Ruptures

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This chapter explores the struggles with rupture of a small Catholic community in the east of Tokyo. Rupture is here conceptualized in two ways. On the one hand, following Robbins (2007), it is a temporal break: a radical interruption of previous modes of existence in favour of new ones. On the other hand, rupture is also here understood as a spatial relationship, as the radical division of a minority religion and the wider society surrounding it. In Tokyo the two go together as conversion into the Christian life entails significantly breaking with urban Japanese society and its rhythms. The community of the Church of the Holy Family struggles with both forms of rupture, imposed on them by both the priest himself and the general understanding of religiosity and its place in society outside the church. What follows focuses on the ways in which people deal with these imposed ruptures in the face of their own feeling and desire for continuity.

The work of Joel Robbins especially (e.g. 2007, 2010) has identified the importance of temporal ruptures for the Christian world view and imagination. Conversion is identified as the breaking point with the past, a divine invasion into the self that leaves everything changed – a radical juncture that spurs people to cut with the old traditions and replace them with new virtuous ways of life (e.g. Meyer 1999; Engelke 2004; Keller 2005; Keane 2007; Vilaça 2014). The scholar of religion Lewis Rambo (1993) had already come up with a similar framework with its identification of seven stages of religious conversion. While the process of conversion involves the totality of seven stages, this pivots on a ‘crisis’, which he defines as a rupture in world view that precipitates change. The rest is dealing with the world post-rupture through the processes of
readjustment, reconciliation and reinterpretation that many anthropologists have studied in converted groups (e.g. Lienhardt 1982; also Kan 1991; Scott 2005; Vaté 2009; Chua 2012).

These processes of reinterpretation and reframing of the past are engaged both by the individual, in their understanding of their own life history, and by communities at large, usually as a consequence of missionary activity. Rupture needs not only to be an existential transformation of the self but it is often a collective transformation, and hence signifies a breach with many things that fall under the rubric of ‘tradition’: rituals, institutions, rhythms that gave meaning to the community’s life before conversion. Indeed, Robbins’s own concern with rupture emerges from his previous work with the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004). Here Robbins focuses on the existential impact of conversion on the Urapmin, whom he understands as locked in an incomplete transition between the ‘traditional’ value system and the Christian one they recently adopted. In other words, the question of conversion and rupture here becomes one with the question of culture change and its implications. The Urapmin, Robbins argues, have indeed adopted Christianity but they are yet to fully integrate it in their own way of life. They still live between two cultural systems that are in the process of being synthesized and yet are still distinct, and this disjuncture manifests itself in moral contradictions. The Urapmin, that is, still possess two distinct frames for understanding their behaviour and these often clash without resolution, leaving people trapped between conflicting values.

When the Christian mission encounters non-Christian cultures, sometimes pre-existing cultural meanings are altered and yet the wider cultural categories remain untouched, a process that Robbins calls ‘assimilation’. Here the indigenous cosmos adapts itself to incorporate foreign elements and yet it remains structurally unchanged, and hence able to propagate itself. The difficulties experienced by Portuguese missionaries working on the evangelization of the Tupi in sixteenth-century Amazonia provide a vivid example of this process (see Viveiros de Castro 2011). To the missionaries’ frustration, the Tupi appeared to appropriate only those aspects of Christianity that validated their own cosmology and allowed the continuation of their culture. Similarly, Robbins understands the Urapmin engagement with Christianity to have been initially a form of assimilation – a ‘utilitarian conversion’ motivated by traditional non-Christian values (2004, 115).

Conversely, a successful mission fostered a situation where people cease to try to reproduce ‘traditional’ systems and embrace the new culture as a ‘whole’, as a self-conscious effort accompanied by the eradication
of old values (cf. Ortiz 1995, 102–3). Robbins calls it ‘adoption’ and defines it as the moment in which people take on the new cultural system ‘on its own terms’ (2004, 115), when the old culture stops providing the frame for action and Christianity takes its place. If assimilation implied the rejection of full conversion in favour of continuity with the past – those attempts to protect cultural boundaries that Shaw and Stewart (1994) branded ‘anti-syncretism’ – adoption spells the full embracing of that radical temporal rupture demanded by Christian conversion.

In the 1990s the Urapmin were on the road to adoption; that is, they had incorporated Christian values but not fully completed the transition to the new culture. People had indeed radically turned away from their traditional way of life, yet their social and economic structure remained the same as it was before (see also Robbins, this volume). This fracture engendered moments where ideas about social structure came into conflict with Christian ideas of the moral person, leaving the Urapmin with intense moral conundrums (Robbins 2004, 35). They were living with ‘two cultures’, or rather in the difficult space between them.

Robbins’s model has been criticized for treating ‘Urapmin traditional culture’ and ‘Christianity’ as two ‘wholes’ (e.g. Rumsey 2004; cf. Hirsch 2008) and not recognizing the hybridity that already preceded Urapmin conversion. In the Japanese context, treating Christianity and indigenous culture as bounded wholes is, however, somehow fitting, given that people themselves – priest, congregation and the average urban dweller – seem to treat the two systems, despite the indubitable presence of hybridity, as clearly distinct homogeneous wholes and hence the transition between one and the other as a radical shift. In the Church of the Holy Family, whose community this chapter focuses on, people struggle with this transition and try to maintain their own sense of continuity with people, institutions and social forms of Japanese society despite the pressures from both inside and outside. Unlike the Urapmin, however, people here are not afflicted by moral anguish and often fail to conform to Christian precepts in order to participate in the ‘old culture’ unperturbed, deliberately keeping these deeds away from the priest’s eyes and ears. Taking as an ethnographic fulcrum the community’s experiences of drunkenness and intoxication, which are explicitly banned by Catholic dogma as conveyed by the priest and yet engaged in by the community on a weekly basis, the chapter investigates the way in which people try to find continuity in the face of rupture. Looking at the ways in which people at times let the Christian frame of meaning encompass social and cultural forms belonging to Japanese mainstream society while at other times allowing mainstream society to encompass Christian
elements, the chapter argues that something peculiar happens in those secret drunken nights. In the blur of drunkenness, it is impossible to discern which culture is providing a frame for action: frames become images until one cannot tell which side is encompassing which, which is figure and which is frame. In this haze rupture and continuity are blurred, and activities branded as sin by the church can become themselves fundamental parts of the Christian life.

**The picture: the Church of the Holy Family and its community**

The Church of the Holy Family is a small Catholic church in one of Tokyo’s poorer eastern neighbourhoods in the part of the city known as *shitamachi*, ‘down town’. The building is simple and unadorned and stands in a yard that is shared with the Christian school next door, which also comprises a small community centre and the church offices. A single cherry tree stands in the middle of the car park. The inside is unadorned in a way that, although uncommon for the usually ostentatious style of Catholic sacred design, is perhaps more in line with Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. Upon entering one is met, on the two sides of the main door, by two stoups for the holy water mounted respectively by a statue of St Francis Xavier, the missionary who brought Catholicism to Japan in the sixteenth century, and the Virgin Mary. Small stained-glass windows follow the aisles on the two sides, separated by wooden carvings of the Stations of the Cross, and the nave is in shadow even during a bright day. The pews are wooden and so is the simple crucifix behind the altar. Overall, a sober atmosphere of simplicity pervades the building, which remains mostly empty during the week. In the afternoon, when all the cars and bikes have left and the churchyard has returned to its usual stillness, the church runs a Sunday school for the children. A few people, mainly self-appointed ‘aunties’ (*obachan*), help with the running of the school where the children learn Christian songs, stories from the scriptures and play together for the rest of the afternoon.

The upkeep of the church is taken care of by volunteers, a core of about ten retired people who clean, cook and are responsible for administration. The liturgical activities, on the other hand, are run entirely by the priest, whom everyone simply calls ‘the priest’ (*shimpu-sama*). His sermons are simple and relatable – they talk about keeping faith in hard times of loss and grief, to trust in the Lord (*kami-sama*) when things don’t go the way you desire, of the love of God being reflected in the family
and between co-workers. When he preaches from the pulpit he becomes agitated and talks too fast, stutters, turns red and waves his hands in the air. Waiting outside the door after Mass, calm and composed, he greets people leaving the building, inquiring about their health and families.

The priest is very much the moral beacon of the community. Although the prescriptions of Catholicism are laid out in the holy books, the relationship with the scriptures is not always an easy one for the community. The Bible is not a central object of devotion as in other Christian communities around the world (cf. Robbins 2012) – rather it is engaged with only in Bible class once a week and through the hard-to-follow sermons of the priest on Sunday. The strong emphasis on the importance of the scriptures one finds in many ethnographies of Christianity is here eclipsed in favour of other activities.

In the Church of the Holy Family the language of the scriptures is obfuscated and, above all, difficult. The unintelligibility of the scriptures does not trigger processes of intense engagement with the Bible as is often found in narratives of American Protestantism. Carapanzano’s (2000) account of Evangelical literalism, Bielo’s (2008; 2009) portrayal of the intense processes of Biblical exegesis and knowledge production in Bible studies classes and Malley’s (2004) description of the way people link Biblical readings with their own life circumstances are all examples of the ways in which people place the word of God at the very heart of what it means to believe. For the community of the Church of the Holy Family the scriptures do not have such aliveness and do not demand such vehemence. Instead they become inert, a chore, something that is not part of the vibrant life of the community but a duty that simply has to be done (cf. Whitehouse 2000) – sometimes easily, when one can be carried by the lull of the ritual of Mass, and other times more onerously, when one tries to decipher them at Bible study class.

It is instead through participation in church activities that identification with Christianity is felt most strongly by the community. The ritual of Mass is felt to be important and everyone enjoys participating in it. However, when asked for details about the ritual itself or the readings of the day, people claim ignorance and defer to the priest. This self-proclaimed ignorance is never met with frustration but with a placid acceptance – people do try to listen to the Gospels but they are not moved, do try to go to Bible study class but it’s too difficult to understand. People do not seem to be motivated to spend more time studying and asking questions about the meaning of the scriptures; what seems to be important instead is being there – being at Mass and participating in it. Saito-san, for example, felt strongly moved when she was asked to do the first reading from the pulpit at Mass and she
spent hours rehearsing the few lines of the book of Isaiah. T: “Was it interesting?” S: “Yes very interesting.” T: “What do you think it means?” S: “Oh I do not know … it’s difficult … I don’t understand it”.

While modesty undoubtedly plays a part in the answer, the point of the rehearsal was never to let the meaning sink in but rather a purely formal concern with getting the reading right in its delivery. Of course, a rehearsal is about performance, and yet the engagement with the scriptures through the repetitive reading of a few lines of the Old Testament was never for Saito-san a spiritual or meditative act. In the same way, the most moving parts of Mass are singing together (especially when one is leading the choir), participating in bringing the offerings to the altar, and simply being there and being seen. Communion is not only a moment of recollection but also an occasion to dart one’s gaze around and see who is there, bow slightly to greet people and smile at friends. For the same reasons the informal reception in the community hall after Mass and the time spent in the churchyard outside are extremely important, and people often head off afterwards to spend time together in a café or at a sushi restaurant. Time spent together is, for the community, where the Christian life truly ‘happens’, where the self-determination as Catholic believers is performed, embodied and most acutely felt.

However, this does not mean that people would rather see the church abandon those activities. Even though the Bible is hard to understand and the rituals are sometimes tedious, people cherish them and they wouldn’t want them to be any ‘friendlier’. Indeed, many people assert that they chose Catholicism because of its rigid structure, because it felt old and legitimate (cf. Brown 2017). People like the formality of Mass, and someone went so far as to propose that Latin hymns be introduced in the choir’s repertoire. There is indeed a certain anxiety about authenticity: people are concerned with how their church, their rituals and even the aesthetics of their leisure time resonate with their original source, Catholicism in Europe and the USA. The rituals, meetings and classes’ strict adherence to the Italian and American model is what makes people feel connected to a transnational Catholic community. It is not a loose feeling of an international communitas, a spiritual community united in the love of God, that holds the church together in people’s minds but instead a formal resemblance. ‘When I went to Mass in Italy’, says Fukuzawa-san, dreamily showing a picture of herself posing in front of the Coliseum, ‘it was just like in our church!’ The rigid formalism of the Catholic spiritual life is also what distinguishes the community from the Protestant churches in the neighbourhood – ‘see … our church looks like a real church … the other churches just look like normal houses’.
The point here is that the community’s understanding of Christianity as extremely social, as something to do with the collectivity, is not opposed to the dogmatic form of which the priest is understood to be the keeper. The dogma and formalism are for the community fundamental to their identity as Catholics, even though they do not need to fully understand it. Form is here precisely what it is meant to be – form – and it does not demand the grasping of meaning. However, this more ‘communitarian’ form of religiosity is not entirely part of the Catholicism the priest is painstakingly teaching the community. In church these religious forms seem almost an emergent phenomenon, something that the community does in order to sit more comfortably in partial foreignness of Roman Catholicism. The priest values the commitment to community, yet he still wishes people would engage with scriptures and dogma in the ways that he is trying to teach them.

The community’s engagement with the church is however genuine and marked by a deep commitment. In fact, one could say that the community is doing extra work in engaging the church beyond the bounds of what is expected of them. The faith as promulgated by the priest is highly dogmatic and does not give the community the tools to build and strengthen community: it provides a centre of gravity around which to build such community but not enough occasions and means to do so. Life at church satisfies a certain craving for form and exerts a strong centripetal force that allows people to come together.

However, how to perform and foster community is another matter. Time in church is always too short and too sporadic, and people are constantly creating spaces of sociality outside it where they can live the Christian life together, as a community. Church only lasts a few hours on a Sunday and on Thursdays at Bible study class. People need more, and thus create occasions to be together meaningfully as Christians. It is in these spaces, this chapter argues, that the struggle with rupture is most strongly felt.

The frame: rupture in a minority religion

Christianity in Tokyo today is very much in a minority. On a national scale the number of Japanese people partaking in any Christian denomination amounts to less than 0.9 per cent, of which only 0.4 per cent is Catholic. In the Archdiocese of Tokyo, the number of Catholics amounts to about 0.5 per cent and similar numbers are seen in the surrounding diocese of Saitama and Yokohama. The demographics tend to be largely constituted
by the middle class of the main urban agglomerates with the exception, albeit dwindling, of the countryside in the Nagasaki area. The numbers of Japanese Catholics have been steadily decreasing since shortly after the post-war boom (Mullins 2011), and it is mostly the influx of migrants, mainly from the Philippines and Korea, that allows the percentage to stay the same. Most churches provide services in Tagalog, Korean and other languages along with the Japanese Mass, and church membership – the church studied here being an exception – tends to be ethnically quite mixed.

While Shinto shrines are ever-present features of the urban landscape, the statistical imperceptibility of Christianity is visually reflected in the scenery of the city, where churches are few and often tucked away in back streets. This invisibility is partially reinforced from within: one’s faith is rarely mentioned, public displays are not encouraged apart from rare occasions such as the first part of the Mass on Palm Sunday, held in the churchyard. Christianity, and even more Catholicism, is truly a

Figure 5.1  Outdoor service under the cherry tree on Palm Sunday. Photo by the author.
minority religion – small, scarcely visible, unassuming. Discourses of rupture, coming both from within and without the bounds of the community, keep it separate and circumscribed.

In its minority status, the perception of Christianity in Japan today is a complex matter. It is grouped under the category of shūkyō – a word translatable as ‘religion’, but that does not comprise the amalgam of Buddhist and Shinto practices in which virtually everyone partakes. Buddhist and Shinto weddings, funerals, shrine visits, ancestor worship, local festivals – all of these fall under the wider notion of dentō – ‘tradition’ – together with tourist vistas, kimonos, local delicacies, common architectural elements, imperial regalia, and the blend of syncretic elements and secular daily practices that people simply define as ‘part of their culture’. In other words, the Shinto and Buddhist elements that pervade the lifestyle of a Japanese person are not necessarily a religious expression, but parts of a wider life-world of signifiers that constitutes – in the collective imaginary – being Japanese. Foreign religions on the other hand are, in a real sense, ‘religions’ – and they imply a certain break with that horizon of signifiers that grounds one in the culturally specific being-in-the-world of Japan.

When one says shūkyō the image that generally forms in people’s minds is, inevitably, one of the numerous ‘new religions’ (shin-shūkyō) that cropped up just after the Meiji reformation and more intensely after the Second World War (e.g. Clarke 2000). ‘New religions’ are viewed negatively or with suspicion, especially after the Tokyo subway sarin attacks by the group Aum Shinrikyō (Oumu Shinrikyō) in 1995. Most people today see members of new religions as dangerous and, fundamentally, as outsiders. Catholicism is not a shin-shūkyō itself, although many groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and other modern denominations are considered Christianity-based new religions. Yet the word shūkyō recalls, if not the extremism of new religions, a certain dissonance with Japanese society and its structures; with the family, its rhythms of inheritance, marriage, burial and so on. For the non-religious person being affiliated with religiosity is difficult, potentially dangerous (abunai) and embarrassing.

Because of this perceived distance between ‘religions’ and majority culture the post-Meiji history of Christianity is not an easy one. Christians in Japan have gone through many challenges, from discrimination to outright violence (see Ghanbarpour 2015). The Church of the Holy Family was established as part of a missionary effort from the Tsukiji parish to spread Catholicism in the east of Tokyo. During the riots that followed the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, churches, representing
‘the West’, were a prime target for the rioting masses, and the Church of the Holy Family was burned to ashes. Today there are no tensions between church and neighbourhood, and the community does not like to talk about the difficulties that they encountered in the past.

One can find a strong parallel in the story of Ishigawa-san who, together with his wife, runs a non-denominational Protestant church in the same neighbourhood. The church is hosted in the remains of American Second World War army barracks, and when they took over from a foreign pastor, about 30 years ago, the community was hostile and diffident. ‘It was horrible’, Ishigawa-san says before a candle-lit service, ‘people would break our windows at night. I was so scared.’ Their attempts to spread the word of God were met with silence, hostility and threats. While things are different today, some of these sentiments linger in a muted interiorized way and, despite all the politeness and kindness that suffuses relations between neighbours, Christians are still seen with a measure of suspicion.

The gulf between Christians and mainstream urban society is, however, not only asserted from the outside, but also from within. While things such as festivals, visiting shrines and keeping a household shrine (kamidana) are perceived in the mainstream as ‘tradition’, the priest himself marks them as religious activities. In so doing, participation in these activities, which are by most people perceived as important moments of bonding with family or the local community, is equated with taking part in rituals from other religions and worshipping false idols. For the priest, kami worship, together with Buddhist worship, is incompatible with the doctrine of Catholicism and its one and true God.

This creates considerable problems if one has close family members who are not themselves Christian. Important rituals such as bon or the New Year celebrations are incompatible with the Christian life, leaving Japanese Christians in an awkward situation that creates, in practical terms, a real chasm between believers and non-believers. The same can be said of important rituals of passage, such as shichi-go-san, in which children from the church cannot participate. In other words – given that both kinship and community life are largely mediated through Buddhist and Shinto institutions such as Shinto weddings, Buddhist funerals, Buddhist remembrance rituals – conversion to Catholicism does engender the sense of rupture that Robbins has identified as being at the heart of the Christian experience. In line with Robbins, this sense of rupture has a strong temporal dimension – activities that characterized one’s former life are now part of a prohibited and amoral alien world. However, the rupture is, as we have seen, also markedly spatial insofar as Christians are bound to spaces that are separate from the surrounding world, spaces where different rituals
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and activities happen in parallel with the world outside. This is reflected in the positioning of family graves, which are usually placed in Christian cemeteries outside Tokyo or, if sharing land with the non-Christian dead, in out-of-the-way parts of bigger existing graveyards. The families of a part of the community, for example, are buried at one extremity of the famous Yanaka cemetery in Ueno, out of the way on a downward slope next to the fence that overlooks the railway lines.

The Christian ban on cultural forms considered part of everyday life outside the church effectively maps, from conversion onwards, an alternative life-course: one that inhabits different spaces, that demands different rituals and that eventually enforces this separation even after its ending. In the face of these strong discourses of rupture – with one’s former self, non-Christian kin and the city around them – people in the community have to live with their own strong sense of a continuity between themselves and the urban world that surrounds them.

Conversion and continuity

The temporal rupture elicited by conversion, as we have seen, has been understood by scholars studying Christian communities to be the defining existential experience at the heart of the Christian life. This seems to

Figure 5.2  A Christian cemetery at the edges of Tokyo. Photo by the author.
resonate in the way both the priest and the mainstream discourse of Japanese urban society understand the place and meaning of the Christian life. Yet the community at the Church of the Holy Family has very different stories of conversion that seem to emphasize not a rupture but rather an unproblematic continuity that sees entering into the faith as a chapter in a continuous life-narrative.

For the vast majority of people in the community, their personal Catholic legacy does not stretch backwards for more than one generation. Many inherited their faith from their parents or older siblings, who had themselves converted sometime after the war. In that period, I was often told, Christianity promoted itself as a religion of pacifism and love in a country traumatized by decades of aggressive nationalism and the atomic bombs that ravaged Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Christianity resonated with the new national pacifist consciousness as well as asserting its presence by investing heavily in volunteering and welfare activities. People who converted had in most cases been at a Christian school at some point during their education. Christian schools were, and are, a middle-class aspiration, and the vast majority of parents who sent their children to these schools simply wanted the perceived benefits of a Western education without considering the Christian teachings that came with it. Many times conversion had been simply a by-product of such education. Yoshida-san, for example, was sent to a Catholic kindergarten and then to Christian schools for most of his primary and secondary education:

At that time people wanted Western life; the clothes, food, houses, movies. My mother sent me to Christian school and asked me to not believe in Jesus, only learn love and Western culture from the Christian teachers. In senior high school (kōkō) I did not follow her advice and when she finally allowed me, I was baptized.

Others, such as Sasaki-san, did not convert until much later. He was baptized in his fifties when, nostalgic about his youth, he remembered fondly the times at Catholic school and developed an interest in Christianity that, within a few years, led him to become an active part of the church’s community. Maeda-san’s story is a bit different. Now in his seventies, he was first exposed to Christianity when his wife started to frequent church more assiduously after the birth of their first child. Her mother was Christian but she had not paid much attention to it in her youth. Later in life, when she stopped working to be a stay-at-home wife (shufu), she started to visit the local church en route to shopping for groceries. Her interest in Christianity grew and she soon started to fill her time with the church’s activities.
Shortly afterwards her husband started to attend as well, and both are today part of what constitutes the core of the church’s community.2

‘I developed an interest’ (kyōmi wo mochimashita) is a phrase I heard often when I asked about conversion. No intense religious experiences, hierophanies or moral epiphanies. No conversions in time of illness, loneliness and despair. The way people talked about their conversion was astonishingly mundane and lacked the radical temporal and existential quality that much anthropology on Christianity has understood as the core of conversion. The gradual and casual nature of the community’s experiences of conversion tell a very different story – one where conversion is only a chapter in the longer and continuous trajectory of one’s personal history.

For people at the church of the Holy Family, conversion came as a slow process and deliberate decision. Christianity came as a flavour or an afterthought, something that was investigated in one’s spare time, at the edges of the everyday. While stories of gradual conversion are not unique, the point here is that baptism and conversion do not leave the person and the world any different. Although people do gain a new social circle and new routines, there is a sense that things are, at a fundamental level, the same as they have ever been. Everyone I spoke to, for example, has very fond memories of their hometown (furusato), of its (Shinto) festivals,
its shrines and their experiences as young women and men. The strong bonds developed in secondary education are for many Christians still the most important relationships in their lives; not parts of a previous life but core building blocks of an enduring sense of identity and continuity.

Fukuzawa-san, for example, meets every two months for dinner with two of her oldest friends. Throughout their youth they periodically travelled together in both Japan and Europe. They are somehow extraordinary people for the place and time they grew up in, three women cherishing their bond, travelling without men and having successful working lives. At every meeting they drink and look at pictures of their travels – of them smiling in front of a rural shrine in Kumamoto or in a restaurant in Florence. Her friends are not Christian (and, as we shall see later on, their activities in the restaurant are not that Christian either), but for Fukuzawa-san these meetings are extremely important – they punctuate her time, infuse a sense of belonging and nostalgia in her life and create a sense of continuity. The timeline existing in and through those meetings and pictures has nothing to do with the timeline of her conversion; her life is not a two-part narrative of before and after, but a snaking continuous one of growth, adventure and friendship in which her conversion only provides a background element.

‘Don’t tell the priest’

Bans on such things as festivals and shrine worship are not perceived by the community as coming from the dogmas of the church, but rather from the priest himself. This does not mean that people believe these restrictions to be his arbitrary whim. Rather the priest is, in this small community, the only real connection with the wider church and the very source of moral and spiritual authority. This section focuses on one of these banned activities – drinking – a moment where the community’s sense of continuity comes into direct friction with the rupture that the priest’s prescriptions demand. This friction, as we shall see, does not leave people suffering moral torment and guilt as in the case of the Urapmin, but rather to unproblematically act behind the priest’s back. Days of celebration, for example the one described next, exacerbate this tendency and bring the very core members of the community to act, in secret, in direct conflict with the priest’s prohibition.

After a day trip with the community, the coach parks in front of the church and people pour into the yard. Saitō-san, a lady in her seventies gives people knowing looks while the community slowly starts to disperse. A few days back Saitō-san invited some of the community’s
members to a drinking party (*nomikai*) after the trip and, upon inviting me, emphatically whispered: ‘Don’t tell the priest!’ When the crowds disperse, she walks over to some of the people who purposefully stayed behind, among them Kimura-san, a younger member known for his sombreness. She asks: ‘Are you coming with us?’ Kimura brings his hand to the back of his head, sucks air through his teeth and says: ‘I have to wake up at 5 a.m. for work, I want to come but … it’s a bit … ’ As Donald Keene beautifully pointed out, ‘Japanese sentences are apt to trail off into thin smoke’ (1955, 26) – and Camille Paglia has added: ‘a vapour of hanging participles’ (1990, 174). ‘It’s a bit … ’ – the silence hangs in the air for only a second before Saitō-san’s hand falls heavily on his arm: ‘Just come for one drink, won’t you?’

Drinking is an important part of Japanese urban social life. Brian Moeran (1986) suggestively painted the cities of Japanese industrial capitalism as comprising two worlds: a world of light, populated by salarymen and housewives moving between office buildings and department stores, and the world of darkness, belonging to the entertainment districts: the *mizu-shōbai*, the ‘water trade’, made of *izakaya*, bars, hostess clubs and snack-bars. Even thirty years after Moeran was writing, before the bubble burst and the ‘Japanese miracle’ gave way to enduring economic crisis, the world of darkness is in full force and entertainment districts cluster around many rail and underground stations.

From the industrial surroundings of the church we enter the neon-lit alleys full of *izakaya*, bars and *karaoke* parlours. When we arrive at our destination one of the elders of the community stands up and gives a short speech thanking everyone for the good day and encouraging all to have fun and drink plenty. Drinking starts and the atmosphere gets raucous, glasses are filled and speech soon starts to get slurred. The conversation moves between recent church activities and members of the community. ‘Have you seen such and such recently? Is the baby born yet? I heard she went down to Fukuoka to stay with her mother.’ There is no elephant in the room, no acknowledgement of sin through omission. All conversations rotate around the church, around its activities and its members. The priest is frequently mentioned, always with respect and affection, and yet we are doing something that the priest has explicitly banned the community from doing.

On a Friday night around the entertainment districts of Tokyo one is likely to see scenes of extreme loss of control: ‘throwing up, urinating in public, dancing on train platforms, falling asleep stretched out on the seats of a train, making passes at or otherwise insulting someone normally shown respect, speaking openly about things that usually go
unsaid’ (Allison 1994, 45) are common behaviours at these times and places. Such scenes dramatically clash not only with the demeanour one expects in the ‘world of light’, but with the usual personality of one's acquaintances as well. In Tokyo there is an extreme leniency towards inappropriate drunken behaviours, and what is said while drunk is often quickly forgotten the day after.⁴ In my experience one can go so far as to say that drinking and drunkenness are positively valued if the social occasion is appropriate – being drunk (yotte iru) is a desirable condition and drinking to get drunk is explicitly many people’s intent when going out.

Catholic morality works explicitly against this tendency. The loss of control, the breaking of boundaries, the spectre of addiction are all hurled at the community from the pulpit as examples of sinful behaviour and spiritual loss. Around the end of December – when most workplaces, voluntary groups and associations hold their end-of-the-year drinks (bōnenkai) – warnings about the spiritual and physical dangers of alcohol intensify. True community, says the priest, is not the one you reach through intoxication but the one you reach through love and care. The priest here is targeting the age-old Japanese trope that intoxication provides a ‘frame’ for egalitarian relationships (see Nakane 1970); that in the communitas of drunkenness one can express one’s true self and let go of the façades that one has to wear navigating the hierarchies of everyday life. ‘That is not real community; real community is in the heart.’

Yet that night people leave the restaurant drunk, and this is not an exception but one of many such occasions. Suddenly people are out on the streets again; it is dark now and the cold evening air wakes everyone up. A few people bow goodbye, but someone pulls my sleeve gently and asks ‘Won’t you come for another drink?’ A few others nod, more sleeves are pulled and the group sets off into the chilly air of the night, where insistent touts insist on showing their menus and try to pull people into their restaurants. Kimura-san, who was reticent from the beginning, tries to leave but finds himself agreeing to another drink. ‘Just one … then I really have to go.’ Eventually another restaurant is chosen and the same ritual starts.

Clapping, more food and drinks come to the table, more laughing. Kimura-san finally manages to slip out. Then everyone is outside again, a few people disappear in the night and four of us wander drunkenly to another izakaya. That night I have to carry one of them all the way home: she quietly sings songs of her childhood and tries to make me sing along; she mumbles apologies and praises my kindness while I pull her weight on my shoulders. I leave her at her door after helping her find her keys.
People in the community often furtively organized dinners at their houses with the explicit intention of getting drunk—planning ahead what we would be drinking and who should bring what. Inevitably the alcohol would not be enough, and from drinking good French wine one would end up drinking whatever they could find in their cupboard, or making a trip to the corner shop to buy cheap liquor. While the main topic of conversation throughout all the drunken evenings I have participated in is always the church, there is no hint of moral torment, of guilt. Asking about the prohibitions over dinner one gets joking replies such as ‘ah it’s bad, isn’t it’ or an upward glance at the sky, the joining of hands as if in prayer and, with a smile and childish voice, ‘I am sorry, Lord’ (gomenne kami-sama).

**Dual encompassment and the blurring of rupture**

People’s engagement with the church suggests that what we are seeing is neither a form of assimilation nor a form of resistance. One could be tempted to see the community on a similar trajectory as the Urapmin were in the 1990s, moving from traditional to Christian culture—their efforts to foster community outside the church still locked in the old framework, into old behaviours that clash with their new culture. What is fundamentally different, however, is that the Urapmin were haunted by this friction, while here people seem to pay it no heed.

In Robbins’s analysis, assimilation and adoption are understood as processes whereby one culture comes to frame another (cf. Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974), where one of the two cultures gives meaning and motivation for engaging in elements of the other. A good way to understand this process is Dumont’s (1980) notion of ‘encompassment’, which he saw as the ground for his theory of hierarchy: encompassment is a part/whole relationship in which contraries can coexist. Dumont calls this relationship ‘the encompassing of the contrary’ (1980, 239) and gives, fittingly here, a Biblical example. Sexual differentiation in the Garden of Eden is predicated on a double relation—Adam and Eve are, as members of the human species of opposite sexes, in a binary opposition. However, given that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, that he is the original member of the species from which she was created, he encompasses her; a relationship of identity is established between the two.

‘Encompassment’ provides a useful lens through which to understand the assimilation/adoption paradigm. The assimilation of Christianity in other cultures is a situation where the traditional culture encompasses
Christian elements. The relationship is hierarchical: only the categories change and not the relationship between them – the image changes but the frame remains. The Urapmin were going through the opposite process: they were slowly encompassing elements of their traditional culture (e.g. notions of big-manship) within the Catholic framework. Robbins’s point is that this encompassment is incomplete and the hierarchy has not yet been properly established. Given that the two ‘cultures’ were at times equally important, not hierarchically encompassed, their friction generated torment and guilt.

When turning to the church’s practices in Tokyo, however, it is hard to determine which direction this encompassment is working in. When people are out drinking, they are encompassing Christianity with the wider norms of Japanese society. They are asserting continuity by acting like any other non-Christian person, but within this frame understanding themselves as Christians. In other words, this can be understood as a form of assimilation where Christianity has been encompassed into the wider framework of Japanese society: the content has changed, now a Christian community instead of a group of friends, but not the framework – everything is understood through the categories of urban Japanese modernity.

On the other hand, the opposite is also true. People are encompassing elements of their old life into their Catholic one. Their understanding of Christianity is precisely what is giving meaning to their meetings and the drinking is encompassed within that understanding. People are first and foremost Christians engaging in what they understand as the Christian life – drinking is not antithetical because it is encompassed into Christianity, hierarchically subordinated to the wider framework that gives meaning to people’s lives as Catholics. In the same way, people’s engagement with the church was deeply motivated by their desire to lead a Christian life, a desire that brings them to explore territories uncharted by the sparse schedules and activities provided by the church. In other words, it is hard to determine if the process is one of assimilation or adoption – which of the two cultures is encompassing the other.

When zooming out to a wider canvas, to the wider scale of urban Japanese modernity, one finds the same difficulties. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) ‘inculturation’ has been part of the Catholic Church’s strategies to make the faith resonate with non-Western cultures. Christian dogma, for instance, condemns ancestral worship as it runs contrary to its ideas of afterlife, and yet many Christians in Japan today have an ancestral altar in their house and honour the spirits of their ancestors (see, e.g., Reid 1981; 1989). While before Vatican II the
orthodox line was to encourage people to dispose of them, with the publishing of a pamphlet called ‘Guidelines for Catholics with Regards to the Ancestors and the Dead’ (sosen to shisha ni tsuite no katorikku shinja no tebiki; 1985) people were allowed to pay respect to ancestral altars as long as all Buddhist iconography and devotion be replaced with Christian forms (see Swyngedouw 1984; 1985; also Mullins 2011). The same is true of many other activities, such as the maintenance of Christianized family graves, virtually indistinguishable from traditional ones if not for a small crucifix carved next to the family name.5

When one looks away from Christian spaces and to the surrounding urban culture of modern Tokyo, a similar logic is at work. Within the products of mass culture, especially manga, anime and video games, Christian – and overwhelmingly Catholic – symbolism and themes crop up everywhere (e.g. Suter 2015). These imaginary spaces are inhabited by people on a daily basis and bleed into the ‘real’ world through advertising, messaging applications, corporate branding, fashion and gadgets. Appadurai (1996) has argued that imaginative spaces acquire a new power with modernity, and indeed modernity and Christianity do seem to share a special relationship in Tokyo (cf. Doak 2011). Christmas, white weddings, churches and crosses; all these are appropriated and fused into the wider fresco of Japanese modernity.

For example, while the nation-building of the past has cast Shinto weddings as one of the necessary rites of passage of the Japanese person, today two-thirds of weddings celebrated in the Tokyo metropolis are Western-style ceremonies. ‘Western style’ here means Christian, even though the vast majority of the ceremonies are Christian only in appearance. These wedding chapels are usually in expensive hotels in the centre of town, modern halls with neon crosses, off-white walls and futuristic interior design in transparent plastics and glass. The pastor performing the ritual is a Western actor reading a script and the ceremony is a short affair that follows the ritual steps immortalized in the last scene of nearly every romantic comedy (Fisch 2001; LeFebvre 2015). In the light of this insistent presence of Christian signifiers in the landscape of urban modernity, one needs to consider whether Christianity really is only a minority culture, a figure in the background, or perhaps a much more prominent figure in the scene. There is, in other words, an ambiguity as to the place of Christianity within its encompassing frame.

One finds, both on the community scale and on a wider societal one, an ambiguity as to exactly what is encompassing what. When the community partakes in Shinto festivals and rituals or gets drunk with non-Christian friends, one could indeed say that Christianity is
encompassed into the old culture that surrounds it. However, when people move their grave to a Christian graveyard, or change their ancestral altar for a Christian one, they are performing an act of adoption; it is Christianity which is successfully encompassing the old culture. We find in the life of the community an oscillation, to borrow Edmund Leach’s famous term (1954; 1972), where people successfully manage to sometimes let one system encompass the other, while at times the opposite is true. People manage to let Christianity encompass the social forms of majority culture – in their dealing with the altars, with life and death rituals – and, at other times, let the social habits of majority culture encompass their Christian identity.6

Drinking, however, seems to achieve both simultaneously. When people transgress the priest’s restrictions they are not, in their minds, acting against Christian values but they are precisely living the Christian life. As we have seen in those drunken hours the conversation is dominated by topics to do with the church, and one cannot possibly argue that what people are doing is actually simply taking the formal elements of Christianity and encompassing them within the wider framework. The opposite is obviously not true either – Christianity is not encompassing Japanese social modes of interaction because both the priest and social perceptions of their faith are vocally telling people that this is not possible. Those meetings seem to contain, simultaneously, both kinds of encompassing acts.

Evenings of drinking exist in a continuum with the life of the church; they are just another facet of it (cf. Pedersen, this volume). Yet they also exist in a continuum with people’s life outside it, with the other meetings they have with their friends and family. In those nights there is no difference at all between the Christian life and wider Japanese society, between intoxication and piouness, between the world inside the church and the world outside it. The two blur and become one, and thus people feel no moral afflictions. Instead of clashing, the two systems blur, and in that hazy space rupture disappears, if only for a few hours. In those moments people are indeed breaking the rules of Christianity, framing their Christian endeavours within the framework of urban Japanese sociality, interpreting their actions through the latter. However, the drinking itself is understood through their Catholic life, as a means to be a group, to build bonds and a strong Christian community. Being Christian is never hidden, it is never ignored – it is indeed the whole point of drinking, of breaking the priest’s restrictions. Through a series of figure ground-reversals, through a dual encompassment where inside encompasses outside and vice versa, the two ‘cultures’ blur and become
indistinguishable. In these moments sinning can be the very Christian life and being Christian can mean its opposite: participating in heathen rites, intoxication and so on. It is impossible to point out which of the two frames is encompassing the other – which system is giving meaning to people’s actions: by partaking in activities constitutive of life ‘outside’ they come closer to the ‘inside’, and by converting and coming ‘inside’ they find a community to be built through the ‘outside’.7

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the ways in which people try to achieve moments of continuity in the face of intense discourses of rupture. The chapter has worked with two big ‘wholes’ – Christianity on the one hand and ‘urban Japanese modernity’ on the other. It has tried to show how people oscillate between the two, letting one encompass the other, bridging the gulf of rupture every time they go into and out of church. In the haze of drunkenness, a double encompassment is achieved – the two cultures overlap and blur, sinful activities become virtuous, transgression becomes the performance of the Christian life.

Given the Christian insistence on rupture, it is not surprising that this chapter has worked, like Robbins, with two extreme outcomes of culture contact and change: rupture, with a new Christian cosmos, or continuity, with the continuation of the old culture. There is of course a middle way, one where the two ‘cultures’ come to a sort of Hegelian synthesis. This is close to what much anthropological literature has called syncretism (e.g. Shaw and Stewart 1994) or creolization (e.g. Hannerz 1987; Stewart 2007). What we find here is, however, not one of those cases. Rupture is a daily reality for the community, one that they struggle with and that they cannot ultimately overcome. The fleeting blurring and identification of the two cultures only lasts for a few hours, and rupture is imposed on them as soon as they walk around town or into church. At the same time, what we are seeing here is most likely not a process with a definite direction and outcome as it was for the Urapmin but, as is testament in the absence of friction between the two, this does not seem to be the case in Tokyo.

People have no intention of giving up many of the things the priest wants them to give up. ‘Giving up’ is not something the community does lightly: even giving up chocolate at Lent usually lasts only a few days (and, in recounting their failure to abstain, people do so with the same levity with which they talk about their drinking). They are not striving
towards total conversion and stumbling on the way. They are, however, 
not trying to assert their sense of continuity either, for their activities are 
hidden from the eyes of the priest. One might comment that, if the com-
community had its way, the Catholicism of its members would develop into a 
syncretic form. This might be the truth, but it might also be overlooking 
the community’s craving for form and dogma. The affectionate transgres-
sions of the priest’s dogma might not mark a desire to be rid of them, but 
a particular affective way of engaging rupture. People are not challeng-
ning rupture, but creating spaces so that continuity can coexist with it.

Notes

1. Robbins is here relying on Sahlins’s model (1985; 1992); ‘assimilation’ here also encompasses 
what for the latter is a third process – ‘transformation’.
2. Even the story of conversion of one of the key figures of Japanese Christianity – Uchimura 
Kanzō, the founder of the Non-Church Movement (mukyōkai) – is underwhelming and gradual 
(Ch. 1 in Uchimura 1985; also Mullins 1998).
3. A drinking establishment that also serves small dishes of food such as skewers, fried chicken, 
pickles and fried noodles.
5. Note that the only activities that are encompassed are Buddhist, never Shinto. Shinto, with its 
perceived polytheism, seems to be much more threatening to the Church than Buddhism. Altars 
and graves are reinterpreted and encompassed, but never household shrines or amulets.
6. Cf. Daswani (2011) and Werbner (2011) for the use of an oscillatory model in non-Western 
Christian contexts.
7. Here saliently morality has not been part of the picture, and the notion of encompassment tried 
to capture the same process without its moral dimension. However, morality has, albeit brief-
ly, surfaced in the ethnography. In Robbins’s analysis the Urapmin experienced what Bateson 
(1972, 201–27, 271–8) has called a ‘double-bind’: an emotionally distressing dilemma where 
one receives two conflicting and mutually negating messages. Kimura-san, whom we have seen 
unsuccessfully trying to avoid drinking with the community, is the closest example I have seen 
to a moral double-bind. As in the notion of encompassment, for Bateson there is a hierarchical 
element to the double-bind: a verbal message is framed by non-verbal ones that directly con-
tradict the first. Kimura-san was stuck between the priest’s dogma – thou shall not drink – and 
a situation where drinking was encouraged if not required. While he would have never stated 
this publicly on the night, when asked on different occasions he confirmed that his reticence 
and discomfort were explicitly to do with the awareness of the ‘wrongness’ (warui) of the act. 
Kimura-san is, one could say, only encompassing one way – he is the kind of Christian the priest 
wants the community to be and is hence, paradoxically, struggling to be part of it.

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