

Stickers for Nails

The Ongoing Transformation of Roles, Rites, and Symbols in Japanese Funerals

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This article traces the effects of modern commercial ritual spaces and new crematoriums on the meaning and structure of contemporary Japanese funerals. The widening physical separation between the mourning family and the corpse throughout the death process parallels an increase in the ritual authority of the professional funeral industry, which has led to several notable variations in funeral styles. Of particular note is a changing attitude towards the corpse that emphasizes the physical (consumer) comfort and individual needs of the deceased over the pacification of the spirit.

Keywords: *sōgi* — funeral industry — *nobe okuri* — funeral rites — ritual authority

An old man in a battered suit stands in the main room of a large farm house in Tokushima. He is using his hands to rub clean a rock he just picked up outside. Around him there is a bustle of activity as people prepare for the departure of the coffin to the crematorium. The man looks around, puzzled at the preparations. "I found a stone. Aren't we going to close the coffin with a nail?" he asks. "Oh, they don't do that anymore," a woman tells him, "they just use stickers now." "Stickers?" he asks, completely at a loss, "but what about the nail?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. They don't like metal in the coffin when they cremate the bodies—that's why they just use stickers now."
(private observation of a funeral in 1999)

THIS PAPER EXPLORES the gap that defines both the practical and symbolic aspects of contemporary Japanese funeral practices. The loss of communal knowledge and funeral materials, such as coffins, accompanying the urbanization and modernization of the country at the turn

* The author would like to thank Kimura Taneo and Yoshikawa Junzō for the support they gave him while researching Japanese funerals.

of the century gave rise to a professional funeral industry that has now extended its authority into the realm of funeral symbols and ritual. The growing physical separation between the mourning family and the corpse parallels a symbolic disjunction that has allowed the industry to adapt, or in some cases re-create, older ritual forms so that we now see significant changes in the purpose and structure of contemporary rites.

By examining the role of the industry and focusing on some of the main sites of the modern-day rite, such as the commercial funeral hall and the modern crematorium, I hope to clarify the following trends in contemporary funerals: increasing physical separation between mourner and corpse; the symbolic shifts and temporal changes in the funeral rite; the effects of new technologies on both the funeral process and symbols; and, finally, the ongoing individualization of the deceased, which has shifted the focus of funeral rites from placating the spirits of the dead and sending them safely to the other world to treating the deceased almost as if they are still living and in need of physical and consumer comforts.

Eschewing the premise that contemporary funerals are mere degenerations of traditional rural practices, I claim that current forms, like their predecessors, are legitimate reflections of the values, economic realities, views on impurity and the afterlife, and technical developments of the society in which they exist. Thus, the postwar commercialization and rationalization of the funeral process mirrors larger trends in Japanese society and may provide insight into the transformation of ritual and symbol in other industrialized societies.

The Rise of the Funeral Industry

The development of the professional funeral industry in Japan, as in the United States, was a response to societal changes, technological advancements, and the consolidation of previously disparate services.¹ Before World War II, funeral arrangements in Japan were often handled by subgroups of community organizations. These funeral cooperatives (*sōshiki-gumi* 葬式組) organized materials and labor to produce coffins, memorial tablets (*ihai* 位牌), flowers, and other necessary items (NAKAMAKI 1986, p. 178). The modern-day funeral company grew out of businesses that were in some way involved with the pro-

¹ For information on the growth of the funeral industry in America see LADERMAN 1995 and 1996, BLOCH and PARRY 1982, and VERNON 1970. For information on the funeral industry in Japan see NAKAMAKI 1986; FUJII 1983; MURAKAMI 1990, 1991a, 1991b, and 1997; and YAMADA 1995.

duction of funeral-related items such as cabinets or flowers. These companies then expanded their operations to offer more and more complete services under one roof and at a more affordable price.²

The rise of the funeral director (*sōgiya* 葬儀屋) coincides with, and is indicated by, several basic patterns.³ Inherent in the development of the funeral industry is the change from community involvement to a more individualized family rite.⁴ Central to this change is the shift of funerals and wakes from homes and temples to ceremonial halls rented or owned by the industry. Another factor, coinciding with the loss of contact with hometown temples, is the rise in temple introductions carried out by the funeral companies. Growing out of this material consolidation and logistical control is the *sōgiya's* increasing role as the authority on and purveyor of ritual knowledge.

Temple Introductions

It is widely acknowledged that the relationship between Buddhism and the Japanese primarily centers on death and ancestor worship. A major survey published in 1984 by the Sōtō Zen sect involved more than 1800 respondents from various areas of Japan. The questions evaluated the religiosity of those surveyed by assessing their knowledge of, and interaction with, their temples. According to the survey, 78% of the respondents said that their reasons for visiting a temple were to participate in funerals/memorial rites (SŌTŌSHU SHŪSEI CHŌSA IINKAI 1985, chart 27).

The increased movement from rural to urban areas and the subsequent isolation of families has caused a widespread loss of connection to family temples (*bodaiji* 菩提寺). The survey found less than half of those polled knew the affiliation of their home temple (SŌTŌSHU SHŪSEI CHŌSA IINKAI 1985, chart 18). We can predict then that the most common reason for contacting a temple in the family's new location is directly connected to death.⁵ Significantly, the family rarely seeks out

² In addition to the *sōgiya-san* there are also mutual-aid societies (*gojokai* 互助会) that charge membership fees in return for discounted wedding and funeral services at some future date. FUJII notes that this type of association began in Yokosuka in 1948 and estimates that in 1981 "one of six families have subscribed to the association" (1983, p. 60).

³ *Sōgiya*, *sōgisha*, and *sōgiya-san* are fairly informal terms that can refer to the individual or the company. I use "funeral director" rather than the more simple "undertaker" to try to convey the wide range of services offered.

⁴ See, for example, FUJII 1983; MURAKAMI 1990, 1991a, 1991b, and 1997; NAKAMAKI 1986; and YAMADA 1995.

⁵ This data is borne out by my own interviews of funeral company employees who confirmed that, particularly in the case of young couples, over half of their clients have to call their hometowns just to find out their family temple affiliation.

a temple directly but instead depends on the *sōgisha* for an introduction. According to one survey, close to 90% of all calls after a death went to a funeral company or mutual-aid association while only 1% went to a temple, shrine, or church (IKEDA 1986, 145). Another more recent survey that compared results from 1992, 1995, and 1999 found that while a steady 83% of calls went to a funeral company or mutual-aid association, the number of requests to a temple, shrine, or church went from six percent in 1992 to zero percent in 1999 (NIHON SHŌHISHA KYŌKAI 1999, p. 42).

According to the head of a *Kōekisha* (the largest funeral company in Kansai) branch in Kyoto, approximately 60% to 75% of the funerals it handles each year involve a temple introduction. At *Kōyusha*, a smaller, local *sōgisha* in Ikoma, the figure is roughly the same; and at *Kōekisha* in Osaka it is about one-third, though this may be misleading because of the large number of company funerals (*shasō* 社葬) they handle. All of the priests I interviewed admitted that the lion's share of the funerals they performed came from introductions by funeral companies, and all agreed that this reflected badly on current relations between Buddhism and the general populace.⁶ Though it is difficult to get specific details on the numbers of introductions to various temples, it is clear that there is a reciprocal relationship going on, with some priests also recommending specific funeral companies. As the head of *Kōyusha* put it, the temples and funeral companies maintain a balance of give and take (*mochitsu, motaretsu*).

Funeral Halls

The shift in location of the wake and funeral from home to hall has occurred mostly within the last thirty years, with the decrease in average living space as more people live in apartment buildings.⁷ Integral to the takeover of death services by the funeral industry has been a consolidation of material, temporal, and spatial elements of mortuary

⁶ It should be noted that, depending on location, most funerals at a given temple may be for the members of that temple and thus would not involve an introduction. Another way in which a small temple or subtemple may attract families is by advertising grave space. (Connections are also maintained with makers of gravestones who sometimes offer introductions.) Most often this ensures that the funeral and subsequent memorial rites will be conducted by that temple.

⁷ A survey of four major centers in Japan found that in 1977, 84% of funerals were held at homes with only 4% at funeral halls. Twenty-two years later, 19% were at homes and 60% were at funeral halls. The two most common reasons given for not holding the funeral at home were lack of space and difficulty in rearranging the furniture (*Sōgi* 1999, p. 51).

rites in the modern funeral hall (*saijō* 齋場).⁸ The *sōgisha* is now in complete charge of setting up the entire physical space for the rite. Funeral halls not only eliminate the home and temple as sites in the funeral process, but more importantly create a space that is both commercially oriented and ritually malleable.

My research on Kansai area *sōgisha* in 1996 found that they all maintained their own halls. Over half of the funerals by *Kōekisha* in Kyoto are held at a hall. At *Kōyusha* in Ikoma approximately 60% of the funerals are held in a hall they own, which may have as many as five funerals occurring simultaneously. The *Kōyusha* building offers rooms of varying size and layout, ranging from a large hall to a tiny Japanese-style room in which the immediate family and priest(s) sit in front of the altar. Outside of this room is a large linoleum-floored, cafeteria-style room for the general guests and an altar where they offer incense.

Gyokusen'in 玉泉院 in Osaka has six individual rooms that seat up to sixty people each for wakes and funerals. These rooms open on to the main hall for the final farewell but may also be closed off with accordion-style doors for privacy. Adjoining each room is a Japanese-style room, complete with a small refrigerator and tea service, where family members can spend the night of the wake. There are also sliding panels behind the altar that allow funeral staff to set up and change the altar without being seen by any of the guests in the main hall.

None of the companies where I conducted interviews had priests working full time at the halls. If the family has not arranged for a priest themselves, one is introduced from a list of local, "helpful" temples. Though some priests do not mind working in the halls, it is not uncommon for them to note the loss of extended contact with the family throughout the funeral when it is held in a rented space rather than at a home or a temple. One Nichiren priest complained that although he is treated with respect by the staff of the funeral company, he has no real contact with the families. He is welcomed at the door, told where to wait, informed when it is time to start the funeral, and politely thanked when he is done (*SŌGI* 1997 p. 35). One Rinzaï priest from Tōfuku-ji, when asked how he felt about the *sōgiya*, told me that, particularly when the funeral was held in a hall rather than a home, he felt like an employee who was told what to do and when to do it. This sentiment was also expressed by a Jōdo priest at a subtemple of Kurodani Temple who told me he actively advises his temple supporters

⁸ A similar evolution can be seen among wedding companies where the move to their own hall signals a change in priorities from providing affordable services to making a profit (EDWARDS 1989, p. 44).

not to use a funeral company at all. He is in a stronger position than most priests, however. Thanks to a large parishioner (*danka* 檀家) base, he was able to build his own funeral hall on the grounds, separate from the main temple.

Funeral halls are designed for ritual, but they are also undeniably commercial spheres. The fact that there are often several funerals occurring simultaneously makes it clear one is in a rented space. The names of families holding funerals that day are posted on boards in the front lobby, much as the names of guests are displayed at inns and restaurants. The main floor of Gyokusen'in contains not only the reception for the funeral, but also several information and sales counters as well as a full coffee shop. Glass cases display the different meals, thank-you gifts, and offerings available. At Kōyusha's hall there is a smoking corner in the lobby where guests can watch the service on closed circuit TV or peruse the various displays of gifts, discount funeral packages, and rental clothes.

Sōgiya as Ritual Authority

The Buddhist priest's main function in the funeral is to effect the successful spiritual transformation of the deceased through symbolic ordination, merit transference, sutra chanting,⁹ and, in Zen sects, a short talk (*indō* 引導) designed to help the dead attain enlightenment.¹⁰ Through proper performance of these rituals the priest ensures not only a rebirth in paradise for the deceased, but also safety for the family who would be threatened if the spirit remained attached to this world. When we view the priest as a ritual specialist rather than the sole authority and source of meaning in today's funeral-industry rites, we can begin to see the areas in which he abdicates control.¹¹ In many instances, practical concerns and logistics determine the flow of the

⁹ The sutras read at funerals are written in classical Chinese (*kanbun*), which most Japanese cannot read. The fact that no one understands the content of the sutras being chanted is not simply an indication of the loss of past traditions (it is worth pondering the degree to which the general populace was ever well versed in, or could understand the content of, the various sutras chanted at funeral ceremonies), rather it is something that undergirds the authority of a group of specialists that not only maintains this gap but claims the authority to bridge it.

¹⁰ The *indō*, literally "to lead or pull someone" (to enlightenment), though sometimes translated as "eulogy" or "sermon," is in fact neither of these. A eulogy is a talk *about* the deceased, while a sermon is aimed *at* the funeral guests. An *indō*, on the other hand, is a talk directed at the deceased in order to bring him or her to enlightenment. My thanks to Victor Sogen Hori for pointing out this important distinction.

¹¹ As Catherine BELL has shown, the textualization of ritual involves the development of a mediating authority or "ritual specialist." She also indicates that the rationalization of religion

funeral rather than doctrine or tradition. One example is the posthumous ordination.

Priests informed me that the usual order of turning the deceased into a Buddhist monk through posthumous ordination had to be rearranged because the body was put in the coffin directly after the last rites (*makuragyō* 枕経) and thus was no longer present to be ritually shaved in a symbolic tonsure (*teihatsu* 剃髮). Here we see a concrete example of the way in which the shortened time frame of the modern funerary process directly inhibits the priest's ability to inscribe a meaningful mark on the corpse and thus may be seen to undermine the significance of the posthumous ordination itself.

At the same time, there seems to be a growing perception of Buddhist priests' involvement in funerals as mere business. In surveys taken both by consumer groups and by the funeral companies themselves, the single most common concern (*ichiban komatta koto*) regarding funerals is the proper amount of money (*fuse* 布施) to be given to the priest. Another common question centers on the cost of the posthumous name (*kaimyō* 戒名) conferred on the deceased by the priest.¹² Though priests generally say that the amount paid for the *kaimyō* is entirely up to the families, the perception among the general public is that the inclusion of certain characters in the name, such as *ingō* 院号, as well as the length of the name, raises the price considerably.¹³

Though difficult to quantify, it is generally accepted that the rapid urbanization and modernization after World War II caused a decline in traditional values and knowledge in Japan. With this in mind, the logistical and informational gap created by the move to cities must be extended to include a spiritual fissure between priest and parishioner. Thus, even though the *sōgiya* cannot usurp the priest's transformative power over the body, it is quite clear that his economic authority has spread into the ritual sphere. In other words, the funeral professional's role as mediator between the mourning family and the practical concerns of the funeral has grown so that *sōgiya* are now mediating both secular and religious aspects of death.

"is accompanied by a process in which the relationships among human beings become objectified as relations among things, most readily seen in the generation of official titles, institutions, personnel, and even official language" (1992, p. 131).

¹² Internal survey by Kōekisha, Osaka. See also NIPPON SHIHOISHA KYŌKAI 1999, p. 47.

¹³ A priest at Kaikichi-ji talked about another priest who told people flat out that a *kaimyō* with the word *ingō* would cost the outrageous sum of ¥30,000,000. As a result, that priest was called *Ingō oshō* 因業和尚 (heartless priest), a pun on the term *ingō* 院号 (see ISHIHARA 1986, pp. 37–42). Depending on the temple, the actual cost for a *kaimyō* that includes the term *ingō* ranges from one to five million yen (ISHIHARA 1993, pp. 230–39). See also BODIFORD 1992 and SHIMADA 1991.

Although the *sōgiya* is defined in Japanese as a lender or seller of funerary implements (*Kōjien* 2nd ed. 1975, p. 1283), the industry's influence now goes beyond a mere business practice and encroaches directly on both the funerary role of the Buddhist priest, the physical participation of the mourning family, and, in some cases, the very form and meaning of the rite. It is now impossible to discuss funerals in contemporary Japanese cities (and in many rural areas as well), without considering the *sōgiya*.

The organization and general control of the rite is completely in the hands of the funeral companies. At most of the funerals I attended, before the official start, it was a member of the funeral staff who instructed the family on how to offer incense, the proper way to bow, and the best way to greet the guests. The funeral companies also provide numerous pamphlets that detail all aspects of the funeral process from the moment of death to the last of the forty-nine-day rites. The *Kōekisha* pamphlet, for example, is over seventy pages long and offers explanations of more than fifty Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian terms. The client is also shown the proper way to dress, how to place flowers in the coffin, and the manner of picking up bones after cremation. Greetings for use by the family are also provided in intricate, fill-in-the-blank detail.

The new system of licensing examinations for funeral director (*sōsai direkutā* 葬祭ディレクター), which began in August of 1996 and is recognized by the Ministry of Labor, supports the contention that funeral professionals are gaining more social authority.¹⁴ In April 2000, Japan's first private, officially recognized funeral professional school, Japan Human Life Ceremony Senmon Gakkō 日本ヒューマンライフセレモニー専門学校, opened in Kanagawa Prefecture. Students study a wide variety of subjects including history, religion, ritual culture, business, and communication.

When there is an entrenched ritual specialist it is often difficult to change established norms. If, however, one also approaches the *sōgiya* as a type of ritual specialist ("professional controlling elite," to use METCALF and HUNTINGTON's term [1991]), one who is in control of not only practically all phases of the disposal of the corpse, as well as the physical space and time of the rites, but is also the main source of information regarding funerary practice, then we must seriously reconsider the extent to which the Buddhist establishment maintains a hegemony over rites concerning death.

¹⁴ One Buddhist priest wrote regarding the new licensing, "It is a regrettable fact that in this country the only groups who have yet to go under national control are the street gangs and the temple priests" (see *Chūgai Nippō* 96/11/7, p. 1; 96/11/16, p. 6).

Changes in the Funeral Procession

The movement of crematoriums and graves to the outskirts of cities along with the invention of motorized hearses (*reikyūsha* 霊柩車) at the beginning of the Taishō era gradually brought an end to the funeral procession, *sōretsu* 葬列. These societal changes fundamentally transformed the funeral process and created a need to reinterpret certain rites and symbols through emerging technological forms.

Though there were hearses in the Meiji era, it was not until the beginning of Taishō that they began to be widely used. Early opposition centered on the loss of the procession and the importance of family members' carrying the deceased's coffin. As the head of a funeral company points out to his son in a novel of the time:

Once you burn people's bodies that's it. The beauty of human feelings is that we want to stretch out the time for farewell even for a person's remains. You of all people should know that no matter where the funeral occurs, people try to extend the time before the deceased departs (*shukkan*). And to leave that to an emotionless car that drives away with a toot toot of its horn.... Do you really think you can do something so fiendish?!

(quoted in INOUE 1990, p. 145)

Not only did the hearse eliminate contact with the corpse during the procession, it was also seen as garish and low-class. Until the turn of the century, funeral customs and accessories generally spread from the upper to the lower classes, but the hearse reversed this trend, starting out among the commoners before gaining currency with the wealthy (INOUE 1990, pp. 152–53).

The success of the hearse depended in no small measure on its ability to somehow preserve the tradition of the procession while at the same time rendering it superfluous. The persistence of the hearse, despite strong opposition, can be attributed to its design and connection to traditional architectural styles. The gabled roof (*kara hafu* 唐破風), which until the Edo period was seen as a symbol of both authority and religiosity, connected the hearse to shrines and traditional buildings like the Kabukiza in Tokyo (INOUE AND MACHIDA 1992, pp. 58–59). Also, as “moving architecture” (*idō suru kenchiku-butsu* 移動する建築物), the *reikyūsha* is very similar in design to the various portable *mikoshi* 御輿 shrines and floats used in festivals. The first hearses were simply the palanquin (*koshi* 輿) of the earlier funeral procession placed on the back of a truck. In the transformation from a disposable, one-use object to a reusable (rentable) one, the hearse

grew more and more elaborate, taking on the styles we see today (INOUE 1990, pp. 35-38).

Anyone living in southeastern Kyoto near the municipal crematorium will have seen what passes for the contemporary funeral hearse procession. The hearse, either lavishly decorated in gold and bright colors or with plain wood (*shiraki* 白木), is followed by a small caravan of black taxis and minibuses; it causes no stop in the normal flow of city life and evokes no visible reactions.¹⁵ A 1978 *Yomiuri shinbun* survey of nationwide adherence to various superstitions included reactions toward funeral hearses. The survey found that only 9.7% of those asked said they were worried (*ki ni suru*) about coming across a hearse in their daily lives.¹⁶ In comparison, 57.5% of those surveyed observed Buddhist calendar restrictions, which include not marrying on *butsu-metsu* 佛滅, 46.5% purified themselves with salt after returning from a funeral, and 42% avoided sleeping with their head to the north (*kitamakura* 北枕) (*Yomiuri shinbun*, 6 August 1978).¹⁷

The contemporary procession follows the same rules of order as the traditional version, with the closest family members carrying the picture of the deceased and the memorial tablet and riding in the taxi directly behind the hearse. No family members ride in the hearse, however, which, like much of the handling of the body during the funeral, is left to the professionals.

The funeral hearse, then, in its outward appearance appropriated and reinterpreted the symbols of the lost procession. The garish kitsch of the "shrine style" hearses (*miyagata* 宮型) was designed to recreate and maintain the liveliness (*nigiyakasa*) of the Meiji *sōretsu* 葬列, which were in turn based on mimicking daimyo processions of an earlier age (INOUE 1990, p. 152).

¹⁵ Hearses elaborately decorated and covered in gold leaf are common in most areas except Kyoto and Osaka, where the plain style prevails (INOUE and MACHIDA 1992, pp. 62-63).

¹⁶ The most common superstition mentioned in relation to funeral hearses is that unless you are moving in the opposite direction to the procession, you must cover your thumbs with your other fingers. Explanations for this take several forms. First, by covering your thumbs, called "parent fingers" (*oyayubi* 親指), you protect your parents from a premature death. Another common explanation is that when you cover your thumbs you are praying that you will be with your parents when they die.

¹⁷ *Kitamakura* (northern pillow) refers to the belief that only the dead should lie with their heads pointing north. This is one of the many symbols within the funeral that serve to identify the deceased with the historical Buddha, who is said to have died while facing the Western Pure Land, with his head to the north.

High-Tech Send-Offs

It is fascinating to note that the procession remains, a century after it began to disappear from urban areas, a recurring theme in modern funeral developments. Initially, the pomp and display of the earlier procession was transplanted to the funeral altar (*saidan* 祭壇)¹⁸ and other sites of the funeral (MURAKAMI 1997, p. 106). Priests I interviewed in Osaka said the instruments they play when entering the funeral hall are supposed to evoke the traditional funeral procession in which priests made music as the body was carried to the grave. But perhaps the most striking re-creation of the funeral procession is one offered by a funeral hall in Osaka that caught national attention a few years ago with its high-tech rendition of the traditional rite.

Gyokusen'in, in Neyagawa City, Osaka, opened in 1977 and, according to manager Tomikawa Nobuyoshi, was the first funeral hall in Japan.¹⁹ The hall was constructed from a converted bowling alley after the company had been conducting funerals for members in private homes for six years. Gyokusen'in now handles between 130 and 150 funerals per month.²⁰

The main hall of Gyokusen'in is in the huge, two-story space that used to house the original bowling lanes. It is roughly 70 meters long and includes six individual funeral rooms (*kokubetsu-shitsu* 告別室) with attached rooms for sleeping, a large space for company funerals, and a raised stage area called *nobe-okuri rōdo* 野辺送りロード (The Funeral Road).²¹ It is along this forty-meter stage that the unique rite of Gyokusen'in takes place. After the funeral ceremony in one of the six private rooms is finished, the coffin is loaded onto a motorized cart at one end of the stage. The priest sits on a seat just in front of the coffin, while two family members (one holding the memorial tablet, the other a photograph of the deceased) sit at the back of the stage. The four-meter wagon takes roughly three minutes to move the length of the hall, with close family members walking behind carrying

¹⁸ The altar is similar to the coffin in Western funerals in that it is one of the main displays of wealth in the funeral. Size, style, materials, and number of tiers (generally from three to five) all determine cost. For a discussion of the shift from palanquin to altar see YAMADA 1996.

¹⁹ The information for this section came from visits to Gyokusen'in in February and March 2000. I am grateful to Mr. Tomikawa and the other Gyokusen'in staff for their patience and openness.

²⁰ Numbers fluctuate according to the season, with more deaths occurring in winter. Gyokusen'in performs up to seven funerals a day, each one taking about an hour.

²¹ *Nobe-okuri*, literally "sending off [in] the fields," refers to older-style rural funerals. It still holds the general meaning of "funeral," though the terms *sōshiki* and *kokubetsu-shiki* are standard today.

other items from the funeral altar, just as in a traditional procession. With taped music playing in the background, the guests clasp their hands in prayer as the coffin, practically glowing under a spotlight, reaches what looks like a tunnel of laser light. At the last instant, as the music reaches its crescendo and dry-ice smoke pours out, the entire cart (coffin, priest, relatives, and all) is sucked through a door so that it appears to simply vanish into the other world (*anoyo* あの世).

This service, which began after the remodeling of the hall in 1991, is extremely popular and is requested about 100 times a month, meaning that roughly 70% of customers ask for it. There seems to be no preference based on age or profession, but Mr. Tomikawa informed me that many of the people requesting the service had heard about it from friends or had seen it when attending someone else's funeral at Gyokusen'in.

The idea for the rite came from former president Saitō Shin'ichi, who thought of it while trying to reproduce certain traditional elements of funeral rites in order to create a more moving and emotional service. In an interview in 1991, he said,

These days the coffin is just thrown onto the hearse. There are very few areas that still perform the procession, but I think the funeral has its very roots in *nobe-okuri*. It is the biggest ritual in the sending off of the deceased from this world to the next. I wanted to express this somehow and bring back some of the lost spirit of the rite. (SOGI 1991, pp. 38–39)

This kind of attempt to appropriate and re-create tradition is one of the hallmarks of current funerals (and present-day ritual in Japan in general). As with the funeral hearse, the success of new forms generally depends on their connection to tradition. A passage on *nobe-okuri* found in the Gyokusen'in pamphlet and on the home page states that

in olden times, when burials still took place, the priest would head a procession of family members carrying the coffin, along with relatives, friends, and neighbors all seeing the deceased off to the grave. While offering up a prayer from the heart and embracing memories in your breast, walk together with the deceased along the final path of this world ... *nobe-okuri*.²²

A fascinating aspect of the Gyokusen'in service is its connection to weddings. Keihan Gojo Sentā 京阪互助センター, the mutual-aid associa-

²² See the homepage at www.ijnet.or.jp/gyoku/. This homepage also has photos of a *nobe-okuri* service.

tion that uses Gyokusen'in, is also connected to the well-known Tamahime-den 玉姫殿 wedding hall group. It was the idea of the former president of Gyokusen'in to make use of the Tamahime-den production know-how in his company's funeral services (*SŌGI* 1991, p. 38). Particularly striking is Gyokusen'in's use of the term *nobe-okuri rōdo*, which immediately brings to mind the Japanese term for the wedding aisle, *bājin-rōdo* (virgin road). Tamahime-den is famous for its flashy (*hade na*) weddings that include the bride and groom riding in on gondolas and standing on raised revolving platforms with laser lights and dry-ice smoke. Their current commercial shows a Western bride in a white bikini and veil surfing atop her soon-to-be husband. With the priest surfing along beside them they all sing, *naritai hana-yome ni narō!* (Let's become the bride we want to be!)

This focus on performance is found not only at Neyagawa but at all the Gyokusen'in funeral halls. At their Osaka center there is a giant stained-glass mandala on the ceiling of the main hall. At the end of the ceremony, an elaborately decorated mechanized "spirit car" (*gorei-sha* 御霊車) transports the coffin to the waiting hearse in a rite described as adding a "solemn atmosphere to your final moment with the deceased" (www.ijjnet.or.jp/gyoku/osakakita.htm).

This connection to weddings supports the idea that modern ritual forms, particularly those in rented halls or hotels, as they focus more on performance and display, are becoming increasingly open to interpretation and modification. There is a distinct change in priorities and subsequent expansion of new ritual forms when a group establishes its own ceremonial hall and begins competing in earnest with other companies. This trend, seen in both weddings and funerals, has expanded considerably in the last ten years. For example, a growing number of young Japanese now choose to have chapel weddings presided over by Western "ministers," often with no religious credentials. These services evoke images of Western Christian weddings with ring exchanges, vows, and kisses, and take place not in churches but in single room "chapels" in large hotels.²³ As the number of hotel weddings declines, however, hotels are turning toward funerals that tend to test traditional boundaries. The Mitsui Urban Hotel in Osaka Bay is now offering the "Cinderella" coffin for women that is completely transparent and presents an image not of a corpse, but of a "princess at rest."

²³ Ritual structures have loosened to the point that one major Osaka hotel offered a Millennium Countdown wedding at which sixteen couples could get married simultaneously and kiss at the stroke of midnight, with friends and family watching a giant television screen in the main hall next door.

The Final Bath

Another innovative reinterpretation of a traditional rite is the final ritual bathing of the corpse offered at Gyokusen'in. Off of the main reception hall on the first floor is a large bathroom, or "purifying room" (*seijō-shitsu* 清浄室), indistinguishable from a Japanese *ofuro* except for the large painting on the wall of the bodhisattva Kannon riding a dragon down from the heavens, and an oversized Western style bathtub in the center of the room. According to Mr. Tomikawa, Gyokusen'in was the first place in Japan to offer a full bath for the deceased, including scented shampoo, conditioner, and soap before encoffining.²⁴

Traditionally the deceased was washed by the women of the family in the rite of *yukan* 湯灌. The water used was called *sakasa mizu* 逆さ水 (reverse water) because rather than adding cold water to heated water to achieve the desired temperature, the process was reversed. This inversion of normal procedure distinguished the act from everyday life, and, along with other rules such as wearing protective headbands and purification with sake, served to protect the participants from death impurity.

In the Gyokusen'in version, however, the purification function is downplayed in favor of the idea of a final bath for the deceased. The first part of the bath is carried out by two Gyokusen'in staff members dressed in hospital whites without any of the aforementioned ritual protection. Because there are large amounts of bodily fluids, the deceased is initially bathed behind closed doors. The deceased is completely naked and placed in the bath with scented soap and water. Family members are then brought in for the second half so that they can participate in a token washing of the face and body.

Research by Hikaru Suzuki on CSC, a funeral company offering a similar bathing service in Kita-Kyūshū, revealed that "the resuscitation of [the] bathing ritual necessitated reinventing, recreating, and reshaping it into a ceremony which the public is willing to accept" (SUZUKI 1997). Thus CSC, the first company that began marketing the service, had to find a balance between linking their service to the traditional *yukan* rite while at the same time deemphasizing the purification aspects. Instead of being treated as a corpse, the body of the deceased is treated as a living individual having a relaxing final bath.

This modern *yukan* shows again the pattern of readaptation of tra-

²⁴ Though Mr. Tomikawa admitted that other companies have offered bathing services for the deceased before, he insisted that Gyokusen'in was the first to actually put the deceased completely into a bath. In Suzuki's study, mentioned below, the deceased is never submerged in a bath but is rather sprayed with a shower nozzle.

ditional (or what are perceived as traditional) rites within new technologies and societal structures. In this process there is an attempt to legitimize the new form by locating it in some pure historical past. Predictably, certain elements of the original rite are downplayed or lost while others are emphasized and adapted. This bathing service adds a further element, however, in regard to what it says about contemporary attitudes toward the corpse.

The fact that most people now die in hospitals has meant for some time that the duty of washing the deceased has passed over to nurses who use prepackaged alcohol swabs rather than water. This, however, is acceptable as part of the general clinicalization of the dying process. Having funeral staff actually *bathe* the deceased is another matter entirely and shows clearly another area where the funeral industry is entrenching itself in the ritual sphere. Both at Gyokusen'in and at CSC we see that it is the funeral workers who bathe the deceased (without any overt protection against impurity) with the family offering only token participation by ladling some water onto the deceased at the start of the bath. This is a highly significant shift in perception of death impurity, and reflects a more generalized trend toward treating the corpse as a *living* individual in need of special care.

The Modernization of Crematoriums

The new breed of crematoriums began in the late 1960s with the rebuilding of older facilities to incorporate new technologies and transform the negative image of such sites.²⁵ Central to these goals was the creation of a reburning technology that not only eliminated smoke and odor through secondary burning but also did away with the large telltale smokestack.²⁶ The new crematoriums, which look like first-class hotels, with design changes that downplay their function, conceal and clinicalize the death process and, as we shall see, serve to further separate the family both physically from the corpse and remains and symbolically from the ritual process. In order to illustrate the differences between new crematoriums and their predecessors, I will turn to personal observations (1997) made at an older (prewar) crematorium and its replacement in Kamojima 鴨島, a small town near Tokushima City.

²⁵ For the history of the crematorium, see ASAKA and YAGISAWA 1983, and their individual articles of 1991.

²⁶ The first "re-burning crematorium" was built in Koga, Ibaraki, in 1973, and the first crematorium without a large smokestack was constructed in Yamagata in 1977 (see ASAKA 1991 and YAGISAWA 1991).

The older crematorium in Kamojima, in use until 1998, was a small semi-enclosed space big enough to burn three bodies simultaneously. Even on busy days it was run by a single man, so family members carried the coffin in themselves and placed it on a shelf that slid into the oven. The three doors to the oven were roughly one meter apart so that the final rites before burning had to be staggered to avoid overlap. After incense offerings and a final sutra chanting by the priest, the coffin was slid into the oven where it took roughly two and a half hours for the body to burn completely. Some people gathered outside by the river or sat in a small prefabricated shed to eat snacks and drink beer or sake, but at least half of the mourners stood just outside the covered part of the crematorium to watch the rites for other groups that had just arrived. The size and layout of the facility was such that the entire process was open to everyone and several men from different groups also went around to the back where they talked to the operator and watched the bodies being burned.

After the body was cremated, word circulated and the family gathered around. The remains were still quite hot (still smoking in fact) and people were asked to step back while the operator picked out certain bones representing the entire body for the rite of collecting the remains and placing them in the urn (*shūkotsu* 収骨).²⁷ Since not all of the bones are used, this collection requires that larger bones, such as the femur and the skull, be broken and ground up by hand. At this point the crematorium worker began commenting on the physical remains in a way I found quite shocking. At one point, as he broke the femur in half, he commented, “The deceased didn’t exercise much, did he?” As he went on to point out stains on the skull that indicated bleeding in the brain, the family members showed an almost clinical curiosity as they examined the recently reduced remains of the deceased.²⁸ Several people asked questions about the bones or made comments such as, “Yes, he wasn’t doing enough walking like we told him.”

In *Hone no fōkuroa* (Bone Folklore), Fujii Masao confirms that, mysteriously, the grief of the mourners seems to end abruptly once the corpse enters the oven. He goes on to suggest that the mourners now feel that the deceased has “crossed the bridge” (*hashiwatashi* 橋渡し)

²⁷ Traditionally the bones are passed from one person to another using chopsticks that are mixed, that is, one is made of bamboo and the other of wood. Because of this tradition, using mismatched chopsticks in the home or passing food directly from one set of chopsticks to another is widely considered taboo.

²⁸ This is in sharp contrast to Lori DANFORTH’s observations of women at rural Orthodox Greek funerals who were plunged into grief after exhuming the remains of their loved ones for reburial (1982, pp. 117–52).

and that the transformation of flesh into white bones signifies the attainment of buddhahood (FUJII 1988, p. 115). While it is difficult to say how most Japanese feel about this transformation, it is clear that in this final stripping away of that which was recognizable as the deceased, we see a marked change in the relationship to the corpse. And while Fujii, as both a scholar and a Jōdo priest, explains this change in Buddhist terms, my own observations found much more of a medical orientation than a religious one. Though the condition of the Adam's apple (*nodo botoke* 喉仏, literally "throat buddha")²⁹ was noted, the bulk of the conversation during the *shūkotsu* process was about identifying certain bones and commenting on the health of the deceased.³⁰

The new crematorium in Kamojima is designed as much as possible to mask its function, from the partitioning of space inside to the new, low-profile chimney. Built on the exact site of its predecessor, it is from the outside, and even from the lobby, indistinguishable from a large hall or hotel. The deceased is no longer carried in by family members. Instead, the coffin is carted into the hall through a separate entrance by crematorium staff using an electric trolley. Inside, the building is separated into individual rooms with automatic doors so that, except in the open lobby, one is rarely aware of other funeral guests. More importantly, the room for the final incense offering before cremation as well as the *shūkotsu* room are also separated. In this way the guests do not see the coffin placed into the oven, nor are they present when the remains are removed and arranged for the *shūkotsu* rite.

When the body has been cremated, an announcement over the PA system calls guests to a private room where the bones for the urn have already been separated and placed on a small cart. The mourners are never presented with the smoking remains of the deceased and are thus one more step removed from the transformation process. The new oven is also much more efficient, with the cremation as much as forty-five minutes faster than before. A staff member explained that, whereas before factors such as the health and physical condition of the deceased could greatly affect cremation time and efficiency, the new facilities produced far more consistent results.

The *shūkotsu* rite itself remained little changed, but the private

²⁹ The Adam's apple is said to resemble the shape of a Buddha sitting in meditation. This bone is packed with great care into the top of the urn, just under a piece of the skull. For an explanation of the significance of the placing of bones in the urn see KENNEY 1996–1997, p. 423.

³⁰ It should be noted that reactions at funerals differ greatly depending on the age of the deceased and the cause of death. In the examples above, there were no young or accidental deaths.

rooms empty of any decoration or symbols in the new facility and the medical garb of the crematorium staff created a far more clinical atmosphere than at the old facility. There were still the same medical comments about the state of the bones and people still noted the pristine state of the *nodo botoke*.³¹

The destruction of the body relates to the liminal process in two ways. First, it literally transforms the body from one physical form into another, allowing the spiritual body to be symbolized in Buddhist and folk religious terms. Second, it provides a period of instability and fear associated with this transformation and the inherent impurity dangers, both physical and social. With the body now symbolized in medical terms and the fear of transformation largely sanitized, the modern cremation, like other elements of the rite, is transformed.

Improved techniques and remodeled crematoriums, in their efficiency, layout, and clinical feel, are having a profound, though as yet unmeasured, effect on the transformation of the corpse and the liminal period. Historically the shift to Buddhist funerals, and thus cremation, “operated a disjunction between the state of the deceased’s body and the destiny of the soul, thereby rendering the metaphorical relationship between the corpse and the soul more abstract” (FAURE 1991, p. 207). This disjunction is due to the loss of decay as an element in the funeral and thus a limiting of what one may call the liminal power of the corpse in its ability to represent the state of the soul.³² Indeed, as the site of the final and total destruction of the deceased in his or her known form and the place where mourners must physically confront the newly reduced remains of a loved one, the crematorium is undoubtedly the center of liminal rites. Before improvements in the technology for burning the body, the fear of having to come back the next day to find the flesh not fully consumed, combined with the smell and the stigma of death, made the crematorium a powerful and frightful place. Thus the switch to cremation in and of itself, though ending the element of decay, still provided the uncertainty and instability that mark liminal periods of “betwixt and between.” With the new-style crematoriums, however, there is a clear widening of this spirit/corpse disjunction.

Externally we no longer see the telltale smokestack, and the smoke from the ovens is now burned again (a modern-day secondary treat-

³¹ The private room proved far more acoustically sensitive than the open space of the old crematorium so that everyone was acutely aware of the sound of the breaking and grinding of the bones.

³² LORI DANFORTH points out that the decomposition of the body in rural Greece must take place naturally, thus indicating that the Orthodox Church does not approve of cremation or even airtight coffins that may delay the process (1982, p. 48).

ment of the deceased?) so that it has no odor. Bodies are burned consistently and quickly, out of sight, as the mourners are (re)moved further and further from the process. The symbolic power of the *shūkotsu* rite—a rite that is still one of the most powerful moments of the funeral—has clearly shifted, along with death and illness, from the religious to the scientific or medical sphere.

Individualization

Along with the material and logistical changes, perhaps the single most significant trend in contemporary Japanese funerals is toward the individualization of the deceased. The shift from community-sponsored rites to more isolated urban individual family events has been discussed by MURAKAMI Kōkyō (1997; English translation above, pp. 335–52) and others, but the current trend goes further. Though the idea of the privatization of the funeral clearly captures the isolation of the mourning family, I propose an extension to include the “individualization” of the deceased who, with the increasing choices and commercialization of the funeral process, has a kind of presence at the funeral, not only in spirit and memory, but also as an individual (consumer) with choices and wants. Concomitant with this focusing on the individual is a lessening of concern with death impurity and an increasing variety of responses to death.³³

A stark, if still limited, example of changing attitudes toward death impurity is the recent (re)creation of the bathing ceremony for the deceased. While discussed above mainly as an example of how new interpretations of traditional rites emphasize some symbols while downplaying others, it is also significant that the final bath treats the deceased not as an impure object to be feared, but as an individual receiving a service. As Suzuki’s research showed, the marketing of the bath service is predicated on benefiting the deceased.

Of course, it could be argued that the Japanese Buddhist funeral has always been about benefiting the deceased, whether through incense and sutra offerings or the *indō* rite. But just as traditional folk and Buddhist symbolic interpretations of death and the corpse are shifting to the medical realm, so too are views of the individual moving from the religious to the individual or consumer sphere. While in

³³ Philip MELLOW argues, “The more diverse are the approaches to death in modern societies, the more difficult it becomes to contain it within a communally-accepted framework, and thus limit the existential anxiety it potentially offers to the individual. The apparent cultural diversity and flexibility in modern approaches to death can therefore be explained as being consistent with the sequestration of death from public space into the realm of the personal” (1993, p. 19).

the past benefits, such as the transfer of merit, were aimed at the spirit of the deceased, designed to placate and ensure safe passage, the focus now seems more physical.

Within the contemporary Japanese context we see, in terms of the *kokubetsu-shiki*, an emphasis on offering condolences and saying farewell, with a general downplaying of rites of liminality.³⁴ Though one could argue that the series of rites during the forty-nine-day period after death (*shijūkūnichi* 四十九日) are clear examples of liminal rites, the first of the seven-day rites, traditionally occurring one week after death, is now commonly held on the same day as the funeral so that friends and family from distant areas may participate before returning home.³⁵ In some cases the second through the sixth seven-day rites are ignored completely so that there is simply one service on the forty-ninth day after death (SŌGI 1997, p. 38).

The contemporary *kokubetsu-shiki*, with its focus on allowing friends of the deceased to offer incense, has become such an integral part of the funeral that most Japanese no longer realize it is a separate rite and the word itself has become synonymous with *sōshiki* (FUJII 1980, p. 539). One can certainly draw a parallel between the emphasis on *kokubetsu-shiki* and the increase in popularity of the chapel weddings mentioned previously. By having a Christian wedding, a couple can invite a fairly large number of friends and co-workers who would otherwise be excluded from a smaller Shinto-style wedding ceremony.

This emphasis on the *kokubetsu-shiki*, previously a distinct ritual but now indistinguishable from the funeral itself, would tend to support this idea that rites of separation are now equally important, if not more so, than rites of liminality. With the loss of the liminal fear of the corpse due to advanced technologies for processing the body as well as the increased medicalization of death, the emphasis of the funeral on pacifying the potentially dangerous spirit has shifted to bidding a proper, social farewell to an individual and offering condolences to the family.³⁶

³⁴ In VAN GENNEP's *The Rites of Passage*, he points out that though one may expect rites of separation to be the focus of funerals, it is in fact rites of liminality that predominate (1960, p. 146).

³⁵ Traditional Buddhist teaching tells us that if the deceased has escaped the cycle of birth and death, this is decided on the seventh day. Otherwise the person will be reborn sometime up to the forty-ninth day after death (SMITH 1974, pp. 50-51). The system of seven-day cycles and the later memorial services both relate to the cult of Jizō and the Ten Kings imported from China. According to this belief, the dead are judged by a different king on each of the seventh days after death until the forty-ninth, when it is decided into which of the six realms (*rokudō* 六道) the deceased will be reborn. For details on the Ten Kings see MATSUNAGA and MATSUNAGA 1987, vol. 1, pp. 232-35.

³⁶ This is best evidenced by the increased emphasis on, and growing elaboration of, *chōji*

If fear of the dead is, in part, indicated by strict adherence to ritual norms and time frames, we must assume that there has been a lessening of this fear and a concurrent drop in concern with death impurity. With a lessening of this fear also comes a shift in the focus and a testing of the boundaries of funeral behavior. With the *sōgiya-san* firmly entrenched as a social and ritual authority on death, it is easy to see how new forms can develop that stretch and sometimes transgress previously acceptable limits.

The idea of nonmedical professionals giving the deceased a final bath and the recent trend toward having *kokubetsu-shiki* in major hotels—something unheard of ten years ago—both show a distinct lessening of concern over contact with death.³⁷ Increasing numbers of Japanese are using will banks and other means to determine the content of their funeral ahead of time. Like living wills in North America, this trend maintains the deceased as an individual force in the funeral. Another, admittedly unique but high-profile, example is the idea of a living funeral (*seizensō* 生前葬), made famous by Mizunoe Takiko in 1992. She said that she wanted to have a funeral while still alive so that she could thank all the people who had helped her. The funeral produced parodies of incense offering, telegrams of condolence, and sutra chanting (GOTŌ 1996, p. 121).

This trend is naturally expanding beyond the funeral service to include methods of burial and graveyard choices. The Grave-Free Promotion Society of Tokyo, founded in 1991 when the laws controlling the disposal of human remains were loosened, now boasts 8,000 members. The society helps people with scattering ashes either on land or at sea. Last December saw the third launch of the American Taurus rocket, which places seven grams of a person's remains into a 250-kilometer orbit for anywhere from one to ten years. The so-called *uchū-sō* 宇宙葬, or space burial, advertised through Sekise Inc. of Nagoya, included ten Japanese (one-third of the total), and the launch was broadcast on the internet (<http://www.uchusou.com/>).

Conclusion

Mr. Tomikawa of Gyokusen'in never spoke of any of the services his

readings. These condolence messages, read during the funeral, are often directed to the deceased or talk about his or her life, and are becoming a more central element of current rites. One funeral hall in Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi, uses a projector and a large screen that hangs down in front of the altar to show images and video from the deceased's life (*Soci* 1991, p. 45).

³⁷ Of note are the Royal Hotel in Osaka and the Ōkura in Tokyo, both of which offer space for company funerals (*shasō*) and "farewell parties" (*Japan Times*, 12 December 1996).

company offered, from the modern *nobe-okuri* to the final bath for the deceased, as new. He believes he and his staff are preserving the heart of the traditional Japanese funeral as performed for centuries. For Mr. Tomikawa, only the outward form and setting have changed. He was, however, quick to agree with the idea that modern funerals are marked by an ever-decreasing amount of physical contact and proximity between the bereaved family and the corpse. In fact, he pointed out that the *nobe-okuri* service at Gyokusen'in was created to address that very loss.

The majority of deaths now occur in hospitals and hospices rather than at home. Consequently the final washing of the corpse, traditionally performed by the women of the family, is now handled by hospital nurses or funeral industry workers. The procession no longer exists outside of rural areas, and in cities there is rarely a need or even opportunity for family members to carry the coffin. While the essential rites of covering the deceased with flowers in the coffin before it departs for cremation and the placing of bones into the urn stand out as points of contact, they are both losing significance. The strong emotional outbursts that may proceed *shukkan* are often cut short by the need to reach the crematorium at the appointed time, while the *shukotsu* appears to be growing more medicalized and abstract.

With the lessening of physical contact and increased emphasis on the deceased as an individual comes a loosening of ritual rigidity, thus resulting in symbols becoming more malleable and open to new interpretations. Changes in society have led to the end of certain rituals—as in the case of the procession. New forms emerge that both lead to and reflect new attitudes and beliefs. These are again manifested in new ritual forms or, more often, new interpretations of previous forms and symbols. Belief systems and ideas take form in the physical shape of rites. New high-rise graveyards are the embodiment of recent ideas regarding the care and worship of ancestors.³⁸ The image of a priest riding a motorized coffin-wagon into a tunnel of laser light and smoke is a clear example of the way in which technological advances have provided opportunity for new services that have, no matter how seemingly bizarre and kitsch, remained strongly anchored in traditional views of death and the afterlife. Dry-ice smoke, spotlights, and synthesized music aside, the deceased is simply being transported to *anoyo*, in the centuries-old tradition of *nobe-okuri*.

³⁸ In fact, we are overdue for a new study of ancestor worship, one that takes nuclear families and urban areas into account, and one that approaches new methods for memorial services as legitimate attempts to maintain family connections and a sense of continuity in a modern environment.

What we are seeing is the interaction between society, technology, and ritual that we have always looked for in funerals. Societal changes set the stage for reinterpretations of existing symbolic forms and may bring about the end of certain ritual practices. New forms emphasize some, but not all, elements of their predecessors, and in this choosing we see the various societal, scientific, religious, and consumer forces at work, each inscribing meaning on death and the corpse.

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