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Japan Has Little Time for Its Old-Time Religion

By HOWARD W. FRENCH - September 13, 2001

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TOKYO, Sept. 12 -- Dressed smartly in a black skirt and a turquoise silk shirt with wide lapels, Yuka Sugimoto receives visitors in a sleek suite of offices these days, handing them a business card taken from a fancy zebra-skin wallet.

In both style and setting, this might be the greeting of a top business executive. It is hard to say, in fact, which would be the rarer position for a woman in today's Japan, corporate director or the job she holds: chief priest of a Shinto shrine.

Ms. Sugimoto has taken a creative approach to ensuring the survival of her 800-year-old shrine, which is nestled in a forest of office buildings between two of Tokyo's hippest and most bustling centers of youth culture, Shibuya and Harajuku.

Ms. Sugimoto offers purification rites and other religious services to the big media companies that surround her. She has also built a state-of-the-art shrine, complete with high-tech lighting and motorized shutters, renting fashionable office space to nearby businesses on the grounds.

Her innovative marketing of an old religion reflects the difficulty of all religions in an increasingly secular Japan. Shinto in particular seems to be losing support. Many urban shrines are finding that renting their land, always a premium in Japan's cities, is the best way to survive.

Walking up the steep stairway that leads to the shrine and through the concrete-paved courtyard of the complex, one could hardly guess that this was a place of worship were it not for the telltale thick rope hanging from a bell used to call the spirits.

That is just as well, said Ms. Sugimoto, because it had almost no visitors when it was a rustic copper-roofed structure built on a cedar and bamboo frame, before the renovation she directed three years ago.

Ms. Sugimoto, who became head priest eight years ago, after the death of her father, says the path she has taken is probably preferable to an advertising campaign to attract more visitors. "People say we should do public relations work, or make a Web page, but I'm not sure it would do any good," she said. "And if more people came, I'm not sure what I would do with them. I don't have the time to receive them, and can't afford to hire more staff."

The situation of Ms. Sugimoto's shrine encapsulates the plight of Shinto. The religion figures prominently in the news each August, when there is a debate about whether the prime minister should visit one of its most famous shrines, in Tokyo, which honors Japan's war dead.

People visit other famous shrines, and shrine visits are popular on select holidays, like the New Year. On the whole though, fewer and fewer Japanese are showing an interest.

Before World War II, it was virtually unheard of for a Shinto priest to be a woman, and the priesthood was usually passed from father to son. But with the lack of interest in religion and with families growing smaller, shrine priesthods have had to open up to daughters, to keep them in the family. Priests go through a training period. Ms. Sugimoto is one of 25 women among the 404 head priests in Tokyo, according to the Association of Shinto Shrines.

Shinto is a faith that worships spirits that are found in all objects, living and inanimate

The Japanese have traditionally managed to retain affiliations with several religions at once, apparently without conflict.

"The religious practice of an ordinary man is highly complicated: he is likely to be Shintoist as a Japanese, Buddhist in face of death and suffering, Confucian as a social being in general, personally often a Christian and, as a man of science, a materialist," wrote Kurt Singer, in a classic postwar book about Japanese society, "Mirror, Sword and Jewel."

The problem today, though, is the low level of overall interest in religion. A commonly cited indicator is wedding practices. A generation ago, 70 percent or more Japanese were married with Shinto rites, says Kenji Ishii, sociologist of religion at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo. Today, Christian-style weddings are in fashion, even though few Japanese identify themselves as Christians. Shinto marriages constitute fewer than 20 percent of the total.

Some experts in Shinto dispute the significance of wedding customs, though. "In the past the Japanese didn't really have wedding ceremonies," said Masato Uno, a professor of Japanese folklore at Edogawa Gakuen Women's Junior College. "The important event was the reception. This is really just a question of esthetics."

But there are other indicators of Shinto's decline, from statistics showing fewer shrine visits nationally to a decline in observance of the so-called 7-5-3 rites of passage for children on those birthdays, when their families go to a shrine for prayers.

With few people living in her shrine's vicinity, and an awareness that young people have little interest in shrine ceremonies generally, Ms. Sugimoto has pushed the business angle as far as she can. Her days are now spent performing purification ceremonies for television studios that hope for success with new plays or sitcoms, or blessing new construction sites to ward off accidents or earthquake damage.

"Japan is in recession and business may be down, especially for the construction companies," she said with a knowing grin. "But the flip side of this is that I receive requests from real estate companies to pray for an increase in tenants. We have a saying in Japan that people only pray when they are in trouble."