
BEYOND SPEECH ACTS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SILENCE IN THE SHINTO MARRIAGE RITUAL

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ABSTRACT

Rituals and ceremonies in the Western tradition, give priority to the spoken word and various kinds of declarations. But in the Asian tradition, there is also an appreciation for the unspoken. In this article, the researcher will examine the non-verbal communication which takes place in the Shinto marriage ritual. The marriage is accomplished without “words,” “announcements,” or “declarations.” The consummation of the marriage takes place when the couple quietly drinks the sacred liquid, three times in three different cups, for a total of nine times. It is only then the marriage is accomplished. By investigating such a ritual in the Japanese culture or Eastern culture, the paper also suggests limits to Western speech act theory as developed by John Searle.

Keywords: Shintoism; marriage ritual; silence; Speech Act Theory; Ishin-Denshin

The Importance of Words in Christianity

Central to the Christian tradition is the creation through the word. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God,” that the word, or *logos*, becomes flesh. In the Gospel of John, it is written:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:1-5).”

In verse 14, it says,

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:14).”

The Greek word *logos* had profound meanings in the early Christian tradition. When *logos* was with God, the *logos* contained God, the *logos* embraced God, and the children of God who speak *logos* preach God’s message. Ultimately, the Son of God, is *logos* and through *logos*, leads people to salvation and eternal happiness. Therefore, in Christianity, words (*logos*) can at the same time be God, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. Also, words were used directly through God himself, the son of God, the prophets and the angels.

The Christian Marriage Ritual

Likewise, the Western Christian marriage ritual relies on words and declarations. The couple is asked to perform their “vows” or pledges to one another.

The bridegroom says:

I, (Name), take you, (Name), for my lawful wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.

The bride says:

I, (Name), take you, (Name), for my lawful husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.²

The pastor asks:

(Bride's name), will you have this man to be your husband; to live together with him in the covenant of marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful unto him as long as you both shall live?

The bride answers:

I will.

The pastor asks:

(Groom's name), will you have this woman to be your wife; to live together with her in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful unto her as long as you both shall live?

The groom answers:

I will.³

After the exchanging rings and some more words, the celebrant finally declares:

(Bride's name) and (groom's name), having witnessed your vows of love to one another, it is my joy to present you to all gathered here as husband and wife. (To the groom.) You may kiss the bride.⁴

Without this final announcement, Christian wedding cannot be completed, and the couple is not yet officially married despite the fact they having recited their vows. According to the Speech

Declarations and Speech Acts

In his book *Expression and Meaning*,⁵ John Searle classifies his speech acts in illocutionary points into five categories. They are “Assertive,” “Directive,” “Commissive,” “Expressive,” and “Declarative.” And in the category of “Declarative speech acts,” Searle places such examples as marriage and baptism. In his understanding, there is no objective marriage. Marriage is a social contract, and it is a social reality that human beings have created and institutionalized. Searle explains that a pastor or priest’s “declaration” is necessary speech act to create the marriage as a social reality. Without this declaration, such rituals as marriage and baptism cannot be real. These speech acts “create new states of affairs by representing them as being the case.”⁶ Searle’s point is that if marriage is a social contract, people in the society must acknowledge these declarations as officially valid. However, the question arises; is there another way for marriage to be official without words or declarations?⁷

Shintoism and the Sacredness of Nature and Act

Shintoism is a religious movement is deeply attuned to nature. Although there was no holy scripture until Buddhism was introduced in seventh century⁸, most rural Japanese people believed in the existence of many gods in nature.⁹ Many Western scholars see Shintoism as a primitive animism. However, Shintoism’s respect for the sacredness of nature is more intricate than more primitive forms of animism. The eight million gods or the Yaoyorozu no Kami (八百万の神) are prevalent everywhere in the nature. Gods are nature, and the all the products that the nature yields such as foods and shelters are considered the blessings from gods. Yet the gods do not merely give human beings food and shelters like a monotheistic God, but rather gods are within the food and the shelter.

Rice is given by a god, but rice too is a god. As a result, farmers believe the act of harvesting rice is itself sacred. The sacred expresses itself in phenomena. The Shinto priests performed rituals to thank the gods and conducted seasonal festivals to purify the mindset of human beings. Thus, in order to thank and worship gods, small wooden houses are constructed, and offerings of food and alcohol are made. These offerings are done not to appease the gods, but to purify people's mind show that symbolic acts are more powerful than the mere utterance of words.

Shinto Marriage

The present form of Shinto marriage had been fixed since 1900 when the royal family's marriage ceremony was held.¹⁰ Since then, by and large, the procedure has been almost the same. Just as in Western marriage, there are music, prayers, and utterances of words of blessing. However, the significant difference is that there is no verbal announcement declaring when the couple is married. And no declarations of the couple leading to the recognition of the marriage. The ceremony was usually held with small numbers of people compared with that of Western marriage, only with family and extended family. It is a non-verbal event. As mentioned, during the San-San-Kudo, Miko provides Sake with three different cups, and the couple drinks a little Sake which is considered as sacred liquid without words three time in three cups. The first cup is the past, the second one the present, the third one he future. Although the Guuji¹¹ speaks some words and performs rituals to remove evil spirits (the Harai ritual), purify them (the Kiyome ritual) or to pray for prosperity, these declarations are not the definitive acts through which the marriage is achieved. It is achieved when the couple performs the San-San-Kudo Ritual (三三九度) quietly drinking sacred liquid three times in three different cups, for a total of nine times. It is only then the couple as well as their family members and other people who are present in the ceremony recognize the marriage. After this ritual, all acknowledge the completion of the marriage. The social reality of marriage comes into being without words. Unlike the Western marriage, no official has the authority to announce

the completion of the marriage. Miko is a female god, but it is the bride that plays the role of the female god during the ceremony. The Shinto priest, who is always male, conducts the whole ceremony, but he only plays a role within a larger sacred ritual. He does not have the authority to announce the completion of the marriage. The ones who have the authority are the gods who are present during the whole ritual. The eight million gods who had been present everywhere in nature and who had always coexisted among human beings are the authority who protect and bless the newlywed couple without human words.

Conclusion

In Judeo-Christian monotheistic personal God uttered words to create the world. So for the most part, sacraments and official contracts are conducted through words and declarations. On the other hand, for Shintoism's more panentheistic approach where both act and object are sacred, words are less important. The marriage ceremony is an act of drinking the sanctified liquid, and constitutes a wordless act of togetherness since it is without words that gods appear to human consciousness. The bride, personifying Miko the female god again returns to being an ordinary woman after the ritual, and the couple returns to reality. However, the sacred reality through which they were married now becomes a social reality. *Ishin-Denshin* (以心伝心) is still one of the utmost important idioms in Japan, which means "thought-transference," or "non-verbal heart to heart communication."

ENDNOTES

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² <https://www.catholicweddinghelp.com/topics/text-rite-of-marriage-mass.htm#consent>

³ <https://www.theknot.com/content/protestant-wedding-ceremony-script>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Rogers Searle. *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1979.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ It is interesting to note that the traditional idea of the consummation of a marriage in the Catholic Church was the sexual act between the couple, which was in some cases even witnessed by the priest.

⁸ The holy scripture here refers to (古事記) Kojiki and (日本書紀) Nihonshoki, in which there are many personal gods; however in this article, the researcher focuses on impersonal gods where ancient people before century were believing in and worshipping before 7th century.

⁹ 八百万の神, Yoyorozu-no-Kami means 8 millions gods in the nature or universe, however there are no 8 million names of gods in any scriptures; it simply means countless gods.

¹⁰ Joy Hendry, *Marriage in Changing in Japan: Community & Society*. Routledge. 2010.

¹¹ 宮司 or Guuji is a Shinto religion's priest

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