

## ENCOUNTERING THE EAST. CULTURAL DISTANCE, CLASHES OF PERCEPTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RELIGIONS IN JAPAN

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**ABSTRACT**— *This paper studies cultural distance and the ways, in which it can influence perceptions of cultures, people, social and psychological phenomena. There are two main foci in the present research. The first is the significant differences between the Japanese and Western conceptions of religion. And the second is the methodological challenges that can be experienced by non-Japanese researchers when they are confronted with the specific Japanese worldview. The study is based on the findings of 27 ethnographical interviews conducted in the Kansai region of Japan and registered on tapes. Although there is a common belief that Japanese are “non-religious”, “non-spiritual”, and “non-metaphysical”, on the basis of the interviews conducted this paper claims that Japanese religious identity exists and that it can be defined as a conscious or subconscious drive to the supra-natural. It can also be expressed in many different forms, such as bowing down, praying, meditating, chanting, contemplating, etc. However, the Japanese conceptions of religiousness have very little in common with the European or American concepts of religion. The Japanese worldview is based on synthesis, while the Western worldview is grounded on differentiation. In the clash of the two diametrically opposite perceptions misunderstandings and miscommunication can occur. Thus, for a long time researchers have read Japanese meanings through Western codes. In learning how to decipher local codes, new meanings start to emerge. In such a way, the reconciliation of the two conflicting perspectives brings higher level of knowledge and understanding of culture.*

**Keywords:** Japan, Japanese culture, Japanese religions, cultural distance, perception, cross-cultural study, ethnographical interview

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### PERCEIVING AND UNDERSTANDING JAPAN

This paper studies cultural distance and the ways in which it can forge attitudes towards cultures, people, social and psychological phenomena. It dwells on the clash of the Western and Japanese perceptions of what religion and religious behavior is as well as on the possible approaches to reconcile the two conflicting worldviews. Cultural distance can create in some cases enormous challenges and hardships for researchers, especially when they are confronted with totally new and different perceptions of social acts and psychological phenomena.

There are many studies dedicated to the importance of cultural distance in cross-cultural management, mergers and acquisitions (Akanni and Ahammad 2015; Drogendijk and Slangen 2006; Tihanyi et. al. 2005). The impact of cultural distance has also been explored in relation to expatriates' adjustment (Hemmasi and Downes 2013) and to tourists' intention to visit a country (Ng et. al. 2007). However, there are few studies, which underline the connection between cultural

distance and perceptions of “otherness”. In the study of Petkova and Lehtonen (2005) 200 Bulgarians and 200 Finns were interviewed by means of a questionnaire. The informants were asked to write down as answers to open-ended questions the first two-three things that came to their mind when they thought of some nationalities and ethnic groups. Many of the respondents characterized the target countries and nationalities as “close”, “similar to us”, “neighbors” or “distant” and “unknown”. Statements, such as “I don’t know anything about the country”, that were not rare at all, also reveal high perceived psychological distance from the country, which relates to both the lack of existing knowledge of it and to the geographical and/or cultural distance. Thus, the researchers concluded that geographical and cultural distance can often translate into psychological distance too. In the study of Varamaki (2005) Japanese tourists were interviewed on board during their flights to Finland by means of a questionnaire. It was found out that the Japanese informants do not significantly distinguish between Finland, Sweden and Norway and that in their perceptions different features of the Scandinavian countries can mix up. In the two studies of Varamaki (2005) and Petkova and Lehtonen (2005) cultural distance is related to the nature of the stereotyping process too. When informants assess nationalities, considered to be geographically and culturally close by them, they apply a variety of more specific stereotypical attributions to particular cultural traits, customs and traditions in the “other” country or to concrete personality characteristics, such as, for example, “diligent”, “temperamental”, “slow”, etc. If informants have only scarce factual knowledge about the target and perceive the nationality as geographically and culturally distant, they tend to make more general and less specific assumptions. In such cases stereotypes about people do not suggest specific personality traits but rather characteristics assumed to be typical of the larger region where the country is presumed to be situated. Such characteristics can be, for example, “Northern” / “Southern”, “hot” / “cold”, “Scandinavian”, etc. (Petkova and Lehtonen 2005:69).

For Europeans and Americans Japan is both geographically and culturally distant. Understanding the East Asian cultures has preoccupied Westerners’ minds ever since the Age of Discovery starting in the fifteenth century. The considerable amount of literature dedicated to contemporary Japan emphasizes on the Japanese collectivistic worldview in opposition to the high individualism of the Western societies. However, the individualism-collectivism dichotomy, proposed by Hofstede et al. (2010) is nowadays progressively put under criticism. Yum (1994) suggests that collectivism should not be understood as an abstract concern for a general collective body but rather as an emphasis on social relationships and their maintenance. Similarly, Hui and Triandis (1986) argue that collectivism can be treated in two different ways: as a concern for a certain subset of people and as a concern for a generalized collectivity of people. In this relation Faure and Fang (2008) give many examples of the paradoxes of the East Asian cultures, where, according to them, it is possible to witness high level of individualism in a social setting considered to be collectivistic.

According to the classification of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) Japanese are oriented to particularism, rather than to universalism. In other words, they differentiate grade and regulate relationships according to the level of intimacy, the particular context and the status of the person involved instead of applying the same rule to everybody with whom they interact. Hall (1976) defines Japanese culture as a high-context culture. For example, a word or an expression in Japanese can be given different and even opposing meanings and are thus to be always understood in relation to the particular context. This is in sharp contrast with the Western European and American cultures that are considered to be low-context cultures. For instance, if in Western Europe or in the USA it is acceptable to ask someone: “Would you, please, close the window?”, in Japan it might be more appropriate to say: “Isn’t it cold today?”.

Moreover, according to Hall (1976) Japanese possess a sense of time, which is different from that of Europeans and Americans. While the latter have a linear understanding of time, and past,

present and future are separated, the Japanese vision of time can be presented as circular and past, present and future may overlap. Thus, in most of the classifications Japan is seen and depicted as a cultural counterpoint of the Western European and American societies. However, cultural dichotomies (collectivistic, high context, particularistic and polychromic culture versus individualistic, low context, universalistic and monochromic culture) may give an overall impression of the Japanese and Western cultures but they do not take in consideration all the nuances of social life and experiences in the two cultures.

According to some researchers there are considerable barriers in the cross-cultural communication between Japanese and Western people (Ishii and Bruneau 1994). To a great extent this phenomenon is associated with two diametrically opposite cultural models molded by two entirely different religions. The Western culture was born by the Catholic and Protestant spirit while the Eastern one is tightly connected to the traditions of Buddhism. The different religious and social beliefs have triggered not only different communicative styles of the Japanese and Western people but also a totally different sense of the “self”. In studying the “self” in Japan and the USA, Barnlund (1989) proves that the Japanese private “self” occupies much bigger personal area than in the USA. Themes that can be discussed openly in America and may belong to the public space are part of the Japanese private “self” only and are not considered to be topics of public conversation in the Eastern country. These are, for example, partners’ relations, money and sexual issues.

Margaret Mead [1928] (2001) argues that authority in general and religions in particular implement two main principles of regulation in society: guilt and shame. Thus, she distinguishes between two basic cultural patterns. The first one is based on the sense of shame and the second one is established on the sense of guilt. According to her the culture of guilt (American culture) emphasizes on the inner standards of conduct, while the culture of shame (Japanese culture) underlines the outward standards of behavior. This classification has been debated for about a century. Ruth Benedict [1946] (2006) builds her analysis of Japanese culture on the grounds of the Mead’s theory of shame and guilt. Some Japanese researchers nowadays fully accept the cultural patterns, proposed by Mead and Benedict, and they even maintain that the sense of guilt has been unknown in Japan. According to Jun’ichi (2005) only with the acceptance of Christianity has the sense of guilt become indigenized part of the Japanese culture. Simultaneously, other Japanese researchers find this classification either simplistic (Doi 1993) or underestimating the main principles of Japanese life (Lebra 1976).

Thus, cultural distance, indeed, matters. In the effort to understand and interpret the culture of the “other”, it is possible for a researcher to project their own stereotypes about the cultural “otherness”. In this sense Said (1991) writes that Orientalism as a concept and cultural discourse has been developed by the Western Europeans to serve to their own needs, because only by means of its antipode can the West become aware of its achievements and forge its identity. So, individuals, social groups, nationalities and even civilizations need the “other” in order to confirm the “self”. In this relation Jandt and Tanno (2001) state that the way the concept “other” is used in European thought from Plato up to the present day social life is “perceptual imperialism”. The latter, according to them, is the process of observing and interpreting information about cultural “others” through an underlying set of ideas based less on reality as on myth. Brislin (1981) and Lustig and Koester (2003) show, too, that typically people use the categories of their own culture to judge and interpret the behaviours of those who are culturally different from them. Similarly, Shi-Xu (2013) demonstrates that in some Western texts the discourse of the East Asian “other” often implies wrongdoing on the part of the “other”. Thus, in the study of distant countries and civilizations, researchers might sometimes be trapped in their own cultural models of perception and attribution.

Because of some religious traditions the stereotypical images of the Japanese worldwide are based on the assumption that they are serious, reserved, rigid and inward-oriented. In opposition to this statement Ito (2003) shows that “manga”, or Japanese comic art, including caricature and cartoons, forms a significant part of Japanese popular culture today. It affects behaviors and social trends by creating booms in sports and hobbies in Japan. This fact proves that Japanese love jokes and funny stories. Moreover, the origin of manga is related to the Japanese Buddhism and the first examples of this comic art are found in the Horyuji temple, built in 607 CE in Japan (Ito 2003:458). This also means that religious beliefs and cultural models based on them should not be viewed and esteemed stereotypically.

The cultural specificity of Japan is to a great extent founded on its religious and spiritual traditions. It is a well-known fact that many Japanese adhere to two and sometimes even to three religions simultaneously. Some of them do not even see any considerable differences between Buddhism and the local Shinto religion (Andreasen 1993). According to Reader (1991:12) the religious ideas, concepts and activities are socially and culturally imbibed without necessarily being explicitly recognized as religious by performers. Similarly, Sakaya (1993) states that the uniqueness of Japanese culture is embedded in the Japan’s native religion, Shinto. It has no sacred texts, bibles or sutras, nor has it any precepts or commandments. Thus, from worshipping multiple religions at once the habit of taking only the needed parts of each religion was established. This tendency, according to Sakaya, was later translated into the social sphere and the economy. In such a way, in Japan only desired elements can be selected from religions, philosophies and economies, and this feature constitutes one of the most important specificities of the Japanese society nowadays.

Actually, the very concept of “religion” has for centuries been vague and culturally distant for the Japanese people. The term “Japanese religion” was coined and used for the first time by Anesaki Masahuru in 1907 for English language readers and later introduced by him into the Japanese society. According to Jun’ichi (2005) the term “Japanese religion” has a dual meaning: the first one refers to a unified religion particular to Japan, and the second one indicates the different and diverse religions in the East Asian country. He also maintains that the first meaning is exclusive, while the second one is inclusive. The author argues that most often scholars have deliberately avoided the term in the first, exclusive sense and that they have understood Japanese religion in the latter sense.

Thus, most often religion in Japan has been studied as an institutionalized form of worship and as different religious and cultural communities, such as Shinto, Buddhist, Christian, New Age and folk religions. Much less attention has been paid to the religious consciousness of separate individuals, expressed in their beliefs and social behavior in everyday life. Cultural identity and religious identity in particular can be studied on two different levels: on the level of the social group and on the level of the separate individual. On the level of the group there are as many religious identities as religious and cultural groups exist. On the level of the individual cultural and religious identity is a unique construct and a blend of values and beliefs, which may derive from the participation of the individual in various social groups and communities (Petkova 2005: 52).

Many researchers define contemporary Japanese people as “non-religious” (Lebra 1976) and even as “non-metaphysical” (Nakamura 1963) and “non-spiritual” (Yum 1994). According to a sociological study, conducted by Bachika (2010), 23,5 % of the Japanese interviewed by him claim that they do not believe in anything and 87 % do not engage in any spiritual practice. These facts are the reasons for Bachika to conclude that Japanese have a very weak religious and spiritual consciousness.

This paper studies the religious beliefs of Japanese individuals who are not involved in any particular denominations or religious groups. In other words, the religious consciousness is explored on the level of the separate individual. Although there might be various cases in Japan, this paper argues that Japanese are spiritual. Moreover, there is a great paradox: most of the Japanese believe and openly declare that they are not religious or spiritual but in reality they share spiritual beliefs and they even perform spiritual practices. The study of the Japanese informants given below, confirms this observation. According to the present research not only is Japanese culture fostered by religious traditions but Japanese social behavior is also determined by some deeply rooted spiritual beliefs and perceptions of the world. For example, the particular time orientation in Japan (polychromic time versus the monochromic time of the Westerners) is often related to the belief in reincarnation and to the religious cult of the ancestors (“senzo”) who are thought to protect the continuity and prosperity of the household. Actually, all the specificities of the Japanese culture can be explained with the strong impact of Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism and Confucianism that intermingle in the Far Eastern country. This is why the paper argues that the role of religion and spiritual traditions has been underestimated in the analysis of the Japanese social and cultural behavior. On the contrary, the spiritual attitude is an eminent part of Japanese culture, often without being viewed or recognized as “spiritual”.

Thus, there are two main foci in this paper. The first one is the significant differences between the Japanese and Western concepts of religion and the clash of the two perceptions. The second one is the methodological challenges that can be experienced by non-Japanese researchers when they are confronted with the specific Japanese worldview. Deciphering cultural codes of very different cultures without being trapped in one’s own cultural model and biases might become in some cases a real trial for researchers. The interviews presented below shed light on some of the difficulties, which non-Japanese scholars might experience in Japan.

### AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN JAPAN

The ethnographical interviews, presented in this paper, were conducted in the Kansai region of Japan and more particularly in the cities of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe. 27 Japanese informants were interviewed with face-to-face interviews recorded on tapes. They were asked about their personal beliefs and spiritual practices and experiences. The informants were randomly chosen with no respect to age, social class, status, education and profession. Among them there are students and university professors, businessmen, medical doctors, lawyers, school teachers, journalists, social workers, shopkeepers, housewives and unemployed people. Because of the high privacy in Japanese society, the informants are kept anonymous and their names and profiles are not revealed in this study.

The limitations of the ethnographical interview are more than evident. First, only a very small number of Japanese informants are included in the study. And second, they come from a particular region of Japan – the Kansai area, and more specifically from the cities of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe. Because of the limited number of participants and of the random choice of interviewees it is impossible to draw conclusions about any differences between the social groups in Japan. In the spiritual practices together with the individual inclinations there might be some differences between the social communities in terms of sex and age, status and profession, hobbies and interests. Because of the limitations of the present research, it cannot be representative for all the people and social groups in Japan. Moreover, there might be some cultural peculiarities in the different regions and localities within the country. Thus, Kansai region cannot be representative for all the local cultures in Japan either. Hence, the research presented in this paper does not pretend to exhaust all the cultural

specificities related to the spiritual practices in Japan. Rather, here the interviews are only used as an example and demonstration of the Japanese religious and spiritual perceptions. However, on the basis of the observations some conclusions about the Japanese cultural and social behavior can be reached too.

To the first question “Are you religious?” all the 27 interviewees without any exception give an explicit negative answer. For a researcher it seems that the explicit negative answers given by the Japanese interviewees would make any further effort to study the Japanese spirituality and religious consciousness a futile and useless act. It seems also that Japanese, indeed, are non-religious and non-spiritual. However, it turns out that there is a real discrepancy between what is explicitly declared and what is practiced in everyday life. Here are some examples from the conversations with the interviewees:

*Interviewer: Are you religious?*

*Informant 1: Well, my family is Buddhist and a little bit of Shinto, mainly Buddhist, but I am not really religious.*

*Interviewer: Do you go to temples and shrines?*

*Informant 1: Oh, well (laughing), mmmm....I don't go there regularly, less than once a month. Mmmmm,... I don't really decide to go. Because I live in Kyoto and in Kyoto there are many, many temples and shrines, so everywhere I go, I see such places, and if I have time, I just pop in. But it's not a big thing here, it's just a casual visit.*

*Interviewer: What do you do in the temples or shrines when you visit them?*

*Informant 1: Not all the temples and shrines, but most of them have such an atmosphere, such tranquility. I love to simply sit there, especially when I am stressed out. I feel good, I feel calm and blessed.*

The other interviewees give similar answers to the question about religiousness:

*Interviewer: Are you religious?*

*Informant 12: I don't think I am religious. I belong to no religion and I don't believe in any religion.*

*Interviewer: Do you go to temples and shrines?*

*Informant 12: Sometimes....You see, sometimes I feel like going to shrines. Especially the first day of the year, I go to draw omikudji: how to describe it, they put some random words on a sheet of paper, you take it and read it and that's a sort of prediction, your luck for the New Year. I always want to draw omikudji. [...] Sometimes I also go to temple.*

*Interviewer: Does it help to go to temples and shrines?*

*Informant 12: Going to temples or shrines is like going to your mother and father saying greeting words for the New Year and spending a little time with them and after that going back to your life.*

*Interviewer: Do you participate in some rituals there?*

*Informant 12: If I want to participate and participate in any religious ceremony, the main reason for this is tourism and sightseeing but most of the time I don't really want to participate in these religious things. I prefer to be alone and meditate, and contemplate and become reflective.*

Similar are the statements of another informant:

*Interviewer: Are you religious?*

*Informant 15: (long pause) No...*

*Interviewer: Do you belong to a particular religion?*

*Informant 15: No.*

*Interviewer: How often do you go to temples and shrines?*

*Informant 15: Maybe 15 times per year...*

*Interviewer: 15 times? Why 15 times? How do you know it's 15 times?*

*Informant 15: About 15 times...Not for religious reasons but for sightseeing. We can see beautiful places like sakura places, you know, they are beautiful in April. We can go to the temple and see the beautiful trees and scenes, and sightseeings.*

*Interviewer: Does it happen that you pray when you go to a temple or shrine?*

*Informant 15: Yes, sometimes I pray.*

*Interviewer: Why do you pray?*

*Informant 15: (long pause) For the family to be happy...*

*Interviewer: Do you think that prayers have any influence?*

*Informant 15: I don't believe that prayer has some influence but with it I feel refreshed. I like the silence in temples and shrines. It makes me feel good.*

What is “normal” and logical for a Japanese individual might seem quite confusing for a European or American researcher. All the informants state that they are not religious and that they do not belong to any religion, yet they can sometimes perform religious or spiritual practices. This paradox between open claims and actual social behavior created one of the biggest barriers and stumbling blocks in the initial phase of the present research. For Europeans it might be normal and acceptable to dwell on religiousness and to discuss philosophies, rituals and one's adherence to a particular religion or denomination. Conversations on this topic can be generated in different communication settings and even someone who does not profess or believe in any religion may explain the reasons for their choice. However, for more than a month the talks with different Japanese informants about religions and spiritual practices did not give any sufficient results. When asked about their religion, the Japanese interviewees felt confused and embarrassed and most often they did not give any particular answers. Also, the interviewer understood very little from their talks. After a month of fruitless efforts to receive information on the Japanese beliefs and spiritual practices, and after 10 people had been interviewed, the research had to start anew with a differently structured conversation. The first 10 interviews are not included in this study. The present paper dwells on the 27 interviews taken after the questionnaire was restructured and modified. According to the advice of the colleagues from Osaka University the strategy of the interviews was changed and some “tricky” questions were invented too. These were particular and specific questions, which for the Japanese informants, without any doubt, seemed to be more meaningful than the general talk on religion, faith and rituals. It might be that the Japanese interviewees, indeed, give different meanings to the concept of religion. Another possibility can be that in a culture of high privacy talking about

one's personal beliefs and spiritual practices might not be a theme for a public discussion. However, in designing several specific questions it was possible to trigger out some of the personal beliefs of the interviewees.

One such particular question is about visiting temples and shrines. Although the informants state that they are not religious and that they do not engage in any spiritual practices, all of them visit temples and shrines on different occasions. These occasions most often are: celebrating New Year (the biggest celebration in Japan during which by tradition everyone goes to a shrine or temple), sightseeing and tourism, Japanese marriages, funerals and commemorations. As Lebra (1976) and Reader (1991) state religious practices and traditions are no more religious, they are recognized as cultural by performers. Most often with them the individuals pay respect to their forefathers and ancestors, or "senzo", which is one of the strongest cults in Japan. However, on the basis of the findings of this research, the paper disagrees with the most common understanding that Japanese are "non-religious", "non-metaphysical" and "non-spiritual". It is true that most often spiritual practices in Japan are viewed as cultural, rather than as religious rituals. Yet, most of the Japanese share or profess, at least to a certain extent, some spiritual beliefs too.

The author of this paper once made an experiment in Kyoto. There was a small Shinto shrine on a cross-road and the pedestrian lane was passing directly through the center of the shrine. For two hours she was sitting in the garden, observing the pedestrians who were crossing the yard of the shrine. Most of them, even in a hurry, were performing the rituals that are prescribed to be done in a Shinto shrine – clapping two times with hands and bowing down. Some would perform more elaborate rituals, with clapping hands and jumping, and third would bow down, ring the bell and throw coins in front of the altar. Very few were those who did not pay any attention to the shrine when crossing it. Most of those who performed the rituals might claim that they are non-religious and that they follow the rituals because of the esteem of traditions. Yet, behind their behavior, at least on a subconscious level, there might be some beliefs, which surpass the simple gratefulness to traditions and ancestors.

A proof of this statement can be found in some of the explanations given by the informants in this study. Actually from the first to the last informant the answers are amazingly similar. Here is one more example:

*Interviewer: Are you religious?*

*Informant 26: Mmmm.... No.*

*Interviewer: What religion does your family belong to?*

*Informant 26: According to our tradition in Japan I have to keep in my house the religion of my family. It is Buddhist. And maybe Shinto, both.*

*Interviewer: Do you go to temples and shrines?*

*Informant 26: Not for religious reasons. I go for sightseeing. If someone comes and visits me, I bring them to temples and shrines.*

*Interviewer: How often do you go to temples and shrines?*

*Informant 26: Actually there is a shrine near our house, so when we cross it, we always pray, it is just outside... (She is standing up to show how she prays: she is clapping 2 times with hands and bowing down).*

*Interviewer: Why do you pray? Does it help to pray?*

*Informant 26: It doesn't really make me happy but it helps me to clear my mind. It makes me calm and relaxed.*

*Interviewer: To whom do you pray?*

*Informant 26: Mmmm.... (long pause) It is difficult to say...*

Although most of the interviewees state that they visit temples and shrines only for sightseeing and cultural reasons, many of them also confirm that they perform some practices there. Among them are: “bowing down”, “praying”, “meditating”, “chanting”, “sitting still”, “contemplating” and “observing nature and things”. These practices not only indicate the reflexive and contemplative attitude of the Japanese informants but they also confirm that at least to a certain extent and subconsciously the Japanese interviewees share some spiritual beliefs.

The second specific question, posed to the Japanese informants in this study, is about having Budsudan (Buddhist altar) and Kamidana (Shinto altar) in their homes. Most of the informants do have Budsudan or Kamidana at home, and often they have both Budsudan and Kamidana. Some of the interviewees, when asked about their religion, do not give any answer but mention their Budsudan or Kamidana at home.

*Interviewer: What is your religion?*

*Informant 6: I don't know.... (long pause)... I have no religion.*

*Interviewer: What is the religion of your family?*

*Informant 6: I don't know, just normal Japanese religion...*

*Interviewer: Maybe you are Buddhist?*

*Informant 6: I don't have a Budsudan.*

*Interviewer: Do you have a Kamidana?*

*Informant 6: Yes, in my house there is a Kamidana. Two years ago I bought a Kamidana.*

*Interviewer: So, you feel you are more Shinto than Buddhist?*

*Informant 6: I don't know, Shinto probably, maybe, not really sure.*

*Interviewer: Do you go to temples and shrines?*

*Informant 6: Yes, I think it is very soothing. I think it is important to appreciate, to be grateful. Our ancestors are around you, all the gods are around you. This is why I think it is important to appreciate and to be grateful. That's why I started going to Shinto shrines.*

Obviously, one particular reason for the difficulty of a Japanese individual to talk about religion might be the fact that Japanese mix and adhere to different religious traditions, most of which come from Shinto and Buddhism. Moreover, they are even unwilling to differentiate between them and to determine themselves as “Buddhist” or “Shinto”. They also speak about “having Budsudan” or “having Kamidana” at home, which in the high context of Japanese culture is a slight suggestion about their inclination respectively to Buddhism or Shinto. For a European who is used to talk about denominations, doctrines, philosophies and rituals, such a talk about having altars,

Budsudan or Kamidana, at home, without knowing much about Japanese culture, might turn out to be confusing. Kamidana and especially Budsudan are kept in Japanese homes not only to worship the divine but also to commemorate members of the family who have passed away. Here is another example:

*Informant 5: Yes, we have Kamidana and Budsudan at home. For me it's something very natural. When I was born, my family already had them. So, they have always been there.*

*Interviewer: Why do you need the two of them?*

*Informant 5: Budsudan is for Buddhism. Our Budsudan is a very traditional one, it is not anything special. My father passed away 8 years ago and there is a memorial of him on the Budsudan. This is the way to pay respect and gratitude to our ancestors. And our Kamidana is for Shinto religion. The two of them protect us, our home and our family.*

*Interviewer: Do you pray in front of the Budsudan and Kamidana?*

*Informant 5: Yes, from my childhood I learned to pray in front of the Budsudan and Kamidana.*

*Interviewer: How do you pray?*

*Informant 5: Just I hold my hands in front of me and I feel gratitude.*

*Interviewer: Do you chant sometimes?*

*Informant 5: Yes, sometimes we chant. ..*

Actually, only one of the 27 informants determines herself as a Buddhist and dwells on the differences between the different religions. In this relation it might not be a coincidence that this person has spent more than ten years in the USA and that she has experienced a strong influence by the Christian culture:

*Interviewer: What is your religion?*

*Informant 3: I am Buddhist.... (pause) Technically I am Christian, I was baptized when I was 14 but only because my mother wanted this for me.*

*Interviewer: Oh, your mother is Christian?*

*Informant 3: Now I wonder whether she was baptized, maybe she was but I'm not sure. She wanted it for me but that was not the choice which I made. I was too young to have any idea what I was doing. But if I was to choose any religion or to be in a certain religion, I will be a Buddhist.*

*Interviewer: And what about the religion of your family?*

*Informant 3: Well, I think my mother is a kind of a Christian, I think my father is a kind of a Buddhist but he went through a Catholic phase when he had a Catholic girlfriend... You know, my parents are divorced (laughing). I think my sister likes Christianity a lot, if she would choose a religion, she will be into Christianity and she is technically Christian as well. She was also baptized when I was baptized. And we are all a little bit of Shinto too. Well, everyone finds his own way to be religious.*

Although some of the informants may show preferences to either Buddhist or Shinto religion, one particular feature of the answers in this study, and of the Japanese society in general, is the amazing easiness with which spiritual traditions coming from different religions can mix, combine and synthesize in the specific Japanese worldview. In many cultures if, already in a given religion,

one chooses to adhere to a different one, the choice might bring a lot of contradictions, frustration, guilt and suffering to the individual. Thus, it can also provoke a crisis of identity. In the case of the Japanese culture sharing two or three religions is not seen as contradictory. The Japanese informants presented in this study take it as a normal and natural practice to follow two or even three religious traditions. Very often also these traditions are mixed to the extent of a specific construct, which is perceived to be more a cultural than a religious one.

The third specific question posed to the Japanese interviewees is whether they have had omamori (Japanese religious amulet). All of the informants, without any exception, state that at one time or another they have had omamori. When asked why they have had it, they give different explanations, most of which are contradictory with their main statement that they do not follow any religious or spiritual traditions and that they do not believe in anything.

*Interviewer: Do you have omamori?*

*Informant 1: Yes, I do. I think omamori and prayer help in the same way. God always gives you what you need but it may not be what you want. Omamori I think is protecting you, so that you can continue on your path without obstacles and you will be given what you need. Some people take omamori all the time, but I put it near my Budsudan and this is my secret corner.*

*Informant 11: Yes, of course, I have omamori (laughing). My family says you should have omamori. Mentally it helps me, yes, I think it makes me secure.*

*Informant 24: Yes, of course, I have omamori. And when I was studying for the examination for entering the university I had many omamories.*

*Interviewer: Do you think that omamories help?*

*Informant 24: Yes... (laughing) these omamories were especially for students to be successful at examinations.*

*Interviewer: Is there anything else that is helpful for you?*

*Informant 24: Well, together with omamories, fortune telling also helps. Well, probably any kind of fortune telling can help but omikudji (fortune-telling paper strips) is very effective and easily accessible. Sometimes when I go to the shrine and take omikudji, I choose the omamori according to the predictions in it.*

While the students included in this study most often choose omamori because of their examinations, all the other Japanese informants state that in a particular period of time they have kept omamori with them as well. Most often also they believe in the strong protective power of the amulet.

Here are some other examples:

*Informant 27: Yes, yes....I have omamori. Even now I have it with me... well... because I don't want to have an accident or some bad experience.*

*Interviewer: So, you believe that omamori has some influence on you?*

*Informant 27: A little, yes, it helps a little. If I have omamori I will be careful and I will take care of myself too.*

*Informant 23: Yes, I have omamori. Here it is (he is showing the omamori)*

*Interviewer: Ah, it is nice...Do you think that it helps you in some way?*

*Informant 23: If I feel weak, having an omamori is something that definitely helps me....*

So, all the informants, without any exception, have had omamori at one time or another. They also believe that omamori is a natural and easy way to keep oneself away from accidents and unpleasant situations in life.

And the last question, posed to the informants, is whether they believe in fate or destiny and what according to them destiny is:

*Interviewer: Do you believe in fate or destiny? What is destiny?*

*Informant 7: Ah, that's a very difficult question....In Japan you have spring, summer, autumn and then winter, and then the spring comes along. Seasons change... maybe destiny exists in the seasons' cycles. Personally destiny is similar to seasons' cycles. They cannot be changed. Destiny cannot be changed by a person. It is a Buddhist way to put it maybe but destiny is decided.*

*Informant 8: Well, I don't know about fate. There are many gods in Buddhism and Shinto. But I think they all are expression of one being. I would not call it God because for me God is not substantial but it is in every substance.*

*Informant 13: I don't know what destiny or fate is... (long pause), you know, it is difficult to say. But I believe in a kind of reviving. Yes, probably reincarnation exists. So, if I die, in the world there are six billion people and people keep being born into this world, so I am a kind to... you know, after death, to shift into a new body.*

*Informant 16: I believe in my own will and effort but yes, there is some destiny.... Maybe the gods and the kamis, I don't know, but there is some energy in the whole universe....*

*Informant 19: Yes, I believe in some universal power, which I can't see. I actually don't know what exactly it is...*

*Informant 24: Sorry, I can't tell you anything about fate... I don't know anything about it. But according to our religion Shinto even in this moment when we are talking with you, there are many, many kamis in this room. Sometimes we can even feel their presence. I believe in a kind of a supernatural presence, which I can't really explain.*

*Informant 27: Destiny? I don't know... I think we can change our destiny by ourselves but sometimes it is difficult...I don't believe so much in destiny but I believe in spirits. Especially in nature. I think everything has a spirit, especially in nature, the trees, the ocean, the sky, the stones, the stars, even they have a spirit.*

When asked whether they believe in fate or destiny, the informants state that they believe in: "God" or "gods", "kamis" (Shinto deities), "angels", "nature" and "nature cycles", "spirits", "ghosts", "reincarnation", "energy", "being", "supernatural presence", "universal power", etc. It can be seen that the personal beliefs of the interviewees are grounded on different religious traditions. Often Buddhist, Shinto and Christian beliefs mingle and blend together to shape the particular and specific Japanese understanding of life and death.

To conclude, all the Japanese interviewees explicitly declare that they are not religious and that they do not engage in any religious or spiritual practices. Some of them also state that they do not believe in anything. However, their claim about being "non-religious" and "non-spiritual" is in a

sharp contradiction with their later statements about some practices and beliefs which they adhere to. Most of the informants also state that they go to temples and shrines mainly for sightseeing and cultural reasons. But very often also they bow down, pray, meditate, sit still, contemplate or chant in shrines and temples. Most of them have either Budsudan or Kamidana, and often they have both Budsudan and Kamidana at their homes. Although the interviewees explain this fact with following the cultural or family traditions, the perseverance of performing spiritual practices, such as “bowing down” and “praying” in temples and shrines or in front of the Kamidana or Budsudan at home, indicates that behind these acts there might be more reasons than just paying respect to traditions. All the informants, without any exception, either have omamori at the time of the interview or they have had it before. The majority of them also have trust in the miraculous power and protective energy of the amulet. Many interviewees also mention the practice of “taking” or “drawing” omikudji, fortune-telling paper strips in Shinto shrines, thus showing their belief in both fate and predictions. And finally, the interviewees believe in some supra-natural or transcendental reality, which exists beyond the material limits of the everyday life.

## DISCUSSION

Despite the common belief in the social and cultural sciences that Japanese are “non-religious”, “non-metaphysical” and “non-spiritual”, this paper shares a different opinion. Although there might be various individual cases in Japan, Japanese are spiritual. However, their spirituality is different from the European or American one and it cannot be measured by European or American standards. From the study, presented above, it becomes clear that the very concepts of “religion” and “spirituality” are vague, alien and culturally distant for many Japanese individuals. Researchers might dwell on “Japanese religions” but even in contemporary time the ordinary people do not really understand and accept the concept of religion. It turns out that, indeed, as a European term and practice, “religion” has been superficially imposed in Japan.

The difficulty to understand spirituality in Japan is related to the fact that usually Japanese do not adhere to one particular religion or denomination, as Europeans and Americans do. In their daily life Japanese can mix many religious and spiritual traditions and they are also unwilling to differentiate between them. Most often they accommodate both Buddhism and Shinto but they can also be highly receptive to many other cultural influences, such as Christianity, in the form of Catholicism or Protestantism, and New Age or folk religions. This high receptiveness to various religious traditions creates the difficulty of a Japanese person to talk about any preferences to a particular denomination. They may sincerely perform spiritual practices, such as “praying”, “meditating”, or “paying respect to ancestors and gods with bowing down”. They often also explain their behavior as “cultural”, “social” and “devoid of any religiousness”. This understanding is to a great extent due to the psychological alienation of the Japanese individuals from the concept of religion. This means that the explicit declaration about “non-religiousness” and “non-spirituality” is in contrast with some deeply rooted Japanese beliefs, no matter whether these beliefs can be described as “religious”, “spiritual”, “metaphysical” or simply as “superstitious”. Thus, this paper argues that religious or spiritual identity in Japan is a specific mental construct, which is a mixture of many different religious, spiritual and cultural traditions and which can often be unconscious.

However, even in the argumentation that Japanese are spiritual, there is a contradiction. First of all, if most of the Japanese people deny that they are religious, is Japanese behavior really religious/ spiritual, or it is cultural? And when two researchers describe a given act as a religious or cultural behavior, do they use different words to designate the same social psychological phenomenon, or they see the single act as two entirely different existential realities? Thus, one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the present research turned out to be not methodological problems but ontological questions. Obviously one very important dilemma here is cultural perception and

deciphering cultural codes. In such a way, in arguing that Japanese are spiritual, when most of them reject this statement, is not the researcher trapped in their own cultural model of perception and argumentation?

Since the idea of the absolute cultural distance and relativism is rather unacceptable, this paper suggests a simple criterion through which a given act can be designated as “religious”/ “spiritual”, on the one hand, or as “cultural”, on the other. The suggestion here relates to the individuals’ personal beliefs. A prayer done as a courtesy to the group or as a respect to the family tradition may not be anything more than a cultural act. A prayer done with the belief that one is being heard by a divine being or entity may be classified as spiritual. It is possible that people participate in religious rituals, perceiving them as cultural ceremonies, such as marriages, funerals and commemorations, for example. However, in this study the majority of the participants confess that they believe in some supra-natural entity or existence and thus their attitudes and behavior can be classified as “religious” / “spiritual”. Simultaneously, these beliefs are not openly expressed and declared. On the contrary, they have been triggered out with the use of various specific questions. This also means that the spiritual beliefs of many Japanese can be a part of the individual unconscious.

In Europe individuals can openly discuss philosophical points and doctrinal differences between various religious and spiritual traditions and they can show many rational arguments about following or not following any particular denomination. Thus, the traditional European approach to religion is based on differentiation. In the opposite, the Japanese perception is grounded on synthesis and unification. In such a way, the Japanese informants do not show any inclination to talk about “religions”, “religiousness” and “spirituality”, because these phenomena are related to the mentality of differentiation. For a European or American “religion” is a particular system of faith, doctrine and philosophy or certain rituals practiced. Usually they also have clear mental concepts in their minds about what religion is. It turns out that Japanese are more reflexive and contemplative, their approach to the supra-natural is more intuitive than rational, and that they rely more on their direct personal experiences than on abstract mental concepts and philosophical argumentations. Because the Japanese worldview is based on synthesis, the majority of the Japanese people are not inclined to determine themselves as “Buddhists”, “Shinto” or “Christians”, as Westerners would normally do. Instead of “religion”, Japanese also prefer to talk about “Japanese culture”, indicating with this term the particular system of Japanese beliefs, attitudes, and rituals, coming from numerous religious and spiritual traditions.

Moreover, when Westerners join a given denomination, they are usually led by the principles of ethics. Japanese are often attracted to religious sites by esthetics. The major motive of many Japanese individuals for visiting temples and shrines is to contemplate the beautiful views and sceneries. In other words, the connection with nature is of the utmost importance. Trees, flowers and stones, their arrangement in space and their combination with the architectural features of the surrounding buildings, are the reasons for many Japanese people to show interest in shrines or temples. Thus, the religious sites become places for meditation, contemplation, and sitting in silence with nature, which for the Japanese are all forms of prayers. The strong drive to the supra-natural can also be observed in the arrangement of Kamidana. Both in Shinto shrines and in Japanese homes Kamidana is an empty altar. Except for the occasional flowers or stones, which can often be perceived as animated, there are no images, statues or paintings of kamis, no books, texts or objects of worship at the altar. The empty space of the Kamidana symbolizes the Japanese belief that the unknown is vaster than the known. In such a way, the empty space of the Japanese altar is a reverence for the unknown in all possible shapes and forms beyond the limits of the human imagination. This conviction obviously predetermines the difficulty of a Japanese person to talk

about religion or even about particular religious beliefs. The unknown can be attained intuitively and by means of the meditative and contemplative mind, rather than with philosophical speculations.

Thus, religious identity in Japan cannot really be explored with the traditional European quantitative methodology, such as empirical research with questionnaires. If explicitly asked “Are you religious?” or “What is your religion?” many Japanese informants would declare that they are not religious and that they do not perform any religious practices. Even, if asked “What do you believe in?”, some Japanese would also maintain that they do not believe in anything. Thus, only in longer personal conversations with specific questions the beliefs of the Japanese informants were revealed. Such questions have been about going to temples and shrines, having Budsudan and Kamidana at home, keeping omamori with oneself, and the belief in fate or destiny. This also means that in most of the cases religious/ spiritual identity and beliefs are implicit, hidden and sometimes even unconscious mental constructs. One needs to pose many various questions to uncover some of the subconsciously suppressed beliefs of the informants. Also, the specificity of the Japanese society is related to the high context of culture. Explicit and direct questions, such as “What is your religion?” can often produce confusion and embarrassment in the informants’ minds. The Japanese way of expressing thoughts is rather implicit and non-direct. This is why the traditional quantitative method of questioning might not give efficient results in the study of the Japanese spiritual beliefs. In addition, questions, which for Europeans or Americans make sense, might not necessarily seem meaningful to Japanese informants.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper studies religious identity and spirituality in Japan on the level of the separate individual. If on the level of the group there are as many religious identities as religious and cultural groups exist, on the level of the individual cultural and religious identity is a unique construct and a blend of values and beliefs, which may derive from the participation of the individual in various social groups and communities. The paper does not agree with the most common belief in the social sciences that Japanese are “non-religious”, “non-spiritual” and “non-metaphysical”. It claims that although the Japanese religiousness has very little in common with the European or American religiousness and spirituality, Japanese religious identity exists. It is expressed in conscious or subconscious psychological drive to the supra-natural. This drive can also be manifested in many different forms, such as bowing down, praying, meditating, chanting, contemplating, and striving for a special protection and recognition, self-examination. It is evident that the religious beliefs and spiritual mentality in the Far Eastern country have deeper psychological mechanisms than what has been suggested in the scientific literature and that these mechanisms need to be further given attention, investigated and analyzed.

On the basis of the interviews it is evident that there are considerable differences between the Western and Japanese conceptions of religion and spirituality. A significant reason for the underestimation of the Japanese religiousness has been cultural distance and the clash of two distinct perceptions of what religiousness and religious behavior is. On the one hand, the very concept of religion is culturally and psychologically alien for the Japanese people, because it is based on the principle of differentiation. On the contrary, the Japanese worldview is founded on synthesis and unification. This is why many Japanese are unwilling to determine themselves as “Buddhist”, “Shinto” or “Christian”, etc. Also, they might prefer to designate their system of beliefs, perceptions and attitudes with conceptions different from “religion”. In this respect the very term “religion” might not express properly the uniqueness of the Japanese spiritual mind. On the other hand, researchers have automatically transferred the Western clues of the concept of religion to the Japanese society. For a long time they have read Japanese meanings through Western codes. Thus, cultural distance can create clashes of perceptions. However, in learning to decipher the local codes

the researcher can start reading new meanings. Finally, the reconciliation of the two conflicting perspectives brings higher level of knowledge and understanding of culture.

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