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Japanese Ambivalence about Traditional Mourning Requirements

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This article is based on research carried out in Japan last year to consider the role of the ancestral tradition in contemporary responses to death and loss. This long-standing system of collective and domestic rites is designed to reinforce and perpetuate family ties beyond the grave. It includes the funeral and cremation ceremonies, memorial services, grave visits and home altar rituals through which the living encourage and support deceased loved ones in making a smooth and peaceful passage to the afterlife and eventually ancestorhood (Smith 1974). Such ideas persist in a post-industrial context of mixed and competing messages about how death should be handled. As in the UK, dying and mourning have been placed in the hands of a variety of professionals with increasing emphasis on consumer choice.

In seeking to illuminate contemporary responses to traditional forms most research has focused on overt rituals. But what of their meanings for the bereaved individuals who engage with these? Did they find support for their grief or were they simply conforming to the status quo? The interviews I conducted with 17 bereaved Japanese people, 13 women and four men, aged 29 to 63, painted an ambivalent picture. Some individuals felt constrained by the dictates of tradition, whilst some found them beneficial. Others took an improvisatory approach to redefine, adapt or even dispense with tradition and achieve a more personally satisfying experience. Though the emphasis of different accounts could weigh positively or negatively, none were wholly consistent, but rather conveyed the double-edged nature of people's experiences of the ancestral tradition, its costs and benefits.

Costs

The impact of a loved one's death was reported to set in motion a flurry of activity that focused attention away from the bereaved person's personal sense of loss and grief to engage with the more social



Traditional Japanese Buddhist Funeral Setting (Tanaka Daisuke)

implications of death. A change of gear and accompanying sense of pressure was described in terms such as *'suddenly all these things took over'*, and *'all of a sudden it became very business-like'*. Such pressure was linked in part to the demands of what was often an individual's first direct encounter with 'funeral Buddhism', a negative expression of Japanese Buddhism being limited to the performance of funerals and memorial services. These have been criticised for being overly formalised and emphasising commercial rather than spiritual matters (Tomatsu, 2001). 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, 2000). Misaki¹, a woman in her 60s, reported that the funeral director had tried to encourage the family to buy the most expensive coffin for her husband. Her daughter had silenced him by saying *'doesn't it get burned along with the body?'*

Whilst Misaki's experience indicates that such pressure may be resisted, in a culture that promotes social conformity, people tend to take the line of least resistance. In contrast to the emphasis on personal autonomy in many Western societies, in Japan proper performance of one's role in

the group and fostering harmonious relationships is valued over individual self-expression. This contrast is reflected in the provision of mourning guidelines. In the UK, these are minimal, allowing scope for individual self-expression, yet leaving people at a loss as to how to behave (Valentine, 2008). In Japan there is no shortage of cultural prescription, though this may allow little room for personal grief, as reported by Rin, a woman in her 50s and Noriko, her 20s:

'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.'

'So the first thing I thought was I better tell everybody, I better tell his company and his relatives. Then all of a sudden I was busy with so many things – funeral preparations. I was kind of sad in a way but I was so busy with all these things that I couldn't really register my sadness.'

The resentment this could evoke was conveyed by Nanami, a woman of 30, whose husband died suddenly and unexpectedly of an aneurysm:

'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.'

So too could the private, domestic observances feel at odds with more personal inclinations. Noriko reported having bought a domestic altar, or *butsudan* for her husband, her mother having urged her to do so. This was in spite of feeling that 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.'

Benefits

Yet meaning could be found in the status quo, Izanagi, a man in his 40s, discovering that traditional forms could take on new light in the face of losing a loved one. Thus he remembered the funeral ceremony for facing him with the stark reality of his wife's absence:

'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 7th day and the 49th 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.'

Rin found meaning in having restrained her grief during the cremation ceremony so that her husband's spirit could 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 words to him were – 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.'

Traditional requirements could be adapted to accommodate more personal needs, such as retaining a loved one's ashes rather than burying them on the 49th day as required by tradition. Arisu, a woman in her 30s, kept her mother's ashes at home for three years until, in Arisu's words, *'I no longer needed them near me to experience her presence'*. Holding the funeral at home could be a welcome release from the pressures associated with a more public affair. Akiko, a woman in her 40s, recollected her father's home 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. ... 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 we were able to see him off in a very relaxed atmosphere... That was a kind of pleasant discovery for me that you can have a very private, small funeral...'

For Rin, the funeral itself was considered unnecessary, visits made by friends to the house to pay respects and take their leave serving the same purpose. She further departed from convention by keeping her husband's body in a futon during that time:

'So for those three 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 three days.'

For Tomoko, a woman in her 20s, who suffered a miscarriage, the absence of any

formal ceremony for such a loss called for improvisation. Thus she approached her father, a Buddhist priest, to perform an informal ceremony in her parents' home. As a result she was able to find support for her grief as well as ensure the well-being of her unborn child:

'After the miscarriage I asked my dad to have a ceremony for my child. So me and my husband went to my parents' house, which is a Buddhist temple. And I didn't know, but my mother had invited my brothers and sisters, so they were there and my dad said a sutra and so did my brother – he's a priest too. And I was crying so hard and my older sister was crying for me too and I think that helped me a lot because I thought my pain and suffering was understood by someone else. But I sort of felt relief that the baby went back wherever she or he was coming from.'

Conclusion

Thus, participants conveyed the costs and benefits of traditional ancestral rites. The costs reflected the demands of overly formalised and commercialised funerals and emphasis on social conformity that could impose restraints on or feel at odds with personal grief. The benefits were linked to the provision of rituals and a period of time for registering the fact of death, and assisting a loved one's peaceful departure that made sense of emotional self-restraint. Compromises could be achieved through treating tradition as negotiable, even optional, in the light of more personal needs. For example, the ashes could be retained, the funeral held at home or dispensed with altogether, and a special ceremony could be devised where none had existed. In recounting their experiences, participants sought to reconcile the social obligations of mourning with their need to find personal meaning in their loss. ■

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality.

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