One warm afternoon, Suzuki-san and I were sitting in a small café in Kamakura, a medium-sized city near Tokyo. Suzuki-san is a thirty-eight-year-old man who works for a pharmaceutical company in Tokyo. He told me: “I do not believe in Shinto or Buddhism. I do not go to shrines or temples for religious reasons. Christian doctrines taught me that I should follow God, but not kami [deities, often associated with Shinto] and hotoke [buddhas and ancestors].”

Having converted to Christianity when he was in college, Suzuki-san maintains no domestic altars enshrining ancestors and tutelary kami at home, the central sites for ritual activity in Kamakura. Suzuki-san is exceptional, not only because Christianity is a minor religion in Japan (just 1.4 percent of the entire population are Christians),¹ but also because he believes that his ritual actions must be supported by his personal faith. In contrast, most of the people I met in Kamakura tended to downplay personal faith in specific religious doctrines when explaining their ritual actions, such as praying to the tutelary kami or ancestors for health and protection. In fact, Japanese people today are known to emphasize “the primacy of action” over belief in explaining their ritual actions (Reader 1991, 15, 20). It is customary for families to belong to Buddhist temples, and many value memorial rites conducted by Buddhist priests to venerate ancestors. Nevertheless, it is not unknown for people to lack knowledge of the Buddhist tradition (shū) to which their family temple belongs.² In Kamakura, too, ritual actors are more frequently concerned with praying for the well-being of themselves and those close to them, both living and dead, than with theological issues. The attitude of “do it and see if it works” is widespread. And perform-
ing rituals might eventually lead to personal commitment to religious ideas and doctrines.

The primacy of action is also evident in recent survey results. They indicate that there are many more ritually active people than those who say they believe in religion or kami and hotoke. Typically, only one-third or fewer report that they have a religion/religions in which they believe, and approximately two-fifths believe in the existence of kami or hotoke. Yet many more respondents reported that they visit Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines during New Year holidays and family graves, often located in Buddhist temple compounds, at least once a year. According to the 1998 NHK (Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai, or Japan Broadcasting Corporation) survey, some 81 percent of the respondents reported that they reverently face (ogamu) or pray to kami and hotoke at least once a year (Onodera 1999, 55). The 2001 Yomiuri Newspaper survey indicates that some 78 percent of its respondents maintain domestic altars to kami or hotoke (Yomiuri Newspaper, 28 December 2001, 15).

Thus we cannot assume that religious rites are expressions or confirmations of belief in the doctrine regarding supernatural entities and powers. Rather than treating belief and ritual action as self-evident analytical categories and assuming that the former causes the latter, their relationship must be investigated as being culturally constructed and socially generated. In Kamakura, rather than a prerequisite, a personal conviction of or belief in kami’s or hotoke’s power is just one of the possible consequences of ritual practice. Ritual’s persistence and relevance owe much to ritual forms that can create an elevated context infused with a sense of moral order pervasive in daily life. Common ritual actions performed in Kamakura can simultaneously engage ritual actors in special contexts set apart from daily life while evoking moral personhood cultivated in mundane bodies and environments.

When commenting on the small number of believers in religion compared with the number of ritual practitioners, some argue that Japan is a completely secular society, and thus that religion has little relevance to people’s lives, while others say ritual practitioners lack awareness that they have a religion because it revolves around conventional rites intertwined with daily life. Neither a meaningless formality nor mere custom, ritual potentially, rather than automatically, provides contemporary urbanites with culturally significant ways of constructing meaning and power. In short, this book aims to demonstrate that people’s ritual bod-
ies and environments provide fertile ground for nurturing diverse yet culturally patterned interpretive possibilities and for producing engaging moments of personal significance.

**Approaches to Ritual**

Rituals are more than repetitive, stylized, prescribed behavior or the social routine. For instance, I do not want to use the analytical category of ritual to examine taking out garbage in Kamakura, even though it fits with a common anthropological definition of ritual in a number of ways: it happens regularly at fixed times and places and involves rigid, prescribed rules and procedures about how to put it together, pile it up, and clean up the collection site. Such descriptions apply to many other aspects of social life or individual habits (see Goody 1977). I certainly do not mean to deny the usefulness of “secular rituals” as an analytical category—formalities that “can present unquestionable doctrines and can dramatize social/moral imperatives without invoking the spirits at all” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 3). Graduation ceremonies in Kamakura, for example, fit nicely into this group. Yet, rather than examining secular formalities, this book investigates religious rites, or those often defined by their associations with supernatural entities and powers (such as kami and hotoke in case of Kamakura) and analyzes the ways in which people construct ritual’s multiple interpretive possibilities. Depending on the situation and whom we ask, ritual encounters with kami or hotoke can be religious occasions of devotion, social occasions of bonding, or formal occasions with little religious value. And some of these characterizations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although anthropologists have often studied both the religious and the social implications of religious rites, it has not been uncommon for them to assume that practitioners hold belief in “supernatural” powers and entities associated with religious rites. Then what difference does it make to our understanding of ritual if people state that they do not believe in associated powers and entities or religious doctrines? Though people in Kamakura do not always consider kami and hotoke “supernatural” in the strict sense of the term, they still acknowledge them socially and are aware of their potentially beneficial and destructive aspects. Despite such acknowledgment, we cannot assume that people always find religious importance in rituals involving these beings and powers; and the mat-
ter is complex, because even nonbelievers I met told me that sometimes rituals become personally meaningful occasions of emotional engagement in both social and religious terms.

There are several ways of dealing with this issue of belief, though they are not limited to the following list. First, one could avoid the issue of what people say—ritual’s meaning—and study only what they do—their ritual activity. This approach is unattractive to me, given my interest in discovering what difference ritual makes to people’s lives. Second, one might maintain that people follow conventions and mechanically reproduce ritual actions without recognizing their significance. This account is inconsistent with my observation that people seriously engage in ritual activity and care much about how it is done. Third, one might claim that people do not say they believe in religion but actually do believe in it without knowing they do. By discrediting their accounts of themselves and their actions, this problematic view would portray people as mindless enactors of convention incapable of understanding what they do. Both what people do and what they say matter.

In order to comprehend ritual action in Kamakura, I turn to “practice theories” in anthropology because they illuminate the relationship between people’s views of ritual activity and their ritual action. Just as Japanese people tend to emphasize the power of doing, so practice theories highlight the ways in which performance brings categories, ideas, and values into action, thereby (re)producing them. At the same time, practice itself may change these very values and ideas by exposing them to contestation, manipulation, and modification. With practice theories, moreover, ritual actors receive credit for their agency in reproducing as well as changing cultural forms. This perspective stands in sharp contrast to earlier views that regarded actors as powerless pawns following some preassigned scheme. Ritual actors are now seen as active participants who use ritual forms strategically to their advantage. Participants are reported to use rituals to enhance their status (Bloch 1987; Nelson 2000) or to resist authority through collective violence in times of rapid social change (Schnell 1999). Emphasizing the agency of social actors, practice theories criticize the view that rituals thoughtlessly reproduce established ideas, such as religious beliefs, doctrines, and ideologies. Thus, they question certain long-standing concepts in Western thought—for instance, that thought belongs to the mind and that the mind is superior to the body and its actions.
Rituals are often said to create a sense of togetherness in the social world while also maintaining the status quo in a society—with or without the participants’ knowledge. But if we are to treat people as active agents capable of strategic participation in rituals, their actions need to make sense to them (cf. Staal 1975). Recent anthropological studies highlight the process in which ritual becomes politically appropriated as a form of performance (Aggarwal 2001; Albro 2001; Mines 2002). Ritual participants, then, need to understand ritual’s usefulness in a practical sense in order to use it as an instrument to their advantage.

In examining ritual’s meaning and power, I will focus on nonspecialists’ accounts, because it is not just specialists and the committed who (re)produce, maintain, and modify rituals. On the contrary, actions of the majority who are nonspecialists determine rituals’ survival or decline in a significant way. Their perspectives and knowledge are as critical as specialists’ views in understanding ritual’s (re)production and power; so we cannot dismiss the accounts of the religiously uncommitted as irrelevant or inferior to the theological accounts offered by ritual leaders and specialists.

Over the course of Japan’s history, many schools of Shinto emerged, whereas various traditions of Buddhism came to Japan from the Asian mainland and saw further developments and change. Yet, most people I met knew little about the various schools of Shinto, and nobody mentioned them when explaining their actions at a Shinto shrine or at the domestic altar to kami. People sometimes discussed various traditions of Buddhism of their family’s affiliation (such as Nichiren-shū) and commented on certain components in their ritual styles (such as “we do rituals with lots of drumming”), but they rarely discussed theological issues. A Zen priest in his fifties even told me that the gap between priests’ and parishioners’ religious worldviews is so great that he feels there is no overlap. Although this is an extreme opinion, despite a number of continuities, both informants and scholars reported certain discontinuities in religious knowledge and concerns between specialists and nonspecialists. Given this difference in perspective, I would like to focus on nonspecialists’ views as complements to institutional or specialists’ views. This approach also makes sense considering the extent of scholarship on religion and ritual in contemporary Japan that has an institutional emphasis: there are many useful studies of Buddhism and Shinto (to name recent anthropological studies, e.g., Littleton 2002 and
Nelson 2000) and of organizations and followers of the so-called New Religions (e.g., Davis 1980; Earhart 1989; Guthrie 1988; Hardacre 1986; McVeigh 1997). In seeking to discover ritual’s importance among the religiously uncommitted, this book deals with both Shinto and Buddhist practices in which they commonly participate. Shinto, the native religious tradition, and Buddhism, officially brought to Japan in the sixth century, were combined for more than a thousand years. People were Shintoists and Buddhists at the same time, though they did not necessarily see themselves as belonging to two separate religions. The Meiji State (1868–1912) attempted to separate the two officially, yet in today’s Japan the separation remains incomplete in practice (R. J. Smith 1974, 15). Despite certain tensions and conflicts, but with no major religious wars between them to eliminate one or the other, Shinto and Buddhist traditions interacted, and theologies reconciling the two traditions came to flourish (ibid., 12). As a result, mutual influence led to a complex orchestration and integration of native and indigenized foreign practices without completely eliminating distinctions between the two traditions. Given the history of blending Shinto and Buddhism and a persistent practice of combining the two traditions in the daily life of many contemporary Japanese, I examine both Shinto and Buddhist rites that are relevant to them. In addition, since various rites in contemporary Japan, such as weddings, festivals, and death and memorial rites, have been examined in detail by others (Ashkenazi 1993; Edwards 1989; Hardacre 1997; Schnell 1999; R. J. Smith 1974; Suzuki 2000), I will emphasize the role that certain ritual forms and frameworks play in uniting these various facets of ritual action, rather than focusing on a specific ritual or a single tradition.

**Understanding Ritual Practice in Kamakura**

In Kamakura, ritual bodies and environments provide a common source of meaning, uniting different spheres of ritual action and contributing to ritual’s multiple, patterned interpretive possibilities. The production of ritual contexts owes much to the use of actions and environments that resonate with—or differentiate them from—the daily routine. Rituals use bodily practices that are common in daily life—bowing, cleaning, giving, receiving—in a higher context (Chapter 2). Bowing to *kami* and ancestors, for example, is interpreted in relation to the bowing done
in daily life. Ritual actions, therefore, orient participants toward experiences beyond the immediate ritual context and link them to meanings in everyday life. In other words, acting bodies *embody* ideas and values that everyday practices evoke. Thus the body becomes a site for communicating complex thoughts and values, challenging earlier views that dismiss the body as an animal-like, instinctive part of a person (Farnell 1995, 18, 23). This, in turn, brings us to question the mind/body dichotomy and the superiority of mind over body in considering the value and functions of ritual action.\footnote{10}

The creation of ritual contexts comes, not only from acting bodies, but also from the environments that contain them. Bodies do not act in a vacuum. Whether in a house, a neighborhood, or a shrine, it is necessary to take ritual environments as seriously as the ritual bodies that act in them (compare, e.g., with Casey 1996; De Boeck 1998; Feld and Basso 1996; Kahn 1996, 2000; Lovell 1998; Rodman 1992). In both ritual and everyday life, just as bodies are hierarchically ordered, so places are ordered according to upper/lower, front/back, and interior/exterior distinctions that are tied to contrasting cultural meanings such as purity/impurity, formality/informality, and respect/disrespect (Chapter 3). Interacting ritual body and ritual site mutually constitute each other, producing and reproducing cultural dispositions in which body and place are embedded.

Pierre Bourdieu maintains that the habitus, “the durably installed generative principles of regulated improvisations” (1977, 78), is formed in a person as he or she grows up (81) and produces “a commonsense world” (80) for those who share the same habitus. The habitus provides continuity from one situation to another for a person, as well as producing regularities in social life over time (82). Such routine (re)production of actors’ subjectivities occurs in the use of the ritual body as well as place. Thus the habitus takes bodily and *emplaced* forms.\footnote{11} Because rituals involve bodily actions and environments that are commonly used in everyday life, people may refer to their meaning—such as (dis)respect, (im)purity, and (in)formality—when interpreting ritual actions and environments. When this occurs, ritual can empower a sense of order that prevails in everyday life by producing a privileged body (Bell 1992) as well as a privileged environment. Because it possibly crystallizes what feels good and thus right in Japanese social life, ritual can produce an occasion of emotional engagement\footnote{12} with or without detailed theological knowledge.\footnote{13}
Connections among places that constitute the community of Kamakura may also become a source of ritual’s meaning. Like a room, a house, or a shrine, Kamakura consists of upper/lower, front/back, and exterior/interior zones that interact with its history as a former capital and resort to generate yet another layer of meaning (Chapter 4). According to the image of Kamakura as an ancient capital, the northern area associated with medieval warriors and their political organization is considered “higher” than the southern communities, which are associated with commoners. According to the image of the city as a prestigious resort, the beach area that formerly housed upper-class summerhouses and resort hotels becomes a “high” place. Participants draw localized meanings and valuations from a constellation of places within Kamakura.

Yet it is not ritual’s symbolic potential alone that helps participants to construct the meanings ritual can generate—whether a sense of harmony or a communal identity (Chapter 5). Ritual demands that participants act in specific ways, and a native understanding of practice maintains that performing ritual with sincerity may lead to an understanding and appreciation of what that ritual embodies, however empty it may seem at the beginning. People’s interpretations of ritual are diverse, however, and participating in a ritual does not mean that people accept the same unambiguous meanings (Bell 1992, 183). Ritual, then, offers an interesting political potential to various groups, whether those in power or the oppressed, although its implications differ depending on who is using it. By performing ritual, people can create a context in which ritual actors appear to submit to its demands, making ritual a tool for appropriation rather than a mechanism for direct control or indoctrination (see Bell 1992). Through ritualization, people fashion a strategic context for interaction and appropriation for diverse purposes (Chapter 6).

In short, then, the people I met in Kamakura find meaning in the ways in which they use the ritual body, the immediate ritual site, and places beyond it. People’s ritual bodies and environments provide a common interpretive framework that brings together their encounters with kami and hotoke in a range of contexts.

**Historical Contexts**

Examining a smaller number of believers in religion despite a comparatively larger number of ritual practitioners, some scholars of Japan have characterized the Japanese people as unreligious or areligious,
while others have thought that the Japanese are religious in their own way. Whether they characterize the Japanese as religious or not, scholars have often noted how religion in Japan is integrated into social life, as a result of which practitioners might fail to recognize their religion as a category set apart from social conventions (Ishii 1997, 3; Kaneko 1988, 101–102; Ömura 1988, 15; Shimada 1991, 168; Yanagawa 1991, 10–12). The intertwined nature of religion and social conventions in Japan is described by a variety of phrases: religion without belief (Yanagawa 1991); religion as conventional events (Miyata 1999, 4); religion as action, or something one learns to do (tashinamu; Ömura 1988, 16); “natural” religion without a founder (Ama 1996, 67–68); family religion (Kimura 2003, 145); or religion built on kinship and territorial relations among people (Shimada 1991, 181). While those scholars have highlighted significant aspects of religion and ritual in modern Japan, our understanding of ritual practice in today’s Kamakura will benefit further from situating the issue of many ritual practitioners but fewer believers in religion in recent history and relations of power. By stressing certain historical continuities and change before and after World War II, this brief sketch will show that the number of believers reported in surveys declined in postwar Japan in changing political, economic, and social contexts.

In describing these changes, I would like to use Nakada-san’s life course as a point of reference. Born in 1923, Nakada-san is married to a tea merchant from Kamakura and was seventy-two years old at the time of my fieldwork between 1995 and 1996. As she was growing up, ultra-nationalists established a firmer hold on the Japanese government and widely propagated the national ideology of State Shinto, defining the emperor as living kami and Japan as a divine nation. Nakada-san was sixteen years old when World War II broke out in 1939. In those days, the state urged the empire’s subjects to sacrifice themselves for the nation and the emperor, the divine father figure to whom they were indebted. Ritually, people were encouraged to pray for Japan’s prosperity and honor the emperor, his divine ancestors, and the war dead at domestic altars and community shrines. Thus the state imposed patriotic meanings on certain ritual actions. The state permitted religious freedom as long as people and organizations honored the official discourse of ritual, and took disciplinary measures in cases of nonconformity. By the time Nakada-san reached her teens, many new religious movements had developed, characterized by charismatic leadership,
advocating social reforms, and blending established and folk religious elements. The state exerted a particularly tight control over these religious organizations and required the amendment of their doctrines if they challenged the state-sanctioned framework of ritual. Nonconforming organizations risked imprisonment of their leaders and destruction of their facilities. The Ministry of Education’s 1940 survey results illustrate these ideological influences of the time and give us an insight into ritual’s meaning in prewar Japan at a time when large-scale national surveys on religion were rare. The survey asked twenty-year-old male respondents to choose the closest feeling to what they experienced when reverently facing kami and hotoke. Some 48 percent reported that they did so “in order to pray for the prosperity of the Japanese empire.” Education at the time aimed to indoctrinate young people into the national ideology, and we find its influence in the survey results.

Nevertheless, the state’s policies in prewar Japan by no means exhausted other interpretive possibilities, nor did they homogenize ritual practice among all people. Rather than simply swallowing the state ideology, some people reported that they privately contested state-sanctioned meanings of ritual. According to an eighty-eight-year-old woman, for instance, her deceased father used to say that he was never indebted to the emperor. And Nakada-san recalled that “People whose family members were drafted used to go to Shinto shrines to pray for their safe return.” Thus, others might have focused more on personally significant reasons for praying at domestic altars and shrines, though such reasons did not have to contradict patriotic meanings of ritual.

A major shift in the official paradigm of ritual action followed Japan’s defeat in World War II. When the war ended in 1945, Nakada-san was twenty-two years old. Not only did the emperor announce to the public that he was human, but the very idea of his divinity officially became a taboo. Among the public there was also a sense that, despite their prayers, divine powers had failed to protect the nation. In postwar Japan, a new “democratic” paradigm of ritual emerged, and today the state no longer officially defines ritual’s meaning. The new constitution ensures people’s full-scale freedom of thought and religion. Separation of church and state had occurred. These changes in postwar Japan provide a point of reference for people today in constructing ritual’s meaning, though there are also a number of continuities. Rituals for ensuring national prosperity and reverent veneration of the war dead remain alive
in postwar Japan, for instance, both for some individuals and in certain religious institutions. Moreover, the framework of practical benefits provides another continuity of ritual’s meaning before and after the war—at shrines and temples it is common to find people praying to kami (and hotoke) for both material and nonmaterial desirables (see Reader and Tanabe 1998).

The postwar shift in the official paradigm of ritual action did not lead to the production of value-free ritual practices. Although different in character from the Ministry of Education’s 1940 survey, for instance, many national surveys conducted after World War II by major newspapers sought to measure the level of Japan’s “democratization” (Ishii 1997, 10). The 1946 survey conducted by the Ministry of Education was designed to measure people’s “superstitious” tendencies in various parts of Japan (Meishin Chôsa Kyögikai 1949, 5). What the term “superstition” implied ranged widely from belief in the existence of ghosts, gods, monsters, and goblins to notions of luck, folk medicine, and spirit possession. Commenting on the published results of the 1946 survey, Education Minister Takase ShÔtarÔ stated that people’s superstitious tendencies tended to limit their lives (ibid., 1). Contradicting scientific thought and rational practice, superstitions were considered to hinder Japan’s development as a cultured nation (bunka kokka). Far from constituting objective measures of people’s spontaneous thoughts, surveys were designed to judge, directly or indirectly, people’s progress in accordance with certain values—the adoption of freedom of religion, for example, or a departure from superstition.

It is important to locate the declining number of believers in religion despite the persistence of ritual activity in postwar Japan, not only in the discourse of favoring “rational thought” as opposed to “superstitious” belief in certain supernatural entities, but also in postwar economic expansion and urbanization. When Nakada-san was in her thirties, an increased demand for labor in manufacturing and service industries encouraged the massive migration of rural populations to urban areas. The result was a rapid growth of urban populations often lacking strong ties with established channels for ritual activity, such as the neighborhood shrine venerating tutelary kami and family temples venerating ancestors (Fujii 1974; Ishii 1997, 97–98; Morioka 1970; Morioka and Hanajima 1968). Yet this did not lead to the disappearance of ritual activity. Some urbanites found new channels, while others utilized cer-
tain preexisting ones on a new scale or with a new twist. Granted full-fledged religious freedom, many new religious movements sprang up in postwar Japan, and some grew rapidly by providing channels for ritual activity to new urbanites (Tsushima 1992, 289), ranging from healing to ancestor veneration. Urbanites rediscovered renowned religious establishments in former capitals (Kamakura was one), and many prominent shrines and temples in cities became sites for mass-scale tourism and New Year visits during the 1960s (Murakami 1982, 106). Urbanization also encouraged the commercialization of certain life-cycle rites. During the 1970s, the number of funeral halls increased and offered commercialized funerals to new urbanites lacking solid community ties to conduct these rites (Suzuki 2000, 57). Commercialized wedding halls also sprung up to cater to people’s needs (Edwards 1989). These trends of tourism and commercialization continued throughout the heyday of recent economic prosperity during the 1980s, known as The Bubble, and have not disappeared in today’s long-term recession. As Japan underwent these changes in the political, economic, and social realms, the percentage of people surveyed who reported that they had religious beliefs declined from approximately half or two-thirds between 1946 and 1950 to some 30 percent between the early 1970s and 1980s. The sarin attack of 1994 by the Aum Shinrikyō sect members is one notable incident in post-Bubble Japan that reportedly marked a further decline in the number of believers in religion to some 20 percent. In this unprecedented crime, sect members randomly killed twenty-seven people and injured many more by releasing deadly poisonous gas on a Tokyo subway. (I began my fieldwork in the year after the gas attack.) Rituals in contemporary Kamakura, therefore, reside in complex historical and ideological contexts of today and recent past.

Thus, in her lifetime, Nakada-san saw a number of dramatic changes in the discourses of ritual action and the shifting channels of ritual activity in urban contexts. Despite some fluctuations, it was not until Nakada-san was in her late forties that we find 30 percent of believers in religion yet twice as many ritual actors, according to national surveys. And by the time she was in her early seventies, the number of believers had further declined to some 20 percent in some surveys. Yet, during these years, despite some fluctuations, national surveys tend to indicate no sharp decline in conventional ritual activities such as visits to ancestral graves and New Year visits to temples and shrines.
Looking over this brief historical sketch, the gap that surveys reported between the number of ritual practitioners and believers in religion has not always been the defining characteristic of religion in Japan; surveys conducted in early postwar Japan indicate that the majority reported religion in which they believed. So we cannot assume that the small number of believers in religion reported in surveys derives from the pattern of ritual participation set in the Edo period (1603–1868), as some scholars have suggested (see, e.g., Kimura 2003). During the Edo period, families were required by the political authorities to participate in Buddhist rites to venerate ancestors, and the stem family (ie), rather than the individual, was the unit of participation. Though historical practices do provide significant contexts for what happens today (see Chapter 1), discourses on religion and ritual in postwar Japan have undergone significant transformations despite certain continuities over time. Meanwhile, other scholars have reconsidered what “the number of believers” measures in the context of modernity and scrutinized the ways in which the notion of religion—a foreign, modern concept rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition—became injected into and accommodated in the political discourse of the state (Shimazono 2004). Areligious or unreligious Japan, some argue, was created by Japan’s accommodation of the belief-centered, foreign notion of religion (see, e.g., Yamaori 1996, 4–6).

While these perspectives stressing historical continuities and discontinuities are useful in illuminating ritual practice in today’s Kamakura, this study will focus mainly on discovering situated accounts of ritual actions from the perspectives of ritual practitioners. By exploring ritual’s meaning and relevance for those who maintain no strong commitment to religion, this ethnographic study will attempt to complement historical studies focusing on long-term change in ritual in modern Japan as well as surveys on ritual that provide large-scale trends at a national level.

**Notes on Fieldwork**

To understand how the meanings of ritual activity are (re)produced for the majority, I elected to concentrate not on a particular religious organization but on nonspecialists who are not particularly committed to any specific religion. Yet, it was not easy to obtain their perspectives. I did not
have the founder of a religious organization or the author of a sacred
text to whom I could turn. People I met in Kamakura were hesitant to
discuss such issues as religious faith. Moreover, most people were reluc-
tant to claim personal authority on ritual matters; they often thought it
necessary to consult other sources of authority to explain rituals. Some
referred to ethnological books about Kamakura; others suggested that I
talk to a priest. In the case of neighborhood festivals, names of “elders”
were cited as a source of information. A retired journalist in his early
sixties who had written a memo about neighborhood festivals and
customs told me that people in Kamakura are already modernized. He
said they no longer practice the “traditional” and “authentic” rituals
described in ethnological works.

Yet my informants never referred to “the Japanese tradition” as a
way of explaining what they did. Their response contrasts with the expla-
nations an American colleague obtained when he studied Shinto rituals
in southern Japan. When pressed by “why” questions, his informants
reported: “We do this ritual because it is part of the Japanese tradition.”
My informants, on the other hand, cited certain aspects of the ritual that
are unique to Kamakura or their own neighborhood. The only time I
heard people explain their rituals by referring to “the Japanese tradi-
tion” was during the dedication of medieval archery at a shrine. Since the
event attracts many tourists including foreigners, the announcement
was made in English to cast it as truly traditionally Japanese.22

Despite people’s reluctance, I kept asking for their personal views
of ritual activity. Things began to go more easily when I began asking for
explanations they might give to a child. I assumed that people wanted to
teach children what is appropriate and important about ritual actions,
and their explanations to them would likely contain what they consid-
ered to be significant. This approach evolved as I observed adults and
children interacting with each other on ritual occasions during field-
work. Furthermore, questions about movements, gestures, and place in
ritual contexts often led to interesting discussions. Thus I began to focus
on the meaning of certain gestures, movements, ritual objects, ritual
sites, and placement of bodies and objects.

To be sure, I was including diverse populations and rituals in which
people commonly participate. I talked to people of various ages, gen-
ders, and classes, and observed a range of rituals: domestic rites, visits
to ancestral graves, life-cycle rites, festivals.23 During fourteen months
of fieldwork I attended more than eighty scheduled rituals, both Shinto and Buddhist, mostly public events in the oldest section of Kamakura City. When no rituals were scheduled, I visited workplaces and houses, conducted interviews, and observed people at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. At the end of my stay, I conducted a questionnaire survey about ritual life (N = 142).

I was an anomaly in the field—not because I look Japanese but am not, like American scholars of Japanese descent such as Hamabata (1990) and Kondo (1990), but because I did not fit into the life-course progression expected in Kamakura. Typically people there are expected to graduate from college, get a full-time job, marry, and have a family. These life phases tend not to overlap (Brinton 1992), particularly for women. Although women used to quit their full-time jobs when they got married, these days they are more likely to quit when they have children, and reenter the workforce—often as part-time employees—once their children are mature enough. I did not fit into this scheme. I was old enough to have a full-time job but didn’t. And yet, unlike the typical student, I was not dependent on parents. In addition, I was old enough to have a family but lived alone. Furthermore, I often crossed lines of gender in male-centered networks of artisans and merchants. Since I was married, I did not have the experience of Matthews Hamabata (1990)—his informants tried to arrange a meeting with a prospective spouse.

Generally people treated me as not yet completely mature but beyond the immature stage of a dependent student. This depiction was partly strategic, because the largest initial problem I faced in the field was finding an entry into the community. Informants did not understand why I was interested in their everyday lives and what seemed trivial and obvious to them. In this my identity as a Japanese played a part—informants assumed that what they did would be self-evident to a Japanese person. My experience was very different from that of my American colleagues: they tend to stand out in Japan, and people usually assume foreigners need help. I, however, blended in quite well in Kamakura, a city that draws many tourists. To gain access to people and information, I needed to convey the idea that I needed explanations and introductions. My contacts with people in the initial stages of fieldwork, therefore, did not come as easily as they did for my American counterparts. Once I found a few people who were socially important and willing to give me introductions, though, fieldwork became efficient.
To protect the privacy of people who participated in this study, all informants’ names in this book are pseudonyms. Place-names and attributes of some locations in Kamakura have also been changed.

Old Kamakura: The Site

Kamakura City, located at the southeastern end of Kanagawa Prefecture on Sagami Bay, is a city of 169,112 people (as of 1 March 2004) occupying 39.53 square kilometers (Figure 1). An hour away by train from Tokyo, Kamakura is an urban place with factories, commercial districts, family businesses, schools, hospitals, and modest farming and fishing populations. It is home to a diverse population typically found in urban communities elsewhere in Japan: white-collar workers, office clerks, civil servants, owners of small businesses, shopkeepers, housewives, students of different ages, children, and retired persons. Although Kamakura is urban, people often told me that it is “underdeveloped” (inaka) because it lacks the exciting nightlife and big commercial districts offered by major cities such as Tokyo and Osaka.

I conducted fieldwork in the district of Kamakura (Old Kamakura), one of the city’s five. It is often assumed that people tend to be less concerned about social conventions, including ritual life, in urban areas. Yet despite its modern, urban lifestyle, Old Kamakura is known for a variety of ritual occasions. I therefore chose the district as a research site for a combination of reasons: its tradition of urbanism, residential stability, the presence of famous religious establishments, and frequent rituals and festivals.

Old Kamakura is best known to the public as a historic place because it was the capital during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). The glory of Kamakura did not last long, however. It declined to the status of a provincial city during the Muromachi period (1333–1568) and was a little more than a collection of villages during the Edo (1603–1868). The town regained some of its prosperity when it became a prestigious resort for the national elites during the Meiji period (1868–1912). This was a time when the construction of health resorts became popular, along with many other aspects of the West’s material culture and customs. Later, as the transport system improved, Kamakura became a bedroom community of Tokyo and remains so to this day.

As elsewhere in Japan, whether people are employed or run their
own businesses—and, in the case of employees, their company’s size—shapes their identity in Old Kamakura. In general, white-collar employees of large corporations embody a new middle-class ideal; their positions are often considered more prestigious than those of the locally self-employed people (jieigyō) who run small family businesses, such as greengrocers, beauty-salon owners, electricians, and tea merchants. Yet such ideas are often contested in multiple ways (Kondo 1990). Company employees, for example, are considered to have surrendered creativity and freedom in exchange for job security. The self-employed are
considered freer and more independent, but their positions do have less prestige in mainstream society.

On a return visit to Kamakura in 2001, however, I discovered the waning prominence of white-collar employees in an economy in recession. Jobs at prestigious corporations are no longer assumed to be utterly secure, because the recession makes it difficult for these companies to ensure lifetime job security for all the regular (male) employees. Yet the situation for the self-employed is not significantly better, as the recession hit small-scale businesses even harder. During my return visit, an electrician who used to employ eight workers in 1996 told me that he now employs only two.

A person’s work status is considered to manifest itself in attitudes, values, and lifestyles, including ritual life. The new middle-class people, for example, tend to be commuters who largely withdraw from community life; they leave Kamakura in the morning and come back in the evening. The old middle class, however, often live and tend their businesses in Kamakura. As a result, unlike the commuters, the locally self-employed are characterized by overlapping social, political, and economic networks. One person easily finds connections to another person through kinship ties, business ties, neighborhood ties, school ties, and friendship. Frequently I heard statements such as “Oh, he and I went to the same middle school,” “Oh, she is my husband’s relative,” “My third son and her daughter were classmates,” or “We’re neighbors.” Wives of commuters who came from Tokyo and moved to Kamakura when they married often described Kamakura as “narrow” (semai) because people tend to maintain such overlapping social networks. Due to their involvement in these networks, compared with salaried employees, self-employed people play a central role in community rites.

A Tour of Old Kamakura

Early on weekday mornings, commuters in formal dress arrive at Kamakura railway station by car, bus, bicycle, and on foot to get to their workplaces. During the day, particularly on weekends, flocks of tourists arrive at the station. Great waves of tourists visit during the seasons of cherry blossoms in April, hydrangea flowers in June, and fall leaves in November. Yet despite all the tourists, the city gains little economic benefit from its proximity to Tokyo, where most visitors stay.
At the left edge of Kamakura station’s traffic circle, a torii gate indicates a beginning of a pathway leading to the renowned Tsuruoka Hachimangū Shrine (or just Hachimangū) via Komachi Street. The street is full of cafés and a variety of eating places offering full courses, lunch boxes, noodles, ice cream, and crepes. Tourists slowly zigzag down the street as they stop at fashionable boutiques, antique shops, china shops, and an incense store. Among the souvenir shops, a few stores for locals coexist, such as a tofu bean curd shop, beauty salons, bookstores, pharmacies, and an electric appliance store. Smells come from open-air stands baking rice crackers and steaming *omanjū* sweets. Natives on bicycles skillfully navigate through the crowd. In spring and fall, groups of students on school trips, dressed in dark-blue uniforms, block the street as they walk in lines following their teachers.

Komachi Street brings a visitor to Hachimangū, the symbolic center of Kamakura. Originally built by the founder of the Kamakura shogunate, the shrine houses Hachiman-sama, protector of Kamakura’s residents. Many tourists carry the dove-shaped cookies in bright-yellow paper bags decorated with the design of a large white dove—messenger of Hachiman-sama. Businesspeople are quick to employ symbols of Kamakura to their advantage. Hachimangū attracts a couple of million people every January, often ranking among the ten most popular sites for New Year visits in Japan. Wakamiya Ōji, the busiest main street, with its cars, bicycles, and pedestrians, connects Hachimangū and the beach areas in the south. Along the main street there are restaurants, groceries, bakeries, souvenir shops, a tatami-mat maker, a shoji-screen maker, a sword sharpener, sweetshops, a hospital, and a Catholic church.

Typically of Japan, Kamakura city consists of numerous neighborhoods (*chō*), and neighborhood associations act as semipublic institutions bridging residents and the municipal government. Old Kamakura is divided into eighteen neighborhoods, each of which is considered to have its distinctive characteristics. The neighborhood of Yuigahama along the beach, for example, used to be the center of prosperity during the resort era. Yet the popular and prosperous inns and hotels no longer exist; smaller residential homes have replaced them. On Yuigahama Street, a sweetshop occupies a Western-style concrete building that once impressed people with its modern appearance. With cracks in its wall, it no longer seems very modern. An old-fashioned fish store remains in business and is still known for its “second-home” price—the higher...
prices charged to wealthy vacationers with summerhouses during the resort era. I was told that this shop used to take orders from the house of the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Kawabata Yasunari. Descendants of summer vacationers, occupying much smaller lots they inherited, are scattered throughout the beach area. No longer a luxury limited to the nation’s elite class, the beaches along Sagami Bay currently attract surfers and swimmers from late spring to early autumn. On weekends the bay, inundated with the colorful triangular sails of windsurfers, resembles a garden full of flowers. A small number of families still practice fishery in small boats, specializing in the aquaculture of seaweed and inshore fish. Early in the morning, older men and women can be seen collecting seaweed on the sandy beach.

In the late afternoon, the Kamakura station area bustles with housewives shopping for the evening meal. Large national-chain supermarkets stock regular, mass-produced foodstuffs, while Tokyo-based upscale supermarkets carry expensive imported food. Some of the small-scale, family-owned businesses deal in local products. Energetic shopkeepers quickly fillet and sell trays of shore fish. Farming women from neighboring communities bring their homegrown vegetables to the market. Local high school students stop at ice-cream stands or fast-food places like Kentucky Fried Chicken. On my recent visit to Kamakura in 2003, I discovered a Starbucks providing coffee lovers with an all-nonsmoking environment rarely found in Japan. The diversity of these businesses meets the needs of a diverse clientele.

By late evening, tourists are leaving and commuters are coming home. Most souvenir shops and restaurants close as soon as the tide of tourists begins to ebb, as early as six or so. At ten thirty in the evening, bus service ends for the day and gleaming black cabs take over the traffic roundabout. From a distance they resemble a school of black fish at the bottom of a dark ocean. Lighting up their headlights as commuters jump in, they disappear into the deep and quiet residential areas, away from the main streets. Although Kamakura’s past makes it a unique place for residents, except for the presence of tourists in many respects the city looks just like other bedroom communities in Japan.