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**The role of the ancestral tradition in bereavement in contemporary Japanese society**

**Abstract**

By focusing on the reported experiences of bereaved Japanese people, this paper explores the continuing role of the ancestral tradition in contemporary responses to death and loss. In a society that emphasises social conformity, it demonstrates the diverse and innovative ways individuals negotiated a shared tradition in a contemporary postmodern context in which a variety of cultural messages compete for attention. Traditional Buddhist mourning rituals that promote family and social solidarity now take their place alongside a medicalised system of dying, commercialised mourning, bereavement counselling and increasing emphasis on individualism and personal choice. Five categories of responses are identified to reflect the different ways the individuals concerned sought to reconcile social and familial obligations associated with traditional approaches with their need to find individual and personal meaning in their loss. Some participants felt obliged to conform to traditional forms from which they took little comfort, whilst others found them to be supportive and meaningful. Some took an improvisory approach, putting their own personal stamp on received wisdom. Other turned to alternative forms of support, either to supplement or replace traditional approaches. Their responses reflected the complex, dynamic, fluid and ambiguous relationship between the individual and their social and cultural resources, demonstrating the contribution of individuals to shaping culture.

**Keywords:** Bereavement; traditional approaches; Japan; social obligations; individual agendas; continuity and change.

## **Introduction**

This paper illustrates and examines some narrative extracts from interviews with 17 bereaved Japanese people, men and women of different ages, carried out in 2008-2009, to explore the role of the ancestral tradition<sup>1</sup> in contemporary responses to death and loss. In a culture<sup>2</sup> that emphasises social solidarity rather than individualism, this tradition promotes continuing mutual obligations between living and dead family members and a sense of continuity between this world and the next (Plath, 1964; Smith, 1974). In contrast to Britain and other Western societies, emphasis is placed on proper treatment of the dead rather than the psychology of the grief reaction. However, Japan is also a postmodern society in which traditional ideas and forms take their place alongside a scientific world view, medicalised dying, commercialised mourning, the emergence of hospice and palliative care, and bereavement counselling. With individualism and personal choice gaining ground (Lock, 2002), traditional concerns about fulfilling one's obligations to others whether living or dead are having

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<sup>1</sup> By 'ancestral tradition' I refer to a set of death-related ideas and practices that are considered by many Japanese people to represent an age-old, shared heritage. However, it needs to be noted that such practices have always been subject to variation from region to region and changes brought about by different historical and political periods (Tsuji, 2002). Thus, practices that tend to be considered a 'the way it has always been' are more likely to represent the death policies of the early Meiji period (1868 – 1912), when certain practises were promoted and became more widespread.

<sup>2</sup> By 'culture' I refer to 'a way of doing things', or the norms, values and belief systems that shape the way societies and groups within society behave, and are taken to be self-evident, natural and normal. Yet what is taken-for-granted within a particular cultural context can vary enormously between cultures. Thus, in relation to death, such variation will be evident in differing norms about how mourners should behave and what should be done with the dead (Walter, 2009)

to compete with more contemporary ideas about the therapeutic needs of bereaved people.

The way Japanese deathways are changing in the light of contemporary post-industrial conditions is well documented. These changes have mainly been explored by studying how people materialise their loss through the overt rites and ceremonies that form such an integral and compelling feature of the ancestral tradition (see e.g. Suzuki, 1998; 2000; Murakami, 2000; Rowe, 2000; 2003; Yamada, 2004). Medicalisation, commercialisation and the rise of the funeral industry, widespread cremation and advanced technology have been found to be having a significant impact on both practical and symbolic aspects of funerary and burial practices. As a result, funerals are becoming more private, individual and diverse affairs that represent the final expression of the deceased person's life. Mourners' behaviour towards the dead has seen a shift in emphasis from veneration to memorialisation (Smith, 1983; 1999; Suzuki, 1998; Lock, 2002; Goss and Klass, 2005). New burial trends, such as "natural burials", no longer prioritise familial ties and succession, but allow people to choose how and with whom they want to be buried.

However, the role and significance of traditional forms for the bereaved individuals who may or may not engage with these in a contemporary context of mixed and competing cultural messages about death and loss has remained unexplored. By focusing on what individuals have to say, it becomes possible to capture how these cultural scripts are translated and lived out on a day-to-day level. Then, the role of ancestral ideas in bereavement as it forms part of and impacts on the daily business of living becomes more apparent. This perspective highlights the way individuals

interweave ideas promoted by different institutions with those from popular wisdom and everyday socialisation to produce a diversity of responses to, what is considered to be a shared tradition. In so doing, it draws attention to the role of individuals in shaping culture.

First I give a brief sketch of the key ideas and forms that are associated with the ancestral tradition. Then by way of more immediate background I present some findings from a bereavement study carried out in Britain (Valentine, 2008) that prompted further related research in Japan. Then I introduce the Japanese study, the approach I took and what I learned from those I interviewed about the way individuals make sense of death and loss in a society that is postmodern yet promotes cultural and traditional conformity. I present the findings to capture the different ways my participants sought to reconcile potentially competing ideas associated with traditional and contemporary approaches, so as to meet the demands of the living, the dead and their own grief. I conclude with a brief summary of what these findings have revealed about the role of the ancestral tradition in bereavement in contemporary Japanese society.

### **The Ancestral Tradition**

The ancestral tradition, or *sosen-sūhai*, its associated ideas and forms reflect a discourse that emphasises the sacred nature of family ties that transcend the life-death boundary. Fostered within the extended household, or *ie* system, they encompass a familial devotion that is almost mystical in character. As such *sosen-sūhai* represents an indigenous faith that has remained separate from more formal religious traditions,

though having absorbed elements of these, particularly Buddhism (Smith, 1974; Valentine, 2009). However, the tradition has come to be considered synonymous with Buddhism, having been institutionalised during the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Tokugawa government through requiring households to register at the local Buddhist Temple. These then became the locus of ancestral rites with Buddhist priests as officiants, to enable the government to institutionalize devotion and loyalty to the emperor via these rites through the extension of people's sense of familial obligation. Then in the Meiji period (1862- 1912), such a binding of Buddhism with emperor worship via domestic ancestral rites was rekindled. Today the link with Buddhism remains, though no longer serving a theocracy.

Yet, *sosen-sūhai* was once a household-centered affair, requiring no relationship with formal religion. Intimately linked to an agrarian life-style, *ie* relationships are hierarchical, based on obedience and loyalty rather than emotional closeness (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994). The status of ancestorhood receives special veneration, something that depends not on individual merit, but on the continuing loyalty and devotion of the family after one's death (Smith, 1974). This takes the form of an elaborate and sophisticated system of collective and domestic rites and observances which promotes continuing attachments between the living and the dead. These attachments are based on reciprocity and mutual dependency, the living providing care and comfort for their dead who in turn look out for the living.

The belief that the dead depend on the living for their well-being initially finds expression through engaging in funerary and after rites for a period of 7 weeks during which the family gathers on every 7<sup>th</sup> day to encourage and support the deceased

loved one's smooth passage to the afterlife and eventually ancestorhood. During this intermediary stage, the deceased's spirit is believed to be in a restless state until the 49<sup>th</sup> day when, subject to the family's ministrations, it finds repose in the next world (Tomatsu, 2001). At a more personal, private level, such support takes the form of daily prayers and offerings at the domestic altar or *butsudan* as an expression of the deceased person's continuing role in the family (Goss and Klass, 2005). These private rituals are highly varied to reflect the nature of the individual to whom they are directed, such as offering their favourite food and flowers and keeping them in touch with those family matters that are likely to be of particular interest to them (Smith, 1974; 1983). Such concern to provide dead loved ones with those comforts that reflect their particular preferences in life reflects a sense of continuity between this world and the next.

This tradition has been represented as adaptive and therapeutic in coming to terms with bereavement (Yamamoto *et al*, 1969; Klass, 1996; 2001; Klass and Goss, 1999; Goss and Klass, 2005). It has also been found to have its limits for some groups of bereaved people, in view of the changing values and life-style patterns that have accompanied modernisation and urbanisation during the latter part of the twentieth century (Matsushima *et al.*, 2002; Deeken, 2005). These changes include the waning of the household system in favour of smaller family units and self-chosen relationships based on emotional dependency rather than duty, and the individualising, privatising and secularising of experience (Lock, 2002; Long, 2003).

## **UK Study**

The impetus to carry out a bereavement study in Japan arose from findings from interviews with 25 bereaved individuals, 15 women and 10 men aged 17 to 63, in Britain from 2004 to 2007. These interviews similarly reflected a discourse in which the dead remain part of the lives of the living, though one that is not rooted in any strong sense of a shared traditional frame of reference. Rather, in a multi-cultural society the emphasis is on ‘individuality and diversity’, as reflected in participants’ frequent references to the importance of people grieving in their own way (Walter, 1999; Valentine, 2008). Within such a context, there was no shortage of ritualised behaviour, but this was as much spontaneous and idiosyncratic as formal and prescribed. In the process of recounting such behaviour, some participants revealed an impulse to care for the body and well-being of deceased loved ones to suggest a greater and surprising similarity between the two contexts, in terms of the meanings given to certain actions, than has so far been appreciated (Valentine, 2009). Indeed, such similarities would not be apparent through observation alone, only through listening to the way people make sense of their experience. For example, the need to safeguard a loved one’s comfort and well-being was conveyed by Lynne\*, a woman in her 50s, in recollecting her mother’s burial:

*... but I just thought no she must feel very lonely down there somehow – ‘cos she was very – absolutely potty about her dog so we put the photograph of her present dog and the previous one in the coffin with her for company.*

Janet, a young woman of 19, tried to make sense of her desire to comfort and protect her friend, who died in a car accident, in the absence of any belief in an afterlife.



*But it's just weird thinking that he's there and he's got like no-one looking after him or anything like night after night – it's just such a cold horrible place really a graveyard ...I suppose it's conflicting – because I feel I don't believe in life after death, yet on the other hand I don't like to think of him being there and not having anyone – like at night.*

Lynne's and Janet's concerns about deceased loved ones being left 'alone' echo Japanese concerns that the dead are not abandoned to the extent of being prepared to take in unrelated dead who have no-one else to care for them (Smith, 1974). They suggested not only a desire to integrate the dead into the lives of the living, but a preoccupation with the treatment and well-being of the dead in a culture in which bereavement is anchored in the grief reaction. Yet, in the bereavement literature, the Japanese emphasis on mutuality, care and concern for the body and well-being of deceased loved ones has been identified as a point of contrast with post-mortem relationships in Western, Anglophone contexts (Klass and Goss, 1999). In the US, these continuing bonds have been viewed, psychologically, as involving inner-representations of the dead, who, reflecting a protestant cultural heritage, continue to exist on a higher plane as moral guides to those they have left behind (Marwit and Klass, 1996). Such relationships are thus one-sided, having therapeutic value for the living, whilst the living can do nothing for the dead. Yet, according to my participants, and, as represented in other UK sociological studies (Bennett and Bennett, 2000; Hallam et al, 1999), continuing bonds were experienced as both tangible and reciprocal, an expression of continuity between the worlds of the living and the dead. As such, they are reminiscent of the nature of post-mortem relationships as represented in the Japanese ancestral tradition.

## **Japanese Study**

To further explore this apparent link I carried out a similar open-ended, conversational, interview-based study in Tokyo, during 2007-2008, in which 17 bereaved individuals, 13 woman and 4 men, whose ages ranged from 29 to 63, volunteered their experiences of losing close others (see appendix). The sensitive nature of the topic required an approach that allowed participants to be self-selecting. A combination of theoretical, opportunistic and snowball sampling in which participants were asked if they knew someone else who might be interested in participating, was used. Potential participants were not approached directly, since it was important to ensure that there was no sense of feeling pressured. Rather information was made available at three locations, to which individuals who fitted the criteria of having lost loved ones responded as follows: three participants came from an English Language School, six from a Grief Counselling Centre and five from the University of Tokyo. Three additional participants approached me through word of mouth (Valentine, 2008). Informal interviews were also carried out with a Buddhist priest, a Funeral Director and a Bereavement Counsellor. A self-selecting method, and a time frame of only 11 months produced a small, non-representative sample. Yet, through generating rich data, this study, in keeping with the anthropological tradition, has sought to learn about the 'general' through the 'particular', or how culture speaks through the individual. I would therefore argue that the findings that have emerged have relevance beyond this sample.

Four participants were sufficiently fluent to be interviewed in English. The remaining 13 were interviewed with the help of an experienced interpreter, both in terms of language and topic, a Japanese woman, in whose home the interviews were held. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed alongside subsequent interviewing, analysis and interviewing informing each other. Adopting grounded theory approach allowed me to consult with both the interpreter and participants, as I went along, on

any areas of unclarity. The nature of the interview setting, the sensitivity of the interpreter and the topic itself, created a non-threatening, supportive, intimate space in which participants relaxed and talked freely. Interviewing through an interpreter enabled me to further appreciate the importance of body language and how it is possible to engage with another in a way that goes beyond words. This was a deeply moving, absorbing and challenging experience, through which I became more aware of the assumptions I was bringing from my own culture.

For example, in the course of interviewing I was to discover the extent to which ‘proper treatment of the dead’ and reinforcing familial and social ties continued to frame Japanese understandings of bereavement, as compared to the Western emphasis on the ‘therapeutic needs of the bereaved’ and recovering personal autonomy (Walter, 1999; Klass and Goss, 1999; Goss and Klass, 2005). In asking participants if they found traditional rituals supportive of their grief, I was struck by the way some struggled to answer this question, sometimes seeming to change the subject. On further consideration, I realised that my question reflected the way, as a Westerner, my own understanding of bereavement was coloured by therapeutic assumptions. I had thus unwittingly asked them to switch frames, something that not all participants were able to do. Those who seemed to introduce another topic had in fact gone on to answer my question in terms of whether they had got it right for deceased loved ones and others in their social circle. Though the therapeutic discourse and its associated emotionality was far from absent in people’s narratives, as a frame for evaluating ancestral rites, for most participants, though not all, it clearly missed the point. Similarly, I was reminded of the way some of my UK participants, as represented by

Janet, struggled to make sense of their impulse to be with and care for the physical remains of their loved ones in the absence of a shared cultural frame of reference.

### *Approach*

Since my aim was to ground social and cultural norms and values in everyday concrete experience, I invited participants to recount their bereavement experience, that is, to tell me their story. This approach encouraged interviewees to set the agenda rather than imposing my own, and to explore the meanings of the topics they introduced. It involved taking care not to interrupt their narrative flow, whilst at the same time encouraging them to articulate their thoughts, feelings and experiences as fully as possible. In so doing, it allowed more personal, less formally structured details, incoherencies, ambiguities and contradictions to emerge (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

As a result I found that, just as in the UK we take our own rituals and customs for granted, so my Japanese participants had a similarly mundane view of their own. Indeed, I often needed to probe for details they were inclined to gloss over and no-one mentioned ancestors until specifically asked about their relevance. Yet, when encouraged to reflect more deeply, it was as though some individuals rediscovered their own tradition to find unexpected meaning and relevance, whilst for others it further confirmed the lack of any meaningful connection between tradition and their own experience. Though considered a shared cultural heritage, the ancestral tradition represented different things to different people. The nature of its role in people's lives could reflect and interact with the role of other, sometimes competing factors, as well

as fluctuate and be subject to reassessment with hindsight. For such rites do not exist in isolation but become interwoven with other social factors that form the fabric of people's day to day experience.

In spite of strong pressures for social conformity, those I interviewed portrayed a society that was not as culturally homogenous as is often assumed, the ancestral tradition providing only one of the available options for framing responses to death and loss. As indicated, their responses represented the diversity of ways in which traditional forms could be negotiated in a contemporary context in which a variety of cultural messages compete for attention (Seale, 2000; Long, 2001). Indeed, my participants conveyed how traditional rites were not necessarily the most significant aspect of their experience, in some cases being only vaguely recalled. As with our own culture, their customs and rituals were almost invisible to them, their responses to being asked to recall them suggesting that they had rarely given them conscious thought. Some were inclined to believe that their loved ones might be in the same place as their ancestors, but most felt any link with the ancestors to be irrelevant to the experience of losing an immediate loved one. Several participants had bought a new *butsudan* to commemorate their loved one and therefore having nothing to do with the ancestors (Smith, 1983; 1999). For others, their loved one's "corner" served the same purpose.

In presenting these findings in more detail I take a cultural perspective that explores the process by which individuals make sense of their world through the wider web of cultural symbols (Long, 1999). By focusing on the reported experiences of individuals it becomes possible to explore how the larger structures that pattern social interaction and limit possibilities, may also be reinterpreted and transformed by people's creative

agency. Though beyond the scope of this paper, such experiences will also reflect a variety of social and structural variables. However, by focusing more narrowly on the ideas through which people interpret their experiences, I aim to capture the complex, dynamic, fluid and ambiguous relationship between the individual and their social and cultural worlds and the role of individuals in shaping culture.

### *Findings*

The impact of a loved one's death was reported to set in motion a series of rites that focused attention away from the bereaved person's personal sense of loss and grief to engage with the more social implications of death. The way participants reported the onset of death rites conveyed a change of gear and accompanying sense of pressure that was described in terms such as "*suddenly all these things took over*", "*all of a sudden it became very business-like*" and "*things just happened so quickly*". Such pressure was linked in part to the demands of what was often an individual's first direct encounter with what has been termed 'funeral Buddhism'. This negative image refers to the way Japanese Buddhism's main role has become limited to the performance of funerals and memorial services (Tomatsu, 2001). These have been criticised for being overly formalised with an emphasis on commercial rather than spiritual matters. Funeral companies have similarly been given a bad press for their role in creating more pressure for bereaved people through promoting lavish, ostentatious send-offs (Suzuki, 1998; 2000; Prideaux, 2002). Both institutions play a key role in encouraging and perpetuating traditional rites and customs. My participants' recollections drew attention to the way many Japanese people may feel

obliged to go along with this. Yet they also conveyed how such social and commercial pressures were still negotiable.

In such a context, traditional mourning could be experienced as daunting and overwhelming, bearing little relevance to the sense of personal loss. Yet support and meaning could be found, if not at the time, in retrospect, or through the bereaved person having put his or her own personal stamp on received wisdom. Some turned to other forms of support. I have categorised their responses as follows:

- 1. Following tradition at the expense of personal feelings.*
- 2. Challenging tradition through revising, redefining and adapting the status quo to reflect more individual and personal circumstances and priorities.*
- 3. Finding meaning in traditional forms.*
- 4. Combining traditional forms with alternative supports.*
- 5. Rejecting traditional forms and turning to alternative supports.*

These five categories are used to organise the following discussion of the way participants struggled to reconcile the social obligations that accompanied traditional mourning requirements with their need to find some personal meaning in their loss. It will highlight paradoxes mourners grapple with in applying more generalised cultural messages to their everyday lives, particularly in relation to ‘out of the ordinary’ experiences.

**1. Feeling obliged to follow a tradition at expense of personal feelings.**

Participants' narratives conveyed a context that emphasised preserving the status quo and that this often meant prioritising the social obligations, or '*giri*' associated with tradition, over more individual and personal feelings, or '*ninjo*'. As briefly described, the sophisticated and extensive nature of ancestral rituals reflects a cultural emphasis on social embeddedness, interdependency, loyalty and conformity (Shimazono, 1981; Long, 1999; Tsuji, 2005; Prideaux, 2002). In contrast to our own culture's valuing of personal autonomy, in Japan personhood is other-oriented, sensitivity to the needs of others and fostering harmonious relationships being valued over individual self-expression. A sense of identity depends on proper performance of one's role in the group rather than pursuing individual interests, something which runs the risk of disrupting harmonious relationships and losing face. In contrast to minimal guidelines for mourning in the UK, in Japan there is no shortage of cultural prescription together with a strong sense of obligation to carry this out to the letter. Rin, a woman of 50, whose husband died of cancer, conveyed how the demands of *giri* may leave little room for personal feelings, or '*ninjo*':

*I was suddenly thrown into all the things to be taken care of and there was no time to be sad and no time for any last message to give to my husband so all that emotional stuff had to be put aside.*

Yui, a woman in her 40s, felt that social obligations could take precedence over remembering the dead. Thus she described her mother's funeral:

*And it involves koden - people bring money - and how much is appropriate and there are a lot of things around it. So her funeral ended up rather a grand one with 400*



*people attending it. I'm not sure if it's just a Japanese thing but it seems that how grand it is is more for the people who are left behind not for the person who has died.*

Nanami, a woman of 30 whose husband died suddenly and unexpectedly from an aneurysm, conveyed the emotional costs of such pressures:

*Then our mutual friends came to pay respects to him and burn incense and I had to welcome them and deal with all that. Then I had to plan his funeral so I met the funeral conductor there too. So I dealt with all that but I still couldn't take it in. And I was very sad during the funeral and wake and I wanted to scream and I wanted it to stop but I had to deal with people, speak with people.*

The demands of tradition could be experienced in relation to more private, domestic rites. Noriko, a woman in her 20s, bought a *butsudan* for her husband in compliance with her mother urging her to do so, in spite of feeling it was an outdated tradition and inappropriate for a woman living on her own.

*Well my mother said to me don't you think you should do something – get him a butsudān? – and I said well I think they're a bit sort of naff and for a woman living on my own do I want to have that sort of thing in my room? - It seems a bit kind of odd – but she said no, you should really get one for him - he should have his own room if you like - so that was really the main reason I got the butsudān.*

When asked if the *butsudan* provided a location for her husband, she replied:

*To be honest with you - the butsudan has nothing to do with it - but what I feel is that he is talking to me directly and what he's thinking comes straight into my head - so I don't feel I have to go to the butsudan and do anything -*

Whilst Noriko felt obliged to comply with practices that were experienced as little more than empty gestures, for others they were open to negotiation and challenge.

**2. Challenging tradition through revising, redefining and adapting the status quo to reflect more individual and personal circumstances and priorities.**

In contrast, Takara, a woman of 30, chose not to buy a butsudan of her own in view of her hope to remarry in the future, something she felt sure her dead husband would be ok with, since he would want to see her happy. She did not want something so 'permanent' and envisaged a time when his 'corner' would eventually disappear. In this way she negotiated the obligations associated with traditional family relationships to accommodate the contemporary valuing of romantic attachment and personal freedom:

*In the early days there were loads of photos but I've now reduced them and there are just one or two. So - we had a very good relationship and he was indispensable to me - that's true, but I'm alive and I want to enjoy my life and one day there might be somebody who will understand me and I would like to fall in love with somebody and I'm sure my husband will accept that. So I have decided not to be persistent about him and I'm sure my husband would like to see me happy*

Izanagi, a man in his 40s, demonstrated how traditional ideas about caring for the dead could be combined with finding support for one's own grief, to produce an interweaving of ancestral and therapeutic ideas. He achieved this by undertaking to choose his wife's *kaimyo*, or posthumous, honorific name traditionally chosen and assigned to the deceased person by the Buddhist priest. Izanagi's rationale for such non-conformity was that the priest not only did not know his wife as a person, but would have had to come up with something very quickly, with the funeral scheduled to take place the day after his wife died. Since Izanagi had both the time and knowledge, he was far more qualified to do the job. His awareness that his wife was dying enabled him to take time to give careful consideration to constructing a name that truly reflected his wife's life and character, to encompass her love of the ocean and her work as a designer. He drew attention to the uniqueness of the opportunity he had taken, conveying that in caring for his wife he was also caring for himself:

*When somebody dies they give them a Buddhist name and normally the priest does this - and often they are in a rush because they only have a few days till the ceremony - and the priest probably doesn't know anything about the person and so isn't the best person to come up with the name. So I thought about her character and life in itself and I chose a Chinese character to suit her personality – so I was very happy to be able to name her. Because she liked the ocean I thought about something to do with the ocean and she was a designer so I thought about something to do with her occupation and you know things she liked. So I was able to choose two Chinese characters that have meaning for her instead of the priest choosing them. So I feel like I named her and I think it's a good thing –not many people do this, so I'm lucky that I had chance to do that and so I'm proud about that.*

Izanagi thus personalised and redefined a practice that has become one of the targets for people's criticism of 'funeral Buddhism' in relation to the high prices bereaved people may pay to temples to secure a high ranking name.

A further target for criticism is the custom of *koden*, according to which mourners are required to bring a cash gift along to the funeral as a gesture of support for the bereaved family. Such support has its costs for the family too, which, on the basis of reciprocity is then required to make a return gift or *koden gaeshi* to all *koden* donors of half the value of their *koden* gift. Since the amount of *koden* given should reflect the mourner's status in relationship to the deceased and his or her family, a record must be kept of the amount given by each person to be able to make a return gift that reflects this amount. Since the receiving of *koden* obliges one to give *koden* in the future, the tradition binds people in a continuing cycle of reciprocity which, though experienced as onerous, ensures social inclusion, enhances reputation and boosts identity (Tsuji, 2005).

Yet, Misaki, a woman in her 60s, conveyed how the meaning and experience of *koden* could be redefined as a contribution towards commemorating the deceased person:

*I found the giving and receiving of koden very helpful. I was able to use it to publish my husband's memoir book and for the expenses of the party at his first death anniversary, as well as donate something to the Macrobiotic Institute that treated him. Then rather than a return gift, I wrote to people to thank them for their donation.*

In this way, Misaki was able to fulfil the social demands, or *giri* associated with this long-standing funeral custom in a way that served the needs of her own personal feelings or *ninjo*.

Akiko, a woman in her 30s, discovered that the social and commercial costs of the funeral could be reduced through holding an informal gathering at home. Thus she remembered the small home-based funeral that her deceased father had requested and that, in honouring his wishes she had attracted criticism from people who felt excluded. Yet, she also conveyed that, in prioritising respect for the dead over obligations to the living, she found a welcome release from the pressures associated with a more conventional funeral:

*It was a very warm family, homely atmosphere kind of funeral - because my mum's and dad's relatives don't get along he didn't want to invite them. And there's this neighbourhood community association, they weren't allowed to come either - we explained the situation to them but they still criticised us for not including them. So he wanted to invite his tax lawyer and lawyer and banker and sushi chef - and we played his favourite singer's song throughout the ceremony and so we were able to see him off in a very relaxed atmosphere - exactly how it was written in his will. And that was a kind of pleasant discovery for me that you can have a very private, small funeral without koden or anything. So it was much easier – much less pressure.*

A formal ceremony could be opted out of altogether, in Rin's case visits made by friends to the house to pay their respects and take their leave serving the same purpose. She further departed from the norm in leaving her husband's body in the

futon in which he was placed to transport him home from the hospital rather than the usual mode of transferring the body to a coffin at this juncture:

*So for those 3 days all his friends came to say goodbye to him so I took that as the funeral rather than having a conventional ceremony. Normally Japanese tradition is to put the body in a wooden coffin but I chose to put him in a futon for those 3 days.*

However, some individuals were able to find meaning in the traditional Buddhist funeral ceremony, particularly the power of its rituals to mediate the fact of death.

### **3. Meaning found in traditional forms**

Though taking an unconventional approach to the *kaimyo* tradition, Izanagi found that the traditional funeral ceremony needed no improvisation. In reflecting on his wife's funeral he realised how powerfully its rituals had faced him with the stark reality of her absence. He emphasised that this had nothing to do with holding any specific religious belief but rather was down to ritual participation:

*As I said, I'm not religious... but to do all these ceremonial things rather than the belief... that has been very helpful to me. I've been to many funerals before like friends and people from the office – I've always felt a distance. But when it comes to my wife and her photos on the stage and the monks chanting. So the funeral was the place that forced me to face the reality about her leaving me and it's very sad but it really made me believe that she had really died – not like an image or a feeling but*

*just me going through the process forced me to face the reality. So being forced to face and accept the reality I think is a very important step to go through.*

For Harui, a man in his 50s, the provision of a series of rites allowed *time* to come to terms with his son's death, as well as served as a measure of his grief:

*The Buddhist death ritual has a series of rituals, like the 7<sup>th</sup> day and the 49<sup>th</sup> day and by going through these rituals I went through different types of emotions and it takes time - so I had to go through all those rituals and sometimes I felt maybe my son was coming back and sometimes it felt like I was saying goodbye.*

Similarly for Nanami:

*And then I had the 49<sup>th</sup> day and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year ceremony, and until the 2<sup>nd</sup> year ceremony I couldn't really put my two hands together because that to me would have been to have admitted that he's died. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> year ceremony I started to be able to do that and admit it to myself, so in that respect the rituals served as a good transition.*

Such meaning could be found in *retrospect*, through reflecting on one's experience. Thus Momoka, a woman in her 20s, recalled the funeral of a close friend who had taken her own life:

*And when I saw her at the funeral, because she jumped in front of a train there was blood between her teeth ...and when I saw her face - she must have been very hurt -*

*hit by a train - and maybe deciding to commit suicide itself must have been very hard for her. So it was very hard for me to think how she must have felt just before she died... Though I didn't realise at the time, when I think about it now I think it helped to show me that she really had died. And that notice has her name on it – we have a death notice that has the person's name on it. It didn't seem real but at the same time it told me that she had really died.*

For Rin, finding retrospective meaning was experienced as reassuring:

*By just talking to you now it has reassured me that I did the right thing – at that time I was so absorbed in the whole thing and didn't have the time to think logically.*

In reflecting on her role in her husband's cremation ceremony, she concluded that her efforts to restrain the expression of her own grief had allowed his spirit to depart in peace:

*And then they put him in the oven and shut the iron door. But before that – there's a gap in the coffin where you can see the face - I was able to see him and say goodbye to him first. My last word to him was –I thought I won't cry and I won't lose myself or he probably can't leave the current world – so just for him to be able to leave here I told him, “ I'm ok”, so he could leave this world in peace.*

#### **4. Combining traditional forms with alternative supports.**



For others traditional rites had their place but were regarded as insufficient to meet certain needs, such as that of sharing experiences with like-minded others. Harui drew attention to the way losing a child could cause bereaved couples to drift apart, and how the more contemporary ritual of sharing one's grief with others in the therapeutic space of a psychotherapy group (Árnason, 2007) enabled his own marriage to survive such a loss:

*So I continued the vision psychology after my son died and that helped my grief, especially being in a group. Though initially my wife and I found it difficult to express our feelings in front of a group, because we participated together that probably kept our relationship well, because I've seen many cases where the husband would go off to work and the wife would be left at home, alone with her grief and become so stressed that eventually she would get a divorce. So although it was difficult for us, because we couldn't hide our feelings that actually worked very positively for us.*

For Izanagi a therapeutic space provided the emotional support and sharing that was not necessarily available from immediate family. He reported that, in being unable to talk about his wife's death with family members, he initiated a men's bereavement support group to bring together those who had suffered a similar loss:

*I hate to say that family - parents and siblings have not been very helpful. I'm sure they care and worry about me but I don't talk about it to them and they don't talk about it to me, so perhaps it's better to speak to somebody who is in a similar situation. And I felt this is something I can't solve by myself, so one week after her death I went to a group meeting for thinking about life and death. Then I started a*

*group to talk about and listen to each other's feelings. It's been two years since my wife passed away and this has been the most important part of my healing.*

Misaki, who, with her husband, had converted to Christianity<sup>3</sup> just before he died, gave voice to the way some people found comfort and meaning in the less formal and more personal and intimate nature of the Christian funeral:

*Even though the majority of the congregation were non-Christian many found the service comforting. It was more personal, intimate and easier to understand than the Buddhist.*

She further reported how her husband's friends displayed his old school flag at the funeral even though this was against church rules. She drew attention to her own involvement in creating a floral display to reflect her own and her husband's Christian beliefs and the way others had conveyed their sense of loss through contributing eulogies:

*When I got to the church I found that S's school flag had been put up by his old school friends. I then found out this was against ecclesiastical regulations but no-one stopped us. I had my own special plans for the flowers - I wanted to create a heavenly gate of white flowers and the florist did an excellent job of this. Three eulogies were said, all which expressed shock at S's death and honoured his life - I felt they bore witness to his life and that he was living in their hearts and minds.*

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Christian perspectives on the ancestors in Japan see, e.g. Reid, David (1989) Japanese Christians and the Ancestors, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 16, 4, 259-283

Arisu, a woman in her 30s, made similar observations in comparing her parents' funerals, her father's having been Buddhist and her mother's Christian:

*There was definitely a more community like feeling with the Christian ceremony. With the Buddhist, it might sound a bit funny but it felt more business-like, you know they had a funeral conductor there and they took the remains away, so it felt very different in that way. In the case of the Christian funeral I think it really suited my mother - it was what she would have wanted. Whereas the Buddhist ceremony was much more ritualistic, and I didn't understand the chants. But at the Church ceremony there were songs and the priest did a sermon and I understood that.*

Yet, in turning to Christianity as providing a more personalised and accessible approach, Misaki reported that Japanese people may still wish to incorporate ancestral ideas alongside other religious beliefs, something which may or may not be accommodated by the Buddhist temple:

*Though I am Christian I still wanted S's ashes interred with his ancestors and his family's Buddhist temple were willing to do this. Apparently this is not always the case.*

Arisu recollected that the temple had accommodated her family's wish for a Buddhist-style memorial tablet or *ihai*, to commemorate her Christian mother to the extent of giving her a very special death name:

*Normally when you have a church service temples don't like you to have a ihai, but because my mother had such a good relationship with this temple they let her have one. And engraved on it are the Kanji for saint and for beauty.*

Kioshi, a man in his 30s, in trying to make sense of the suicides of both his mother and sister, carried out ancestral obligations alongside turning to Catholicism as more genuine and accessible. In relation to deaths that are believed to create unhappy, restless spirits, he sought to provide his loved ones with proper care, as well as find a more personal and intimate form of support for his own grief:

*I liked the idea that the priest is available - the Catholic priest seemed more true - you know more authentic. Buddhist priests are pretty distant. But I make sure we do all the ceremonies as tradition requires. The funeral, the 49th day, the first obon, the first memorial, everything was properly carried out. Of course this was all done for my mother's and sister's spirits so they can rest in peace.*

##### **5. Rejecting traditional forms and turning to alternative supports**

For some the formalities of the ancestral tradition only served to detract from the real meaning of losing a loved one. In recalling her aunt's funeral, Sumiko, a woman in her 20s, felt saddened by the preoccupation with social rules she considered trivial and at odds with the needs of deceased loved ones:

*When my aunt died and her husband was already dead my cousin, her daughter is forced to sit in the best seat at the funeral and her boyfriend sitting next to her caused*

*some kind of problem. Some people said, "Why does he sit there because he's not related to the dead person? It's wrong for him to sit there" - and other people say, "Her daughter is young and she's very upset and so she needs him to sit next to her". I just think that's all so ridiculous - because I don't care where people sit. But some people care and speak ill of someone because of that kind of trivial thing. A funeral is a place to mourn the dead and some people just complain about those kinds of things and don't care about the dead. So I think that's sad.*

She contrasted this experience with the funeral of a friend who died of a heart condition, at which she found that a more informal and intimate approach enabled mourners to talk and share memories of the deceased person (Walter, 1996). Such conversational remembering she felt was crucial to being able to accept that the person had died. She described how this was achieved at the informal funeral gathering in her deceased friend's Catholic University chapel:

*I think it's really good to talk about the dead because if we don't then we can't accept. But if we talk then we can accept. So we just talked about him. We went to the Catholic university where he graduated. We have a church inside the university and the priest gave a speech and it was very good because we just came and talked about him.*

For Mieka, a woman in her 40s, conventional forms failed to play any meaningful role in helping her to become reconciled to losing her younger brother through suicide. In her own words *"it just felt like a formality rather than a real farewell"*. So she sought counselling support and, as a result of talking about her loss she found herself

making numerous collages to, in her words “*try and connect with my brother and heal my sadness*”. She brought some of her collages along to the interview to show me:

*They're a series of 6 pieces, but I've just brought 3 of them. The first has hands at the bottom that are positioned to hold something and feathers at the top that are falling. The second piece has hands that are holding a sparrow, which is me holding my brother. When I made the first one I just made it independently and then I made some of the others independently and then I saw how it could be a series. By making this series, by holding him in my hands by myself and cremating him by myself, within me I felt - I truly felt that my brother has come back to me. By doing this it was the first time that I felt that he's here with me. The feeling I had was that by making this is that somehow he was returning to me. With such an unconventional death, with the police and the way everything happened, I felt I was very distanced from him.*

She eventually stopped her counselling sessions but continued to make collages, an activity that became her own personal ritual through which she recovered and redefined her relationship with her brother. In the process she discovered and nurtured a talent that now finds expression in making collages for others:

*After this it has been mainly for other people - before this I did it for myself and for my own feelings and now I find it surprising that I now do it for other people.*

## **Conclusions**

In interviewing bereaved Japanese people I set out to explore the role of the ancestral tradition in the experience of losing loved ones in a contemporary context. In the process I discovered as much diversity and improvisation as in my interviews with bereaved people in Britain where there is no culturally embedded, shared tradition. That individuals rarely follow blindly the dictates of culture, but rather redefine, revise, or reject these to produce their own versions of established practice is well captured by my participants' narratives. Even where there is the outer appearance of conformity this will still mean different things to different people. Thus, in recounting their experiences my participants conveyed a range of responses to traditional forms and their role in making sense of death and loss. The demands of tradition were experienced as detracting from or having little relevance to personal grief. Yet traditional forms were open to revision and could be adapted and, in effect, challenged to meet individual requirements. They could mediate the fact of death, in some cases with hindsight and engage survivors in assisting a loved one's peaceful departure. They could take their place alongside or else be substituted with other approaches.

Some individuals conveyed how traditional forms could be experienced as unrelated to and intrusive of personal feelings, requiring these to be ignored, submerged or mastered in some way. For others, social obligations could be treated as negotiable, even optional to the extent of reinterpreting the *koden* custom, composing the *kaimyo*, holding the funeral at home, even dispensing with a ceremony altogether. Others conveyed that traditional forms could still be found relevant and meaningful. The funeral and extended series of memorial ceremonies provided both rituals and a period of time that could facilitate mourners in accepting the fact of death, though this

could be far from comforting and only appreciated with hindsight. Such ritual participation, as well as bringing home the reality of a loved one's death, could serve as a measure of one's grief and create a sense of order that could be comforting and stabilising. It could provide a means of caring for deceased loved ones, something that could entail one's own emotional self-restraint. Some expressed their appreciation of a more personalised approach, with less emphasis on formality and more on sharing and intimacy. For some this was found through turning to Christianity, though not necessarily to the exclusion of ancestral rites. Others were drawn to the more contemporary ritualised activity of the therapy group where they could engage with others who had encountered similar experiences. These responses represented an interweaving of traditional and contemporary ideas in attempting to make sense of the impact of a loved one's death in a way that reconciled the potentially competing demands of the living, the dead and their own grief.

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