

Transforming the Spirits
New Religions and Spirit Beliefs in Contemporary Japan

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Belief in spirits has been a common characteristic for some ‘new religions’ (or *shinshūkyō*) established in Japan during the last few decades. According to Shimazono Susumu belief in spirits in new religions increased, rather than decreased, with the advance of modernization and urbanization.

Shimazono (and other scholars) explained this in terms of adaptation of traditional folk beliefs in a modern, urban setting, in which spirits can be manipulated and controlled by human beings.

In this paper I will discuss the transformation of spirit beliefs in a new religion, Agonshū, a group developed in late 1970 from a previous organization founded in the 1950s. One of the central teachings in Agonshū is the importance of ritual in order to pacify unhappy spirits, who are suffering because they weren’t able to achieve liberation after death and who are the causes of human beings’ problems and misfortunes. By “cutting the karma” members following Agonshū’s teachings and practices can liberate those spirits and obtain health and wealth. Over the last decades, however, Agonshū has gradually shifted its focus on rituals to pacify the unhappy spirits, to ritual for the “spirits of soldiers who died for Japan”, while, at the same time, starting using expressions such as “power spots” to indicate its main centres. In doing this Agonshū is attempting to attract both potential members who are interested in sacred places believed to have a special spiritual power and also to enter the more political discourse linked to memorialization of Japan’s war dead. In discussing this I will address issues related to the distinction between secular and religion in Japan, in particular to why beliefs in spirits are not necessarily seen as in contrast to secularisation processes.