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## Home Buddhas: Historical Processes and Modes of Representation of the Sacred in the Japanese Buddhist Family Altar (*Butsudan*) \*\*



One of the most peculiar objects that characterize Japanese religiosity is the Buddhist family altar (*butsudan*). This paper discusses some of the ways in which the *butsudan* and its ritual uses serve to represent ideas about the sacred in Japan. I analyze the structure of the *butsudan* and some of the most representative practices in which this object is employed. Next, I present a history of the development of this object by referring to historical and anthropological evidence dating further back than the actual diffusion of this specific object in the seventeenth century. I also discuss important objects related to (and often used in conjunction with) the *butsudan*, such as ancestors' tablets (*ihai*) and the kami altar (*kamidana*). Finally, I argue that, lacking a shared normative discourse on *butsudan*, the Buddhist family altar mainly functions, within many contemporary Japanese households, to present a vague but complex “atmosphere”—one that is not explicitly “religious” but is related primarily to ideas of “tradition” and family memory.

*Keywords:* *Butsudan* – *Ihai* – *Kamidana* – Representations of the sacred – Buddhist sacred objects.



### *Introduction*

The Buddhist family altar (*butsudan* 仏壇) in Japan is the center of family worship and devotional activities, as an important communication tool between this world and the world of the afterlife; it also produces a sense of continuity between the generations, e.g. when people report to the ancestors events related to the living members of the family.<sup>1</sup> An opinion polls carried out by the Sōtō sect (Sōtō-shū 曹

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1. The close connection of *butsudan* with the family and its social transformations is indicated by studies of the Seventies which identified a “*butsudan* boom” related to the diffusion of a nuclear family, but also transformations in religious practices due to increasing individualistic and interiorizing attitudes; see, for example, Morioka (1975).

洞宗) in 1984 shows that more than 90% of those who responded have a *butsudan* in their homes, and more than 80% worship either every day or a few days every week. (Sasaki 1993: 20-27; see also Sasaki 1996: 149) This peculiar religious object is therefore a good starting point for an investigation of Japanese attitudes toward the sacred.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will present some aspects of the *butsudan*. In particular, I describe its styles and structure and the practices associated with it; next, I discuss its complex historical developments, which involve interactions with other religious objects such as funerary tablets (*ihai* 位牌) and home *kami* 神 altar (*kamidana* 神棚). Finally, I outline some of the ways in which the *butsudan* contributes to the production of a vague religious “atmosphere” (a “feel” for religion), rather than to specific religious practices, in contemporary Japan.

### Styles and Structure of Butsudan

The term *butsudan* is commonly written today with two characters meaning “Buddha altar,” but the original and correct form has a different character for *dan* 檀 meaning “patron” as in terms such as *danka* 檀家 or *dan'otsu* 檀越 (both referring to patron or sponsor of Buddhism and its ritual activities). This terminological issue is significant, because it suggests that in its original meaning the *butsudan* was not merely a “Buddhist altar” but more specifically a concrete indication that its owner was a patron of Buddhism—therefore, at least formally, a committed Buddhist.

There are *butsudan* of many different shapes and dimensions, but in general it is a feretory (*zushi* 厨子)-like piece of furniture made with wood.<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that the original models of modern *butsudan* are probably the Tamamushi 玉虫 *zushi* or the *zushi* of Lady Tachibana 橘, both made in the seventh century and preserved at Hōryū-ji 法隆寺 temple near Nara. (Hirayama 1949: 60) There are several regional variations, many of which date back to the Edo period. Among the most representative forms, the *miyako* 京 *butsudan* from Kyoto claims twelve centuries of history; it is followed by the *Kawabe* 川辺 *butsudan* from Kagoshima 鹿児島 (Kyūshū) which was supposedly created eight centuries ago; dating from the Edo period are the *Iiyama* 飯山 (Nagano), *Kanazawa* 金沢, *Nagoya* 名古屋, and *Hikone* 彦根 styles of *butsudan*; finally, the Tokyo 東京 and Akita 秋田 styles are more recent. In addition to these classical forms, recent additions

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2. We should note that also in China and South Korea many houses have special areas (including objects and altar-like structures) dedicated to the worship of ancestors and deities; the Japanese *butsudan* should perhaps be studied within the larger context of East Asian religiosity.
  3. For a detailed description, see Kondō (1982).

include portable models, Western-style *butsudan* (which are supposedly easier to adapt to the furniture of most Japanese modern homes), models with a video deck and TV screen incorporated (to watch video images of deceased ancestors), and *butsudan* for pets (they come in bright colors such as white, pink, or blue). Most modern *butsudan* are made with polished wood (*karaki* 唐木) or lacquered in black on the outside, while the inner side is usually gilded (*kinpaku* 金箔);<sup>4</sup> they have folding doors on the front. Many models are the result of highly specialized and elaborated craftsmanship, sometimes with a strong artistic nature. The production and use of a *butsudan* involve several traditional arts: wood carving, metalwork, lacquer, gold leaf, and shell decorations, sculpture, flower arrangement, and incense appreciation.<sup>5</sup>

Inside, the *butsudan* presents a hierarchical, three-tier structure. On the top tier there is a platform, which is a miniature reproduction of a temple's main altar. On this platform there is a buddha image (the main focus of worship of the household or *honzon* 本尊), sculpted, painted or represented by a written formula (*myōgō* 名号). The main images of the *butsudan* vary according to the Buddhist school and the personal inclinations of the owners. Below is an indicative list of the standard images recommended by the most important Buddhist denominations in Japan.

Hossō-shū 法相宗: Mind-Only mandala (Yuishiki mandara 唯識曼荼羅).

Tendai-shū 天台宗: triad constituted by the Buddha Amida 阿彌陀 at the center with Dengyō Daishi 伝教大師 (Saichō 最澄, the founder of the Japanese Tendai school) to the left and Tendai Daishi 天台大師 (the Chinese monk Zhiyi 智顛) to the right.

Shingon-shū 真言宗: triad constituted by Buddha Mahāvairocana (Dainichi 大日) at the center, with Fudō Myōō 不動明王 to the left and Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師 (Kūkai 空海, the founder of the sect) to the right.

Sōtō-shū 曹洞宗: triad with the Buddha Śākyamuni at the center, Keizan Jōkin 瑩山紹瑾 at the left and Dōgen 道元 at the right.

Rinzai-shū 臨濟宗: triad constituted by the Buddha Śākyamuni at the center with the bodhisattvas Samantabhadra (Fugen bosatsu 普賢菩薩) and Mañjuśrī (Monju bosatsu 文殊菩薩) respectively to the left and right.

Nichiren-shū 日蓮宗: triad composed by the Great Mandala (Daimandara 大曼荼羅, i.e., the inscription with the formula *Namu myōhō renge kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經) at the center, and the gods Daikokuten 大黒天 (Mahākāla) and Kishimojin 鬼子母神 (Hārītī) respectively to the left and right.

4. According to a 1985 annual report of the association of *butsudan* shop owners, more than 60% of family own a gilded *butsudan*, whereas only around 20% own one in polished wood; quoted in Sudō (2003).
5. For an example of the production process of a *butsudan*, see for example, <http://www.avis.ne.jp/~butsudan/koutei.html> (accessed April 16, 2010).

Pure Land (Jōdo-shū 浄土宗): triad with Amida at the center, Hōnen 法然 to the left and the Chinese patriarch Shandao 善導 to the right.

Jōdo Shin-shū 浄土真宗: the main images vary widely according to the branches of this denomination, but the most standard one is constituted by the Buddha Amida at the center surrounded by Rennyo 蓮如 to the left and Shinran 親鸞 to the right. (Sometimes, the Amida figure is replaced by a more abstract representation of light).

In any case, it should be noted that Buddhist schools usually give their parishioners a high degree of freedom in their choice of the main images to be placed in the family *butsudan*.

The buddha image is placed on a hourglass-shaped platform, sometimes called the *shumidan* 須弥壇 (lit. “Mount Sumeru altar”) because it reproduces the shape of the cosmic mountain, Mount Sumeru, which is at the center of the Buddhist universe. On a layer below the main buddha image are placed the funerary tablets (*ihai*) of the ancestors, the family record (*kakochō* 過去帳),<sup>6</sup> scriptures, offerings, and a votive lamp. In this way, the *butsudan* is a veritable “religious cosmos” for the family (Sasaki 1993: 27-34; 1996: 170), as it displays a vision of Japanese Buddhist cosmology related to the ancestor cult, namely, the Buddha at the top and human beings at the bottom, with the ancestors in between acting as mediators between these two realms.

The place of contact between the secular and the profane is represented by the lower tier, in which human beings place their offerings and other tools needed to communicate with the world of the deceased. Gorai Shigeru 五来重 and more recently Sasaki Kōkan 佐々木宏幹 have indicated that the term *hotoke* (仏 or ほとけ) in Japanese has three different and partially overlapping meanings, respectively, “Buddha,” “ancestor,” and “spirit of the dead.” The *butsudan* is the place in which the multiple meanings of *hotoke* are embodied and actualized. (Gorai 1994: 192-200; Sasaki 1996: 168-178) In this sense, the *butsudan* can be envisioned as a good display of the three levels of Buddhism as described by Melford Spiro. In his classical study of Buddhism in Burmese society, Spiro distinguished among three dimensions of Buddhism in the Burmese context, which he called, respectively, nibbanic, kammatic, and apotropaic. (Spiro 1982) I think that Spiro’s framework can, with a few changes, be generalized to Buddhism as a whole and thus to Japanese Buddhism as well. In it, we have a sphere concerning ultimate salvation (be it extinction into nirvana, deliverance into a Pure Land, or becoming a buddha in the present body), a sphere related to material and spiritual existence in this

6. *Kakochō* is a register, usually kept at a temple, in which priests record, for each parishioner (*danka*), secular and Buddhist names, date of death, and other information. A copy of this register is sometimes kept at home.

world that is envisioned as processes of merit-making, and a sphere of magical operations.

Accordingly, we could say that while the top tier in the *butsudan* refers to the nibbanic sphere (ultimate salvation in the afterlife), the mid and lower tiers represent, in ways that are sometimes closely interconnected, the kammatic (merit-making) and the apotropaic dimensions (the latter is particularly evident in practices and offerings aimed at propitiating or pacifying ancestors). The *butsudan* can thus be understood as a space of multiple mediations. Like a temple, it constitutes an interface between the profane and the sacred. Through the *butsudan*, ordinary people can interact with the invisible realm of deities (ancestors and, to a lesser extent, buddhas); this interaction occurs at one's home and most of the times does not require the intervention of a priest.

### *Religious Practices Centered on the Butsudan*

Worship at the *butsudan* takes place every morning, but since there are no strictly codified rules, it varies widely according to regional customs and family habits. In general, family members (elder women in particular) open the doors of the *butsudan* in the morning, make food offerings to the ancestors and pray to them for protection and worldly benefits, while at the same time asking the buddhas for a peaceful afterlife for the deceased. Some even talk with the ancestors, informing them about news concerning family members.<sup>7</sup> Then, in the evening, the doors of the shrine are closed.

Even though there are no specific, orthodox rules to deal with the *butsudan*, a flourishing Buddhist educational literature gives people indications on how to understand this object and its role in family life and religious devotion. A recent manual on the use of *butsudan* written by Shingon priest Taniguchi Kōji 谷口幸 稔 summarizes the general attitude of Buddhist institutions toward this subject. For example, Taniguchi writes that the *butsudan* is not directly related to ancestor worship, because it is a place where the Buddha abides, and this is its true value; in fact, ancestors are not located physically inside the *butsudan*, even though one is free to believe they are; furthermore, the master of the *butsudan* is the Buddha enshrined in it. (Taniguchi 2002: 25-27) The author insists on the importance of the presence of the *butsudan* in a home and argues that simple devotional

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7. This custom is widespread and seems to have very powerful connotations; an indication of this can be found in TV news reports of crimes, in which the bereaved are shown in front of the victim's *butsudan* reporting about developments (or, more sadly, lack thereof) in police investigations and criminal trials.

practices related to it eventually produce what we may call a religious *habitus*, which improves the life of family members (by securing worldly benefits or *genze riyaku* 現世利益) and ultimately leads them to salvation. Taniguchi emphasizes family practice and writes about the beauty of a family united in front of the *butsudan*.<sup>8</sup> According to him, practices conducive to the formation of such religious *habitus* include, for example, formal, stereotypical formulae of greeting between spouses (husband: “I’m back [from work]!” [*Tada ima* ただいま!]; wife: “Welcome back! You must be tired [for the long day at work].” [*Okaeri nasai. Otsukaresama deshita* お帰りなさい。お疲れさまでした]), and expressions of gratitude to the Buddha and the ancestors before and after taking a meal (*Itadakimasu* いただきます, *gochisōsama deshita* ご馳走さまでした). Such sense of gratitude and contrition and related devotional practices purify the mind from afflictions (*bonnō* 煩悩). (Taniguchi 2002: 8 and *passim*)

Taniguchi stresses that the *butsudan* is not just a piece of furniture, but it is the “Buddha who saves me” (Taniguchi 2002: 14); the *butsudan* is not just a place for funerary tablets either (since tablets are to be placed below the main Buddha) (Taniguchi 2002: 79), but the pure realm where one can meet with oneself, the place where one joins hand in prayer and encounters the truth. (Taniguchi 2002: 9, 11) Thus, the *butsudan* is envisioned as a temple inside one’s home. More specifically, “The *butsudan* is Buddha’s Pure Land”; “when my heart becomes one with the Buddha, the Pure Land appears.” (Taniguchi 2002: 6, 3, 4)

Taniguchi advises his readers to purchase a *butsudan* once in a lifetime, even though such an object can last for two or three generations. In particular, when one is around fifty-years-old, he argues, and begins to be concerned with one’s parents and one’s ancestors, that is a good time to buy a *butsudan*. He also suggests appropriate prices for a *butsudan*. In the past, it is said that 10% of the budget to build a new house was dedicated to the purchase of a *butsudan*, but now rules are more fluid.<sup>9</sup> What we perceive from these instructions is a sense of decorum and the awareness of one’s place in society; one will decide the amount to pay on the basis of such self-awareness of one’s social rank.<sup>10</sup>

The *butsudan* is normally placed in a specific space of the house. In the past, houses (for those who could afford it) had a small worship room called “Buddha’s

8. Taniguchi (2002: 8). This idea would perhaps sound counterintuitive to many contemporary Japanese.

9. Taniguchi (2002: 26). Incidentally, the prices of *butsudan* normally range from a few hundred dollars to several tens of thousands of dollars.

10. It is important to note here that Taniguchi is not alone in carrying out these arguments; similar statements can be found in many websites and other religious literature.

room" (*butsuma* 仏間) which hosted the *butsudan* and in which rituals were carried out. Today, the family altar is typically placed in the *tatami* 畳-mat room of the apartment or the house, near the *tokonoma* 床の間 (alcove)—in other words, in a part of the house that is usually not accessible to outsiders and is often not even used by the family in its everyday activities.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, the doors of the shrine are open during worship (in general, at daytime), and closed when not in use and at night. This fact, together with the elevated position in which the *butsudan* is placed, seems to indicate an attempt to separate it from the pollution of profane everyday life. (Hirayama 1949: 50) Still, normative statements such as the ones I have presented thus far are in direct contradiction with popularly held beliefs according to which the purchase of a new *butsudan* when there is no immediate need for it would result in misfortune. The strong presence of such beliefs indicates an attitude of semi-conscious resistance against the requirements of religious institutions; one acquires a *butsudan* not necessarily in order to worship the Buddha or the ancestors, but only when it is strictly necessary and unavoidable to do so.

It should be noted that *butsudan*, funerary tablets (*ihai*), and the *kamidana* are not just symbolic objects and catalysts for religious activities. As veritable sacred objects, they are infused with the "spirits" of, respectively, the buddhas, the ancestors, and the *kami*. For the *butsudan*, the process of infusion is rather well known; it amounts to a variant of the eye-opening ceremony (*kaigen kuyō* 開眼供養) that inaugurates every buddha image. A new *butsudan* is brought to the family temple where the priest performs this ceremony, variously known also as "inauguration of the *butsudan*" (*butsudan-biraki* 仏壇開き), "infusion of the sacred spirit" (*mitama-ire* 御魂入れ), "infusion of the life force" (*oshōne-ire* お性根入れ), "ceremony of infusion of the buddha" (*nyūbutsu-shiki* 入仏式). The priest summons the spirit of the main Buddha of the temple and infuses it into the *butsudan* in a ritual involving sutra chanting, bowing, and prayers.<sup>12</sup> Sudō Yoshito 須藤寛人 has published an account of an eye-opening ceremony of a Buddha image in a *butsudan* as performed in a Sōtō Zen temple in Iwate Prefecture. After the patron brings the Buddha image to the temple, the priest asperses it with holy water (drawn from the same source as the water used for purification in new year's ceremonies). He then draws the eyes of the statue by holding the brush in a peculiar fashion, namely, he places the brush in contact with his own forehead. This act represents life power flowing into the image from the head of the priest—perhaps an enactment

11. When outsiders come to visit one's home, many hosts close the *butsudan*'s doors.

12. For some additional information, see for example <http://www.e-obutsudan.jp/butsudan7-1.html> (accessed April 16, 2010).

of the mind-to-mind transmission emphasized by the Sōtō tradition, in which enlightenment is passed down from Śākyamuni to his disciples down to the Zen patriarchs and monks.<sup>13</sup> When a *butsudan* needs repair work, or when it is to be disposed of, a reverse ceremony, called an “extraction ceremony” (*hakken-shiki* 撥遣式) or “removal of the sacred spirit” (*mitama-nuki* 御魂抜き), is performed, in which the priest extracts the spirit of the Buddha from the family altar and either dispatches it or brings it to a new *butsudan*. Disposal of *butsudan* is carried out by temples in a special memorial ritual (*butsudan kuyō* 仏壇供養) performed at the spring and autumn equinoxes (*higan* 彼岸), during the celebrations for Śākyamuni’s nirvana (*nehan-e* 涅槃会 on February 25), and on the “Day of the *butsudan* and Buddhist ritual implements” (*butsudan butsugu no hi* 仏壇仏具の日) on March 27; this date was chosen based on the day in which Tenmu Tennō 天武天皇 issued an edict in 685 ordering the construction of Buddhist chapels at all public buildings in the country (see below). The actual procedures for *butsudan* memorials vary according to the temple’s denomination, but as special memorial rites for inanimate objects typical of Japanese religion, they present a number of similarities with other rituals of the same type.

This fluctuation, this continuous shifting of registers, between inanimate objects and sentient beings (the presence of the ancestors in the funerary tablets, the infusion of the *butsudan* with the spirit of the Buddha), and between ritual implements (the objects themselves) and the state of mind and emotional feelings of their users, seems to be a typical feature of Japanese attitudes about religious objects.

### History of the Butsudan

Let us now see more in detail the history of the *butsudan* and the funerary tablets (*ihai*), its more important symbolic objects, and their connections with non-Buddhist folkloric tradition.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have suggested that the *butsudan* seems to be the result of the convergence of the cultural trajectories of two different objects: the main altar in Buddhist temples and a small platform used to place funerary tablets.

13. See Sudō (1997). This ceremony differs from eye-opening ceremonies of both others Japanese schools and other Buddhist countries, such as Thailand and Cambodia studied by Stanley Tambiah, in that what matters here is the legitimacy of the priest performing the ceremony rather than that of the Buddha image in the temple. (See Tambiah 1984)

14. For a general overview, see Hirayama (1949); Takeda (1953, 1971); more specifically on the history of *butsudan* and *ihai*, see Gorai (1976: 96-124).



*Butsudan* is originally the name of the elevated platform situated in the inner sanctum of a temple on which the main icon is placed; this is also known as *shumidan* (lit. “Mount Sumeru altar”). (*Mochizuki bukkyō daijiten* 5: 4471 s.v. “Butsudan”) In particular, the modern family altar seems to be a miniature rendering of a temple (its central and most sacred space), and especially of smaller halls dedicated to private worship (*jibutsu-dō* 持仏堂, lit. “private Buddha hall”) that were built since the Nara period inside aristocratic residences and public buildings. Authors often trace back the history of the *butsudan* to an edict issued by Emperor Tenmu in 685, in which it was ordered to “build a Buddha hall, to enshrine there buddha images and scriptures, and to worship them” in all public buildings in the realm. (*Nihon shoki* 2: 468) This passage is often misunderstood as referring to all households; however, the character *ka* 家 (*ie*) did not refer at that time to commoners’ families and their houses, but to public employees and their buildings; thus, it should be understood as “public buildings.”<sup>15</sup> As is well known, an important part of the process of the Buddhist transformation of Japan consisted in building temples and nunneries (respectively known as *kokubun-ji* 国分寺 and *kokubunni-ji* 国分尼寺) in all provinces, entrusted with performing rituals for the protection of the state also on a local level. Aristocrats and the provincial gentry sponsored temples; in time, they also began to build Buddhist halls inside their own private residences. As Hirayama Toshijirō 平山敏治郎 pointed out, this fact marked an important transformation in the structure of sacred space in Japan: religious institutions were now no longer set apart from the profane world in self-enclosed enclaves, but they were placed right in the middle of the profane world, in the very site of everyday life. (Hirayama 1949) These halls served for individual and family prayer—private ceremonies as opposed to state-sponsored, public ceremonies held at official temples. Interestingly, in the late Heian period priests also began to build their own private halls such as the *jibutsu-dō* at Byōdō-in 平等院 and Raigō 頼豪’s private chapel at Mii-dera 三井寺 (Onjō-ji 園城寺). In the Kamakura period, soldiers and prominent families in the provinces began to build their own private Buddha halls. Those who could not afford a separate building in their residence compounds still had a room dedicated to Buddhist worship (*butsuma*).

Several authors have pointed out that the process of diffusion of halls for private worship from the aristocracy down to the provincial gentry had little or no impact on the religious practices of the commoners, for whom the *butsudan* was just an altar where to worship the funerary tablets considered as receptacles (*yorishiro* 依り代) of the spirits of the ancestors. (Kondō 1982; Mori 2000; Sudō

15. See Hirayama (1949: 61). In fact, if the edict referred to commoners, it could not have possibly been enforced, considering the scarcity of architects, carpenters, copyists, and sculptors needed to carry out this huge task.

2003) During the late middle ages, the Ikkō-shū 一向宗 (present-day Jōdo Shin-shū) organized confraternities and religious services (*kō* 講) at private houses of members, which then played the same function as temples; these services required particularly elaborate and complex *butsudan*. (Gorai 1976: 96-124) This could be one of the direct antecedents of the family altars most diffused today—even though Shin-shū *butsudan*, properly speaking, present the peculiarity that they do not serve to enshrine funeral tablets (*ihai*) but are envisioned as veritable miniature temples.

In any case, it is still unclear when exactly *butsudan* began to be placed in most Japanese houses. Medieval painted scrolls (*emakimono* 絵巻物) show that altars with Buddhist images were temporarily erected in a room to perform a ceremony on special occasions.<sup>16</sup> However, there was no special object in the house comparable to present day *butsudan*. Ceremonies were held at the family temple (*bodai-ji* 菩提寺) or at a chapel in the household compound. Architecture historian Ōkawa Naomi 大河直躬 has studied the process of diffusion of *butsudan* in commoners' houses during the Edo period. He suggests that a likely precedent of modern *butsudan* can be found in the Jishō-ji 慈照寺 (better known as Ginkaku-ji 銀閣寺), the private temple built by Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimasa 足利義政 in 1486. The Tōgu-dō 東求堂 chapel contains a space in the wall that is said to have enshrined an Amida triad and a shelf for the funerary tablets of the Shōgun's ancestors. (Ōkawa 1985: 11) At that time, funerary tablets were usually placed in the family chapel (*jibutsu-dō*). The residences of important feudal lords (*daimyō* 大名) of the Azuchi-Momoyama period (late sixteenth century) did not have anything resembling today's *butsudan*—which is understandable, since ancestor tablets were usually placed at the time in their family temple (*bodai-ji*). However, less important *daimyō* did have a chapel in their houses.

The oldest surviving private houses in Japan, originally belonging to non-aristocrats such as the Hakogi 箱木 House (Kōbe, fifteenth century) and the Furuji 古井 House (Hyōgo Prefecture, sixteenth century), both designated as important cultural property, did not have a *butsudan* in their original construction. However, several houses are still extant that were built in the seventeenth century already with a *butsudan*. For instance, the Yoshimura 吉村 House (Osaka Prefecture, built ca. 1620, important cultural property), has a *butsudan* that is very similar to the one at Ashikaga Yoshimasa's Tōgu-dō. (Ōkawa 1985: 12) The Imanishi 今西 House (Nara Prefecture, ca. 1650, important cultural property) has a room dedicated to Buddhist worship (*butsuma*), with a *butsudan* closed inside a feretory. All of these houses belonged to landowners, wealthy townspeople, and government officials—the upper middle class of the time, as it were; even though they were not

16. See for example the images in *Hōnen Shōnin eden* (3: 20, 70; and 109-110).

representative of a large portion of the populace, they indicate a tendency toward an increasing “domestication” of Buddhist sacred space. Outside the Kinai region, both in south-western and north-eastern Japan, we find early Edo-period houses that were originally built either with or without a *butsudan*. At the time, another ritual space was already present, a shelf called *oshiita* 押板 which was often used to place talismans (*o-fuda* お札) and images of Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大御神, thus functioning as a modern *kamidana* or household altar for *kami* worship (see below). The *oshiita* is the predecessor of present-day *tokonoma*.

Since the beginning, then, it appears that there existed various shapes of *butsudan*: altars for funerary tablets as in the Tōgu-dō of the Ginkaku-ji, alcoves (*tokonoma*), decorative shelves (*oshiita*) as found in Muromachi period aristocratic residences, closets (*todana* 戸棚), and even feretories used in the inner sanctums of medieval esoteric temples. (Ōkawa 1985: 15-18) Hirayama mentions a theory according to which the *butsudan* derived from the *tamadana* 魂棚 (spirits altar), an implement related to the ceremonies for the dead that were performed during the *tanabata* 七夕 festival in the early seventh month, later combined with the Buddhist celebrations of *o-bon* お盆. If Hirayama’s theory is correct, then, in due time a temporary altar for the souls of the deceased (*tamadana*) became a permanent Buddha altar (*butsudan*). (Hirayama 1949: 53; see also Orikuchi 1927: 103-106, 108) In addition, I believe that another possible historical thread, which has not been yet studied adequately, is the influence of Christian (Catholic) cult objects. Missionaries who went to Japan in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries brought with them portable, box-like altars—objects that can still be found in European and south American households.

Thus, the *butsudan* as we know it today resulted from a complex historical process, in which multiple objects with different functions and social backgrounds converged into one, perhaps driven by a common attempt to “bring the sacred home.” This drive received further momentum from the religious policies of the Tokugawa government. As we have seen, the original graphs used to write the word *butsudan* (in the sense of “family altar” and not of “platform at temples on which a Buddhist icon is placed”) literally mean “Buddhist patron” (in which *dan* stands for *danka*, “patron”). As Koizumi Kazuko 小泉和子 has indicated, this clearly refers to the patronage system enforced by the Tokugawa government as a means to repress Christians and unyielding Buddhist groups such as the radical Nichirenists of the Fujū-fuse 不受不施 sect and Pure Land extremists. (Koizumi 1997) All Japanese were required to register at a temple (*danna-ji* 檀那寺) as patrons (*danto* 檀徒 or *danka*); the temple was required to certify that its patrons were neither Christians nor followers of radical Buddhist sects. Furthermore, temples were required by law to ensure that their patrons visited the temple frequently, that they owned a rosary and a private Buddha image (the antecedent of present-day *butsudan*), and that they made offerings regularly. (*Tōkugawa kinrei kō*, first series, 3: 273) Every

year at *o-bon*, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the local priests visited the patrons and performed rituals in front of the family altar (the Edo period predecessor of the *butsudan*), in a service called “renewal of the *butsudan*” (*butsudan aratame* 改め). This temple patronage system, commonly known as *terauke seido* 寺請け制度 (system of temple registration) or *danka seido* 檀家制度 (patronage system), which was established toward the second half of the seventeenth century,<sup>17</sup> adapted to Buddhism the relation typical of Shintō beliefs between a local deity (*ujigami* 氏神) and the local residents (*ujiko* 氏子).<sup>18</sup> Koizumi shows that the *butsudan* came to be widely diffused during the Edo period. For example, when poor people had to sell their property to raise money, a *butsudan* often appeared in the list of items on sale, and other poor people from the neighborhood lavished considerable sums to purchase such second-hand *butsudan*. (Koizumi 1997: 143) At that time, as is also common today, most people did not have a room dedicated to the *butsudan*, which tended to be of small dimensions. In the Genroku 元禄 era this kind of *butsudan* was called, perhaps ironically, “Buddha hall box” (*hako* 箱 *jibutsu-dō*).<sup>19</sup>

This gradual process of decrease in the dimensions of Buddhist halls for private worship, from small temples (Heian and Kamakura periods) to box-like artifacts (since the Edo period),<sup>20</sup> does not indicate a decrease in the social impact of Buddhism; on the contrary, it signals a pervasive diffusion of Buddhism among all Japanese households.

It appears that the diffusion of *butsudan* was also related to the spread of funeral rituals among commoners in the Edo period. Previously, corpses often were simply abandoned in unpopulated areas. Thus, while the *butsudan*, as a compulsory item indicating conformism and subjection certainly functioned as a tool of social and intellectual control by the Tokugawa regime and the religious institutions complicit with it, it also became—in a significant but almost unrecognized move—a symbol of dignity for commoners who were now entitled to care for their dead as ancestors much like what had been the norm among dominant classes. This sense

17. On *danka seido*, see Toyoda (1973: 106-137); Marcure (1985); and Tamamuro (2001).

18. It resembles the Counter-Reformation Catholic parish system which was also a system of social control against heresies.

19. Hirayama (1949: 63). The lavish and highly elaborated *miyako butsudan* was very fashionable in the Edo period, and many *daimyō* prohibited commoners to own one (of course, only wealthy people could afford to buy it); most commoners bought a *hako butsudan*. (See Gorai 1994: 192-200)

20. Ōkawa (1986: 68) argues that today’s *butsudan* is a miniaturized form of private Buddhist halls (*jibutsu-dō*) of late medieval elites.

of empowerment (how conscious it was is difficult to estimate) might also explain the large diffusion and enduring attachment to the *butsudan*. Since the patronage system was related to ancestor worship, the forced support for Buddhism was not envisioned simply as an arbitrary, forceful intervention from above, but also as a way to guarantee a good afterlife for the deceased members of one's family and thus to secure, through accumulation of merit, a better life in this world for the family. The pervasive diffusion of *butsudan* was also related to processes of acculturation to elite models, in which the altar also functioned as a status symbol. It also signaled the incorporation of previous folkloric traditions. Finally, it was also not unrelated to social changes in the countryside, as secondary branches of families (*bunke* 分家) began to acquire their own *butsudan* as a symbol of independence.

### Funerary Tablets (*Ihai*)

Authors have suggested that the development of the *butsudan* depended on the increasing importance played by the funerary tablets (*ihai*) it came to enshrine. Since they are an essential component of the *butsudan*, let us now look at the funerary tablets more in detail.<sup>21</sup>

*Ihai* are rectangular objects, made in lacquered wood, which are considered receptacles (*yorishiro*) or even duplicate bodies (*bunshin* 分身) of individual ancestors. In fact, the priest summons the spirit of the deceased to the tablet before placing it in the *butsudan*. On the front is indicated the posthumous name (*kaimyō* 戒名) and the date of decease of the person, whereas the back contains the profane name and other information.<sup>22</sup> This dual front/back structure is particularly significant when placed in relation to premodern doctrinal speculations concerning the relationships between human beings and buddhas on the one hand, and sentient beings and inanimate objects on the other. (Rambelli 2007: 43-44) *Ihai* in fact display these two oppositions in a rather successful way. They represent the close relation between humans and Buddhas; whereas during one's lifetime one's Buddhahood is latent—on the “back” on one's being, as it were—after death Buddhahood becomes apparent and human nature in turn recedes to the back. Furthermore, *ihai* are made of wood, an inanimate substance, but at the same time they embody the ancestors, animate beings, thus expressing the nondualism of animate and inanimate, one of the central ideas in the Buddhist philosophy of objects. (Rambelli 2007: 58-87)

21. Some important historical sources on the *ihai* are the *Jinten ainōshō* 150: 388-390; *Wakan sanzai zue* 4: 286; *Shinzoku butsuji hen* (1994: 87-89).

22. On the dualism front/back in the *ihai*, see for example the website: <http://www.avis.ne.jp/~kazunori/oihai/ihai.html> (accessed April 16, 2010).

The funerary tablets are not originally Japanese. They seem to have been introduced to Japan from China by Zen priests during the Sung 宋 dynasty. (Hirayama 1949: 65) The term *ihai* itself, written with two Chinese character meaning respectively “rank” and “name tag,” seems to be a Sinitic rendering of the Japanese noun *iwai* 祝い meaning “worship” and “celebration.”<sup>23</sup> While in China the funerary tablets were used in Confucian ancestor cults, in Japan they were incorporated within Buddhism. The formulas written on these tablets were codified towards the early fifteenth century. (Ishikawa 1996: 222-224) Around the same time, members of the military class (*bushi* 武士) began to use them. Their diffusion in commoners’ houses occurred only between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup>

According to Gorai Shigeru, until at least the mid-Edo period commoners used to keep the tablets of their ancestors in the village hall; gradually, however, people began to keep the tablets in their homes, in a process that ultimately resulted in the development of the present-day *butsudan*. (Gorai 1994: 198-199) More recently, Jeroen Bokhoven (Yorun Bokuhoben ヨルン・ボクホベン) has reformulated this interpretation by arguing that, when in the Edo period *ihai* turned into objects of an increasingly important cult, they became more and more elaborate and charged with aesthetic value, to the point that they were enshrined in a feretory, which evolved into present-day *butsudan*. Bokhoven seems to indicate an alternative process to the one described above in reference to the history of the *butsudan*. (Yorun 2001) While authors tend to envision the *butsudan* as the result of a process of acculturation (trickle-down theory), in which popular classes took on cultural formations that originated among the elites (in this case, private temples and chapels of the aristocracy became first a room within the house and later an even smaller object, a feretory-like altar), Bokhoven argues for a kind of parallel development according to which popular practices related to ancestor worship came to resemble elite practices, and the result was a *butsudan* enshrining the *ihai*. More explicitly, Sudō Yoshito proposes a dichotomous relation opposing *ihai* as objects of popular devotion to *butsudan* as objects imposed from official authorities.<sup>25</sup>

23. Gorai (1992: 604). On the history of *ihai* in Japan, see Gorai (1992: 602-623); Shibata (1977).

24. The popularization of *ihai* might be also due to the diffusion of Zen style funerals in Japan especially by Sōtō priests. On this subject, see Bodiford (1992, 1993-94); and Faure (1991). This popularization might be connected to the fact that, beginning with Ashikaga Takauji 足利尊氏, all funerals of the Ashikaga Shōgun were performed according to the Zen rite.

25. Sudō (1998: 343). This “political” opposition has been further analyzed by Sudō in spatial terms contrasting verticality and horizontality. Sudō sees in the *butsudan*

### The Kamidana and its Connections with the Butsudan

In most Japanese households the *butsudan* forms a pair with another religious object, the *kamidana* or “kami altar.” The *kamidana* is placed in the same room as the *butsudan*, albeit in a higher position. It should neither face the *butsudan* nor show its back to it. Thus, in a typical setting, we encounter, on the same side of the room, *tokonoma*, *butsudan*, and *kamidana*. The *kami* altar reproduces a Shintō shrine, with a purification wand (*ōnusa* 大麻) from the Ise 伊勢 Shrine or a talisman (*o-fuda*) from a local shrine; it contains a *sakaki* 榊 tree branch, a lamp, and offerings of *sake* and rice; on top of it is a *shimenawa* 注連縄 rope. Worship takes place every morning or on designated days of the month. There are many regional and family variants, and an orthopraxy of *kamidana* does not appear to exist—there are no strict rules for the interaction with it. (Hirayama 1949: 48) The *kamidana* enshrines the tutelary *kami* of the area in which the house is located and is placed in the house after completion of construction or when one moves in.<sup>26</sup>

In the past, the *kamidana* was placed at the center of the most public space of the traditional Japanese house, namely, a large room in which the family used to gather around the fireplace (*irori* 囲炉裏), near the central pillar sustaining the building known as *Daikoku-bashira* 大黒柱 (Daikoku’s pillar), but also in a “pure” place, a room normally not used for everyday activities, called *dei* 出井 or *okunoma* 奥の間 (there are many regional variations in the name of this space). *Dei* was originally the room in aristocratic houses where the host met important guests. In many parts of Japan, however, the place in the house where *kami* were worshiped or where they were believed to abide was called either *dei* or a dialectal variant (such as *de* in Tōhoku, and *den* or *dein* in Kyūshū). This particular room as it was found in traditional, popular houses is the result of a process of diffusion of elite models

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a representation of a hierarchical structure, which is opposed to the horizontal, more egalitarian mode of interaction that people establish with the funerary tablets. However suggestive, Sudō’s analysis is not completely convincing, especially since it presupposes a stereotypical cosmology that does not seem to play any role in contemporary Japan; in fact, Sudō argues that the Japanese envision the other world horizontally as a place situated beyond the sea or the mountains! This is indeed a *locus classicus* of Japanese ethnology (see, among others, Blacker 1975, especially Chapter 4), but very few, if any, contemporary Japanese appear to share this belief.

26. In the early Edo period, some followers of Nichiren-shū and Ikkō-shū radical branches did not have a *kamidana* at home since they refused to worship the *kami*. (See Hirayama 1949: 49) The persistent tendency to neglect *kamidana* worship by contemporary Jōdo Shin-shū practitioners is discussed, for example, in Dessì (2009: 67). However, there appear to be regional differences; in Hokkaidō, for instance, many Shin-shū *danka* do have a *kamidana* in their homes.

from the capital to the provinces that began in the middle ages; premodern village houses had spaces for worship and spaces for meeting guests, but *dei* is originally a living room/guestroom (*ōsetsuma* 応接間) and not a ritual space. (Hirayama 1949: 47) Furthermore, in central Japan *dei* and its regional variants refer to the main family line (*honke* 本家), thus suggesting that only the *honke* originally had such a space for welcoming guests, and that most other houses did not. In fact, ritual activity (including *kami* worship and ceremonies related to family tombs) was performed mainly by the *honke*. (Hirayama 1949: 48) Thus, it is interesting to note that the space in the house dedicated to welcoming guests became in course of time the space of the *kami*. Whether this process is related to ancient ideas of *kami* as visitors from the outside (*marebito* or *marōdo* 客 or 賓) is open to discussion.

In any case, the purification wand from Ise Shrine that adorn most *kamidana* today were originally diffused by itinerant priests (*oshi* 御師) from Ise Shrine in the late Muromachi period as a way to spread the Ise cult and to promote pilgrimages there. (Teeuwen 1996: 166-167) Placing a wand in the family altar probably derives from the Buddhist custom in which the priest who had performed a ritual service at a private house gave the household a sutra scroll; in Ise's adaptation, the sutra scroll became the talisman.

Thus, the *kamidana* is not an ancient, autochthonous object, but a comparatively new artifact dating back at most to the late middle ages, probably deriving from altars for the Ise cult spread by *oshi* affiliated with Ise Shrine. If this is true, Japanese houses in general did not originally have a *kami* altar in the contemporary sense. (Hirayama 1949: 49) The *kamidana* might also be related to other altars to house and household *kami* I previously mentioned such as *oshiita* or *todana*. We should also consider that premodern Japanese houses hosted a number of different deities—far more diverse than today's homologated *ujigami*. In fact, some houses still today also have altars, in addition to the *kamidana*, for other deities. The *Ebisu-dana* 恵比寿棚 enshrines two small images of Ebisu and Daikokuten, deities that became popular during the Muromachi period when their cult was spread by Buddhist temples;<sup>27</sup> the *Kōshin-dana* 庚申棚 is dedicated to what was originally the kitchen god in Chinese folk religion assimilated with Buddhist gods of obstacles.<sup>28</sup> At times, there was also a temporary altar, called an *engi-dana* 縁起棚, used for rituals aimed at specific goals. In conclusion, the practice to place *kamidana* in houses today does not originate in an ancient, purely “Shintō” custom, but seems to be a consequence of combinatory cults of Buddhist and other deities that began

27. On Ebisu and Daikoku, see Iyanaga (2003); and Komatsu (1998).

28. On Kōshin cults, see Kubo (1980); Kobanawa (1988); Kohn (1993, 1995a, and 1995b).



to develop in the late middle ages.<sup>29</sup> The impression we receive from premodern documents, especially dating from before the Edo period, is that a multiplicity of cults were performed at specially designated places of the house, each involving their own spaces and ritual implements. However, beginning with the Edo period, we also see attempts to limit and control such rituals; often, the diffusion of standardized *kamidana* reduced this ritual multiplicity to the simple worship of a normalized local deity.

What is interesting to note here is that Japanese households tended to reproduce the structure of the sacred space as defined by religious institutions according to their typical combinatory mode, with Buddhist entities being protected by local deities, which were envisioned in turn as manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas; inside the buildings, this was miniaturized in the paired *butsudan/kamidana*. It is not surprising, then, that in the early Meiji period, during the persecution of Buddhism (*haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈), many *butsudan* were destroyed. (Hirayama 1949: 50) Shintō-Buddhist combinations at home, centered on *butsudan* and *kamidana*, are still the norm today, however. A contemporary way of integrating *butsudan* and *kamidana* has been suggested by Takada Yoshitane 高田好胤, a former head priest of Yakushi-ji 薬師寺 in Nara, who is attributed with the statement: “Distant ancestors should be worshiped in the *kamidana*, while recent ancestors should be worshiped as buddhas in the *butsudan*.” (Quoted in Taniguchi 2002: 7) It is interesting that the head priest of one of the most ancient Buddhist temples in Japan envisions the *kami* as a sort of next step after the condition of Buddha—an idea that is probably not unrelated to late medieval forms of inverted *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹, according to which the *kami* are in fact the original sacred beings, who subsequently manifested themselves as buddhas in this world.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, it is important to note that religious combinatory practices that characterized premodern Japanese religion, almost completely eradicated on the level of temples and shrines, are still present in the most intimate locus of religious practice, the household.

“Somehow... Religion”: *Butsudan and Religious “Atmosphere”*  
in Contemporary Japan

Contemporary treatments of *butsudan* and related implements in texts aimed at a larger audience show a constant fluctuation between matter and mind, implying

29. However, Hirayama (1949: 54-55) mentions a possible formal influence also of special wands (*ohake* オハケ) placed on temporary altars (*odan* オダン) at Shintō shrines.

30. On this subject, see Teeuwen and Rambelli (2003).

a deep connection between use of religious objects and the development of feelings that can be generally, if vaguely, described as religious. This connection between materiality and spirituality with respect to the *butsudan* deserves attention as an important clue for the understanding widespread attitudes toward the sacred and religiosity (and/or spirituality) in contemporary Japan.

For example, Taniguchi Kōji argues that “The most important Buddhist implement (*butsugu* 仏具) is one’s faith.” (Taniguchi 2002: 7-8) Buddhist priest and scholar Hatta Yukio also writes that before it is animated by the ritual intervention of a priest (the eye-opening ceremony), the *butsudan* is just a “mere thing;” after this ceremony, however, it becomes “a sacred place displaying the great spirit of the universe.” Conversely, lack of practice results in the “death” of the *butsudan*. Taniguchi further defines the *butsudan* as a “washing machine for the heart/mind” (*kokoro no sentakki* 心の洗濯機) (Taniguchi 2002: 5)—an expression that summarizes well the ambivalent status of material objects in contemporary Japanese Buddhism: the *butsudan* is a machine that purifies the practitioner’s mind and allows him/her to attain a dimension of sanctity. However, not any *butsudan* would do. There are rules (presented as suggestions) concerning the appropriate age for purchasing a *butsudan*, its appropriate price, place, and so forth. All this is presented as a way to give expression to one’s feelings and emotions (*kimochi* 気持ち). The cultural trend to express one’s feelings and emotions through fashionable commodities was perhaps first described and codified in Tanaka Yasuo 田中康夫’s 1980 novel *Nantonaku, kurisutaru* なんとなく、クリスタル (Somehow, Crystal).<sup>31</sup> Thus, the role of Buddhist objects as producers of “atmosphere” indicates their owners’ status and sensibility. Often, such a representation is not outwardly directed as part of a communicative process, but the object functions as a tool to give shape to the owner’s feelings in a process of self-awareness (or self-indulgence?). Furthermore, Buddhist rituals, and to a certain extent also people’s relations with Buddhist objects, are in large part today not necessarily ways to express beliefs, but rather means to give shape to inner feelings (*kimochi*). This is particularly evident in the case of memorial ceremonies for objects that are no longer functional. (Rambelli 2007: 211-273) Finally, one should not forget another peculiar atmospheric effect of many Buddhist objects in contemporary Japan, namely, that of constituting the “dark” side of the “bright” modern Japanese cities—something that is particularly true of *butsudan* and, to a certain extent, of Buddhist temples as well. Ishigami Fumimasa 石上文正 has argued that the deepest point of sacred space is the *oku* 奥, a term that can be only partially translated as the interior, the inner parts, the depths, the bottom of a space. *Oku* is the point in which the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and the profane intersect.

31. See Tanaka (1981). For a discussion of the novel, see Field (1989).

In the house, this point is constituted by the *butsudan*. However, contemporary houses, with their lack of traditional structure and directionality (spatiality), make it difficult to represent this concept; at the same time, the meaning of *oku* has gradually shifted, from the traditional “depth” to a contemporary sense of unpleasant “darkness.” (Ishigami 1985: 82, 109-111) Contemporary attempts to turn the *butsudan* into a “normal” piece of furniture, with a sleek design but still dedicated to storing memories of family members, might be a tendency to counter the somber image that this ritual object has acquired. In any case, Buddhist objects contribute to the creation and preservation, even in somewhat negative terms, of the general symbolism (including atmospheric effects) of the places and spaces of contemporary Japanese culture. (Hatta 1994: 54, 55)

### Conclusion

The *butsudan* is a complex object. Its feretory-like structure makes it a miniature copy of a temple (in particular, its inner sanctum); its relative inaccessibility to outsiders puts it in relation with secret buddhas (*hibutsu* 秘仏, buddha images believed to be particularly powerful and subjected to some form of secrecy and hiddenness).<sup>32</sup> The objects it contains are fully-fledged ceremonial implements, religious paraphernalia, and sacred objects, such as incense, flowers, a votive lamp, offerings and their containers, scriptures and scripture holders, and even percussion instruments to be used in ritual. These objects are endowed in principle with an independent existence of their own; in other words, they are not just accessories for the *butsudan* but holy presences. In particular, the funerary tablets (*ihai*) are de facto the most important objects in the altar. Furthermore, while not all Japanese families own a *butsudan* (some in fact honor their dead not as buddhas but as *kami*, a lasting consequence of early-Meiji period anti-Buddhist policies), most people keep both the *butsudan* and the *kamidana*. It is perhaps in its relation with the *kamidana* that the role of the *butsudan* as a religious object can be fully understood. In fact, the history of the *butsudan* is a condensed cultural history of Japanese religion, beginning with the process of diffusion of Buddhism, its multiple interactions with local cults, and proceeding with the development of new forms of religiosity. In modern times, when most of the historical background has been forgotten or ignored, the *butsudan*, like other religious objects, serves to display and reproduce a sense of tradition and to transmit to the individual a feeling of embodiment of traditional values.

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32. On *hibutsu*, see Rambelli (2002); and Horton (2007: 156-192).

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