

三次のお盆 A Miyoshi Ōbon

A Miyoshi Ōbon (2007, running time: 46:22) is an ethnographic film in the mode of observational cinema about Ōbon, the Japanese Buddhist Festival of the Dead, as it is observed in rural northern Hiroshima prefecture. The film follows Koji Mimachi as he, his wife Misaho, their daughters, and Misaho's extended family commemorate the Hatsubon, or first Ōbon, since Koji's father's death. The footage for this film was shot in Miyoshi, Hiroshima in July and August 2006, and the subjects of the film are a three-generation family of Jodo Shin Shu (True Pure Land) Buddhists known personally by the filmmaker since 1999. The film constitutes an ethnography without text especially intended for classroom use.

Observational cinema, the mode of this film, is a particular genre of documentary film, one that intentionally foregoes the use of such common documentary devices as interviews, talking-heads commentary, atmospheric mood music, and voice-of-God narration. In place of these, observational cinema seeks to follow the action rather than direct it, to substitute detail for drama, and to allow film subjects to speak for themselves—or not to speak, as they choose—as they carry out their practices in their particular local context. The scenes of observational cinema tend to be long and unbroken. The sounds of observational cinema are those created and heard by the film subjects themselves. The goal is to present lived human experience in a way that respects the context in which that experience takes place.

This film privileges the integrity of Ōbon practices as such, that is, how people do what they do and where and when and with whom as well as what they do. Moreover, the film privileges the roles of lay people over those of identified ritual experts and privileges domestic spaces and family cemeteries over temples and other more explicitly religious spaces. In addition, the film brings the voices and bodily experiences of children into the ethnography and highlights the reading/use of texts as an embodied religious practice.

It has been said more than once that films offer a series of suggestions rather than a more conventional academic argument. Among other things, A Miyoshi Ōbon suggests that the labor-intensive and time-intensive preparations for the three-day interval of Ōbon as well as the family gatherings and intergenerational practices performed during the festival are themselves as much religious practices as are the explicit veneration rites of Ōbon. The film depicts a local, moral, interpersonal world in contemporary Japan and reveals how rural western Japan is modern, modernizing, and resistant to certain types of change all at once.

In the last several decades, when it has been treated at all, Ōbon has been approached primarily by two groups of scholars, anthropologists and Buddhologists. For the most part in these studies ethnographers and folklorists have argued with one another about how Japanese Ōbon is or is not, and Buddhologists have argued with one another about how Buddhist it is or is not. The result has been that, in the meantime, almost no one has studied a local iteration of Ōbon practices, that is, very rarely has a particular, local Ōbon religious culture been examined ethnographically in any depth. In this milieu, this film, A Miyoshi Ōbon, pays new attention to the under-theorized and understudied phenomenon of Ōbon in the early twenty-first century, offering a specific case of contemporary practices from a position on the ground in Hiroshima. It invites viewers to consider the sensuous aspects of the festival as exemplary of what Collette Piault has termed “the anthropology of living reality.”