THE JAPANESE WAY OF DEATH

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The process of dying and the funerary practices for the dead have changed greatly in Japan, influenced by professionalization and the division of labor. With the rise of medical institutions and the funeral industry after World War II, dying and death have moved away from home and community to hospitals and funeral auditoriums. The transition in the treatment of dying and death illustrates the shifts not only in the values of death but also in personal relationships and social networks. This chapter compares Japanese death in traditional communities with death in industrialized society and also introduces new funerary trends invented by consumers, which in turn, are incorporated by funeral industry with even more innovations. These examinations demonstrate that the changes in the transformation of practices parallel the shifts in the values of death, the afterlife, and the relationship between the living and the dead, as well as the new form of integration in contemporary Japan.

DEATH RITUALS IN COMMUNITIES:
FUNERALS TO POSTFUNERAL RITUALS

Until the development of the funeral industry after World War II, family and community members knew what was required of them when a person died. According to an 84-year-old elder from Michihara, Kita-Kyūshū City, young people today do not have any practical knowledge of how to deal with death. The first thing they do is simply call a funeral company. From this elder’s view, they act like helpless children; such an embarrassing situation never arose in the past. What is amazing to the elder is that not only are young people ignorant about death but also they are not ashamed of their lack of knowledge. When asked what is most different about today’s funerals from those before World War II, the elder answered,

People were superstitious in those days. When a woman was pregnant she wasn’t allowed to go near the deceased. It was said that if a cat jumped over the deceased’s head, the evil spirit of the animal would go into the corpse and make the body rise up. The cat was kept away from the dead when there had been death in the family.

The Japanese concept of death before World War II has changed dramatically concomitant with the transformation of funeral practices after the war. Central to this shift is the rise of the funeral industry in the postwar period. The two key terms, “funeral rituals” (sôshiki) and “funeral ceremonies,” (o-tôshiki or sôgi), illustrate this distinction. Funeral rituals are community-based, whereas funeral ceremonies are commercialized funerals serviced by the industry. Funeral ritual was the only term used for funerals in Japan before World War II. Today, however, they are commonly referred to as funeral ceremonies, because according to some, “funeral rituals” sound vulgar. This shift in terminology reflects changes not only in the image but, more important, in the structure of funerals and the values surrounding death. Community funerals reflected the participants’ fear of death, which they believed caused the release of malevolent spirits. The ritual’s purpose was to usher the deceased’s spirit safely to the other world and to strengthen family ties as well as the relationship between the deceased’s family and community members. In contrast, in contemporary funeral ceremonies, the widespread use of cremation and the comprehensive services provided by the funeral industry have significantly decreased the concept of the impurity of death.

1. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time in which funeral performances were handed over to professionals. Because the expansion of the funeral industry started from large cities, remote areas continued to perform funerals by themselves. For example, Jane M. Bachnik (1995) who studied a community located in eastern Nagano prefecture observed a funeral orchestrated by community members in 1969. Gradually, however, the elders of the communities passed away, and funeral companies spread into distant localities (Himunya 1994:171)

2. I conducted fieldwork at MoonRise, a largest funeral company in Kita-Kyūshű City, Japan between October 1994 to May 1995. During this time, I also interviewed elders about the community funerals before World War II.
funeral ceremony provided by a funeral company, the deceased is treated as "alive" until the time of cremation. Whereas funeral rituals are dedicated to protect the living from death pollution as well as protecting the deceased from evil spirits, the funeral ceremony centers on beautification of the deceased’s life and memories. In the following, the comparison of funeral processes in a community funeral before World War II and a funeral ceremony after the war demonstrates the changing concept of death in contemporary Japan (Suzuki 2001).

The Community Funeral Rituals

What is referred to here as community death rituals prevailed before World War II. Community funerals began to fade as commercial funeral services offered by funeral industry to expand beginning from cities to rural areas. The funeral and wedding industry began their business after World War II from an urban setting by replacing community ties. Most Japanese faced economic difficulties after the war and had trouble affording a lump sum funeral payment. Thus the business was based on the Mutual-Aid System (gojokai seido) in which they recruited Mutual Aid Cooperative members (gojokaiin) who would pay monthly fee that could be used for either a wedding or a funeral and were predominantly Buddhist in character. They consisted of four types of rites for the deceased: (a) the rites of attempted resuscitation (sospe), (b) the rites of breaking bonds (Zetsuen), (c) the rites of achieving Buddhahood (jobutsu), and (d) the rites of memorial services (tsuizen). (Akata 1980:125-45). Specifically speaking, the first two rituals are funeral practices involving a dying person and the deceased’s physical corpse, and the latter two rituals are postfuneral or mourning practices dealing with the spirit of the deceased. The common theme running through these ritual performances is a transition of the deceased’s spirit from malevolent (ara-mitama) to peaceful (niginitama) or a shift from an impure to a pure state free of death pollution.

Sospe and Zetsuen Rituals: The Rites of Attempted Resuscitation and Breaking Bonds

The rite of attempted resuscitation took place when a person was dying; the family member who sat closest would dip a bamboo chopstick wrapped with cotton on one end into water and wet the dying person’s lips. Sometimes bird feathers were used instead of chopsticks and cotton, but the purpose was the same—to give last water (matsugo no mizu) in a final attempt to resurrect the dying person. At the last moment of life, the family would also call out the deceased’s name (tama-yobai); in some cases, this was performed from a top of a house roof. These rites reflected the belief that the embodiment of the soul or the detachment of the spirit from a body defined life and death.

Villagers called a doctor only after the family was certain of a person’s death. His task was not to resurrect the deceased but to verify death and provide a death certificate so the family could acquire burial permission from the local government.

After the failed resuscitation attempt, the family closed the deceased’s eyes by gently stroking the eyelids and folded the deceased’s hands in the posture of prayer (gassho). The deceased’s face was turned upright or toward the west and covered with a white cloth. The mattress was turned so that the deceased’s head faced north. A razor or a sword was placed on or beside the mattress. In Kita-Kyushu areas, the golden folded screen (kin byōbu) owned by each community was erected upside down at the bedside. The purpose of maneuvering these objects was twofold: (a) to ward off malevolent spirits that might enter the body or the deceased and (b) to differentiate the period of time from ordinary days (Saitō 1986:29-81).

Death was referred to as the “black shadow” (kurobi-gakari) or black pollution (koku-fujō) and was considered dangerous not only to the living but also to deities. The family placed an announcement, "in mourning" (kichū or mochū), on the house gate to inform others of the danger. They also covered their shrine altar (kamidana) with white paper to protect the deities from death pollution. The bereaved also avoided visiting any shrines for a year after the death of a family member to avoid polluting the deities.

The community cooperative or mutual-aid group (kumi or kōgumi) consisted of five to seven households that took full responsibility for providing rituals for the deceased and his or her family. This group helped with funeral rituals as well as with transplanting rice crops, building houses, repairing roofs, conducting weddings, and other annual festivities.
After a doctor had pronounced the person dead, a family member notified the head of the community organization. The community head (kumi-chō), a role that was taken in turn by the household heads of a kumi, was responsible for assigning someone to fetch a Buddhist priest, to inform relatives who lived far from the village, and to buy the materials necessary for the wake and funeral (which included decorative papers for ritual ornaments and food for before and after the funeral). The food included different kinds of tofu (bean curd), which was indispensable as the main ingredient of the dishes because no meat was allowed. Because vegetarian food was considered to be pure, it helped the living purify themselves from death pollution (Gorai 1992:859–62). Finally, the community head ordered a local handicraft shop to build a coffin.

On the evening of the wake, the kumi-chō gathered male kumi members to discuss the rest of the jobs. One of the most important tasks was digging the grave. Other tasks were making all the necessary items—the death flower (shikabana or shikanohana),7 a box for the memorial tablet and death flower (haibako),8 dragons (tatsuguchi or tatsugashira),9 a box roof (akoya or tengai),10 and six candle stands (hi or kōshō).11 Most of these objects had to be made by hand because they were used only once and were left at the burial site or burned after the funeral. Last, men were assigned to arrange the funeral altar, to bring from the temple the objects that the priests would use, and to lead the procession to the grave.

The deceased was left on his or her mattress until the priest arrived to read the first sutra changing (makura-gyō). When the priest had finished the recitation and the sun was down, the bereaved performed a bathing ritual (yukan) for the deceased. The ritual was performed by close family members at home and those who inherited the household.12 They shaved his or her head (the sign of a Buddhist disciple) and clipped his or her nails. The bathing ritual was performed to cleanse the impurity of the deceased and further safeguard both the deceased and the living from death pollution. Water was seen as the medium into which all malevolent elements could be dissolved, and its symbolic power gave the bathing ritual its value. Moreover, the objective of the bathing ritual was to wash away the deceased’s past sins so that he or she would be able to achieve Buddhahood (Gorai 1992:1002).

After the bathing ritual, the deceased was dressed in a white death robe (kyō-katabira), a triangular head cloth (zukin), a pair of hand guards (sekkō), a pair of knee guards, and a pair of Japanese-style socks (shiro-tabi). This attire symbolized pilgrimage and prepared the deceased for a journey to gain Buddhahood. Three women of the community followed strict rules in making the death robe. They measured the cloth by hand instead of with a ruler, tore the cloth instead of cutting it with scissors, sewed the seams so that the stitches were visible, left the ends of the threads untied, and made no collar. Making the garment different from the clothes worn by the living emphasized the contrast between life and death (Matsudaire 1963:189). The deceased, dressed in the death robe, was placed in a round, casklike coffin (maru-kan), which forced the corpse into a sitting posture with the knees bent. Family members, commonly men, put on the lid. “From this point on the deceased was called a hotoke-sama [Bodhisattva]” (Bachnik 1995:125), further separating the deceased from the living (Zetsuen).

After the body had been prepared for its journey into the afterlife, kumi members made a funeral altar from flat wooden boards. The altar stood at the center of a room, and on it were an incense pot, food offerings, and a vase of white chrysanthemums. Meanwhile, the bereaved brought out the deceased’s kimono and hung it outside on a bamboo stick facing north. This performance as a part of the Zetsuen ritual continued until the 7th day of death. The kimono was doused at the horn in a pool of water and was kept moist for 7 days and 7 nights. A former elementary schoolteacher in Tenrai explained to me that the kimono represented the deceased crossing the river located to the north, which lies at the boundary to the world of the afterlife (sanzu-no-kawa). The kimono was taken away on the 8th day to show that the deceased’s spirit had crossed the river safely and had liberated itself from the world of the living.

7. Shikabana is written in characters three different ways: as death flower, paper flower, and four flowers. It is made of four thin wooden sticks about 7 inches long. The narrow white paper is cut and rolled onto these sticks to look like flowers. The four sticks are then erected on a square of wood. A narrow piece of black paper tied around the four corners makes a sort of container. The memorial tablet is then placed in the middle.
8. The death flower was traditionally placed on the grave. Gorai explains that the death flower indicated the whereabouts of the deceased’s burial site for the living. At the same time, it marked the boundary between the world of the afterlife and the world of the living for the soul of the deceased.
9. Two tatsuguchi, one male and one female dragon, were made from bamboo sticks and paper. The head of the dragon was made by slicing the bamboo stick and the body was wrapped with black and white paper. These were carried by the person who led the coffin and family members to the burial site.
10. Three types of box roofs, akoya, tengai, and roppōkan, were used in Kita-Kyōshō. Akoya (Buddha’s house) is made out of paper shaped like a triangular house roof. It was placed in top of the coffin during the procession and led behind the burial mound. Beautiful paintings of lotus flowers or a phoenix were drawn on it by community members. Not all communities in Kita-Kyōshō, however, used the same shape of roof. Tengai (heaven cover) or roppōkan (six-sided container) were used in other localities.
11. Hi were substitutes for candles; usually six units were placed on both sides of the road that led to the burial site. They were also called kōshō because they were made of short bamboo sticks on top of which a red pepper (tōgarashi or kōshō in this region) was tied. The red pepper was supposed to ward off evil spirits (Saitō 1986:114). The six hi represented the six levels of incarnation in Buddhism: heaven, the human world, the world of carnage, the animal world, the world of devils, and hell.
12. Gorai (1992:999–1047) indicates that those who had been responsible for the bathing ritual were household inheritors. In Bachnik’s (1995:123) observation, however, the task was performed by the closest women in the core of households.
Tsuya (Wake), Sōshiki (Funeral), and Kokubetsushiki (Announcement-of-Leave-Taking Ceremony)

The Zetsuen ritual consisted of the wake, funeral, and announcement-of-leave-taking ritual. Usually an announcement-of-leave-taking ritual is encompassed within a funeral ritual, and it refers to performances specifically expressing farewell to the deceased such as chōji (memorial addresses being read) at the last part of a funeral. For the well-known deceased, however, an announcement-of-leave-taking ritual was carried out in temples after a funeral took place at home. The intention of an announcement-of-leave-taking ritual was to accommodate space and provide an opportunity for a large number of guests to participate in a funeral ritual.

The wake began after sunset with a priest chanting a sutra. After the chanting, each family member and neighbor who gathered for the ritual lit an incense stick and offered it to the deceased (shōkō). Community women helped the family serve tea and sweets to guests. The priests stayed with the family and joined in conversation about the deceased. The women participants might leave early, but most men remained until late, drinking sake and talking. The community head allotted the funeral tasks to different men in the kumi, and his wife organized the community women in preparing for the vegetarian dishes (otoki) for the funeral meal. Although the menu itself was predetermined, the women had to decide who would cook each of the five to seven different vegetarian dishes. The food was served on a set of trays and plates and in bowls that the community owned in common. Because using fire and cooking were prohibited in the deceased’s house, the food was prepared at a neighbor’s home. Several women went to that house to help clean and to arrange the trays for the next day.

After the guests left the wake, the deceased’s family stayed awake throughout the night. They took turns making sure the incense and candles continued to burn so that no evil spirits would enter the deceased’s body (Saïtô 1986:50–54).

On the day of the funeral (the wake might last two or three days while family members gathered), members of the immediate family wore white robes (shiro-nokai), with white Japanese-style socks (shiro-tabi) and clogs with white thongs (shiro-hanao). The women wore their long hair tied at the nape of the neck and donned white hats (wata-bōshi). More distant relatives and neighbors wore black kimonos. Different clothes distinguished kin with the closest relationships to the deceased from those with more distant relationships and indicated who was most contaminated.

Around noon, the family and relatives, served by women in the community, ate a vegetarian meal with the deceased. The same meal, served exactly the same way, was also offered to the deceased. The dinner was called departure food (detachi no zen) and was the last communal dinner (family dinner) with the deceased. All family members drank a cup of rice wine (sake) for farewell and to purify themselves from death pollution.

Meanwhile, two community members stood at the doorway of the deceased’s house to meet the guests and record the incense money or condolence gifts (kōden) in the gift book. This practice was important to the maintenance of community cooperation because the giving of a gift must always be reciprocated on some other occasion (Kurata 1979:223). In Kita-Kyūshū, close family members brought one straw sack (ippyo, 60 kg) of rice, and neighbors and friends brought one bag (issho, 1.5 kg) of rice or the money equivalent. The elder I interviewed emphasized that a fixed amount was set so that all the gifts were the same among community members. The rice bags were piled in the open corridor of the living room with name tags to show who had given them. Relatives and friends also brought cloth flags at half-mast (chōki) as gifts.

The funeral usually began in the late afternoon with the arrival of the priest. If the household was wealthy, two or three priests officiated. The priests sat directly behind the coffin. Behind the priests sat the deceased’s family members, other relatives, friends, and neighbors in that order. The funeral began with a priest’s sutra recitation, which was the major part of a funeral. The memorial address (chōji) was read by close family members or friends who talked about the deceased. Thereafter, each person offered incense to the deceased. The coffin was then opened to allow family members to view the deceased for the last time and to put in food (e.g., cooked rice balls and sweets), thread and needles for women or a razor for men, coins (rokumonsen), and other personal belongings. These items were placed in the coffin for the deceased to use on the journey to Buddhahood.

The family used a stone as a hammer to nail the coffin shut; nails were considered effective to keep the deceased separate from the living. The chief mourner was first to hammer a nail into the coffin with a stone, followed by the other family members and relatives, moving from the closest to furthest in relationship. The two kinsmen then turned the coffin counterclockwise three times; it was then removed through a window instead of the door. As soon as the coffin was out of the house, the deceased’s rice bowl was smashed on the ground as a gesture of separation. I was told that these

13. The deceased’s family ate only vegetarian food for 49 days after the death. It was believed that for that period of time the soul of the deceased lingered on top of the house and that vegetarian food prevented the household from succumbing to its impurity.

14. Sometimes the deceased’s house was too small to allow all the priests and the bereaved to sit behind the coffin. In those cases, a stage was made at the outside space directly behind where the deceased’s coffin was placed. The priests sat on chairs (kakunoko), and a community member held an umbrella over them.
bond-breaking (Zetsuen) practices were performed to keep the deceased’s death spirit from returning home.

The noboekuri (procession) was the highlight of the funeral ritual. All the kumi members (except for the very old, the very young, and the pregnant women) walked in the procession to the burial site. Two kumi members had left earlier to place candle stands along the way. The procession was led by the men of the kumi, followed by the family members, relatives, friends, and kumi women. The sequence of the procession was as follows: a kumi member with the firebrand, a kumi member holding banners at half-mast, two members carrying bamboo dragons, the priest(s), the chief mourner carrying the memorial tablet, the second chief mourner with the death flower, the remaining family members and relatives, a kumi member holding the heaven cover (tengai) over the coffin, two kinsmen carrying the coffin, and friends, neighbors, and kumi women. A long strip of cloth was tied around the coffin and extended behind it; from there it was held by a line of kumi women. In wealthy households, a carriage full of sweets followed the procession. The sweets were passed out to children on the way to the burial site with the aim of feeding the hungry spirits (segaki, literally meaning “providing for the evil spirits”) that gather around a death. When the procession reached the gravesite, the coffin was again turned counterclockwise three times and then lowered into the grave with four ropes. The chief mourner was the first to shovel soil on top of the coffin. Other family members and relatives followed in turn. Each time a person finished a shoveling, he or she laid the shovel on the ground instead of handing it to the next person (also part of the Zetsuen ritual). Throughout, a priest recited sutra. Finally, the bereaved took off their clogs and left them at the site. Those male kumi members responsible for filling in the grave remained while the rest of the procession returned home without turning back. After reaching home, they sprinkled salt over their clothes and rubbed and washed their hand with it to cleanse themselves from death pollution before entering.

Meanwhile, the three men who had dug the grave buried the coffin. They filled in the hole and made a rounded mound. The box roof from the procession was put on top of the mound together with the death flowers and memorial tablet. All community members waited to eat dinner (bone-kami, literally meaning "bone-biting") until the three men returned from the grave to take their place at the head of the table. The kumi men ate first, waited on by the women, who fed themselves and the children later. At the end of the meal, offerings of food and sweets were distributed among all kumi members.

JOBUTSU and TSUIZEN Rituals: The Rites of Achieving Buddhahood and the Rites of Memorial Services

The Rites of Achieving Buddhahood implies ritual performances that take place after the funeral through the 49th day (shijakunichi, shichisichinichinichi, or nanananaka) after the death of the deceased, and rites of memorial services are performances after shijakunichi (Akata 1986: 97). The former focuses on ushering the deceased’s spirit to Buddhahood, and the latter emphasizes the transition of a spirit to the household ancestor. In general, however, the two rituals are complementary and can be seen as two sequential phases of one process that aims “to transform the spirit of the dead (shirei) to the status of an ancestral spirit (sorei)” (Smith 1974:72).

In Buddhism, the duration from the time of death to the arrival of the deceased’s spirit to the other world is called chain (Nihon Bunka Kyokai 1993:150), and the 49th day (counting from the day of the deceased’s death) proclaims the end of mourning period (imiake) (Kita-Kyushu Kyokuiinkai, later Kita-Kyushu Education Committee [KEC] 1988:57). It is considered that during this transitional period the deceased’s spirit is judged every 7 days whether it deserves to be a Buddha (hotoke) (Nihon Bunka Kyokai 1993:150). The deceased’s family members performed rituals on each 7th day until the 49th day (shonanoka, futananoka, minanoka, yonanoka, itsunanoka, munanoka, shijakunichi), hoping that the deceased will be deemed worthy to achieve the Buddhahood (Nihon Bunka Kyokai 1993:150). Among them, the first and the last 7th day, shonanoka and shijakunichi, were regarded as most important and were performed by calling in priests, gathering family and relatives, and having commensality in which the members related to the deceased share a formal meal to commemorate the dead (KEC 1988:56). During the transitional period of the deceased, the deceased’s family members are considered to be under death pollution. After the rite of the 49th day, the deceased was reckoned to have arrived at the other world, and this signaled the end of the mourning period—imiake—lifting of the pollution—which entitled the living to return to full status in the community (Smith 1974:95).

The tsuzen rituals are a series of memorial services for the dead conducted after the 49th day. There are two categories of memorial services: (a) those for the particular deceased and (b) those for the collective deceased of the household or the family. For each specific deceased, there are three kinds of rituals. One is the shitsuki-meinichi (annual deathday rite), which marks the date of the person’s death every year (Smith 1974:95). The second is

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15. I was told that participants later cut up the cloth to keep.
16. The term was used in the Kita-Kyushu area to mean the dinner served after cooperating in the labor for the funeral.
17. According to Kita-Kyushu Kyokuiin (Kita-Kyushu Education Committee 1988:57) if 49 days from the date of death spanned 3 months then the bereaved terminated the rite of Buddhahood on the itsunanoka, 35th day. According to Robert Smith (1974:92), it was the 49th day for men and the 35th day for women.
the maitsuki-meirichi (monthly death day rite), which marks the date of death on a monthly basis (Smith 1974:95). The third is nenki (periodic anniversary rites), conducted on the intervals of 1st-, 3rd-, 7th-, 13th-, 17th-, 23rd-, 27th-, 33rd-, 37th-, 50th-, and 100th-year anniversaries (Smith 1974:95; Nihon Bunka Kyōkai 1993:153). The final rite, often the 50th, is called the tomuraiage and deems the deceased to have achieved the status of the household ancestor (KEC 1988:58). In these rituals, priests are invited to read sutras for the specific deceased and commensality takes place among family and relatives who will then visit the deceased’s grave (hakamairi) (Smith 1974:95; Nihon Bunka Kyōkai 1993:153).

“The memorial services for the collectivity of the dead” (Smith 1974) are performed at shōgatsu (New Year), bon Festival (Festival of the Dead, August 13–15), and higan (vernal and autumnal equinoxes). The dead are also honored collectively every morning and evening when family members offer fresh rice and water, and incense is burned at the ancestral altar at home. “The only exception is the first bon after death (katusubon or nibon), when the spirit of the newly dead is singled out for special attention” (Smith 1974:98–99; also see Akata 1986:111).

Festival of the Dead or bon is the most elaborate among the rites for the collectivity of the dead. It is considered that during bon, the ancestral spirits return from the other world to visit the living. The family members visited ancestral graves (hakamairi), swept off dust, and kindled fire (mukaebi, literally meaning “welcoming fire”). On the first night, the welcoming fire is set at the entrance of the house to bring back and greet the dead (Smith 1974:100). In agricultural areas, the welcoming fire was also made at the top of a mountain, and in harbor communities, the fire was set up on a beach (Akata 1988:207). In some areas, a small boat (mukae-bune) was sent to a stream to greet ancestral spirits (Akata 1988:207). At home, the altar was dusted and decorated with offerings, and lanterns were lit (Smith 1974:100). At the end of the bon festival, the okuri-bi (farewell) fire was prepared and the deceased were sent back to the other world by shōryō-nagashi (literally, “flowing of a spirit”). Offerings that were placed on the altar were arranged inside a miniature boat (shōryō-bune) and set adrift into a stream by candlelight. Similar to the bon Festival, the living visit and clean ancestral graves and present abundant offerings during New Year and vernal and autumnal equinoxes.

Rites of memorial services for the deceased are performed not only by individual households but also by community members. The condition of the dead is as important for the former as for the latter. The collective ritual performances “seem bent on neutralizing or evicting [the dead] periodically” (Stefánsson 1995:84) and symbolize the intention of community members to purify the space of the living (Akata 1988:206). For example, segaki18 and bon odori practices are performances of community members whose objective is to purify the collective dead (Stefánsson 1995). Tera-segaki (services for the unmourned dead at temples) are held under the cooperation of community members and temple priests. An altar is set up near the entrance of a temple where memorial tablets of past priests, the war dead, war heroes, those deceased without progeny, those who died young, those who died in accidents, those of aborted or miscarried fetuses (mizuko), and those who died during the year, are placed on the altar along with food offerings (Stefánsson 1995:95). In the ritual, priests chant sutras and community members burn incense for these dead. Bon odori or bon dances are held on the first or the second night at a temple courtyard, schoolyard, or community space where community members dance to the music and taiko (Japanese drum). The purpose of the dances are to “[pacify] the spirits of the dead who were seen as crowding the world of the living during bon Festival (Festival of the Dead), through the collective demonstration of vitality and joyous harmony” (Stefánsson 1995:98).

Thus the rites of Buddhahood and memorial services presents two opposed but complementary forces in action, which Stefánsson (1995) terms “cycle of deification,” and “cycle of purification,” “[The cycle of deification] is primarily of a positive nature idealizing the household unit through a cycle of rituals, while the cycle of purification gives expression for a primarily negative conception of death engaging the entire community” (p. 103).

COMMERCIALIZED FUNERAL CEREMONIES

Contemporary funeral rituals are commercialized ceremonies prepared by funeral professionals. Unlike community funerals, the objective is not to shift the deceased’s malevolent spirit (ara-mitama) to a purified peaceful spirit (nigi-mitama). The performances of commercial funerals have different meanings from those of community funerals. In community funerals, rituals of attempted resurrection (Soset) were executed immediately after death. In contemporary funerals, the period from death to the hospital to the end of a funeral ceremony can also be called a phase of “resurrection,” but for a different reason. In today’s ceremony, the living neither consider death a result of spirit ascentance nor attempt the ritual resurrection. The deceased’s death is negated conceptually until the end of the funeral and accepted only at cremation. Parallelly the negation of death, contemporary funeral ceremonies suppress the concept of impurity and distance themselves from the very idea. I will not go so far as to state that death pollution or impurity is completely absent from today’s

18. Segaki implies muenbotoke or the unmourned dead. Muenbotoke are wandering souls that receive little veneration from the living, either due to their violent death or because they are without offspring. They are often feared because they are considered dangerous (Osara 1976).
funerals, but people perceive it only at the stage of cremation. Even then, it does not last for an extended period because cremation is completed within a couple of hours. In addition, ceremonial performances are not performed to appease the deceased’s spirit or to cleanse impurity; rather, they aim to construct positive memories of the deceased.

In the subsequent sections, contemporary dying and death, including the major stages of funeral ceremony—encoffining, the transportation of the deceased, the consultation (uchiwase), the bathing ceremony (yukan), the wake (tsuya), funeral ceremony (sōgi), cremation (Đabi), and 7th-day memorial services (shōnanoka)—are analyzed.

Contemporary Dying Process in Japan

In contemporary Japan, death has transferred from the home to hospitals. In 1947, 90.8% of people died at home. In 1977, hospital death (50.6%) surpassed the number of deaths at home (49.4%). By 1990, hospital deaths increased to 75.1%, and for cancer patients, to 93.3% (Kashiwagi 1995:4-5). Perhaps the most unfortunate situation of Japanese death today is the isolation of a patient from the loved ones before death. Because the objective of medical professionals is to prolong a patient's life, unnecessary resuscitation attempts take place on dying patients (Kashiwagi 1995:17). During this time, the family members are permitted to see the patient only within a limited period of time each day. As a result, family members are secluded from their family member's last moment of death (Yanagida 1997:10-11).

There are two main characteristics of the process of dying in Japan: (a) patients' dependency on physicians and (b) involvement of family members in medical decision making. First, Japanese patients show extreme trust toward medical professionals. Their dependency on physicians is so great that the physicians themselves may make decisions on behalf of the patient (Kimura 1998:190-91). Second, physicians inform the family first, not the patient, about the terminal diagnosis and then discuss with the family whether to disclose the information to the patient (Kimura 1998:199). According to a Ministry of Public Welfare survey conducted in 1992 (subjects were the bereaved family members whose deceased were cancer patients), only 22.5% of the deceased were notified of their own illness, whereas 98.1% of their family were informed by medical professionals (Kashiwagi 1995:46). The practice of not notifying the patient about his or her illness is still the norm in Japan (Ohi 1998:178). As a result, patients prefer not to discuss the nature of one’s disease, fearing that would cause pain for their family members and friends or that they would be alienated from their social group (Ohi 1998:180-83). Thus “The patient behaves as if he had no knowledge of his imminent death to the end” (Ohi 1998:183). Despite the patients' innocent behavior, the majority of patients knew exactly their state and hopelessness of their situation (p. 182).

Traditionally, a person's death was a family affair. With the advancement of medical technology, the increase in hospitals and medical professionals, and the systematization of medical treatments, the hospitalization of patients became the standard. What was formerly the concern of the individual patient and family members was now broached by the intrusion of a third party—namely, the medical professionals, who possessed authority and control over the patient's life and death (Yanagida 1997:10). Consequently, the dying process in Japan is at the mercy of the “bureaucracy” (Weber 1946), “professionalization,” and “McDonaldization” of society (Ritzer 1993, 2000). The problem raised in this “over-equipped-medical-care” system (jōōshi iryō) is the emphasis on prolonged life and the de-emphasis on terminal care (Fujihara 1993:20).

The Encoffining (Nyukan), Transportation of the Deceased (Shukkan), and the Consultation

When a death occurs, the first task of the bereaved is to call a funeral company. On the other end of the line, a funeral staff member makes initial inquiries and records them thoroughly. A staff member opens the conversation with a formal sympathetic, “I am very sorry for the loss of your family member” (konatabiwa makotoni goshūshō samadeshita). Immediately after this line, however, the staff member quickly switches to a businesslike manner. “I apologize for the inconvenience, but I need to ask you several questions concerning the deceased.” Within 10 to 15 minutes, the following information is gathered: the name, gender, age, address, and phone number of the deceased; the name and contact information of the chief mourner; the place where the deceased has passed away; the time of death; whether the deceased was a Mutual-Aid Cooperative member (gojokai-kaiin, later MAC); the deceased’s religious affiliation; and the price of the coffin to the bereaved desires.

The most important information required before the funeral company can pick up the deceased is the coffin selection and the deceased’s religious affiliation. If the deceased or the bereaved is an MAC member, a specific set of funeral materials, including the coffin, is provided according to the price of the membership fee. An MAC member can simply have the complementary coffin or may get the more expensive ones that are often suggested by a funeral staff. The deceased’s religion and sect determines the type of coffin cover (kan ooi), the braided-twine decoration, other attachments (e.g., sword), and the deceased’s
The coffin, which has been left outside the room on the stretcher, is brought in. The coffin stands are set on the floor, the coffin is placed on the stands, and the lid removed. One funeral professional supports the deceased’s neck while the other lifts the feet and carries the deceased into the coffin. Safely encoffined, the deceased is sprayed with perfume and placed with deodorant packets and dry ice blocks around the body. The body is covered by two blankets, and the lid of the coffin is closed. The coffin cover and braided decoration are then placed on the casket (in the Buddhist case), thus completing the encoffining (nyūkan).

The coffin is then lifted onto the casket, rolled to the elevator, taken to the basement, and carried into the funeral van. The bereaved usually follow the professionals during the transportation of the coffin. The medical staff, notified again at the time of departure, gather behind the funeral van. They send off the deceased family silently by bowing and the bereaved return their bows while the funeral van slowly leaves the hospital.

The encoffined deceased is transported to his or her house or the funeral hall. In more than half of the cases in which a person has died in a hospital, however, the funeral staff are asked to take the body home first. The deceased may have expressed feelings of homesickness while hospitalized, or the family has missed the deceased and wishes the family to be united once again. This process is cumbersome for the funeral staff members because of the number of trips they have to make and the waiting time that is created. To structure this inefficiency into a meaningful efficiency, they often use this time for funeral consultation with the bereaved. For the bereaved, however, it denies the whole purpose of bringing the deceased home by disrupting the family reunion.

A consultation (uchiaiwa or juchikai) between a funeral staff member and the bereaved is a meeting approximately 1 hour in length in which the total cost of the wake and funeral ceremony is determined. A funeral professional visits his customers with a heavy black briefcase full of pamphlets and sample photographs that are significant tools for decision making. The productivity of a consultation, however, is largely due to the use of the efficient order form (mitsumorisho), which is divided into multilayered categories and sections for the wake and funeral. The form is divided in such a way that even a less experienced funeral staff member can smoothly navigate the process and aid customers in their decision making. The form lists items in a chronological and hierarchical order beginning with the price of altars that correspond to the name of the wakes and funerals. The selection of these altars is preceded...
by a funeral professional showing the photographs of what he considers the appropriate size for the deceased and his or her family. The altars for the wake and funeral are the largest expense, and the remaining orders are midprice to lower-priced items, such as ash pot, flowers, gift items, and cards. Each individual item is shown either in photos or pamphlets that clarify the cost ranges and variations in form. When all items are chosen by the bereaved, the time of the wake and funeral are decided. Interestingly, the time of these rituals does not solely depend on the preference of the deceased’s family but is negotiated with the priests and with the funeral company’s availability of funeral rooms.

The Bathing Ceremony (Nyūyoku Service)

Traditionally, the bathing ceremony (yukon) was performed by close family members at home to cleanse the impurity of the deceased and further safeguard both the deceased and the living from death pollution. The ritual ceased as the deaths occurring at home decreased and hospital deaths where nurses wipe the body with antiseptic increased. Ceremony Special Car Service (known as CSC) began marketing bathing services (nyūyoku service) by contracting with funeral companies in 1987. As of 2002, CSC had contracts with numerous companies in every prefecture in Japan and performed 12,000 to 13,000 bathing ceremonies annually (personal interview, CSC President Fuji Ryōl, December 18, 2002). Today, a bathing ceremony takes place after the deceased is picked up from the hospital and has been settled at a funeral hall (or soon after consultation with a funeral professional if the death occurred at home). A funeral professional schedules a bathing ceremony only after verbal acceptance by the deceased’s family members.

The modern version of the bathing ceremony was invented by the president of CSC, who incorporated authenticity (dentō), uniqueness (koset), and effectiveness (kōkateki) into the service. CSC intends to demonstrate authenticity by presenting their knowledge of traditional bathing rituals. The ceremony usually takes place after the consultation at the funeral hall or at the deceased’s home. It starts with staff members announcing the beginning of the ceremony and explaining the meaning underlying the performance. The uniqueness of the bathing ceremony is expressed in the negation of the concept of impurity and instead highlighting the joy of bathing. Only in the introduction is the term purification used, to imply authenticity. The remaining performances use positive terms such as refreshing and beautifying. Although the deceased is not actually immersed in the bathtub, the bathing professional scrubs, shampoos, and showers the deceased. The common meaning of bathing was interpreted here as relaxation after a long day of work and also as a family activity—the time for nurturing the sense of belonging. What makes the bathing ceremony effective is its effect on beautifying the deceased and convincing the bereaved that the deceased has been cleansed. To this end, CSC applies modern technology and fashionable items for the bath. The bathing relies on high tech; the water is boiled in the van that carries the bathtub and is vacuumed again after its use. A showerhead used to sprinkle water onto the deceased is attached to the bathtub, and the temperature can be adjusted as in a normal bath system. Bathing gel, scrubs, and other toiletries are brand-name products that are fashionable and have a pleasant fragrance. The deceased’s appearance, after being showered, having hair blow-dried, and face shaved or applied with make up, indeed, has improved. More important, however, the professional work of bathing, the fresh aroma of toiletries, and the hot steam satisfy the deceased’s family members.

The Wake and Vigil

A wake takes place in the evening on the same day when the deceased has died or the evening of the next day if the deceased has passed away during the night. A couple of hours before the wake, an assigned funeral conductor visits the family to guide them through the wake and funeral ceremony. It is surprising how little families are versed in funeral customs in contemporary Japan. In Buddhist funerals, it is customary to bring a juzu (rosary). Unfortunately, however, young people don’t know the proper way to hold it. The most frequent question from the bereaved is how to present the monetary donation (ōjise) to the priests. According to Japanese funeral manuals as well as funeral professionals, the “proper way” is to write “contribution” on the upper portion of the envelope and the name of the chief mourner below. The appropriate term for contribution differs according to one’s religious affiliation. In Buddhism, “ōjise,” “kōkōraza,” or “ōrei” is appropriate; for Shintō, “goshinseņyo” or “ōrei”; and for Christianity, “kiyen kenkin” or “ōhanaryō” are used. The amount of money to be enclosed depends on the size of the funeral, the deceased’s status while alive, the status of the religious institution, and for Buddhist funerals, the rank of the deceased’s posthumous name (kaimyō). The envelope is placed on the tray (obon) and presented to the priest. The disconcerting responsibility of the chief mourner is to present a funeral speech (moshi aisatsu) and to find a person who will give a memorial address (chēji) at the ceremony. The funeral speech is given by a chief mourner who first provides a personal account of the deceased’s
death followed by words of appreciation to participants who attended the funeral. Due to the lack of experience, most chief mourners formulate their speech by modifying and emulating the sample speech given by a conductor. The memorial address is probably the most influential factor in determining the outcome of a funeral ceremony. The more intimate, sympathetic, and heartwarming the message addressed to the deceased, the more meaningful a funeral it will be. The key is to select a close person to the deceased who can write an emotionally touching letter. Discussing it with a conductor, the chief mourner selects readers. Finally, a funeral conductor informs the mourners as well as provides instructions on the performance of the sequence of the wake and funeral.

The wake often takes place somewhere between 6 and 8 p.m. Fifteen to 20 minutes before the wake, a priest arrives at the funeral hall. A female funeral assistant greets the priest and guides him to the waiting room. Most priests stay in the room until the wake starts, but some priests go directly to meet the deceased's family. Priests often have no knowledge of the deceased, and it may even be the first time the priest has met the family.

The guests arrive gradually. In community funeral rituals, incense money or the condolence money was given on the day of the funeral, but today those who cannot attend the funeral ceremony present their gifts at the wake. The amount of money varies according to the giver's own age and relationship to the deceased or to the bereaved. In general, the older the giver, the closer the relationship to the deceased, and the higher the deceased's social position, the larger the gift. Attendants are seated neatly in two rows facing the coffin and the wake altar at the front of the room. When the wave of arriving guests subsides, the priest is formally called in and a funeral conductor announces the beginning of the wake. The conductor first declares the deceased's name, age, the time of death, and the priest's rank and temple. Then he asks the priest to begin his sutra chanting. When the priest completes the major portion of the text, or about 30 minutes into the wake, the conductor announces the offering of incense. The incense is freshly burned, starting with the chief mourner, then close family members, and then all guests while the priest continues to chant sutra. When the incense offering and sutra chanting are finished, the priest faces the guests and tells Buddhist stories or teachings about death. The conclusion of the priest's talk signifies the completion of the wake, which is announced by the conductor.

The priest's departure is a cue for the other guests to leave. The vigil for the close family and relatives, however, is just beginning. The family gathers around the table that was prepared by a funeral assistant while the guests were leaving. The vegetarian food, catered from a restaurant in individual boxes, is arrayed. The women family members and funeral assistants serve sake and beer to the male family members. Drinking patterns vary according to the circumstances of the deceased's death. Women, who seldom drink after wakes and funerals, retire before midnight, but men continue to drink. When the men withdraw after midnight, the deceased is often left alone. In community rituals, the family members keep burning incense and candles throughout the night to ward off evil spirits. Such a belief is not a concern of contemporary family members, and they are not ashamed of leaving the deceased. Thus the departure of drunken men in taxis concludes the wake and vigil.

**Funeral Ceremony**

The morning of the funeral begins with a female employee serving fresh rice and sticky-rice balls to the deceased. The same food offering from the day before is carefully wrapped in white paper and left behind on the corner of the table to be placed in the deceased's coffin at the end of the funeral. The funeral conductor arrives a couple of hours before the funeral ceremony and collects telegrams for the deceased and consults the bereaved family members who may have questions.

Two hours before the funeral ceremony, the family and relatives are all gathered. Male mourners are in their black suits, and females are in black dresses. Only females who are close family members change into black kimonos (mofuku), assisted by the funeral female assistants. After helping the family with their kimonos, the funeral assistants set out vegetarian lunch boxes (otoki) for the family and relatives. The deceased's lunch box is placed in front of the coffin with a pair of chopsticks. When women of the family are ready, everyone sits down for a farewell meal.

Subsequent to the commensality, the coffin is transferred to the funeral hall by four funeral professionals. The family follows the coffin and watches while it is set at the center of the funeral altar. The funeral altar is decorated predominantly with chrysanthemums but also with other flowers (e.g., lilies, carnations, and roses) that were not traditionally used for funerals. Both sides of the hall are arrayed with tall flower bouquets mounted on pedestals. Each bouquet includes a tablet written in calligraphy displaying the giver's name or company.

The funeral conductor leads the family to the correct seats, starting from the left of the right-hand side row. When all are seated, rehearsal of the funeral begins. Here, family members learn when to stand up and when to give a speech, the appropriate manners in meeting priests and attendants, which path to take for offering incense, what is expected of them when the coffin is opened, and who takes what items during the departure of the coffin (shukkun). By the time these practices are completed, a professional

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26. Commonly, the chief mourner holds a memorial tablet (hitai), which is placed in the death-flower container (shikabana); the second close family member holds the photo of the deceased; and the third carries an ash pot.
photographer arrives to take a group photo of the family. The photographer arranges chairs in front of the casket, close family members are seated in the chairs, and the other relatives stand directly behind them. The chief mourner holds a picture of the deceased, and the camera flashes on expressionless faces.

Guests start to arrive. The front desk is prepared at the entrance of the funeral hall, and friends of the family or company colleagues represent the family and prepare to receive incense money. The upright signs, usually one for general guests (ippan) and company relations (kaisha-kankan) are set up to divide attendants so that their records will be kept in different notebooks. The incense money is presented in a formal manner in which a giver presents the envelope to a representative and both sides bow deeply. The exchange is made even more solemn by elders who use traditional incense money wrappers (fukusa) made of dark-colored silk and present their envelopes by disclosing it from the wrapper. This custom is fading, however. Younger generations, including people in their 50s and 60s, hand an unwrapped envelope of incense money directly. Next, a guest prints his or her name and address. After finishing, the guest is presented with a small return gift, which is again exchanged with deep bows by both parties. The gift of incense money necessitates a return gift (koden-gashiti), with larger return gifts sent to the guest’s house at a later date.

Each guest is seated by part-time female employees who guide the guests to the chairs lined up on the left-hand side, across from the immediate family and relatives. When the rows on the left are filled, guests are seated on the right, a couple of rows behind the family. While waiting, the deceased’s family’s colleagues or friends from work talk to each other or sometimes introduce one another and exchange business cards. In the midst of this chatting, the deceased’s family members are sitting with their head down, hands clasped on their laps.

Five minutes before the ceremony, the funeral conductor checks the stereo for the music tape, ensures the availability of chairs, and answers any last questions from the bereaved. The conductor begins the ceremony punctually by announcing the arrival of the priests. Priests guided by a funeral professional enter the funeral hall; all the funeral professionals standing in the corridor and the room bow deeply and maintain that posture until the priests have passed. As soon as the priests are seated at the center of the stage closest to the casket, the conductor announces the beginning of the ceremony and asks participants to fold their hands in prayer (gasho) along with the priests. For the next 30 minutes, sutra chanting and the occasional ring of the priest’s bell dominate the hall. At the completion of sutra recitation, priests offer incense to the deceased; then the chief mourner follows suit. Several important telegrams are read in full, and for the rest, only names are cited. Next is the memorial address. Until that time, the deceased’s name is mentioned only at the opening of the ceremony, and the entire proceeding passes without raising much emotion. A well-written memorial address, however, can fill the whole audience with recollections of the deceased. The appreciation speech by the chief mourner concludes this memorial address. The chief mourner thanks the guests for attending the funeral, talks about the personal history of the deceased, and explains the cause of death. The speech ends with another appreciative statement to the guests and the chief mourner bowing deeply to the audience before going back to his seat. It is then time for participants to offer incense to the deceased. Guests line up for the offering while priests chant sutra in the background. The chief mourners stand on the left of the altar and greet the guests who finish incense offerings. Most guests pass them with a bow, but some people stop to give a few words of condolence. When everyone is seated once again, the conductor announces the departure of the priests, who are again led by one of the funeral staff members and walk through the line of bowing funeral professionals. Once the priests have departed, the ceremony is nearly over. The guests are guided out of the hall while the preparation for opening the coffin for close family members and friends begins. Funeral professionals transfer the casket to the center of the room and uncover it. The mourners are handed flowers cut by funeral professionals from bouquets, and they place them around the deceased’s face and body. Other personal items of the deceased are included, along with food offerings wrapped in paper. This is the first height of the sorrow in which the bereaved must say their adieu to the deceased. Despite the grieving mourners, the lid is quickly covered and necessary items for the procession are handed to the chief mourners. The Buddhist memorial tablet (shai) is placed in the death flower container (shikabana); the photo frame and the ash pot are held in sequence by chief mourners; and the coffin, carried by male relatives as well as funeral professionals, follows the three mourners. The procession moves down the stairs to the entrance where guests await the final farewell. Once the coffin is placed into the golden dragon hearse, the chief mourner or the representative of a chief mourner thanks the guests again and bows deeply. Then the chief mourner is helped into the hearse beside the driver. As the hearse begins to leave for the crematorium, the conductor urges everyone to fold their hands in prayer (gasho) and to bow.

Cremation (Dabi) and Postfuneral Services

The deceased’s family and close relatives and the conductor are the predominant actors in the cremation; guests do not participate. Not all the relatives are obliged to participate, and hence many relatives stay behind in the funeral hall or return to the deceased’s home.

27. The chief mourner can be a wife, but women usually ask a son, brother, or son-in-law to execute all the public statements.
After the hearse departs with the corpse and the chief mourner on board, a funeral conductor takes a shortcut to the crematorium in order to arrive before the hearse. Upon arriving, he goes to the office and hands in the city government cremation certificate, which was prepared by funeral professionals. No one can be cremated without this permission. The conductor hurries to the entrance of the crematorium, greets the crematory staff, and finds out which incinerator will be used for the deceased.

When the hearse arrives, the chief mourner is guided into the building while the coffin with a memorial tablet placed on top is laid onto a stretcherlike dolly, which smoothly rolls it to the front of the specific incinerator. Immediately after arriving, the chief mourner hands a monetary gift (sunshi) to the chief cremator without a word. Cremators prepare a table with lighted candles and an incense pot, and the conductor guides the family members in offering the final incense to the deceased. After the offering is performed, family members are directed to encircle the coffin. A cremator pulls the lever that opens the door of the chamber leading to the incinerator; the coffin rolls slowly and quietly through it. The door to the inner chamber closes, and the coffin is out of sight. A cremator stands at the chamber door and opens the switchboard with a key. It is time for ignition. The cremator asks the chief mourner to push the button. This is the last farewell and the final height of distress for the bereaved. There is always a hesitation on the part of family members to push the button because this is the moment in which the bereaved must come face to face with the death of the deceased. When the button is pressed, the bereaved hold their hands for prayer, guided by the conductor. After remaining in the posture for a couple of minutes, the bereaved are led to the waiting room at the crematorium. There, restaurants serve meals and alcohol, and ice-cream machines, candy machines, and soda machines line the wall. It takes approximately an hour and a half for the cremation. When the cremation is complete, the crematorium directs the family to gather at the specific incinerator used by the deceased.

The cremation process is monitored by cremators in a computerized station as well as other cremators who check on the body through two small circular windows, 5 inches in diameter, on the side of the oven. Most crematoriums use gas burners, and large computers monitor the temperature of each incinerator. Inside the incinerator, the drama of the deceased is taking place; the deceased is at the boundary between the world of life and death. Although the cremation is both the climax and the transition of the deceased, families never observe it. Families rarely ask to view it, and even if they do, the cremators refuse to allow it, fearing that they will receive complaints. Hence family members begin their healing process in the waiting room while the deceased is transformed into bones.

Family members gather to pick up the deceased’s bones (kotsu-age). The cremated remains, literally a skeleton on its back, appears on the concrete platform. The cremator rolls the dolly into the ash-collecting room (shakotsusushiitsu). The cremated bones are white and dry. A cremator names some of the bones, pointing them out with a pair of metal chopsticks. Then he selects bones from the deceased’s toes and legs, moving toward the skull and setting them on a silver tray. It is believed that putting the bones into the ash pot working from the toes to the skull will properly place the deceased in a standing posture. The skull cannot be put into the small ash pot as it is, so it is violently pierced with the metal chopsticks. The family members are handed a pair of chopsticks, and each pick up the bones, placing them into the ash pot. The bones are procured from the chief mourner to relatives in the order of their relationship to the deceased. The last bone that connects the neck and skull, however, is secured again by the chief mourner. This piece of bone signals the completion of kotsu-age. The cremator closes the lid, places the ash pot in a wooden box, and wraps it with a purple cloth. With the chief mourner tightly embracing the ash pot of the deceased, the family departs the crematory in silence.

It should be noted here that the period of cremation is the only time that the fear of evil spirit, death pollution, and impurity reside in contemporary funeral practices. I argue this point from the persistent custom of the money gift that the deceased’s family gives to the cremators. Occasionally, the bereaved also present money gifts to conductors, funeral assistants, and staff members. The implications of a money gift to the cremators and one that is given to the staff of a funeral company are, however, fundamentally different. The money given to funeral staff signifies appreciation. It could also be considered a “return” for their help. It is important to note that a money gift to the funeral professionals is not obligatory, and furthermore, it is given after all the services have been carried out. From this perspective, it can be considered a tip. In contrast, the money gift is handed silently to cremators as soon as the family arrives at the crematorium, before the actual cremation. In addition, such gifts to cremators are considered mandatory, an obligatory action. According to my informants, the money gift to cremators is necessary because it makes sure that the deceased would be incinerated properly and the family would be able to collect the ashes. This explanation, however, generates questions rather than answers. The bereaved pay a standard fee, set by the city government, for cremation, so one would assume that the deceased would be cremated properly. The riddle lies in the perception of the corpse. The underlying sentiment is that if the corpse is not handled with care, the deceased will turn into a vengeful evil spirit. Thus the money gift to cremators is to ensure the consolation and pacification (kōyō) of the deceased.

The idea of the deceased becoming a haunting spirit due to mistreatment of the dead body has existed since the 9th century (Haga 1987:67), and its elimination was the central objective of community funerals. In contrast, commercial funeral ceremonies negate such a perception and treat the deceased as though they are alive. The act of cremation, however, implies a dramatic change; it draws a
line between life and death. My observation is that the perception of death pollution or the fear of spirits is limited to those who engage in cremation and its aftermath. In commercial funeral ceremonies, the living are always free of impurities. Hence the belief in evil spirits gives the cremators a fearsome authority; they take the soul into the other world. It is this risk-taking for which the cremators are responsible and are paid. They control the fate of the deceased by putting themselves in jeopardy, and thus they control the living. Cremators’ power, however, remains within the liminal state. As soon as the bereaved embrace the deceased’s ash pot, their attitude toward the deceased quickly returns to peace and affection, just as suddenly as the subliminal fear arose.

More than two-thirds of the deceased’s family have the deceased’s 7th-day memorial services (shonanoka) immediately after they have returned from the crematorium. The funeral professionals call this 7th-day memorial service an advanced or elevated ritual (age), meaning that the mourning period has passed. Originally, the mourning period lasted at least 49 days, during which the deceased was worshipped every 7th day by family members, other relatives, and priests. Funeral professionals told me that more and more families are performing the 7th-day memorial service on the same day because it is difficult to gather relatives on the 49th day. Whether it takes place at home or at the funeral company in one of the tatami rooms, the 7th-day memorial service is the final family gathering for the deceased until the first-year memorial service (isshiki), held one year from the day of the deceased’s death.

In contemporary Japan, nenki (periodic anniversary rites discussed earlier) are the most commonly practiced postmemorial services. The shōtsuki-meinichi (annual deathday rite), and maitsuki-meinichi (monthly deathday rite) may be practiced for a short time by family members. The final rite (tomuraiaige) is conducted on the 50th anniversary. Similar to community rituals, priests are invited to read sutras for the specific deceased, and commensality takes place among family and relatives who will then visit the deceased’s grave (hakamairi).

With the increasing cost of graves, many families are now purchasing nōkotsudan (literally, “an altar to secure the deceased’s bones”). They are lockerlike crates stacked on one another and lined up in rows. Nōkotsudō is the term used for the space where collective nōkotsudan reside. They are purchased from Buddhist temples where the member will pay a monthly fee for the use of the space and an additional fee for memorial services on anniversaries and festivals (bon and higan). The problem with this type of nōkotsudō is that once the deceased’s descendants pass away or refuse to pay, the deceased’s ashes will be disposed of by the temple and the space reused for other deceased. Sasaguri-Nanzōin Temple in Fukuoka prefecture claims to have solved this dilemma. At Sasaguri-Nanzōin Temple, one pays the cost of nōkotsudan once. The initial purchase guarantees the permanent preservation (eidaikyō), for at least 200 years, of the bones of the deceased and the memorial services on the deceased’s anniversaries and during festivals. In addition, Sasaguri-Nanzōin Temple does not discriminate between the deceased’s Buddhist or religious affiliation. Although the temple itself is a Shingonshū sect, all Buddhist sects are welcomed, and they even sold a couple to Shintō families.25

**TRANSITION OF THE CONCEPT OF AFTERLIFE: HOUSEHOLD ANCESTORS TO BELOVED ANTECEDENTS**

The performances of community rituals corresponded to the concept of household ancestors as afterlife, whereas commercialized funerals emphasize the memory and appreciation to the deceased. There are new consumer inventions in funerary practices that contest funeral ceremonies offered by the industry. Two of these new trends are the living funeral (seizensō) and the scattering of ashes (sankotsu). They demonstrate the ingredients missing in the commercialized ceremonies, which in turn are forcing the funeral industry to renovate their services. Moreover, as I will show below, these new trends illustrate the changing meanings of afterlife and relationships between the living and the dead (Suzuki 1998).

**The Living Funeral (Seizensō): Who Needs a Funeral After Death?**

Seizensō, which literally means “a funeral-while-alive,” is a funeral conducted by oneself while one is still alive and healthy. When a TV station broadcast the first such funeral for the singer Mizuno Takiko, the coverage by the mass media was widespread and intense. The deceased-to-be Mizuno described her funeral by saying, “I wanted to express my appreciation to all those who have been dear to me while I am still alive” (Ei 1994:104). Her living funeral took place at the Tokyu Hotel on February 19, 1992. The chairman of the ceremony, Ei Rokusuke (1994), describes its success in his book, Happy Ending (Dai-Ojō). “Mizuno’s living funeral was a parody of a common funeral ceremony.” He wrote, “It followed the same practices as in typical funerals, such as the burning of incense to the deceased and the reading of memorial addresses” (p. 104). What was different, however, was the way in which the sutra chanting and music were presented. Ei edited and composed a tape that was a mixture of sutra

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25. All data on Sasaguri-Nanzōin Temple and its nōkotsudō was collected by interviews with the temple priests during my visit on April 16, 1995. During the time of my interview, Sasaguri-Nanzōin Temple had 4,315 nōkotsudan of which 3,800 were sold (within a 3-year period), but only the one-third were in actual use. According to the priest, individuals and families are purchasing these to prepare for their own deaths.
chanting and music from various genres. He included, among others, Buddhist sutra, Koran prayers, Chopin’s Funeral March, Tibetan sutra, carols, and Mozart’s Requiem. While the tape was played, the deceased-to-be’s friends and colleagues presented memorial addresses. At the last song on the tape, the piquant selection “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” the participants began to clap their hands, and the funeral turned into a cheerful party (Ei 1994:106).

Impressed with Mizunoe Takiko’s living funeral, Mr. Hamada, the head of Takano Elder’s Club, organized a living funeral for himself. When I interviewed him on April 17, 1995, he told me how he would orchestrate his living funeral. Mr. Hamada said with determination, “I am going to have my living funeral on December 1, 1997, when I turn 77.” He said he would reserve an auditorium in a hotel, inviting 200 to 300 guests: relatives, colleagues, and friends. He would borrow an altar from a funeral company and decorate the auditorium with colorful flowers used for weddings rather than for funerals. According to his plan, when the ceremony began, the lights would be dimmed to simulate a real funeral, and his colleagues and friends would read memorial addresses about him. After the memorial addresses, he would have a birthday party. The altar and other funeral objects would be removed, the lights would become bright, and cheerful music would be played. He said that he would not ask for incense money; instead, he would send invitation cards just as if he was having a birthday party. A new idea in Mr. Hamada’s living funeral is the return gift he would prepare for his attendants. He would order his favorite apple pies from the best bakery. He had already told the baker that he would need 300 pies that day. At the end of the interview, he criticized contemporary funeral ceremonies offered by the funeral industry saying, “Funerals that cost so much are meaningless unless the deceased can see and enjoy them. The funeral should be for me, not for family members or others. Why do I need lots of flowers, food, and letters after I am dead and senseless?” And this was said by someone who would be considered a paragon of Japanese tradition—namely, a retired instructor of protocol for the Emperor.

The Scattering of Ashes (Sankotsu): Who Needs a Grave?

The second example of the changing attitudes toward the afterlife is a new mortuary rite called the scattering of ashes (sankotsu). The contemporary movement of scattering the ashes of the dead, as espoused by the Association for Promoting a Free Death Ceremony [my trans.] (Sosō no jiyū wo susumeru kai), was devised in February 1991 by Yasuda Mutsuhiko, a former editor of Asahi Newspapers. This practice was initially considered somewhat radical and received support mainly from the intelligentsia. The Association for Promoting a Free Death Ceremony conducted its first scattering in October 1991, off the shore of Sagami Bay on the Miura peninsula. This event was received with much interest and a positive response from the public. The State, which until then had shown an ambiguous attitude toward the scattering of ashes, publicly announced that the practice was legal (Yasuda 1992:123).

Since 1991, the association has grown, gaining more than 700 members in a single year. By 1994, the association could no longer handle the increasing demand for ceremonies, so a private funeral industry in Hiratsuka City, Kanagawa prefecture, was contracted to plan and carry out ceremonies for the scattering of the ashes of the dead (“Sankotsu, Gyōshū e Itaku” 1994). In December 1991, another association promoting the scattering of ashes called the Association for Thinking About Scattering Bones (sankotsu wo kangaeru kai) was established by Professor Ito Takamasu, a former president of the University of Buddhism (Bukkyō Daigaku) in Kyoto. This association has practiced scattering on the Tsugaru Peninsula since October 1992 (Inoue 1993:60). This new mortuary rite has become popular throughout Japan. For example, a company called Sekisei in Kita-Kyūshū commercialized the practice of scattering of ashes. For the cost of 50,000 yen (about $500), the company applies and processes the formal permission required from the State Court (which authorizes the deceased ashes to be dispersed), charters a boat, and scatters the deceased’s ashes for families at Sagami Bay. The commercialized scattering of ashes by this company takes place once every six months.

The dispersing of ashes presents the purest form of remembering loved ones. For example, Dr. Baba Siji, a physician who spent his life working toward a cure for leprosy, privately scattered his wife’s ashes in the sea around Miyako Island in 1975. The story of the doctor appears in the first pages of Yasuda Mutsuhiko’s book, Who Needs a Grave: Natural Burial for Your Loved Ones (Haka nanka tranai: Aizureba koso shizensō) (Yasuda 1991). After the sudden death of his wife, Dr. Baba remembered that she had mentioned that if she should die, she wanted to merge into the water off Nanseien that he loved. Dr. Baba scattered her ashes into the Bay of Irimasa early one morning.

The ceremony of scattering ashes not only provides a memory of the deceased, it also continues to create and provide occasions to share memories with the deceased. Mrs. Kusuda, after losing her husband who had loved traveling to exotic places, decided to scatter his ashes at different sites that he had not yet visited (Yasuda 1991:116–17).

29. In Japan, 77 years is called “kijū” a lucky year to celebrate.
30. Indeed, Mr. Hamada conducted his living funeral as planned. According to the interview conducted on December 02, 2002, his guests brought “corporation money” (kyōdō-ken) and in return received delicious apple pies.
31. The data were collected by phone interview with Kanaizumi Junji, a funeral professional in MoonRise, where I conducted my fieldwork, on December 5, 2002.
Mrs. Kusuda scattered his ashes by making trips to mountains, waterfalls, and hills, remembering the times when they traveled together. In this way, the places where the deceased's ashes were dispersed became intimate places where the bereaved could commune with their departed.

**Changing Value of Death: The Implications of Living Funerals and Scattering of Ashes**

Why would someone wish to have a funeral while he or she is still alive? What are the reasons behind the scattering of ashes? By examining the two consumer innovations, I ask what are the ingredients desired by consumers that are missing in commercial ceremonies?

A living funeral is the celebration of one's life, an occasion on which an individual can be appreciated by others for his or her generosity. This kind of celebration of one's life became important when the elderly began to feel uncertain about how their children would think of them after they had passed away. One of the results of longevity is a funeral ceremony in which family members can recall only a bedridden person, because few of them recollect the deceased in his or her prime. Thus living funerals are intended to assert one's own importance as an individual in a context where the value of the dead as ancestors has declined.

The living funerals and scattering of ashes express the asymmetric relationship between the living and the deceased and "an increasing tendency to demonstrate an affection for recently deceased kinsmen only in the form of simplified memorialism" (Smith 1974:223). In community funerals, the value of the household guaranteed that the deceased would become the household ancestor; this used to provide comfort to the living who "will someday become ancestors and they will live on in the rites throughout the ensuing generation" (Ooms 1976:79). The succession of the household, the inheritance of property, including the ownership of graves and other objects for ancestral rites, and the veneration of ancestors were all connected to the aim of household perpetuation. What was important in this continuation was the balanced relationship between the living and the dead: "Just as the living would not exist without the ancestors, the ancestors exist only because the living remember and memorialize them" (Smith 1992:3). The relationship between the living and the ancestors of the household, which had been sustained by economic succession as well as spiritual exchanges, however, became asymmetrical as a result of social changes in contemporary Japan. Although providing a funeral for one's parents is still considered a duty, descendants have come to see it not as an obligation to household ancestors as such, but as returning a favor to their parents. Consequently, the meaning of one's death has come to depend on how the living evaluate the deceased's personality, merit, and his or her good deeds. I believe that this asymmetric relationship between the living and the dead has generated living funerals.

If we follow the distinction between "pray to" and "pray for" made by Robert J. Smith (1974), both the scattering of ashes and the living funeral demonstrate that those who "pray to" their deceased have declined. "Praying to" the ancestor implies the belief that the deceased's spirit "both exercise[s] direct tutelary functions by virtue of positions held in life and [has] a claim on their descendants for comfort and support" (Smith 1974:145). Thus the act of "praying to" is performed on the basis of a balanced exchange between the living and the dead, whereas, in the act of "praying for," the deceased's spirit is dependent on the living. The increasing emphasis on memories of the deceased rather than the role of ancestors is derived from this asymmetric relationship between the living and the dead. Moreover, the scattering of ashes indicates a further shift from both the *sosen-sūhai*, the veneration of household ancestors, and *senzo-kayō*, offerings to and memorialization of the ancestors. Instead of being prayed to or prayed for, the scattering of ashes is another step in the direction of the personal celebration of the deceased's life as a nonspecific "antecedent," separate from the household ancestors, the continuation of household, or becoming an ancestor for the descendants. The ties between the living and the dead become increasingly horizontal, as opposed to vertical.

**CONCLUSION**

Japanese community funeral rituals have been transformed into funeral ceremonies offered by a funeral industry. The changes in the form of performances reflect the changes in the meanings of death and the dead. In a community funeral ritual, shifting the impure deceased to a purified ancestor was believed important. In a funeral ceremony offered by an industry, significance is placed on the memory, appreciation, and the beautification of the deceased. Hence underlying values of death have shifted along with the changes in personal relationships and social structure in Japan. Even the commercialized funeral ceremonies are not free from challenge. Commercialized funerals are contested, and new trends are created by consumers as spiritual values continue to shift. New practices invented by consumers, however, are reinvented by a funeral industry and are being incorporated as new forms of commercialized funeral practices. The living funeral, the nonreligious funeral, and the scattering of ashes are commercialized and have been offered by the funeral industry today. Ultimately, changes in the funerary practices express the shifts in the personal relationships of the living as well as the relationship between the living and the dead.

The transition to commercialized funeral ceremonies does not imply attenuation of the funerary customs or the absence of religious elements. "There has been an erosion of pre-industrial religious practices, but neither does it ignore the fact that traditional religious ideas reappear in new forms" (Bremen 1995:5). Emile Durkheim ([1915]
REFERENCES


“Sankotsu, gyōshū aiwai” (Scattering Consigned to Funeral Industry”). 1994. Asahi Shinbun (Asahi Newspapers), March 2.


32. Durkheim ([1915] 1965) divides secular and sacred activities of life and defines religion as consisting only of sacred elements. I agree with Jan van Bremea (1995) that these divisions are not appropriate for ritual analysis. My focus is on Durkheim’s argument on the power of religion to bring solidarity among people.


