages as well as towns in Japan, Hanayama experienced rapid sociocultural change in the high-growth era, often called the Japanese postwar economic miracle. According to Knecht (2003a), over a thirty-year period the village changed rapidly as machines, such as tractors and telephones, became part of village life. The older customs, including rituals, were simplified and some disappeared (1989). His articles record and examine such change. When older types of houses with thatched roofs came to be replaced by new house designs, the organization of thatchers came to an end. The last master thatcher showed Knecht a scroll containing esoteric knowledge of thatching rituals and mythology, which Knecht then wrote about in his "Mythology and the Thatching of Roofs" (1993a).

While older organizations disappeared, new organizations, such as a nenbutsu (recitation of homage to Amida Buddha) confraternity, appeared in Hanayama Village. Discussing population change in a hamlet of the village over a fifty-year period, KNECHT (1987) analyzes the relationship between the hamlet formation/reformation and the establishment of a nenbutsu confraternity. He claims that the nenbutsu confraternity was established as a result of villagers' experiences of population change; it supports villagers who are no longer able to depend on receiving help from many relatives living nearby at the time of a family member's death. The confraternity is not necessarily a religious organization but a mutual assistance one for funerals that functions to unite the hamlet, which is based on regional relationships (1987).

In another article, in addition to describing how a nenbutsu confraternity functions at a funeral, KNECHT (1992) argues that death gradually comes to have a public meaning in a funeral. He also points out how funerary ritual spaces move from the most formal room with tatami mats and *tokonoma* at the deceased's home to a graveyard, and how the bereaved family members get over their relative's death as the spaces move. He states that during a funeral, the deceased symbolizes his or her household (*ie*) and the living successor of the household is finally shown publicly. The funeral symbolizes the continuity of both the deceased and the living. He concludes that, although Shinto is

commonly perceived as related to life while Buddhism is associated with death in Japan, the Buddhist funeral symbolizes the continuity of life and death.

ISE PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimage is also a theme Knecht has been interested in during his studies of Japan. On the basis of his deep understanding of pilgrimage in Christianity, he has examined pilgrimages to Ise. Through an analysis of Christian pilgrimage, Knecht (1986a) argues that pilgrimage is a type of salvation on earth: in order to realize this salvation, a pilgrimage's sacred destination must be located far from the pilgrims' daily world. The pilgrims take time to reach the sanctuary remote from the pilgrims' everyday living space by walking, and in doing so engage in a form of prayer for salvation.

While studying the Ise pilgrimage, Knecht took the important step of analyzing in detail the mandala associated with it. This led to a new finding, namely that the Ise pilgrimage mandala enables people to have a quasi-experience of the pilgrimage (2000; 2006c). Mandalas are often seen as geometrical patterns with arrangements of buddhas and gods that represent a Buddhist worldview. In contrast, the Ise pilgrimage mandala is a guide for pilgrims depicting natural environments, special buildings, and people performing religious activities in the sanctuary. Through the mandala, people learn where they should go and what they have to do, including how to pray, in the sanctuary. Through a processual analysis, Knecht concludes that even if people cannot visit the sanctuary, they can have a quasi-experience of the pilgrimage through learning the mandala, which brings them merit just as the real experience of the pilgrimage does (2000; 2006c).

The Ise pilgrimage mandala includes Mt. Asama, where the Buddhist temple Kongō Shōji is located. Although the priests of Ise Shrine claim that Mt. Asama is excluded from the sanctuary, it is often said by pilgrims that a complete Ise pilgrimage must include a visit to Mt. Asama. Knecht's article, "*Ise sankei mandara* and the Image of the Pure Land" (2006c), grapples with this contradiction. He argues that the mandala represents people's syncretic beliefs, a mix of Buddhism and Shinto that suggests the Great God Amaterasu resides on Mt. Asama. The mandala, which depicts Mt. Fuji at the top, also satisfies people's longing to visit the Pure Land. In fact, from the top of Mt. Asama people sometimes actually can view Mt. Fuji, an important sanctuary of another pilgrimage.

Besides these discussions about the mandala, through an analysis of the historical data of the Ise pilgrimage Knecht (2006f) shows that, inside the Ise sanctuary, space becomes more sacred the closer it is to the center. Even the two main shrines at the center, the Inner Shrine and the Outer Shrine, have a hierarchical relationship with each other that reflects this.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF CHRISTIANITY

Parallel with the above-mentioned analyses of so-called traditional religion and folk religion in Japan, Knecht discusses the religious practices of Japanese Christians and then explains how the Church has dealt with Japanese concepts of death, particularly as they relate to ancestor worship. While his background as a Catholic priest no doubt gave him insight into these issues, it was primarily his training as an anthropologist that guided his studies.

For many years, anthropology, which developed in the West, had not regarded Christianity and the Church as objects of study. Consequently, there were few anthropological studies on Christianity published before the 1970s (Schneider and Lindenbaum 1987a, 1). It was only in the 1980s, when postmodernist theories attracted the attention of scholars in the social sciences, that a sizable number of anthropologists started to study the Church as an agent of sociocultural change. In this context, Knecht's articles on ancestor worship and the Church's reaction to it are noteworthy.

In 1988, the year after *American Ethnologist* published a special issue on Christian evangelism (Schneider and Lindenbaum 1987b), the SVD, which is closely allied with well-known anthropological institutes, published the book *Anthropology and Mission* (Piepke 1988). Knecht (1988) contributed a chapter in which he shows, on the basis of an analysis of the relationship between anthropology and the SVD, that anthropology had not necessarily cooperated with evangelism.

Knecht (1985b, 1986b) also examines the issue of Japanese ancestor worship as it relates to the Catholic Church. He claims that, although ancestor worship is closely connected with *ie* organizations, it is by no means limited to them. The worship of ancestors, he points out, is based on an idea that there is a reciprocal relationship between the living and the deceased (the living worship their ancestors and in turn the ancestors protect them), which is deeply rooted among the Japanese. Thus, even if the kinship organization changes (or *ie* declines), it will not result in the decline of ancestor worship (Knecht 1985b, 1986b). Additionally, in his article "Can a Christian die as a Japanese?" (1994), Knecht shows the result of his research on the attitudes of Japanese Christians towards death and the deceased in three parishes of different scales, each of which has a different ratio of Christian families and single believers. He states that in a parish where Christians are cut off from other Christians, non-Christian ideas are more influential.

Recently Knecht participated in a project titled "Christianity and Civilization," led by Yoshio Sugimoto, a former fellow at the Nanzan Anthropological Institute and currently a professor at the National Museum of Ethnology. The project examined how Christianity brought European cultures and a sense

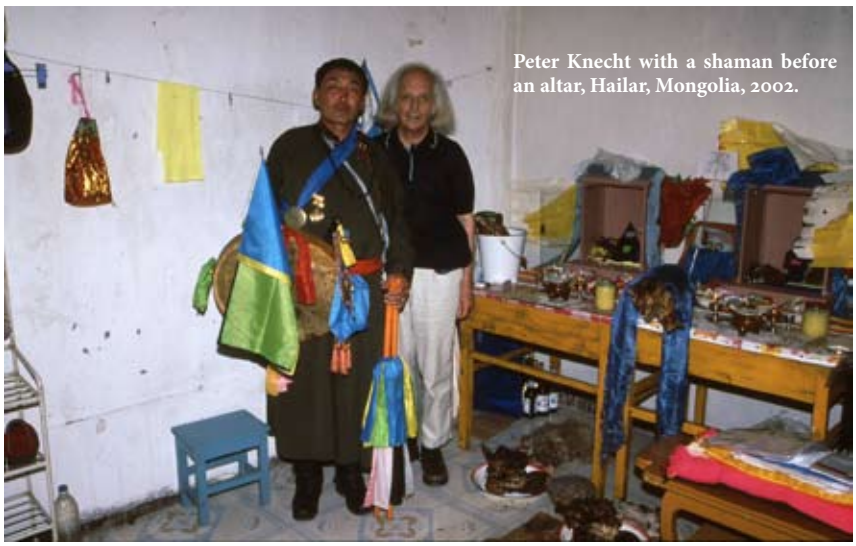
of modernity into non-Christian societies. Knecht's contribution (2006e) examines the discussions of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries with the Japanese government in the transitional era between the Tokugawa period and the Meiji Era. For the Catholics, an important issue was how to incorporate the Christianity among hidden Christians isolated in Nagasaki for several generations into the Christianity that missionaries advocated. The Protestant missionaries attempted to bring European civilizations, including its forms of Christianity, into Japan through education. The Japanese government manipulated its own concept of the freedom of religion to restrict missionary activities, while it simultaneously reevaluated religion as a means of unifying the state. Knecht discusses strategic negotiations between the missionaries and the Japanese government, as well as between missionaries and Japanese, including Christians and non-Christians.

NEW RELIGION

For Japanese, Christianity is a new but at the same time an old religion in so far as it entered Japan more than four hundred years ago; and, in spite of the ban on it during the Tokugawa Period (1600–1867), hidden Christians had continued their worship practices. Some of the new religions in Japan have adopted elements of Christianity as well as those of more traditional Japanese religions. The journal *Academia* published a volume edited by Knecht (1993e) in which five authors discuss Mahikari from a variety of perspectives. Mahikari is a new religion that is said to attract especially those engaged in occupations that emphasize rational thought, such as those closely connected with science (1993b). In the volume, as well as in another article (1995), Knecht (1993c) interprets major symbols in Mahikari doctrine that are adopted from a variety of religions and cultures. He claims that symbols help explain the doctrines: they are a model of and for the new world that Mahikari believers aim to realize in the future. In another article, Knecht (2001) discusses Mahikari's Japanese identity. In it, he considers the historical context in which Mahikari was established and developed and points out how central doctrines were influenced by older Japanese religions such as Shinto.

SHAMANISM

The topic that has been most prominent among Knecht's lifelong research interests may be shamanism. His extensive knowledge of both shamanism and studies of it is exhibited in his introductory chapter to *Shamans in Asia* (Knecht 2003b). This chapter examines a variety of earlier studies from different perspectives and indicates problems in studies on shamanism, such as the relationship between analytical and folk concepts of a shaman.



Peter Knecht with a shaman before an altar, Hailar, Mongolia, 2002.

On the basis of his knowledge of folk religion in Asia, Knecht has explored shamanism in northeastern Japan, including Hanayama Village, and northeastern China. With regard to shamanism in Japan, Knecht discusses the rich symbolism of *kuchiyose*, which is a ritual for summoning spirits of the dead. In a *kuchiyose* ritual, a female medium or shaman called *itako* or *ogamisama* plays an important role by becoming possessed by the deceased and speaking for them (1990, 1993d, 1997, 2004a). For these *itako*, mountains are particularly important. Mountains, which are seen as inhabited by spiritual entities and are representations of either paradise or hell in Japan, are for *itako* a source of spiritual power where they establish and reconfirm their relationships with their guiding spirits (Knecht 2002). In a *kuchiyose* ritual, the mountain symbol is associated with the story of Mokuren in the *Urabon Sutra.* The symbolic mountain here represents a source of spiritual potency and the place where Mokuren collected what the Buddha told him he needed to save his mother in hell. According to Knecht (1993d), the *kuchiyose* rituals he observed were based on this story of Mokuren. Although it is usually interpreted as a story of a good child or offspring in a filial relationship, for *itako*/shaman groups, the Mokuren story is a kind of ancestral tale: *itako*s interpret the story as a teaching method for contacting the dead. Similarly, Knecht (1997) discusses the creativity of individual *itako*s at *kuchiyose* rituals. While *itako*s become independent practitioners by being trained by an instructor on how to perform rituals, they can also create unique modes of expression within the ritual.

Knecht observed a *kuchiyose* ritual in Hanayama Village at a time when the ritual had already become rare there. In Hanayama, as in other regions of Japan,

ie-organizations have changed and declined. Through interpretations of the rich symbolism of the ritual, Knecht claims that the ritual represents continuity of patrilineal relationships among kin and between the living and the deceased in one *ie* household (1990, 2004a).

In addition to research on shamanism in Japan, Knecht conducted research with a project team on shamanism in northeastern China, funded by the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science. Although China is a new field for Knecht, his study of shamanism in Siberia among the Evenki, who had traded with both Russians and Chinese (Knecht 2005a), helped him with this research. In the project, Knecht pays close attention to China's political history, the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution and thereafter, in which shamans were persecuted as those who spread superstitions (2004b, 2005b). It is said that during politically difficult times, no shaman was active in China; however, recently some have returned to practicing shamanism, albeit without the instruments used and clothing worn in shamanic rituals (2004b). New shamans also have appeared despite restrictions and the absence of senior shamans to instruct them (2005b). With regard to these new shamans, the report and article Knecht published in 2004 include many interesting points. For instance, through his research on individual life-histories of shamans and stories about their experiences, Knecht finds two types of shamans: one is a shaman who experienced shamanic illness or a shamanistic initiatory crisis in the process of becoming a shaman; the other is a shaman who did not experience such a crisis but was instead elected by his clan. In spite of these completely different types, what both types of shamans do in rituals is similar to each other (Knecht 2004c). Knecht claims that whether a shaman is recognized as powerful and authentic depends on how much confidence believers have in him or her. In addition, Knecht reports that, because of the discontinuity of shamanistic traditions due to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, some shamans started reading books about shamanism and attending academic meetings on it in order to learn about its history and how it has existed in other regions. This might eventually result in producing an "international" type of shamanism (Knecht 2004b).

Knecht (2005b) also describes a process whereby an individual became a shaman: his shamanic initiatory crisis lasted for around thirty years, and during that time a variety of people helped him in many different ways. Thus, he concludes that a society in which shamans lived can hand on knowledge about shamanism in fragments, and this can result in the revival of shamanism.

By seizing the best research opportunity in China, Knecht provides new findings on shamanism. When he and his project team started conducting research in China in 2000, shamanism was in a period of revival. It was also a time when significant changes were occurring in Chinese culture and society and when it was still not easy for anthropologists to conduct fieldwork there.

Thus, by focusing on individual shamans and collecting their life-histories during this time, Knecht has made an important contribution to anthropological studies of China.

In summary, it can be said that the strength of his studies, as illustrated above, lies in detailed descriptions and analyses of cultural dynamics on the basis of acute observations. His tenacious research and sharp anthropological sense have led to important new findings and enabled him to make significant contributions to anthropological studies on sociocultural change. We anticipate that his further research and publications will continue to exhibit such anthropological acumen and sensitivity.

Editors' note: The front photograph shows Professor Knecht in Hailar, Mongolia, with the leaders of two local families (summer 2003).

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