

Fieldwork Methods: Religions

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Fieldwork Methods: Religions

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1. Introduction

Wherever there are people, there will always be religion. In every age and in every society there has been religion, and still today there are no places on Earth where religion is not present. One might think that the advancement of science would lead to the decline of magic and superstition, but that would be a mistake. Indeed, occultism, belief in the spiritual world and spiritualism are most popular in developed countries. The same can be said for Japan.

The study of religion is difficult because of how hard it is to grasp the target of the research. The other research fields dealt with in this book—archaeology, architecture, cultural property studies, art history, sociology, geography, linguistics, and so on—are all different from the study of religion. Yet religion relates to each one. If the methods to be applied in fieldwork are to be discussed by individual field, fieldwork conducted for the purpose of research into religion makes use of all of those methods while also requiring certain distinct methods.

Many introductory texts on religious studies begin with the categorization of religions, dividing them up into world religions and ethnic religions, polytheistic religions and monotheistic religions, animism, occultism, folk religions, and so on. The texts will then move onto explanations of the various religions in the world, likely beginning with Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. Next, the texts will examine religions limited to certain ethnic groups or nations, such as Judaism, Taoism, and Shintoism in Japan. There will also likely be reference to the establishment of regional movements and sects in Buddhism and Christianity. This sort of analysis and classification, however, is of little significance in the context of religious studies fieldwork.

2. What is religious studies fieldwork?

Religion is a complex cultural phenomenon. Fieldwork focusing on religion, therefore, may take any number of approaches, and indeed unless it is conducted from a multi-

faceted perspective, the researcher is likely to end up with an incomplete understanding of the subject of his research. Here, we will examine the possible approaches in the context of the various elements that make up religion. For expediency, these have been broken down into four levels: concepts, objects, acts, systems.

Concepts

At the heart of every religion are its teachings. These teachings are variously referred to as doctrine or principles, or more widely as thought or philosophy. The content of these teachings may be very specific, or the religion may contrive individual teachings such as concepts of deity, doctrines of salvation, cosmology, views of the afterlife, and views of life and death.

All of these are abstract concepts, and may seem entirely unconnected to fieldwork, but this is not actually the case. If the subject of fieldwork is a living religion, one which is practiced in real life, then information from those persons who preach about the religion's teachings, in other words the religion's founders and other related persons, and the believers of that religion, will function to directly express what the teachings of the target religion are.

For studies looking at historical religions, already lost to time, or at a specific period in the history of a religion that remains today, texts describing teachings are of paramount importance. In such cases, strict philological research methods become necessary. It is impossible to prop-

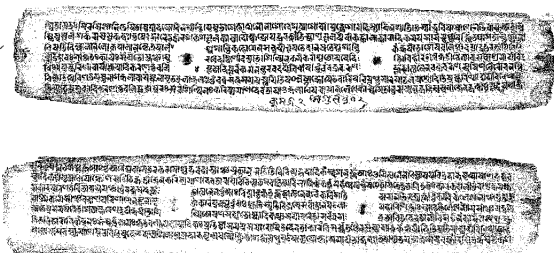


image 1:
Copy of Sanskrit manuscript on Buddhist rituals
Expert knowledge is required to be able to read the text

erly understand the teachings from preconceived notions and misinterpretations, without reading and interpreting a text accurately (image 1).

Attention must also be paid to the historical standing of the person(s) who wrote the text(s). Obviously, these authors are not religious scholars. They were not concerned with the analysis of their own religious beliefs or the comparison of those beliefs with other religions. They were in a position similar to the local informant found in anthropology. They are communicating information in a specific cultural context, and that information is already subject to interpretation.

Objects

There is considerable diversity among religious objects, but one easily recognisable example is that of icons, treated as objects of worship (image 2). These can be described as religious iconography. In Buddhism, religious icons include statues and images of the Buddha; Christianity also has stat-

ues and paintings of Jesus. Even in those religions in which it is forbidden to create images of absolute beings, such as Allah in Islam, sacred images still exist.

Art history understands these icons as works of art and considers their artistic value and historical significance as art. It is necessary, therefore, for the art historian to establish when these “art works” were made, their style, and their iconographic significance. If the objects are considered in the context of religious iconography, however, the situation is a little different. In the extreme argument, even if an object has no value as a work of art, it is still a valid subject of research if it is used for worship and the expression of beliefs.

Also important is that in addition to their independent meanings, these religious iconographs must be considered in terms of their relationship with other elements. They may be used as part of a religious ceremony or ritual, for example, or as part of a sermon as the subject or a means to convey a lesson. They may also constitute a specific object



image 2:
The Goddess of Mahi āsuramardini
As well as being an image for worship, it also decorates the walls of the temple.



image 3:
Rani Ki Vav stepwell in Patan, Gujarat, India
Hindu deities, including the aforementioned Goddess, are carved into the walls of the temple in accordance with a specific layout

placement plan, where their placement within a building or their position in relation to other objects may be significant (image 3). Similarly, when examining religious structures, it is not enough to simply establish the architectural layout of the structure; attention must also be paid to the arrangement of images within that layout and the rituals and services conducted there. Religious objects, therefore, hold specific functions as they intertwine with multiple other elements.

Acts

Rituals are the most obvious example of religious acts examined through fieldwork. In religious studies fieldwork, it is likely that ritual is the subject most frequently studied. There are various terms for these rituals—ceremonies, festivals, services, rites—but they all refer to religious acts with a certain significance or function that are carried out regularly or iteratively. These rituals are most often performed by multiple persons, but can at times be conducted by individuals. They may be conducted by vocational religious leaders, or by ordinary followers, and often both religious leaders and followers have roles to play.

Ritual and practice are not the same, but there is often considerable overlap. Religious practice generally conjures images of ascetic training or meditation, acts conducted on an individual level in order to obtain specific results in the context of the relevant religion. Practice is often subject to formalization and collectivization, resulting in practice being seen as ritual. For example, pilgrimage is an important part of religious practice, but it is often performed in groups, and as such takes on a strong sense of ritual.

Specific methods for fieldwork focused on rituals will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Systems

Religion always has a relationship with the society in which it is contained. Religious groups are in mutually interdependent relationships with other social groups; this becomes evident in the case of temples and churches. These relationships are particularly obvious when economic aspects are considered. In return for economic support, a temple or church may bestow religious “assets”, such as grace, merit, and salvation. Of course, there are some such establishments, such as the monasteries in Europe during the Middle

Ages that strove to be self-sufficient, which are economically independent, but such independence does not signify isolation from the rest of society. Rather, such monasteries and abbeys often function as strategic centres of economy and distribution in their local areas.

Religion may become organized, into sects and religious communities, and these in turn form discrete societies. Within a sect, classifications and hierarchies will develop, and the content of the tasks undertaken by each class will divide and subdivide. Organized religions are also viable targets for fieldwork. Such fieldwork requires the researcher to insert himself, to whatever extent possible, within the organization. Many religions, however, have a tendency to seek to exclude others and non-believers. Equally, penetrating that organization too deeply runs the risk of the researcher losing his perspective as objective other. This will be discussed further at the end of the chapter.

3. Actual fieldwork

The study of a certain ritual will now be considered as an example of religious studies fieldwork. Specifically, let us imagine that we are about to conduct research on a ritual ceremony conducted in a Buddhist temple in Japan.

Objectives

Whatever the research, it will not be possible to obtain concrete results without a specific objective in place. “I’ll work it out once I’m there” or “I can just report the service exactly as it happens, after all I’ll be right there” are examples of underestimations and oversimplifications that will inevitably lead to fieldwork failure. This is particularly true in those cases where the target of research is a ritual or ceremony that will not be repeated, where there is only one chance to observe. The researcher cannot simply ask for the ritual to be performed again because he “didn’t quite get it”.

The objective of a study on a ritual is entirely dependent on how that ritual is problematized by the researcher. It goes without saying that the ritual itself must be precisely recorded and reported, but there is much to be done aside. The symbolic significance and structure of the ritual may warrant analysis, and in some cases the interest of the researcher should lie in the relationship between society and other collectives. It may be possible, for rituals that have

been conducted continuously over many years, to compare the modern ritual with its historical incarnations and examine the changes that have occurred. At the same time, if the ritual is conducted in multiple regions, it may be relevant to seek out regional differences. Some researchers will see significance in how traditional rituals have changed in the context of modernization and urbanization.

These are just some of the objectives of a study, and any number of objectives may exist, as many objectives as there are studies. Once the objective has been clarified, it becomes possible to determine the length and location of the study. The same applies to decisions on how far to extend the scope for the informants to be interviewed, and to what extent case studies from other regions should be included in the target of the study.

Research

It would be a rare case indeed for the researcher to simply turn up on the day of the ritual and get the results he is looking for. Preliminary research and supplementary research is vital, and should be conducted both before and after the ritual.

Preliminary research will include the acquisition of basic information on the temple in general, for example its structure, history, personnel organization, background to how the temple is supported economically, and so on. With regard to the ritual itself, the researcher must familiarize himself with the location where it is conducted, the composition and respective roles of the people taking part, the length of time the ritual takes, and the specifics of how the ritual progresses. It should be remembered that the larger the scale of the ritual, the more complex its various elements will be. Failure to fully familiarize oneself with the ritual as a whole in advance of the ritual being performed will leave the researcher still understanding nothing by the time it is over.

Central to this kind of research is the ritual itself. The researcher must make utmost efforts to record the ritual accurately and objectively. To do this, it is necessary to arrange for and allocate the appropriate number of people to record the ritual. The tasks involved in adequately recording the ritual should be determined in advance: filming and photography, audio recording, making notes on overall progress, individual notes about the main actors, and so on. A team



image 4:
“Mukaeko” ritual conducted at Taima-dera temple in Nara prefecture
Worshippers are packed into the temple grounds.

leader to oversee the entire process is also required. It is also important to remember that on the day of the ritual, the presence of worshippers (ritual participants) may restrict movement in and around the ritual location (image 4). Time and weather may make filming and photography difficult. It may even be forbidden to take footage and photographs of the ritual or the location of the ritual. In order to prevent the unexpected from occurring on the day of the ritual, contact should be made with the organizers of the ritual, at the preliminary research stage. The researcher must fully explain the objective of his research and the methodology he intends to make use of in order to ensure that the organizers will agree to cooperate with the proposed fieldwork.

Once the ritual is over, work must begin to check and confirm the content of the research. Where possible, the main actors in the ritual should be asked to confirm the researcher’s understanding of the overall progression of the ritual and of the roles of the individuals within it; footage and photography may be used in this process. Observers more often than not look at rituals with a one-sided perspective, which can often lead to flawed understanding and arbitrary interpretations. That does not mean to say, of course, that the understanding of those who conduct the ritual is always correct, but regardless it is necessary to acquire information and knowledge from the informant.

The researcher should not need to be reminded of the importance of reporting back in detail to the temple and actors forming the subject of his research, even once the fieldwork itself is over, such as when the research findings are due to be published or presented. Finding oneself the

subject of a one-sided study, presented to the public without any prior approval or notification, can only result in displeasure and distrust. Having the meaning and importance of a ritual made clear through academic research, however, is something that will, most of the time, be welcomed by the people involved in that ritual.

4. Research pitfalls

Finally, we should look at the areas deserving of particular attention when conducting fieldwork related to religion.

The introduction to Claude Lévi-Strauss *Tristes Tropiques* (A World on the Wane) opens with the following famous words: “I hate travels and explorers”. Fieldwork involves great hardship, yet carries a constant risk of producing few results. Today, with so much information available so easily from books and on the internet, it may indeed be rare to make compelling discoveries in the field or experience textbook examples of different cultures. Still, fieldwork is necessary, for it remains the only way to acquire the real-life information that is only available in the field.

There are cases, however, in which travel to and familiarization with the field can result in the researcher coming to understand less of the culture he is attempting to study. When the observer becomes the doer, when he becomes used to seeing things from the perspective of the local people, that is the moment he loses his objectivity. There are also cases in which the objective of the fieldwork shifts onto the act of staying in and collecting information from the field, and the researcher begins to fail in the subsequent tasks of critically appraising and communicating that information. Long stays in the field may also result in the “real-life, real-time” information collected becoming “old” and uninteresting; this is not uncommon.

Such cases can be seen in fieldwork in all types of discipline, but there are also particular pitfalls to beware of that are unique to fieldwork focusing on religion.

Religion is the act of believing in something. Understanding a certain religion can often be synonymous with believing in it. Conversely, having no faith in a certain religion can make it difficult to understand. There are many outstanding scholars of Buddhism and Christianity who are themselves monks and clergy. There are also cases in which a researcher, in his attempts to study a religion, will become

deeply involved in that religion, to the attempt that he cannot extract himself from it. This is particularly important to remember when studying cult religions. Fieldworkers are not immune to mind control just because they are engaged in the study of religion.

Religions can be exclusionary and reclusive, and this too can cause any number of problems. Religions that actively exclude non-believers and different ethnic groups are not uncommon. Most religions also have taboos in place in some shape or form. Not knowing of these rules or ignoring them can lead to trouble, so due care must be taken. The delicacies of religion are demanding of attention, but by paying due attention the research can ensure that his fieldwork runs smoothly.