

A nation in transition – bereavement in Japan



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Japanese people attach great importance to elaborate burial rites: according to a survey in 1995, they pay five times more than Americans for a funeral and 11 times more than UK residents. This, and the tradition of ancestor

worship, has in the past fostered a supportive, continuing bond with the deceased. However, these traditional rituals do not always provide the same comfort in modern Japan's fast-changing society and new ways of coping with bereavement are gradually evolving alongside the old.

In the West, bereaved people are often expected to sever their relationships with the dead; in Japan, however, they are encouraged to maintain and foster this relationship. The presence of a family altar facilitates continuing bonds between the living and the dead, as does the funeral and the thirteen rites that follow.

The elaborate set of rituals for the bereaved has not changed much in recent times, perhaps because they are considered to be of value in the grief process. During the seven-week period of mourning (*chuuin*) the dead person is thought to return to life and die again seven times, at weekly intervals. After the seventh death, on the 49th day (*shijūkūnichi*) the dead one is thought to leave this world for good. On this day the family gathers, either in a temple or at home, for a service and a final farewell. Candles are lit, incense burned, and prayers recited by a priest. Then the urn containing the ashes and bones is placed in a family grave. This ritualised leave-taking at clearly defined intervals seems to be a considerable emotional help in the grief process.

THE ROLE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The idea of continuing bonds, widely discussed in the recent grief literature of the West, has a long tradition in Japanese ancestor worship. It is important to be aware that the Japanese term for worship,

suuhai, has a much broader meaning than the western concept, which is usually associated with a deity. *Suuhai* expresses a deep respectful feeling towards another person that, according to circumstances, may be admiration, veneration, idolisation or even worship.

As Dennis Klass has described in *Continuing Bonds*¹, for many Japanese the focal point for ancestor worship in the home is the Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) or, in some cases, the Shinto shrine (*kamidana*). Food is regularly placed in front of the altar. More importantly, bereaved people will often talk in front of

EDITOR'S NOTE

Cultural change may lag behind technological change but both are inevitable in the modern world. Few nations have changed as rapidly as Japan and Alfons Deeken, who has played a prominent part in improving the support of bereaved people in those crowded islands, is uniquely qualified to describe the effects of secularisation, and other changes in belief. Are the traditions and beliefs of the past doomed to be consigned to the scrap heap of history or can they be adapted to meet the psychological, social and spiritual needs of people today? If they can be adapted this makes it important for us to learn from each other how to preserve those roots that continue to make sense of death and bereavement. CMP

the altar to the deceased person, discuss problems, ask for advice, thank the dead person if things went well or complain if they did not. Young people often ask for help before exams and will report back later on their success or failure.

Many widows use the family altar as a 'hot line' of communication with their dead husband and talk to him about their daily lives, sharing their sadness and joy. This one-way communication means a lot for many bereaved people. Dennis Klass rightly concludes that 'ancestor worship is an expression of the human community that cannot be separated by death' and that 'the rituals of ancestor worship provide a vehicle by which resolution of grief is accomplished'.

MODERN DIFFICULTIES

However, despite these positives, there remains some doubt about whether ancestor worship is sufficient to help today's Japanese through the process of grief. I have talked and listened to thousands of bereaved people during my 40 years in Japan – widows, widowers, bereaved parents and children – and identified four problem areas.

Declining religious belief

According to a survey by the *Asahi* newspaper in September 1995, 63% of Japanese respondents said they had no religious faith. Many experts consider Japan the most secularised country on earth. The question then arises: can a religion-based set of rituals sufficiently fulfil the role of providing a 'vehicle by which resolution of grief is accomplished' when the underlying religious base has been lost?

Changing male/female relationships

Traditionally, a Japanese wife would devote herself fully to her husband and her children. The close bond with her husband would usually survive his death and express itself concretely in daily communication with his spirit, thought to be present in the family altar. However, male/female relationships are rapidly changing. The increasing number of divorces, mostly initiated by the wife, indicates that a growing number of wives may not be able to find their main consolation during widowhood from communicating with their deceased husband from whom they tried – often unsuccessfully – to get a divorce.

Suicide

During the past years, a record number of over 30,000 Japanese committed suicide annually. Many widows who are suicide survivors are filled with anger towards their husbands for deserting them and their children, even after a long period of time. It is, of course, difficult to worship a husband in these circumstances if the predominant feeling is anger against him. I have seen many such families and found that mutual support groups seemed to be of great help to them.

Death of a child

The grief process of bereaved parents is complicated by the difficulty of using their dead child as a source of emotional support and consolation, in the way they have been traditionally been able to do by communicating with deceased adults. Parents see their role as that of protecting and nurturing their children, not the other way about. So the emotional support from a dead child will be considerably less than that from a deceased spouse, father, or mother, and an overwhelming sense of loss will often be the predominant feeling. For the past 20 years I have facilitated monthly mutual support groups for bereaved parents and again found that talking to others who have had a similar loss experience seems often to be the greatest help in the grief process.

JAPANESE ASSOCIATION FOR DEATH EDUCATION AND GRIEF COUNSELLING

During the past two decades the Japanese Association for Death Education and Grief Counselling which I founded in 1982 has played an important role in bereavement care nationwide. The Association has chapters in 47 cities and has over 6,000 members. The three basic goals are:

- To provide death education for healthcare professionals, schools and the general public.
- To improve terminal care in hospitals and develop hospice programs.
- To establish mutual support groups for bereaved people.

Support groups

Each chapter of the Association has set up mutual support groups. The Tokyo chapter holds three group meetings a month, one for widows and widowers, one for parents bereaved of a child, and one for survivors of suicide. Many members have told me that there, for the first time, they could talk about the death of a loved one. It is a general rule in Japanese society that one should avoid unpleasant topics and the

most unpleasant topic is, of course, death. So many Japanese feel that they should not burden their acquaintances with their grief and avoid mentioning a family death. The mutual support group gives them permission, even encourages them, to talk about their loss and grief.

Following the earthquake in Kobe in January 1995 in which over 5,000 people lost their lives, the local chapter immediately organised support groups for parents who had lost children, as well as for those who had lost spouses or other family members. One of the typical issues in the Kobe groups is, unfortunately, multiple loss, for example losing a child, a husband, a house, a job, all in a minute.

Pre-widowhood education

The Association considers one of its main tasks to be the education, counselling, and provision of support for widows. However, equally important from the outset has been the education of married women on the prospect of their future loss, through a pre-widowhood programme. Interest in this is high as Japanese women live, on average, seven years longer than men, so most married women face the death of their husbands and a lengthy period of widowhood. At the beginning of the 20th century, the gap between the life expectancy of Japanese men and women was only one year; the average lifespan of men was 42 years, women 43. By 2003, male life expectancy was 78 years, and for females 85. The longevity of both Japanese men and women is now the world's greatest.

Many widows who attend the Association's meetings complain that there had not been any education preparing them for the difficult transition from wife to widow. As a result of the death taboo, doctors tend not to inform husbands about an incurable cancer and or approaching death, so there can be little communication about this between husband and wife, no final leave-taking, or expression of thanks, or last goodbye. Many widows are troubled by the fact that they failed to talk to their husbands about important issues before they died and resulting guilt feelings are quite frequent.

One of the most efficient methods of pre-widowhood education seems to be conferences that combine lectures from bereavement experts with personal testimonies of widows and widowers. Such conferences have been offered in many cities of Japan, and attract a great number of middle-aged married women. Widows seem to experience a new dimension of meaning in their suffering when given the opportunity to share their experience with

married women who, presumably, as a result of this experience will be better prepared to face their own future bereavement and widowhood in more creative ways. The ideas behind pre-widowhood education are that a woman can be alerted to the importance of better communication during the final period before the death of her husband, and that she will adjust better to bereavement if she has prepared herself for it mentally and emotionally.

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF IN JAPAN

Kenneth Doka has defined disenfranchised grief as 'the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.'² Three reasons why the grief of survivors may be disenfranchised, according to Doka, are that the relationship is not recognised, the loss is not recognised, or the griever is not recognised. Doka sees as the central paradoxical problem of disenfranchised grief that 'the very nature of this type of grief exacerbates the problem of grief, but the usual sources of support may not be available or helpful'.

Each society has its own typical groups who suffer from disenfranchised grief.

Bereaved families of WWII soldiers

In Japan, mothers, widows and children of soldiers who died in WWII are typical examples of disenfranchised grievers. When they were informed that their sons, husbands or fathers had died fighting for the country, they were expected not to shed tears. The death of their loved ones was not to be seen as a loss but as a glorious heroic event of which they were to be proud. Even at the funeral they were expected to be brave and not to let their emotions show by shedding tears.

Bereavement after death from overwork

Hiroshi Kawahito, secretary general of the National Defence Council for Victims of Karooshi, claims an estimated 10,000 Japanese die each year from overwork (*karooshi*). Some experts estimate that in recent years the annual number of deaths from overwork has risen to 30,000 or even 50,000. *Karooshi* takes the form of sudden death, usually caused by heart or brain disorders. Overtime is normal in Japan and, in addition to long working hours, commuting may take up to three or even four hours each day. In 1989, Japanese were 'on the job' an average 2,150 hours a year in contrast to 1,924 hours in the USA, and 1,655 hours in the then West Germany.

A causal connection is difficult to

A new style of mourning?

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establish, and only when the relationship between work and death is established as causal will a company grant compensation. Defence council Kawahito states that if a victim has worked 16 hours a day for seven consecutive days prior to his death he has a chance of being classed as a *karooshi* victim. Owing to the Labour Ministry's strict approval standards for compensation, companies refuse to admit the existence of *karooshi*.

The grief reaction of widows who believe that their husband's death was caused by *karooshi* is complicated in various ways. Strong emotions are often apparent: anger at the deceased husband's company's refusal to acknowledge that the cause of death was due to overwork, and guilt feelings for not having persuaded their husbands to take more rest and thus avoid death from overwork.

CONCLUSION

We have to be aware that different cultures have, indeed, different attitudes toward death and bereavement. Japanese views on death and bereavement are not a static phenomenon but are rather in a dynamic evolving process. In order to understand a country's perspective on death and bereavement, we have to look at the cultural background and the underlying value structures of the culture.

Comparing Japanese culture with that of numerous other countries, from the perspective of my 40 years in Japan, I have come to the conclusion that, despite various differences, what is common in the bereavement experience of people around the world is much greater than what is different. In the 21st century, there will probably be even greater interaction between peoples and cultures than in the past. Being aware of the differences will help us to understand the sufferings and needs of people from different racial backgrounds and enable us to share their sorrow and support them in their grief. At the same time we need not overemphasise cultural differences: as members of the family of human beings we all have similar experiences when confronted with death and bereavement. BC

References

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Looking through an album of my Victorian family photographs, I found myself reflecting on how little I knew about these people. I wondered too how much less my own children and future generations will know about them unless some form of enduring written record is established.

Ways of life are changing and in many countries the close proximity of the extended family is a thing of the past, as members disperse and relocate around the globe. It seems, however, that for a growing number of people the internet is becoming a resource, enabling them not only to create a 'permanent' record of the lives of loved ones following bereavement, but also to share these memories and reflections with friends and family worldwide.

There are now a staggering number of web sites, many created within the last five years, dedicated to the creation of on-line memorials. Some are linked directly to specific funeral homes. Some charge a small fortune to clients perhaps already vulnerable following a bereavement, but a large number appear to offer a reasonable service for which there is a growing demand.

One such site, www.memoriallink.com, founded in 1999, has offices in Colorado and Florida. It provides clients with the opportunity to create a 'biographical representation of an individual's life', a virtual tribute accessible worldwide for generations to come. The copy is written by the client and can include scanned photographs, artwork, poems, lyrics, and newspaper articles. Clients can link this memorial page to that of other family members and send emails inviting selected people to view the page.

Those accessing these memorials are also able to email messages of condolence to the family and even send flowers via an online ordering service. The whole site can be translated into eight languages in addition to English, including French, Portuguese and Chinese.

A site with a slightly different angle is the Canadian-based www.Partingwishes.com, founded in 2000. Again, clients create online memorials to include audio and video clips as well as text and graphics. Unlike the previous site, these memorials are free of charge providing they do not exceed 100 KB. If more space is required, it can be purchased with a one-time-only fee and there are no annual maintenance charges as there are with many sites.

An unusual feature of this site is the facility for clients to create an online document detailing their wishes for their own funeral arrangements, especially useful if there is a fear of family disputes following the death. A 'funeral wizard' helps clients complete a series of very specific questions on their requirements which can be updated at any time, and these can be kept private until needed. The site makes clear that the document is not legally binding but, after a client's death, the organisers take responsibility for informing friends and family around the world, inviting them to view the client's wishes via the site. The document can be created and stored on the site for up to a year free of charge. After that, prices range from \$14.95 for a 10-year site membership to \$199.95 for a lifetime.

Other services provided enable clients to establish a power of attorney and create wills and living wills. The site also links to online Amazon bookstores in the UK, USA and Canada for the purchase of books relating to grief and bereavement.

Although these sites are based in the USA and Canada, there are a few UK-based ones offering similar but more limited services. At www.light-a-candle.com, a unique feature is the possibility of creating different memorials for Jews, Christians and those of no particular religion. In addition, the site provides an email service to remind clients of anniversaries and informs them when others have added to the memorial. Clients can also light a virtual candle for their loved one.

Despite the fact that this site, like many of the others, includes memorials dedicated to movie and music icons mixed somewhat oddly with memorials from the general public, it appears to offer a reasonable and inexpensive service, and 5% of payments are donated to a charity of the client's choice.

Whatever our views on the concept of online memorials services, they certainly seem to be here to stay. Perhaps one of their greatest appeals is that they are dynamic in that they can be constantly updated and new material added by any selected friend or family member wherever they may be. They are also 'permanent', at least as long as the website remains active and the client can afford to pay for them. Certainly for a growing number, online memorials appear to offer a relatively new and effective way of expressing grief as part of their healing process. BC