

COUNTERPOINT

Dealing with death the Japanese ways

By ROGER PULVERS

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There is a quiet revolution taking place in the attitudes and practices concerning death and burial in Japan -- striking changes that shed light not only on how Japanese people today view death, but also life and the relationships that underpin it. So this week and next, I will explore contemporary issues relating to death.

Over the past few years, Japanese people have been taking a much more diversified approach to burying their dead, and this is causing great concern among those who profit from the traditional arrangements, namely Buddhist temples and funeral parlors.

But in order to understand what is happening today, let's look briefly at the past.

Every culture has its own way of dealing with the dead, drawing on rituals and beliefs that may go back millennia. The Japanese are no exception. It was in the Edo Period (1603-1867) that burial customs among the common people first took on a form that we would recognize today. Before then, by and large, the disposal of dead bodies was left entirely to the family. In some districts, particularly western Japan, corpses were either buried in shallow graves, which were used over and over again as communal burial pits, or they were merely dumped by the bank of a river. There is even a word for these "graves," *sutebaka*, which comes from two words: *suteru*, meaning "to abandon or throw away," and *haka*, meaning "grave."

There is also the powerful folktale of "Obasuteyama," or "Ubasuteyama," meaning "Mount Granny Dump." The 1955 novel by Shichiro Fukazawa, "Narayama Bushiko," which, like the folktale on which it is based, depicts the abandonment on top of a mountain of an ailing grandmother by her son, was twice made into a film, in 1958 by Keisuke Kinoshita ("Narayama Bushiko") and in 1983 by Shohei Imamura ("The Ballad of Narayama").

Masterpieces of cinema

They are both wonderful films, but Kinoshita's is a masterpiece of Japanese cinema. In all these renderings, the granny, too, felt as if her time had come. (Some people dispute the authenticity of this practice, but I have no doubt that it existed, and not only in Japan.)

In some regions of Japan people buried their dead without cremation, while in others cremation was practiced. It wasn't until the Edo Period that Buddhism took hold as the dominant religion among ordinary people, and the creation of a family grave and the practice of visiting it became commonplace.

The so-called *mairibaka*, or "grave site for visitation," gained its place in the precincts of temples at that time. Temples began insisting that the souls of ancestors be worshipped at set intervals, such as 49 days, 100 days, three years, seven years, and so on. Of course, temples were paid for upkeep of the grave sites, and priests charged handsome fees for performing the necessary duties, such as sutra reading, for the souls of the dead. The average fee for a Buddhist priest to preside at a funeral today is about 400,000 yen.

But the group profiting most from this practice in modern times is the guild of undertakers and funeral-parlor managers. These businesses conduct funerals chiefly in line with Buddhist conventions, maintaining a solemn ritualistic atmosphere.

There are some 45,000 funeral parlors in Japan today; and the average funeral costs over 3 million yen. However, as Japanese people are typically reserved and shy when it comes to money, most people only find out the cost after their loved one has been buried. They are too embarrassed to talk about money in their time of utmost grief.

The Japanese service, moreover, is an elaborate affair, and includes a wake. Every detail is usually left to the funeral-parlor operators.

In the coming years, it would seem that funeral parlors and temples ought to be getting busier as the *dankai no sedai* (babyboomers) are gradually retiring. According to government statistics published in 2005, the present number of approximately 1 million deaths a year will rise, by the mid-2030s, to 1.7 million.

In contrast, crematoriums in Japan -- which cut out the temples and funeral-parlor operators and already have their hands full -- have traditionally not been in private hands. That's simply because there's no money to be made, since -- although cremation costs vary by region -- they are typically around 50,000 yen, of which some 10,000 yen is a compulsory registration fee.

More relaxed and enjoyable

The future should then be rosy for the funeral-parlor business. But not so.

On Aug. 16, the evening edition of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun reported that many people are opting for "order-made family funerals." These are intimate affairs held only for the benefit of next of kin in a small space such as an apartment. Elaborate rituals and the wake are done away with, which can make the funeral a more relaxed and enjoyable affair. One family, from Kodaira City in Tokyo, is quoted in the same newspaper saying of their order-made family funeral, "We had a great chance to talk in a leisurely way and the food was delicious."

Even the traditional stone marker is being replaced in some cases by a wooden one; and a few people opt for their loved ones' ashes to be specially treated and fashioned into a plate or a pendant.

But the biggest threat of all to both the temples and the funeral parlors is the falling birthrate, now down to 1.25 children for every woman between 15 and 49. Fewer children in the short run means fewer deaths in the long term. But that's not the only thing it means.

If people have only one or indeed no children, who is going to be left to tend their grave at the set periodic intervals? It used to be that virtually everyone in Japan would visit their parents' or ancestors' graves at *higan*, the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. This practice is now nowhere near as popular as it once was.

So, if there's no one who is going to pay respects to you after you die, what do you need a grave site for?

Does this mean that the Japanese will abandon the link between death and Buddhism, held in reverence by the common people since the Edo Period, thereby threatening the solvency of temples? Does it signify a change in the manner of burial that people will be choosing for their loved ones and themselves?

This is what I will delve into in next week's column. And this is where the real revolution is slowly but surely coming to Japan.

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