Urbanization and Changing Funerals in Japan

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In recent years, the 'death problem' has become a big topic of discussion in Japan. In the past, Japanese people did not like to talk about such an ominous matter as death. However, issues surrounding death, such as euthanasia, brain death, terminal care, and thanatology, are now often taken up as main subjects on TV, in newspapers, and in magazines. Lectures and seminars on such topics are also actively held.

In this context, the Japanese traditional forms of funerals have begun to be reconsidered. These days, Japanese people are trying to find new ways of handling funerals, from the service to the burial. Various patterns of funerals are proposed and even fashion shows of burial garments and exhibitions of urns are held. 'SOGI (funeral)' is a bimonthly magazine for funeral services which published its first issue in 1991\(^1\). It introduces various types of funerals with many photographs. Such reconsiderations of traditional funerals and the attempts to create new types of funerals are caused by various factors. One of the main factors is the process of urbanization in Japanese society. Changes in social structure, social community and way of life caused by urbanization have tremendously influenced Japanese traditional forms of funeral. Today, I would like to examine 'urbanization and changing funerals in Japan'.

Features of Japanese Traditional Funerals

Firstly, I would like to briefly explain Japanese traditional funerals\(^2\). Formerly in Japan, with the exception of men in power, funerals for the common people were not carried out and corpses were left unattended. It
was only since the 14th century that funerals for the common people were performed and corpses were buried in graveyards. In general, funeral courtesies were carried out by Buddhist priests in temples in Japan. Of course, Confucianism and Shintoism had influences on Japanese traditional funeral rites as well. However, the influences were small, for Shintoism tended to avoid death and viewed it as an impurity (kegare). Especially in a supporter system of Buddhist temples (danka-seido) during the Edo era, funerals were connected with temples. Since temples and priests took a leading role in funerals in those days, Japanese Buddhism began to be referred to as ‘Funeral Buddhism’\(^{(3)}\). In traditional funerals, it was impossible to perform funerals without involving temples and priests.

Funerals are ‘rites of passage’ with three stages — separation, transition, and reintegration\(^{(4)}\). In a funeral, these stages have the following meaning — 1. the deceased is separated from this world, 2. he/she moves to the afterworld, 3. he/she is reintegrated into the afterworld. The first of the three stages of the rites of passage include, watering in order to moisten the lips of the deceased (shinimizu), washing the dead body (yukan), placing the body in a coffin (nyukan), reciting sutras by the side of the deceased (makura-gyo), and ‘wake’ (tsuya). A wake is a custom where a watch over the deceased is kept all through the night. These are rituals for separating the deceased from this world and to keep him/her in a stable state of death.

In the second stage, the final service (kokubetsu-shiki), cremation and burial are carried out. These are rituals for sending the deceased to the afterworld. In the final service, an altar made of plain wood is set in the front of the room with white chrysanthemums surrounding it. Besides a picture of the deceased, a mortuary tablet (ihai) on which a posthumous Buddhist name (kaimyo) written down by a priest is also placed on the altar. A posthumous Buddhist name represents symbols of faith in Buddhism and the attainment of spiritual awakening of a Buddha. Priests
recite sutras, while people in dark mourning attire burn incense.

As for the disposal of a corpse, cremation is performed, a process introduced to Japan in the 7th century, after the advent of Buddhism in the 6th century. Cremation of common people began in the 14th century. At present, 90% of corpses are cremated (others are intermented, etc). Normally, during the process of cremation, the dead body is burned to ashes down to the bone. However, in Japan, crematories are damped down intentionally in order to leave behind some of the bones of the body. After the cremation, the bereaved family picks up the bones using chopsticks according to the traditional way. The bones are put into an urn and buried in a graveyard. A tombstone is constructed there. It is well known that the Japanese are very attached to the remains of the deceased. (In India, what is left — bones and ashes — are thrown into the Ganges River. They do not need any graveyards or cemeteries at all).

The third stage continues up to 33 years after one's death. During this stage, the bereaved family holds Buddhist mass services for the dead on the seventh day after the death (shonano-ka), on the forty-ninth day after death (shijuku-nichi), on the first anniversary of the death (isshu-ki), on the second anniversary of the death (sankai-ki), and on the thirty-second anniversary of the death (sanjusankai-ki). Also, on memorial days, in equinotical weeks, or on special occasions, they visit the grave and set a wooden symbol of a Buddhist stupa (toba) behind the tombstone of the deceased. It is considered that during this long period, the individuality of the deceased gradually fades away. The deceased is then reintegrated into the afterworld as an 'ancestor'.

These services are usually held under the watch of priests and temples. Needless to say, every time such services are carried out, the family must donate a large sum of money to the temples. Such a funeral system was formed during the Edo period. Since then, priests and temples have had 'patent rights' over funerals. It is a well-known fact that most Japanese visit Shinto shrines during the New Year, hold marriage ceremonies in

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Christian churches and perform funerals in Buddhist temples. For a long time, the Japanese took it for granted that funerals were connected with Buddhism.

**Major Causes for Reconsideration of Funerals**

Recently we have witnessed new attempts to change this traditional funeral system. The major cause for such attempts is the urbanization of Japanese society. Here I would like to stress four points.

Firstly, I would like to discuss the dissolution of a supporter system of Buddhist temples, that is, the connection between the people and temples are getting weaker and weaker due to urbanization. In pre-modern society, each family belonged to a nearby temple. People used to visit their specified temple regularly, and priests of the temple conducted funerals, mass services and burials. Besides these functions, priests were 'teachers of the people', and also were considered 'prominent persons' respected by the village people. After the Meiji Restoration, this system was officially dissolved. However this system continued to be an influential one within the life and consciousness of the people until quite recently.

Urbanization has caused many people to leave their birth places and village communities to find employment. The relationship between people and the temples in their hometowns have become weaker. They usually do not feel the necessity to look for a new temple in their new cities. Presently, when a city-dweller dies, very few people contact the temple in his/her hometown. But if the family wishes to carry out a traditional funeral, they need a priest. In such a case, they often request a funeral company to send an appropriate priest for the funeral. In general, the number of city priests are not enough, and many of the priests introduced by funeral companies are 'bogus priests'. They usually engage in other part-time jobs. When they happen to be called up for a funeral, they wear a Buddhist priest's stole and recite various kinds of sutras which they learned through listening to audio tapes. This is a very
extreme case. However, in traditional type funerals, it is often the case that a priest with whom the deceased and the bereaved family had no friendly relations attends the funeral as a formality.

Secondly, I would like to point out the disintegration of the village community. In a traditional village community, there existed many groups which functioned to maintain a traditional community life. Funerals were significant rituals for the community, supported by various groups. When a person in the village died, the groups undertook all the jobs concerning the funeral — informing his/her death to the village people, making instruments to be used in the funeral, inviting guests, proceeding with the funeral program, the cremation, the burial etc. Even if a certain family was ostracized in the village (mura-hachibu), these groups helped the family in the case of a funeral or a fire. There existed a strong group of people who mourned over the death of acquaintances and took responsibilities for the funeral.

However, because of the migration of people into cities and the change of the industrial structure, the community and human relations have also changed. For example, human relations tend to be weaker now because people’s work places are located far from their places of residence. Human relations have become more and more individualistic and partial. It is not a rare case that city-dwellers do not even exchange greetings with their neighbors. Moreover, since town associations or mutual-aid associations are not strong in the cities, it is very difficult to establish new mutual-help systems for funerals. ‘Local life now needs no celebration: what is there to celebrate when the community that sleeps together is not the community that works together or plays together?’(6) Consequently, traditional ways of handling funerals are hard to inherit. Such phenomena take place not only in cities, but also in rural societies. The tight bonds between people have also faded away in village communities under the waves of modernization. Now, both in a city and in a village, it is not a senior member of the community but a businesslike mortician who
manages a funeral. When we come across the death of a family member, there exists no group of people who mourn the death and help to carry out the funeral.

Thirdly, there occurred the collapse of a traditional Japanese family system (ie-seido). Before the urbanization of Japanese society, a strong family system existed. Members of a family and a blood relation group banded together and lived in a destined community. A family used to carry out a funeral with all its strength, supported by a village community. However, an increase in nuclear families accompanied by urbanization weakened the power of the family system and the bond of blood relation groups. Furthermore, an increase of people who do not marry at all or do not wish to have children, and an increase of divorces and remarriages have caused changes in the ways of traditional funerals. Japan is now confronted with an aging society. Many aged persons have no spouses or children and live alone. For them, their funeral preparations are a serious cause of anxiety, as well as many economical and health problems. ‘Who will mourn over my death?’ ‘Who will be the chief mourner of my funeral?’ ‘How much will my funeral cost?’ Aging persons must live their remaining days with much anxiety about their own funerals.

Fourthly, the problem of graveyards or cemeteries are also grounds for a change in traditional funerals. Because of the overconcentration of the population in cities, a shortage of land and houses and a sudden rise in land price have become very serious problems. Land allotted for graveyards are also insufficient in cities. In addition, new plans to make graveyards often meet with opposition because of environmental reasons. To cope with such problems, various alternatives have been proposed – making coin-locker like cemeteries, putting tombstones on a wall, burying several persons’ remains together in one graveyard etc. At any rate, it is certain that the number of the deceased will infinitely increase. If we wish to continue to follow the traditional way of burial, graveyards
must also infinitely increase and as a result, spaces for those living will decrease. Nevertheless, most Japanese people still wish to bury their bones and ashes in fine graveyards.

**Attempts at New Forms of Funerals**

It is very hard to carry out traditional funerals in present day Japan. A questionnaire survey by ‘SOGI’ in 1996 (2,395 respondents / 3,000 samples) indicated only 22.6 % persons wished to handle their own funerals according to the traditional way. 34.1 % persons do not want traditional funerals, and 7.1 % persons do not wish to have a funeral at all[7]. However, the established ‘funeral Buddhism’, which stripped of all its contents, cannot propose new forms of funerals. People have become critical of such shiftless funerals.

One of the major points of criticism is that traditional funerals cost too much money. Bereaved families are apt to consider that the grief for the death of the family member is expressed by the cost of the funeral. According to a questionnaire survey in 1990 (286 respondents / 400 samples), the average cost of funerals was 3,544,000 yen (about 30,000 dollars). 48.5 % of the respondents commented that the costs were too expensive and hoped to reduce the expenses to a minimum[8]. Furthermore, the prices of graveyards (administrative fee) have suddenly risen. The standard graveyard covers an area of about 4 square meters. The standard price of such a graveyard is 3,500,000 - 4,000,000 yen. People are arguing that paying such an amount for funerals and graveyards is in vain, for it is only to profit priests and funeral companies.

Under such situations, many people have begun to reject the provided traditional forms of funerals. Some people now do not wish to have a funeral at all. We often find obituary notices in newspapers informing the following — according to the intention of the deceased, his/her funeral will not be performed. Some people even wish to carry out their own funerals while they are alive. For example, a famous Japanese actress
performed such a funeral in 1993. She explained her intention as follows. 'When I die, my friends and acquaintances will attend my funeral. It's such a shame that I cannot be able to talk with them at my funeral. I wish to meet them and talk with them while I live.' On her 'funeral' day, one day before her 78th birthday, she was sitting by the side of her alter smiling. She commented that she was very satisfied with her 'funeral'.

Some Japanese now prefer to have their funerals performed without the attendance of priests. In 'musical funerals', favorite songs are performed instead of recitations by priests. In 'funerals by friends', which are proposed mainly by the Soka Gakkai, those who recite sutras are not priests but the friends of the deceased. In such kinds of funerals, usually there is no posthumous Buddhist name and no mortuary tablet provided by priests. Do these types of funerals solve the urbanization problems I pointed out earlier? I would like to explain my answer to this question using 'funerals by friends', as an example.

Firstly, as for the dissolution of a supporter system of Buddhist temples, these kind of funerals have proved that priests and temples are not always necessary. During these types of funerals, friends of the deceased recite sutras instead of priests. During the funeral, the deceased person's name is called out instead of the posthumous Buddhist name. It sounds much more intimate. In addition, there are financial advantages, as the family of the deceased saves money in terms of recitation fees and posthumous Buddhist name fees. Secondly, responding to the disintegration of the village community, these kinds of funerals propose alternative networks of friends formed within the cities. In general, people tend to be isolated in cities. But the Soka Gakkai has successfully formed new 'city communities'. When a city-dweller dies, many friends will come to mourn the death and to help with the funeral. Thirdly, responding to the changes in the traditional family, the groups of friends are playing supplementary roles for the families in funerals. Many persons who do not have spouses or children are no longer anxious about their deaths. It
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is often the case that after a Soka Gakkai funeral is performed, many aged person who had attended, — both Soka Gakkai members and non-members alike, — say they wish their own funerals to be similar to the one they attended.

Fourthly, as for graveyards, the Soka Gakkai is still keeping to traditional ways, although its graveyards are modernized and much less expensive. At this point I would like to mention a movement that is attempting to propose new ways of burial. ‘The Association for Free Funerals’ was established in 1991. It has been actively practicing new ways in disposing corpses — throwing the remains in the sea, scattering ashes in the forest, etc. The thought behind this association is that human beings should return to nature after their death. Many people has begun follow this movement. It proposes a solution for graveyard problems in cities.

In addition, there now appear ‘cyberstones’ on the internet. For example, ‘Sugamo Peace Cemetery’ in Tokyo is trying to erect virtual tombstones on the internet system. The families of the deceased ‘visit’ his/her virtual grave by accessing it through the internet. They need not visit the graveyard in person. One cyberstone of this cemetery costs 100,000 yen. Kannonji-temple in Hiroshima is also trying to create such a system, but one with no fee. Some of its Japanese clients live abroad, and cannot come to Japan to visit their relatives’ graves. Cybernet can easily transcend time and space. These types of graves and tombstones do not need real space. This poses as one solution to graveyard problems in cities.

Conclusion

As I stated above, the process of urbanization in Japanese society has had a considerable impact on the handling of traditional funerals. The major causes are the dissolution of a supporter system of Buddhist temples, the disintegration of the village community, the collapse of a
traditional Japanese family system, and the problems of graveyards or cemeteries. Now some proposals for new types of funerals and burials are being made and they are attracting a great deal of attention. Even some religions are attempting to create new types of funerals. As Bryan Wilson said, 'religion in the past solemnized men's social relationships and their community life. In the modern world, natural communities have largely disappeared; men no longer live, learn, work, play, marry, and die in the same community. Yet, there is no doubt that men hanker after the benefits of a community and seek contexts in which they are responsible for one another. New religious movements can supply precisely this context in a way that no other social agency can. Because religious activity is predicated on transcendental concepts, because sharing and caring are at the core of its operation, because the celebration of the transcendent truth is also a celebration of the community in which the truth is cherished — for all of these reasons, religious groups provide the intrinsic, as well as the symbolic, benefits of community.'

Funerals have existed from the beginning of human history. Their forms were different from place to place, and time to time. There must have been some grounds for established rituals. Japanese traditional funerals also had enough grounds for its formation. But if some customs begin to be reconsidered and change, there are enough grounds, too. The rituals — including funerals — are nothing but manners and customs which should change with the times. These days, Japanese funerals are coping with the change in times. The most important point is whether the essential meaning of funerals are fulfilled or not. Funerals are rituals for the deceased and the bereaved family, not for the priests and morticians. It is an urgent task to go back to the starting point of funerals again, and to create appropriate forms of funerals for the current times. Of course, such new forms will at some point in the future be reconsidered and once again change with the times.
Notes

(1) Editor is Hajime Himonnya and the publisher is Hyogensha, Tokyo. At first, most readers of this magazine were merticians, but now many ordinary people read it.


(5) Generally wooden or bamboo chopsticks are used to collect the ashes of the deceased. Ashes of legs, arms, hipbone, back bone, teeth and skull are collected in order. Finally the ash of the Adam's apple is picked up by the bereaved family.


(7) *Sogi*, vol.6, no.5, 1996.9, pp.30-35.

(8) *Asahi Shimbun*, 1990.10.18.


(10) See Haruyo Inoue, *Ima Sogi Ohaka ga kawaru (Changing Funerals and Graves)*,
Sanseido, Tokyo, 1993.

(11) B. Wilson, *ibid.*, pp. 133-34.

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