



## The Purification Process of Death Mortuary Rites in a Japanese Rural Town

This article provides a detailed description and an analytical narrative of the complex and long process of the mortuary ritual. It attempts to elucidate the way in which the spirit is separated from its body and transformed into a household ancestor as well as how the defiled state of both the living and the dead can be transformed into a state of purity. Throughout the article, I attempt to show that pollution is still vividly manifested in various forms in contemporary Japanese mortuary rituals, and that it is still considered dangerous, fearful, and contagious in some situations. I also illustrate that although pollution inevitably occurs on the occasion of death, it is not considered permanent, but rather it can be diminished or eliminated by performing a continued series of mortuary services. Thus, the analysis as a whole seeks to elucidate why local perceptions of death and the articulation of the actual mortuary rituals must be understood, first and foremost, in terms of pollution and its purification within this local context.

KEYWORDS: Japan—death—mortuary ritual—funeral practices—pollution—vitality

SINCE THE rapid economic growth of the 1960s, Japan has been considered one of the most developed, modernized, and urbanized countries in the world. Rapid urbanization and modernization have brought fundamental social changes to both urban and rural districts. In these circumstances, mortuary rituals have also changed from community-based “traditional” funerals to “commercialized” ones managed by professional undertakers (MURAKAMI 2000; NAKAMAKI 1986; SUZUKI 2000; 2003a; 2003b). Due to this commercialization, the practice of dealing with the dead has now been dramatically compressed, shortened, and simplified in comparison with the past. Nonetheless, many important aspects of the “traditional” perception of death and its ritual articulation remain more or less unchanged in many parts of Japan, especially in rural districts. As BLOCH notes, “[t]hese unchanging aspects... made up a central minimal structure or ‘core’ of the ritual process” (1992, 1). The most important of these aspects is the “traditional” idea that the pollution of death is extremely dangerous, powerful, and contagious, an idea which continues to have an important influence on the treatment of the dead (BACHNIK 1995; HAMABATA 1990, 54–75; HENDRY 2003 [1987], 158–59; LOCK 2002, 211–26; NAMIHIRA 2003; SMITH 1999; WÖSS 1992). Thus, in the rituals, there is still considerable emphasis on the purification or elimination of death pollution. In practice, during my fieldwork, I found that various kinds of purification rituals are still vividly performed during the process of the mortuary rites for the sake of eliminating and purifying the pollution of death.

Using my fieldwork research, in this article I shall illustrate the entire mortuary process in the rural town of Makabe.<sup>1</sup> There have been a large number of publications on Japanese mortuary rituals (BACHNIK 1995; KENNEY and GILDAY 2000; ROWE 2000; 2009; SUZUKI 2000; 2003b), but they mostly provide a very brief and general outline of the basic funeral process. I shall therefore provide not only a detailed description but also an analytical narrative of the complex and long process of the mortuary ritual. I will also attempt to elucidate the way in which the spirit is separated from its body and transformed into a household ancestor as well as how the defiled state of both the living and the dead can be transformed into a state of purity. Thus, the analysis as a whole seeks to elucidate why local perceptions of death and the articulation of the actual mortuary rituals must be understood, first and foremost, in terms of pollution and its purification.

Japanese mortuary practices vary widely from region to region, and many variations exist even within small districts. Many factors have a bearing on the mortuary ritual: the religion of the deceased or of their family; the age at which the person died; their gender; their social status; the family's economic circumstances; and whether the death was a suicide, a miscarriage, an abortion, an accidental death, or even a violent death. However, although there are many differences in dealing with different kinds of death, as for example when WATSON (1988) explained the "uniform structure" of Chinese funeral rites, there appears to be a basic framework for ritual procedures that can be found in almost all kinds of mortuary rituals. Therefore, rather than describing and investigating the variations and their significance, I shall emphasize a description of the most typical mortuary process of "a typical death" as it occurs in one particular place, Makabe. This is based mainly on the typical Buddhist style of funeral rites, as this is the type most commonly performed by people in Makabe.

In order to provide a coherent description of the mortuary procedure, I took my research primarily from sixty-two funerals and a number of subsequent memorial services. I observed and participated in these funerals and memorial services as a kind of apprentice undertaker, guest, onlooker, and researcher during twenty-one months of fieldwork that I conducted from the autumn of 2005 until the summer of 2007. Along with my own experience and observations, I include information on the "traditional" communal mortuary rituals from interviews with local elderly informants, Buddhist priests, and researchers such as folklorists and historians. In some cases, I also add relevant information from other ethnographic works on mortuary rituals in order to explain how my information is similar to or different from that of other ethnographies.

#### CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Funerals usually take place at a commercial funeral hall (FIGURE 1, overleaf) but they are still often held at the deceased's house and, very rarely, at Buddhist temples. During my fieldwork, I made a point of reading the obituary column of a local newspaper, the *Ibaraki shinbun*, every morning before I left home, as it provided me with information about how many people had died the previous day in Makabe, whether they were male or female, young or old, their place of residence, when and where the funeral would be held, and who the chief mourner was going to be (whether they were the eldest son, the second son, a daughter, a son-in-law, a wife, or a husband of the deceased). When I counted the number of funerals which had appeared in the obituary column in 2006, I found that a total of 227 funerals had been announced in one year and among them 166 funerals had been held at funeral halls, 57 funerals had been held at the deceased's home, and four funerals had been held at Buddhist temples.<sup>2</sup> Thus, more than a quarter of the total number of funerals had been held at the deceased's home in 2006.

According to my informants, however, before the first funeral hall was built in 1995, almost all funerals were held at the home of the deceased. Since the first



FIGURE 1. Funeral hall. All photos by author.

funeral hall managed by undertakers opened it has been in great demand because many Makabe residents realized that it was easy and convenient to use the funeral hall and its facilities not only for the deceased's family but also for guests.<sup>3</sup> There is a lack of public transport in Makabe, and so many people drive. The funeral hall has its own car park so guests need not struggle to find parking places. A second funeral hall opened in 1999 and a third in 2005, while I was conducting field-work.

However, most importantly, wherever a funeral takes place, it is carried out by undertakers hired by the deceased's family. In other words, the family must purchase almost all of the funeral accoutrements and pay the undertakers for their services. According to my elderly informants, until undertakers and funeral halls appeared in Makabe, funerals were principally handled by the neighborhood association (*kumiai* 組合). The association was a subunit of the village, consisting of five to fifteen households, and it used to be involved not only in funerals, but also in conducting weddings, transplanting rice seedlings, building houses, repairing roads, and organizing festivals (PEKKANEN 2006, 102–103). In Makabe the association is mostly involved in funerals rather than other neighborhood duties. In the past, it built funeral altars, coffins, grave markers (*bobyo* 墓標), mortuary tablets (*ibai* 位牌), and funeral wreaths (*hanawa* 花輪), prepared food and drinks for the deceased's family and guests, dug the grave, and buried the deceased. Therefore, its role and responsibilities have decreased significantly.

Although most funerals today are carried out by undertakers, the *kumiai* still plays an important role in overseeing the entire mortuary ritual process. For instance, its members consult with the deceased's family and the undertakers about the funeral arrangements. They also negotiate with undertakers when they have different opinions about dealing with the deceased and ways of performing mortuary rituals. They are still stationed at the entrance of the funeral halls to greet guests, receive monetary offerings, and distribute gifts in return. These are the most important parts of the mortuary rituals for creating, maintaining, and strengthening social relationships or cooperation between the surviving relatives and their guests. They also provide salt, water, and towels to the bereaved relatives and guests for the purification of death pollution when they return from the crematorium and the grave.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed salt purification rituals at almost all funerals I attended and observed. For example, when mourners return to the funeral hall from the crematorium or the grave, they are purified by pouring water over their hands and scrubbing them with salt before entering the hall. They also sprinkle salt over their shoulders when they return home from the funeral hall. This ritual of salt purification, called *shio barai* 塩払い (literally "salt elimination"), is still an essential part of the mortuary ritual in Makabe and many other parts of rural Japan because salt has long been considered to be effective in repelling any malevolent spirits and death pollution that may have followed the living from the crematorium or the grave. In this sense, ritual practices remain almost the same as before; in particular, people in Makabe are still concerned with pollution and its elimination or purification.

#### BECOMING DEAD

At the beginning of my fieldwork, a local Buddhist priest told me that each person has a spirit (*tamashii* 魂) within their body (*karada* 体) and when a person dies, the spirit leaves the body. However, as my fieldwork progressed, I discovered that not only the Buddhist priest but also many other informants seemed to assert a similar belief in the separation of the *tamashii* from the body at death. In this sense, as other observers noted, the death of a person is a result of disembodiment of the spirit (GORAI 1994; MATSUDAIRA 1963; SHINTANI 1999; SMITH 1974; 1999). Here, the *tamashii* refers to both the spirit of the living and the spirit of the dead. Thus, it can also be understood that so long as the spirit remains within the body, a person is alive.

It is important to examine how a person dies and when the spirit is separated from the body. A person who is alive has vitality, although each person possesses a different amount of vitality (BLOCH 1992, 59). This vitality can be identified as *ki* 気 or *genki* 元気, the "vital force" or "energy" of human life. Due to this vitality, the heart beats and blood circulates, and thus the *karada* is warm and soft. This makes it possible for the spirit to dwell in the body. In this case, both the *tamashii* and the body can mutually operate, and thus a person can think, feel, and behave. On the other hand, when vitality is exhausted, the heart stops beating, and the

blood stops circulating. Thus the body becomes cold and hard, and the spirit eventually leaves the body; and in this way, one dies.

Although the heart stops beating, the blood stops circulating, and a doctor pronounces a person dead, this is not normally considered the end, because the *karada* is still warm and soft and the *tamashii* still remains in the *karada* for a certain period of time (NAMIHIRA 2004, 75–76). In this sense, as LOCK (1995; 1996; 2002), NAMIHIRA (1996, 2004), and OHNUKI-TIERNEY (1994) note, a biological or medical death cannot be conflated with social and personal death in Japan. When the body is cold and hard, the spirit goes out of the body. Yet, this does not mean that the *tamashii* is completely separated from the *karada* at this point because the *tamashii* wanders near the *karada* and keeps going in and out of the *karada* until it is cremated or buried in the ground. During this initial transition period, the *karada* starts to decompose. Thus, both the *karada* and its surroundings are considered to be extremely contaminated by the pollution of death. At this point, the *tamashii* is also considered contaminated by pollution. However, as BEFU (1971, 109) noted, “it gradually becomes less and less polluted and correspondingly more and more purified” by various purification rituals and a continued series of mortuary services. Therefore, to a certain degree, the process of death in Japan can be construed as the process of cleansing or purifying the pollution of death.

#### PREPARING THE DEAD

When a person passes away, the first thing that the family does for the deceased is to attend the deathbed. The family moistens the lips of the deceased with water using a cloth or a piece of absorbent cotton attached to the end of a bamboo stick. This ritual is called *matsugo no mizu* 末期の水 (“the last water”) or *shini mizu* 死に水 (“water of death”). A local undertaker told me that the deceased’s family often omits this act because many people die in hospital and nurses immediately clean the corpse.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it is sometimes performed in hospital after a doctor has pronounced a person dead. The purpose of *matsugo no mizu* is a final attempt to resurrect the dead or dying person (AOKI 2005; INO-GUCHI 1954, 34; GORAI 1992, 737). In this ritual, the water is used to supply vitality to the deceased or dying person for resuscitation, because water has long been considered a “source of vitality” in Japan. Moreover, if water has the function of replenishing and increasing vitality, it may also have the power to eliminate or diminish pollution because there is an inverse relationship between vitality and pollution. For instance, if vitality is high it may have the power to eliminate or diminish pollution, and if pollution is strong then it has the power to diminish or weaken vitality (NAMIHIRA 1984, 133–85; 2003, 186; OHNUKI-TIERNEY 1993, 56; SAKURAI 1974, 224).

After performing *matsugo no mizu*, the deceased is left on their bed until a doctor arrives to verify the death and to provide a death certificate so that the family can obtain permission from the local government to cremate the deceased. If the person dies in hospital, the family can get the death certificate directly from

the hospital and can contact a local funeral home that will transport the deceased from the hospital to the deceased's home. Upon reaching the home, the undertakers lay the deceased down on their futon in a Japanese-style room. At this point, the undertakers always ask the family which direction is north because it is important to keep the deceased's head pointing toward the north (*kita makura* 北枕). It is widely known that *kita makura* originated in Buddhism because when Buddha passed away, his head was pointing to the north (ROWE 2000, 362; STONE 2009, 73). It is also said that this position is taboo in daily life because it brings bad luck if you put your head to the north when you sleep (BACHNIK 1995, 123; FUJII 1983, 42; SMITH 1974, 94). Thus, *kita makura* is associated with death, bad luck, and pollution.

The palms of the deceased are then joined together on the chest as if in prayer (*gasshō* 合掌). Several rectangular dry ice blocks wrapped in white cotton cloths are placed on both sides of the face, between the legs, and on the chest. Dry ice is used for preventing the decomposition of the deceased's body, and the blocks are replenished by undertakers every twelve hours. A quilt is then put over the body and a *haori* 羽織 (a traditional Japanese jacket) is placed over the quilt in reverse. The face of the deceased is covered with a thin white towel. A knife (a sword was used in the past) or scissors—according to local elders, a knife is for a man and scissors are for a woman—is placed on the chest. These objects are believed to drive evil or wandering ghosts (*muenbotoke* 無縁仏) away from the deceased,

After the deceased's body is laid out properly, the deceased's family informs the closest relatives and then contacts the head of the neighborhood group (*kumichō* 組長) and a Buddhist priest from their family temple (*dannadera* 檀那寺) before deciding on the date, the place, and the chief mourner (*moshu* 喪主 or *sesbu* 施主) for the funeral. In most cases, the chief mourner is generally the closest male relative on the paternal side of the deceased. The funeral normally takes place on the third day after the death. However, if this event occurs at the beginning or end of the year, or a day of *tomobiki* 友引,<sup>5</sup> the funeral is brought forward or postponed, because crematoriums are closed on those days.

Next, the undertakers decorate the pillow-side of the deceased. If the family members have not closed the household Shinto shrine (*kamidana* 神棚), the undertakers close it and cover it with a piece of white paper to keep the pollution of death and malevolent spirits out. This is called *kamidana fūji* 神棚封じ (confining a household Shinto shrine). The paper remains there for forty-nine days, until the spirit of the dead goes to the other world and death pollution is lifted from the house. They then cover all the walls of the room from the ceiling to the floor with white sheets and place a small low table covered with a white cloth or a piece of white paper at the pillow-side of the deceased for displaying offerings. An incense pot, a candlestick, a vase with a white chrysanthemum in it, a bell, and food offerings are arranged on the table. The family should keep the incense and candle burning at all times because it is believed that the wafting incense smoke and the candlelight drive malevolent spirits or wandering ghosts away from the deceased, as well as dispersing or purifying the pollution of death (SAITŌ 1986, 50–54). A

bowl of rice, a plate of sticky-rice balls, a plate of *miso* soup, and a glass of water or green tea are placed on the table. A rice bowl that the deceased used when they were alive is heaped with rice, and a pair of chopsticks is erected vertically in the middle of it. The rice bowl will be smashed by the deceased's family at the grave immediately after the remains of the deceased is interred.

An upside-down folding screen (*sakasa byōbu* 逆さ屏風) is also often placed at the pillow-side of the deceased. This screen is used in accordance with the Buddhist custom for funerals called *sakasa goto* 逆さ事 (upside-down things: a reversal of normal practices). These practices highlight that people are performing actions in reverse during a funeral; for example, dressing the deceased in a death robe (*kyōkatabira* 経帷子) with the right side overlapping the left (*sakasa kimono* 逆さ着物), pouring hot water into cold water to make it lukewarm (*sakasa mizu* 逆さ水), and putting a quilt over the deceased in reverse (*sakasa buton* 逆さ布団). These practices of *sakasa goto* are strongly avoided in everyday life. The purpose of maneuvering these objects in this way seems to be to differentiate the funerary period of time from ordinary days (SAITŌ 1986, 29–81). In other words, these upside-down things emphasize the contrast between life and death that implies the interaction between vitality and pollution. On the other hand, these practices can also be interpreted as implying that the family members do not want to acknowledge the death of their loved one, so they execute *sakasa goto* to defy the natural order, thereby expressing their veneration to the deceased.

The undertakers then consult with the deceased's family and the head of the neighborhood group about the arrangements for the funeral. The deceased's family first have to decide how much they can spend on the funeral, allowing the undertaker to predict the size and scale of the funeral and thus recommend an appropriate funeral package with optional extras.<sup>6</sup> When all accoutrements and items have been chosen by the deceased's family, the undertakers make out a schedule for the funeral. The time of the funeral depends not only on the preference of the deceased's family, but also needs to be negotiated with the priests, and depends on the traditional Japanese lunar calendar that indicates whether a certain day is auspicious or inauspicious for a funeral. The time also depends on the availability of funeral halls and the availability of furnaces at the crematorium.

In the next stage, the deceased's family receives visitors. These are people who were close to the deceased such as close relatives, friends, or neighbors, who come to express their sympathy. At this time, each visitor brings a monetary offering known as *omimai* お見舞い (literally "an expression of one's sympathy"), on their first visit to the deceased's house.<sup>7</sup> The visitor kneels down on *tatami* (woven straw) mats, places *omimai* on the small low table, offers burning incense (*shōkō* 焼香), taps a small bell, makes a bow with folded palms (*gasshō*), and then enters into silence for a little while. After performing the *shōkō* and *gasshō*, the deceased's family usually suggests that the visitor should look at the face of the deceased. The visitor moves close to the deceased, kneels down, and performs *gasshō*. When the deceased's family takes the white towel off the deceased's face, the visitor says a few words to the family, usually something like "They look very peaceful," and finally



performs *gasshō* again. When the visitors leave the deceased's house they wash their hands with water and scrub them with salt to cleanse the pollution of death in front of the entrance of the house where water, salt, and towels are provided by the members of the neighborhood association.

During this period of receiving visitors, a Buddhist priest from the temple of the deceased's household also visits the deceased's house to chant a sutra (*makurakyō* 枕経, literally "pillow sutra").<sup>8</sup> According to one of my main informants, the Buddhist priest offers a short sutra chant on his first visit instead of offering *omimai*. The Buddhist priest kneels down on *tatami* in front of the small low table, performs a *shōkō*, and then chants the sutra for about five minutes. After the priest has returned to his temple, he carefully selects a Buddhist posthumous name (*kaimyō* 戒名) for the deceased. The purpose of giving *kaimyō* to the deceased is to separate the unstable, dangerous, and polluted spirit from the physical body and eventually transport the spirit safely to the realm of the Buddha or the Pure Land (GORAI 1992, 631). *Kaimyō* is determined by many factors, such as the deceased's status while alive, age, gender, achievements, character, and contributions to the temple (SMITH 1974, 81; COVELL 2005, 167–69; 2009, 299). However, in reality, it may be widely known that *kaimyō* has ranks related to the amount of remuneration given to the temples (*ofuse* お布施), which may range from a cheap or free name to the most elaborate names costing several million yen or more (ROWE 2000, 359). Since the growth of the Japanese economy in the 1960s, the price of *kaimyō* has also increased. When I asked the local Buddhist priest about the relationship between *ofuse* and *kaimyō*, he lapsed into silence for a while and then said carefully, "Well, there is no bad *kaimyō* but there is good *kaimyō*." It seemed that he did not want to admit that *kaimyō* is ranked by *ofuse*. The high prices charged by the temples have become a controversial issue in Japan, especially since the newspapers reported that some temples put pressure on families to buy a more expensive *kaimyō*.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, as COVELL (2009, 310) showed in an example of higher-priced *kaimyō*, many Japanese families, especially in rural districts, still consider lengthy and prestigious *kaimyō* as a symbol of social status.

After the appropriate *kaimyō* has been selected, the priest writes it down on two temporary mortuary tablets made of white wood: one is called *kariihai* 仮位牌 (interim tablet) which will be placed on the funeral altar during the funeral and then will be placed on the post-funeral altar (*atokazari* 後飾り) until the forty-ninth day after death, and the other is called *noihai* 野位牌 (field tablet) which will be placed with the urn in the grave after the funeral. The *kariihai* and the *noihai* are placed together until the funeral ends and the cremated remains are entombed. Although my informants did not directly note when the *tamashii* is separated from its *karada*, at this point it can be presumed that the *tamashii* is separated from its body and will stay at home until the forty-ninth day after death (OOMS 1976, 66; SMITH 1974, 81).

## THE ENCOFFINING SERVICE

In the late afternoon of the second day, the deceased's body is encoffined by the family members under the guidance of the undertakers. This service is called *nōkan* 納棺 (literally “encoffining the dead”). At the encoffining service, before the deceased is placed in the coffin, the deceased's body is briefly cleaned by members of the family. In the past, the deceased's body was washed with water in a process called *yukan* 湯灌 (literally “washing a corpse with lukewarm water”) for the purpose of cleansing or purifying the pollution of death (CLARK 1994, 129–31).<sup>10</sup> However, nowadays many people die in hospitals, where nurses clean them with antiseptic alcohol. This is why some of the undertakers I worked with mentioned that the deceased's body no longer needs to be wholly bathed in water as happened in the past. Thus, in Makabe, disposable moist cotton wipes (*sējōmen* 清淨綿) are used to clean only the exposed parts of the body, such as the face, arms, hands, legs, and feet. Nonetheless, when the bereaved family members clean the deceased's body, it is noteworthy that some of them are reluctant to touch the body. For example, they use only two fingers (thumb and index finger) to hold the cotton wipe, very briefly sweep the body, and then quickly throw it into a plastic bag which will be collected later and burned by the undertakers. This may indicate that people still associate the corpse with pollution. In this sense, although the practice of cleaning the deceased's body has now been dramatically simplified and water has been replaced by moist cotton wipes, it seems to have the same function of cleansing or purifying the pollution of death because, I argue, the fear of death pollution has not changed and still continues to exist in Makabe.

Additionally, SUZUKI (2000; 2003a) also describes a newly-introduced bathing service, the bathing of the deceased's body in front of the deceased's family, provided by professionals. She explains that while the bathing ritual was traditionally performed to cleanse death pollution, the commercial bathing service emphasizes the positive connotations of ordinary bathing, being presented as the deceased's last opportunity to relax (SUZUKI 2000, 188–89; 2003a, 64). Suzuki then argues that the negative image of death pollution, which “traditionally” characterized death, has now virtually disappeared from contemporary Japan because of the commercialization of the treatment of the dead. However, her assertion is inconsistent with her own observations and interpretation because she notes that many bathing service staff quit after only one or two years “because many staff conceal the job from their parents, fiancé(e)s, relatives, and friends, and once the secret is uncovered they receive so much opposition that they quit” (SUZUKI 2000, 156). It may be suggested that there is still a social stigma attached to funeral professionals and their work and that they are perceived as being dirty and polluted by contemporary Japanese.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Suzuki's ethnographic example undoubtedly indicates that people still associate the dead, the corpse, the funeral, and funeral professionals with pollution.

After cleaning the deceased's body, members of the family dress the deceased in a death robe called *kyōkatabira* that is made from thin white cloth. The death robe is always put on with the right side overlapping the left side. The back of the

hands and wrists are covered with a pair of hand guards (*tekkō* 手甲) and the knees are covered with a pair of gaiters (*kyaban* 脚絆). Then a pair of white socks (*shirotabi* 白足袋) is put on, and finally Buddhist prayer beads (*jūzu* 数珠) are placed in the hands. If the deceased is a woman, female members of the family apply light makeup (*shinigeshō* 死化粧) to the deceased's face, and their hair is carefully combed. After the death robe and makeup are put on, the body is placed in a coffin. At this time, the undertaker usually asks the male members of the family for help with the encoffining procedure. When the deceased is placed in the coffin, the undertaker puts several blocks of dry ice on the body. Also, various items are placed in the coffin for crossing to the other world, such as straw sandals (*waraji* 草鞋), a wooden stick (*tsue* 杖), and a white cloth shoulder bag (*zuda bukuro* 頭陀袋, literally “an ascetic pilgrim's bag”) for the crossing of the thorny mountain (*tsurugi no yama* 剣の山, literally “sword mountain”), and imitation paper money (*rokumonsen* 六文銭, literally “six coins”) for the crossing of the river (*sanzu no kawa* 三途の川, literally “the river of three crossings”).<sup>12</sup> At this point, some small items that the deceased liked to use when alive, such as books, reading glasses, photos, clothes, hats, shoes, an alarm clock, or other favorite things such as candies, sweets, green tea, cigarettes, and so on are also put into the coffin.

Additionally, the objects that have been worn, used, or possessed individually by the deceased just before their death such as clothes, bedclothes, rice bowls, and so on, are considered to sustain a high density of death pollution. These items are thrown away or burned after the funeral in an attempt to eliminate the pollution of death. Some of these items are put into the coffin and then cremated with the deceased's body.

In my capacity as assistant to a senior undertaker, I participated in encoffining services. After the body was placed in the coffin, my colleague always asked the deceased's family members to bring him some encoffining objects used or possessed by the deceased—these included items such as ragged *yukata* (informal kimono) or pajamas, socks, and even underwear. However, some valuable items and cherished mementos such as kimonos, watches, and jewelry are not included as encoffining items.<sup>13</sup> My colleague and I would then tightly squash them into the space between the body and the coffin. We tried to put as many items into the coffin as possible, but not all of them could fit because of the limited space. According to my colleague, this practice of placing items in the coffin has a practical function of keeping the corpse in its proper place during transportation from the house of the deceased to the funeral hall or crematorium. Apart from this function, it has long been believed that in some way those items make the departed spirit feel comfortable during their long journey to the other world (SUZUKI 2000, 46). However, it seems to me that the deceased's family members exploit the opportunity to dispose of the deceased's items because they no longer want to keep these ragged and polluted items. They also dispose of other items of the deceased that remain after the funeral. They often ask the undertakers to dispose of large items such as futons because these are heavy and too big for them to dispose of themselves. My colleague told me that the families are reluctant to keep or use the futon

that belonged to the deceased until just before the body is put into the coffin because they still have a fearful image of the corpse. Thus if they use it, it may scare them and give them nightmares. In other words, the corpse and its surroundings are seriously considered to be impure, dangerous, and contagious. According to GORAI (1992, 1046), the corpse may traditionally have been viewed as something to be feared in some way as a source of pollution and of malevolent spirits, and thus can inflict harm on the living if one either touches or comes close to the dead body. Additionally, the defilement caused by the corpse is transferred not only to the living but also to everything coming into close contact with the corpse, as Hertz has stated:

The “impure cloud” which... surrounds the deceased, pollutes everything it touches; i.e. not only the people and objects that have been in physical contact with the corpse, but also everything that is intimately connected, in the minds of the survivors, with the image of the deceased. (HERTZ 1960 [1907], 38)

As DAVIES (2002 [1997], 39) notes, the reason for the idea of transferring defilement from the corpse to its surroundings may be due to the physical facts of actual decomposition because in the process of decomposition the corpse is inevitably linked with bodily fluids and noxious odors which can contaminate the surroundings.

After the deceased's body has been properly encoffined, the coffin is transported by the undertakers from the house to the funeral hall where the wake and the funeral will take place. If the funeral is to take place at the deceased's house, the coffin is placed directly on the funeral altar of a Japanese-style room. The coffin is carried out of the house by male members of the family and put in a hearse. All the family members come out of the house, and neighbors or community members gather around the funeral car to see the deceased off. As soon as the undertaker has bowed deeply to the family, he gets into the funeral car and starts the engine. He honks the horn for a few seconds and then the funeral car starts to move slowly. At this point, all the members of the deceased's family, relatives, and neighbors bow deeply with folded palms until the funeral car goes out of sight. After sending the deceased off, the deceased's family and members of the *kumiai* also travel to the funeral hall on the bus provided by the funeral home, or they go in their own cars.

The coffin is arranged just in front of the elaborate funeral altar at the forefront of the hall. The funeral altar is decorated with fresh flowers and is comprised of two temporary mortuary tablets (*kariihai* and *noihai*), lights, two candlesticks, an incense burner, a photograph of the deceased, and some offerings (*kumotsu* 供物) brought from guests, such as baskets of fresh flowers, bundles of fruits, bottles of saké, or canned food (*uchimorikago* 内盛籠) and food offerings (a bowl of rice, a plate of sticky-rice balls, and a glass of water or green tea) (FIGURE 2). As soon as family members, relatives, and members of the neighborhood association arrive at the funeral hall, they look around the inside and outside of the funeral hall and carefully look at the elaborate funeral altar and offerings with their names written on boards placed at both the right and left sides of the funeral altar to check whether the offerings are correct and their names are correctly inscribed. Meanwhile, several male members of



FIGURE 2. A funeral altar. The blurred images are photos of the deceased.

the neighborhood association go out of the hall and count funeral wreaths, including those that have a bundle of offerings attached to them (*sotomorikago* 外盛籠). A board displaying the donor's name and title is attached to each funeral wreath. They also record each donor's name and the kind of wreath and offering.

### THE WAKE

It is a relatively new trend to hold a wake (*otsuya* お通夜) in Makabe. According to local elders, wakes were not held in the past and the priest was not called on to perform the ritual. It was only the deceased's family, close relatives, and community members who spent the night drinking saké, talking, and preparing the funeral. One of the local Buddhist priests told me that the undertakers introduced wakes when they started managing the funeral proceedings. He still clearly remembered that when he was first invited to perform a wake, he did not know what to do and asked the undertakers what was expected of him.

The wake usually takes place on the evening of the same day the deceased is encoffined and transported to the funeral hall. Before the wake starts, the deceased's family, the members of the neighborhood association, and the funeral assistants receive guests who have come to express their sympathy. At this time, guests usually bring monetary offerings such as *omimai* or *kōden* 香典 (incense money or condolence money, literally meaning "an offering of incense").<sup>14</sup> They receive gift bundles in return (*okaeshi* お返し) for *kōden* or *omimai*, and are guided to their seats by the funeral assistants.<sup>15</sup> The wake starts with an opening address from the presider of the wake (*shikaisha*). It usually starts at six o'clock in the evening and

generally lasts for forty minutes. At the beginning, the presider announces the arrival of the Buddhist priest, his rank, sect, and temple. When the Buddhist priest comes into the hall, all the attendees stand up with folded palms if they are sitting on chairs, or make a bow if they are kneeling down on *tatami* in a Japanese-style room. The priest is seated at the very front of the altar, burns an incense stick, and starts to chant a sutra aloud which takes approximately twenty minutes.

When the priest has completed the sutra chanting, the presider announces the incense offering. The chief mourner, followed by the other members of the deceased's family, relatives, guests, and members of the neighborhood association, in turn perform a *shōkō* while the priest is chanting a sutra. After performing the *shōkō*, the deceased's family hold a feast called *tsuyaburumai* 通夜振舞 (literally meaning "wake feast") and entertain relatives and guests with food and saké as an expression of gratitude for their attendance. The deceased's family and guests share stories of the deceased over food and drink. After the feast, in the case of funeral halls, the coffin is moved from the hall to the *otsuya shitsu* お通夜室 (the Japanese-style room for the wake) where the deceased's family and close relatives spend the night watching over the deceased in the coffin, keeping sticks of incense and candles burning all night.

#### THE PRIVATE FUNERAL

Early in the morning on the third day, just before the departure for the crematorium, the private funeral (*missō* 密葬, literally meaning "secret funeral") takes place without guests. Only the deceased's family, some close relatives and intimate friends, and members of the neighborhood association participate in this ritual. According to a local Buddhist priest, *missō* was not held in the past because the deceased was buried or cremated straight after the funeral and thus there was no need to hold a separate ritual for the departed. However, since the only crematorium in Makabe was closed in the 1970s and people had to go to other towns to cremate their deceased family members, it has become more frequent for the funeral to be held after the cremation and thus there is a need to have an additional ritual for the deceased before the departure for the crematorium. The closest crematorium is about an hour from Makabe. It takes more than four hours in all to go to the crematorium, to have the cremation, and to return home. Thus, if the cremation takes place after the funeral, it is difficult to lay the cremated remains in the grave before it is dark, especially in the winter season.

The private funeral ritual usually starts at eight o'clock in the morning after the arrival of the Buddhist priest and normally lasts for half an hour. First, the priest offers a burning incense stick on the altar and starts to chant a short sutra that takes no more than ten minutes, after which the chief mourner, followed by the other members of the deceased's family and close relatives, offer incense while the priest continues to chant. When all the participants have finished performing a *shōkō*, the undertakers take the coffin down from the altar and remove the lid. The family members and close relatives have a last look at the deceased. They stand in a line placing flowers (usually lilies and chrysanthemums) and the deceased's favorite objects into

the coffin. They then lift the lid up together and place it on the coffin. The undertaker drives half of a nail into the corner of the lid, and the chief mourner hits it twice with a large pebble, followed by the other members of the family, close relatives, and friends. According to a local Buddhist priest, this pebble represents one from *sanzu no kawa*. Thus, hitting the nail with the pebble illustrates the desire of the deceased's family for the spirit of the deceased to cross the river safely. However, more importantly, driving nails into the lid may also represent sealing away the pollution of death.<sup>16</sup>

After all the members of the family have hit the nail, the professional undertaker drives the remaining length of the nail into the coffin and drives more nails into several other places in the lid. The coffin is then carried out of the hall and put in the back of a long black funeral limousine by six male members of the neighborhood association. At this time, the chief mourner and several members of the family, carrying the photograph of the deceased, two temporary mortuary tablets, the food-offering tray, and two bunches of flowers, sit in the front of the limousine. Other members of the family, some close relatives and friends, and some members of the neighborhood association take a private bus. The Buddhist priest gets into the lead car, which is driven by a member of the neighborhood association. The lead car, followed by the funeral limousine and the bus, in turn starts to drive towards the crematorium (*kasōba* 火葬場).

#### THE CREMATION

Cremation has existed in Japan since the medieval period, when it was popularized as part of Buddhist rituals (BERNSTEIN 2000, 297; 2006, 28–29; PICONE 2007, 131–32; SHINTANI 1986, 184). Nonetheless, in some parts of Japan, such as Ibaraki Prefecture, the number of cremations did not exceed the number of earth burials until the late 1970s (BERNSTEIN 2000, 297). I also witnessed an earth burial during my fieldwork. However, cremation today is by far the most common mortuary practice in Makabe.

The cremation for the deceased from Makabe is usually scheduled for ten o'clock in the morning and it normally takes two hours for the whole process to be completed. The funeral limousine arrives at the porch entrance of the crematorium about ten minutes before the scheduled time. When the undertaker opens the back door of the limousine, two crematorium assistants bow with folded palms to the deceased's coffin, and then unload the coffin and lay it on a special coffin trolley (*kandaisha* 棺台車), which they roll into the crematorium. The chief mourner, other members of the family, and relatives follow the crematorium assistants to the farewell room (*kokubetsu shitsu* 告別室). The trolley loaded with the deceased's coffin is arranged in front of the small altar in the room. The photograph of the deceased, two temporary mortuary tablets, the food-offering tray, and two bunches of flowers are handed over from the members of the family to the crematorium assistants and placed on the altar. Meanwhile, the undertaker goes to the reception desk and hands in the cremation certificate issued by the local government author-

ity. As soon as the altar is set with the photograph, mortuary tablets, and offerings, the Buddhist priest comes in and stands at the front of the altar. He then offers incense and starts to chant a very short sutra that takes approximately five minutes, after which the chief mourner, followed by the other members of the family, close relatives and friends, and members of the neighborhood association, in turn perform a *shōkō* while the priest is chanting.

When all the attendees have finished performing the *shōkō*, one crematorium assistant rolls the trolley loaded with the deceased's coffin out of the farewell room, and the family and relatives, carrying the photograph, mortuary tablets, and the food-offering tray and flowers, follow the assistant to the incinerator. As soon as the trolley is stopped in front of the incinerator, the assistant sets the small altar with the photograph, mortuary tablets, and offerings just beside the door of the incinerator. The crematorium assistant then fits a key into a keyhole in the wall and turns it to open the door of the incinerator. When the coffin starts to roll into the incinerator, all the attendees perform a final bow with folded palms until the coffin is out of sight and the door is closed. This is the final intense moment of distress for the deceased's family and close relatives. After the final *gasshō*, the deceased's family and relatives are led to a waiting room. Before they enter the waiting room and take their seats on the *tatami*, the female members of the neighborhood association set the tables with sushi lunch boxes, sweets, and drinks. The deceased's family and relatives spend some time remembering the deceased over food and drink while the deceased is transformed into bones and ash.

When the cremation is completed after approximately one and a half hours, the crematorium assistant opens the door of the incinerator and checks the cremated remains. The wooden coffin has been burnt away, and white bones and ashes remain on the concrete tray. The crematorium assistant slides the tray out of the incinerator and lays it on the trolley, which he rolls into the ash-collecting room (*shūkotsu shitsu* 収骨室) to prepare the ash collecting for the deceased's family and relatives. He wears a white gauze mask, gloves, cloth wristlets, and an apron before starting to separate the dust and small pieces of ash and set the proper bones on the tray. He picks up the metal nails, hinges, and handles of the coffin with a horse-shoe magnet, sweeps up the dust and small pieces of ash, and then puts them into an ash bin. When the bones are properly arranged on the tray and ready to be picked up, the crematorium assistant takes off the mask and gloves, and announces the ash collecting to the deceased's family. The family and the closest relatives are led into the ash-collecting room by the undertaker and gather around the tray.

The deceased's family and the closest relatives get into pairs and put some of the pieces of bones into the urn (*kotsutsubo* 骨壺) with long wooden chopsticks under the direction and guidance of the crematorium assistant. Two people usually hold the same bone at the same time with their chopsticks to transfer them to the urn. This act is strictly taboo in ordinary life and this explains why when two people reach for the same piece of food at the same time with chopsticks during a meal, they both quickly pull their chopsticks back (HAMABATA 1990, 65). The bones



of the feet are picked up first, and the skull is last. According to the crematorium assistant, this is to ensure that the deceased is not upside-down in the urn.

When all the members of the deceased's family and relatives have finished picking up the bones and placing them in the urn, the crematorium assistant puts the rest of the bones in the urn. If there are any big or long bones inside the urn, he crushes them down with a wooden stick (*rokkakubō* 六角棒) to make enough space, and then gathers up all the ashes by sweeping them with a brush and dustpan and placing them in the urn. At this time, a special piece of bone, the Adam's apple (*nodobotoke* 喉仏, literally "throat Buddha"),<sup>17</sup> is carefully picked up and put in the urn with great care by the chief mourner. The crematorium assistant finally lays the skull on top of the bones in the urn and closes the lid. He then puts the urn into a white wooden box and wraps it with a white cloth. A male member of the deceased's family, or sometimes a male member of the neighborhood association, carries the wooden box with both hands to the funeral hall (or the deceased's house).

Additionally, fire has long been considered to have a "supernatural" power and has been used as a purifying agent for the purpose of casting out various impurities and of repelling malevolent ghosts (BERNSTEIN 2000, 319; SAITŌ 1986, 167–68; SHINTANI 1992, 63–66). In this respect, burning a corpse to obtain clean and white bones can be understood as a way of eliminating or purifying the uncleanness or the pollution of death resulting from the decomposition of the dead body. From the Buddhist point of view, these pure white bones can be construed as Buddhist symbols of entering the Pure Land (*jōdo* 浄土) or Nirvana (FUJII 1988, 115). Moreover, it may take a relatively long time to achieve the purification of the corpse in the case of a burial (*dosō* 土葬) because it is a gradual process of natural decomposition that can take from months to years, depending on the environment. In the case of a cremation, it is now completed within several hours. Cremation has therefore greatly mitigated the fear of the pollution of death (FUJII 1983, 47).

#### THE FUNERAL

The funeral (*kokubetsu shiki* 告別式, literally meaning "the farewell ceremony") usually takes place in the afternoon of the same day the deceased is cremated. The deceased's family and relatives arrive at the funeral hall (or the house) from the crematorium about half an hour before the funeral starts. The wooden box containing the urn is handed over to the funeral assistants and arranged on the center of the funeral altar. The photograph of the deceased, two temporary mortuary tablets, the food-offering tray, and two bunches of flowers are also placed on the altar by the funeral assistants.

Before the funeral starts, the deceased's family, the members of the neighborhood association, and the funeral assistants receive guests. At this time, all the guests bring *kōden* and receive gifts in return. They are then guided to their seats by the funeral assistants. When all the members of the deceased's family, relatives, and guests have taken their seats, the funeral starts with an opening address from the funeral presider. It usually starts at one o'clock in the afternoon and lasts for about an hour. At the

start, the Buddhist priest comes in and all the attendees perform a *gasshō*. The priest offers a burning incense stick on the altar and starts to chant a sutra, which takes approximately half an hour.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, although one or two priests are invited to chant a sutra at a funeral, it is also common to invite three or even five priests if the deceased's family is wealthy enough. The number of priests is usually commensurate with the size of the funeral and the household's wealth because it costs a considerable amount of money to invite several priests. When people in Makabe talk about how a funeral is "large" and "splendid," they are almost always referring to the number of priests. In many parts of Japan, although death might be the "great equalizer," the dead can still be classified according to the degree of their wealth. It seems that recent commercialized funeral ceremonies have applied new criteria to subdivide existing classes more distinctly. The commercialization of the treatment of the dead requires households to spend more money for the dead and compete with other households to express their wealth. In other words, the funeral can be used for displaying the wealth of the bereaved family and thus reinforce the social and economic status of the surviving relatives. It is similar to Chinese death rituals; there, as WHYTE (1988, 294) notes, "funerals provide an arena of status competition, as wealthier families use their resources to engage in lavish displays and processions to demonstrate their superiority (and perhaps persuade their poorer neighbors that in doing so they are ensuring the continued prosperity of their descendants)." In this sense, as BLOCH (1986) convincingly demonstrates, the ritual has the power to legitimate social hierarchy among different social members or groups.

After the sutra chanting, the priest again offers up a burning incense stick. When the presider announces the incense offering to the attendees, the chief mourner, followed by the other members of the deceased's family, relatives, guests, and members of the neighborhood association, in turn perform a *shōkō* while the priest is chanting. At this time, the chief mourner and several members of the family stand on the left side of the altar after their offering and bow to the guests who have finished the *shōkō*. After all of the participants have finished performing the *shōkō* and are seated again, the funeral presider announces the beginning of the seventh day memorial service, or sometimes both the seventh day and the thirty-fifth day memorial services according to the Buddhist sect. There are seven seventh-day memorial services which were originally performed every seventh day until the forty-ninth day after death (SMITH 1974, 92–93). However, nowadays, among the seven seventh-day memorial services, the first, the fifth, and the last seventh-day memorial services, which are regarded as important, are performed and the rest of them are omitted. The first and the fifth seventh-day memorial services are usually performed with the funeral and the last seventh-day memorial service is performed separately on the forty-ninth day after the death. The local Buddhist priest told me that the spirit of the deceased wanders this world for thirty five days, then departs for the other world on the thirty-fifth day after the death, and arrives at the other world on the forty-ninth day after the death. Thus, the last seventh-day memorial service is the most important for the departed spirit and cannot be omitted. According to local Buddhist priests, nowadays it is difficult to gather relatives

on each seventh day memorial service because many of them have to go back to work after the funeral and thus the first, or both the first and the fifth seventh-day memorial services are usually performed at the same time as the funeral.

After the announcement of the beginning of the memorial services from the funeral presider, the Buddhist priest again burns an incense stick and begins to chant a short sutra, which takes approximately ten minutes. When the priest has completed the chanting, the presider announces the incense offering. At this time, only the deceased's family and relatives perform the *shōkō* while the priest continues to chant a sutra; following this, the funeral presider announces the departure of the priest. When the priest goes out of the hall, all the attendees perform a *gasshō*. The priest is then led to the waiting room by the funeral assistant and takes a rest until the deceased's family and relatives are ready to depart for the grave.

The presider then reads out telegrams of condolence. Most people who cannot attend the funeral send a telegram. There are usually large numbers of telegrams, particularly if the funeral falls on a weekday. The presider reads out several important telegrams in full and only the names of the senders for the rest. After reading the telegrams, the chief mourner and several other members of the deceased's family carry the photograph of the deceased, two temporary mortuary tablets, the wooden box containing the urn, the food-offering tray, and two bunches of flowers, and stand in a row with their backs against the funeral altar. Two members of the neighborhood association carrying the wooden grave marker also stand beside the deceased's family. The chief mourner makes a short speech about the cause of death and the deceased's life, thanks everyone for attending the funeral, and then bows deeply to the audience.

The presider then announces the end of the funeral and a short funeral procession walk (*kado okuri* 角送り) to the car park. At this time the priest joins the deceased's family for the procession. The priest, ringing a bell, and the deceased's family—who are carrying the photograph of the deceased, temporary mortuary tablets, the wooden box containing the urn, the food-offering tray, and two bunches of flowers—go out of the hall, and all the participants stand up and bow with folded palms until the priest and the deceased's family have passed; they then follow after them. The priest, the chief mourner, and other members of the deceased's family turn counterclockwise three times in front of the funeral hall. According to a local Buddhist priest, turning counterclockwise before going to the grave confuses the spirit of the deceased and makes it difficult for it to find the route from the grave to the home and thus prevents the spirit from returning home. The deceased's family then scatters coins (*makisen* 撒き銭) to the assembled people in front of the funeral hall (or the deceased's house). The coins are picked up by community members, guests, children, and onlookers. On their way back home, using the coins they managed to pick up, they buy and consume soft drinks such as cans of green tea and bottles of fruit juice or water. By doing so, it is suggested that they will be blessed with good health, rejuvenation, and a long life because death due to old age is considered a good death and thus full of vitality. It may be consistent with Bloch and Parry's analysis that “[t]he good death... is a kind of handing over of a

vitality which can then be recycled” (BLOCH and PARRY 1982, 17). However, most importantly, they must spend all their coins and never take them into their homes because, as I was told, “They would bring bad luck.” In other words, the coins are considered to be contaminated by death pollution and thus may cause harm to other household members.<sup>19</sup>

After scattering *makisen*, everyone gets on the bus to the household grave. When they arrive at the graveside, the priest, ringing the bell and followed by the chief mourner and several members of the deceased’s family, slowly turns a low stone table (*daisu* 台子), located in the entrance of the cemetery, counterclockwise three times to prevent the spirit of the deceased from following the family home. The deceased’s family then place the wooden box containing the urn, the photograph, temporary mortuary tablets, the food-offering tray, and two bunches of flowers on the *daisu* and gather around it. The priest chants a final short sutra for several minutes while the deceased’s family and relatives bow their heads with folded palms. Meanwhile, several male members of the neighborhood association open the concrete lid of the compartment (*karōto* カロート) located under the tombstone to prepare for laying the urn into the compartment of the grave (FIGURE 3). Occasionally, if there is no compartment, they dig a hole for the interment of the urn a day beforehand.

When the priest has finished, the members of the neighborhood association move the accoutrements from the *daisu* to the grave. They take the urn out of the wooden box, lay it on the upper shelf within the compartment, and close the concrete lid.<sup>20</sup> At this point, one temporary mortuary tablet (*noihai*) is placed with the urn in the compartment within the tombstone or buried with the urn at the grave if there is no compartment. After the urn and the *noihai* are placed into the grave properly, the wooden grave marker, made of long rectangular pieces of wood on which the deceased’s secular name, the Buddhist posthumous name, age, and the day of death are written, is erected in front of the grave. Two bunches of flowers are put in stainless steel vases. The photograph, the other temporary mortuary tablet (*kariihai*) and other food offerings are placed in front of the tombstone. When all the offerings are arranged in front of the tombstone, the chief mourner, followed by the other members of the deceased’s family, close relatives, friends, and members of the neighborhood association in turn perform the final *shōkō* while the priest chants a sutra. After the final *shōkō* and just before leaving the grave site, the deceased’s family, carrying the photograph and the *kariihai*, stand in front of the grave and one member of the family smashes the deceased’s rice bowl on the ground; by doing this, it is thought that the spirit of the deceased cannot return home in search of food (see also KENNEY 2000, 254).

Upon reaching the funeral hall (or the house) from the graveside, all the mourners are ritually purified by pouring water over their hands and scrubbing them with salt before entering the hall. By doing so, the mourners cleanse the pollution of death, as salt and water are considered to be effective in repelling pollution and any malevolent spirits that may have followed the living from the grave (INOUCHI 1965; SAITŌ 1986). After cleansing death pollution, the deceased’s family hold a banquet called *kichūbarai* 忌中払い (literally “getting out of the period of pollution”; also called



FIGURE 3. *Karōto*, the concrete lid of the compartment under the urn.

*shōjin-otoshi* 精進落とし, literally “dropping the state of abstinence”)<sup>21</sup> for the relatives, guests, and members of the neighborhood association. The participants share stories of the deceased over food and drink in the feast. The main purpose for holding this feast and sharing food, as far as is known, is to commemorate the deceased as well as to offer thanks and remuneration to the guests who have attended the funeral and also to the priest and the members of the neighborhood association who have assisted the deceased’s family in holding the funeral. However, apart from these purposes, I would like to suggest that this commensal banquet may be held for the purpose of dissipating death pollution as well as replenishing vitality. In other words, this commensality allows the deceased’s family to diminish their death pollution by distributing food and drink, and it also allows the participants to supplement their own vitality by ingesting food and drink.

After the feast, the *kariibai* is placed on the post-funeral altar,<sup>22</sup> which is set up by the undertakers in the Japanese-style room of the deceased’s house until the forty-ninth day after the death. This is because—according to a local Buddhist priest—the spirit of the deceased is still in transition and is not yet able to be placed inside the household Buddhist altar (*butsudan* 仏壇) as an ancestor. The deceased’s family rings the bell and performs a *shōkō* twice a day in front of the post-funeral altar. When those who could not attend the wake or the funeral visit the deceased’s house, they also perform the *shōkō* during this period.

## POST-FUNERAL SERVICES

As SMITH (1974, 92) noted, “the funeral is only the first of a series of [mortuary] rites conducted on behalf of the spirit of the deceased.” Although the funeral has taken place, the spirit is still an unstable, dangerous, and polluted being that needs to be appeased and purified by a further series of rituals because the purification is a gradual process that ought to be accompanied by a regular series of rituals over a certain period of time. Namihira Emiko has attempted to understand the series of Japanese mortuary rituals as a process of purifying the pollution of death. For Namihira, mortuary rituals function as devices to eliminate or diminish the pollution of death and finally recover a state of purity. According to NAMIHIRA (1985, 235–36), the pollution of death may be diminished by both the passage of time and the series of rituals, but the series of rituals is more important than the time taken to purify the pollution of death because pollution cannot be fully purified only by the passage of time.

As I have indicated previously, the seven seventh-day memorial services, which culminate on the forty-ninth day after the death of the deceased, follow the funeral rites. According to a local Buddhist priest, the seven seventh-day memorial services used to be performed in full on each seventh day until the forty-ninth day after the death. On each occasion, the Buddhist priest was invited for the sutra chanting, and the deceased’s family, relatives, and close friends gathered. It was also strongly believed that if the deceased’s family failed to perform the seven seventh-day memorial services, then the spirit would be condemned to ceaseless wandering and may pose a threat to the living (SMITH 1974, 92; KLAS 1996, 287). In this case, the spirit cannot be transformed from a polluted state into a purified one. However, as I also noted earlier, some of these services are now omitted or advanced by the date of the funeral.

The last seventh-day memorial service is performed by calling in a Buddhist priest, who chants a sutra. It also involves gathering the deceased’s family, close relatives, and other people who were close to the deceased to share a formal meal to commemorate the dead. At times, if the family is large and the house is not big enough to hold the service, the service is held at the household Buddhist temple, after which participants move to a nearby restaurant to hold a banquet. On this day, the *kariibai* is replaced by the permanent mortuary tablet (*hon ibai* 本位牌) made of black-lacquered wood on which the deceased’s posthumous Buddhist name is written in gold, and it is placed on the *butsudan* with those of the deceased’s predecessors. After the forty-ninth day service, the spirit of the deceased is expected to have arrived at the other world, and this signals the end of the initial mourning period, *imiake*, which entitles the living to return to normal life. It seems that the living and the dead are fully purified by holding the last seventh-day memorial service.

Although the spirit of the deceased is integrated into the realm of the *hotoke* 仏 (Buddha) after the forty-ninth day, the spirit is still an unstable, polluted, and dangerous being that needs to be purified and protected by a further series of formal services. Three sets of services remain to be held after the forty-ninth day.

One is the *tsuki meinichi* 月命日 (monthly death-day service), which marks the date of death on a monthly basis; the second is the *shōtsuki meinichi* 祥月命日 (annual death-day service), which marks the date of the person's death every year. However, nowadays the monthly and annual death-day services are not generally held, and most family members, especially those of the younger generation, pay no attention to these monthly and annual death day services. The third is the *nenki* 年忌 (periodic anniversary service), which is usually held on the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-third, twenty-seventh, thirty-third, fiftieth, and hundredth anniversaries of the death of the deceased, the earlier ones being the most observed. If there are more than two anniversaries in one year, which are for family members now deceased, the memorial services are usually combined. The first and the third periodic anniversary services are generally held at the household Buddhist temple (*dannadera*) with some degree of pomp and splendor. The family invites close relatives, intimate friends, business associates of the deceased, and neighbors. The priest chants a sutra and all the participants offer burning incense, after which they visit the household grave to perform a *shōkō* again and then move to a restaurant to have a banquet.

Although there is variation in the choice of year for the final anniversary memorial service (*tomuraiage* 弔い上げ), the most favored are the thirty-third and fiftieth anniversaries of death. On the final anniversary of death, the spirit of the deceased has achieved the pure and stable status of the household ancestor and is able to protect the house and household members (OOMS 1976, 63; SMITH 1974, 69). At this point, the pollution of death has permanently disappeared. Thus, the final anniversary marks the end of condolences, and purification. At this time, the *honihai* in the *butsudan* is replaced by the *senzodaidai ihai* 先祖代々位牌 (ancestral tablet inscribed with all the generations of the ancestors) and deposited in the *dannadera*. In the grave, the final stupa (*sotoba* 卒塔婆), which is made of an evergreen tree, is erected with the Buddhist posthumous name of the deceased written on it.

There still remain other memorial services, which are not for the individual dead but for the collective dead in the household. The memorial services for the collective dead are held on *shōgatsu* 正月 (New Year's Day), *bon* 盆 (festival of the dead, 13–16 August), and *higan* 彼岸 (vernal and autumnal equinoxes, 18–24 March and 20–26 September). In these memorial services, the spirits of the dead are honored collectively every morning and evening when family members offer food, flowers, and incense at the *butsudan*. The *bon* festival is the most elaborate and magnificent among the services directed to the collective spirits of the dead. The spirits of the dead are thought to return to this world and visit their relatives during the festival. Before the *bon* festival, the house, the *butsudan*, and the grave are cleaned, and the favorite foods of the newly deceased and other ancestors are prepared. Members of each household go to their household grave in the late afternoon of the first day (on the thirteenth) and light paper lanterns to guide their ancestors to their home. At the end of the *bon* festival (on the sixteenth), they bring their ancestors back to their household grave, hanging paper lanterns

to guide the ancestors. They sometimes schedule a special memorial service for the spirits of the dead to be held at home or a temple.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have described in some detail the overall mortuary process in Makabe in order to illustrate the way in which a person dies and their spirit is separated from the body and transformed into a household ancestor. How are we to understand these complex and drawn out processes of formal and structuralized ritual veneration? There can be many possible explanations for holding a continued series of formal memorial services. For example, a well-known explanation holds that the services may placate, pacify, or appease the spirits of the dead, send them to the other world without wandering this world and without bothering or harming the living, and finally help them to achieve ancestorhood, which is said to be for the care of the spirit (HAMABATA 1990, 53–85; KAWANO 2003; MAEDA 1976; SMITH 1974; TAKEDA 1979). By providing comfort to the spirits of the dead through these memorial services, the living may drive out the fear of retribution from themselves and expect to receive their beneficial protection and thus create or enhance their intimate relationship with the spirits of the dead. In other words, as STRAIGHT (2006) notes, the living and the dead are mutually “entangled” by the continued series of mortuary rituals. The services may also reaffirm the social solidarity of the living. More specifically, they provide an opportunity or even an obligation for family or community members to gather, and thus serves to consolidate “the sense of identity” which makes it possible for the surviving members of the family or community to strengthen their motivation to continue their household or community (AKATA 1988; OOMS 1967; 1976; TAKEDA 1976; TSUJI 2006).

However, apart from the religious, social, and psychological aspects of the mortuary services, I also found that the continued series of formal memorial services is above all else concerned with the purification or elimination of death pollution and the distribution or replenishment of vitality. More specifically, they produce vital energy for both the living and the dead through the offering and sharing of food and drink during or after the rituals that might transform the defiled state of both the dead and the living into a state of purity. Although a single ritual itself cannot fully and immediately exterminate the pollution of death, a continued series of formal memorial services may have the power to lead towards a decrease in pollution.

As I have already noted at the beginning of this article, pollution has long been a central concern in mortuary practices in Makabe because it has been considered contagious and dangerous, not only to the living, but also to the benevolent spirit. Pollution and its related beliefs and practices are still found almost without exception in Japanese mortuary rituals. In other words, the ritual imperatives still place a great deal of emphasis on the pollution of death and its purification or elimination, even though mortuary rituals have dramatically changed due to recent rapid industrialization and modernization, from community-based “traditional” funerals to “commercialized” ones managed by undertakers.



Nonetheless, anthropologists such as FUJII (1983), NAKAMAKI (1986), and SUZUKI (2000) have tended to reject the existence of pollution, its association with death and mortuary rituals, and its social and cultural significance. For example, Suzuki argues that in contemporary Japanese society, people no longer associate funerals with the pollution of death due to the development of a commercialized funeral industry that has eliminated the “traditional” idea that death is dangerous and fearful, and causes pollution (SUZUKI 2000, 3). She states that, “[c]ontemporary funeral ceremonies not only suppress the concept of impurity but also distance themselves from the very idea.” Suzuki also explains the reason for the compressed and short procedure of contemporary Japanese death rituals by referring to “the disappearance of the notion of death pollution.” She adds that “[i]f there is no death pollution, then equally, there is little reason to have a mourning period.” However, I would argue that one of the main reasons why contemporary Japanese death rituals are remarkably compressed into several days, in comparison with the community-based “traditional” death rituals, is that contemporary Japanese (both the bereaved family and guests) do not have enough time to hold and attend the lengthy series of formal rituals because many of them have to return to work immediately after the funeral. Although contemporary Japanese death rituals are dramatically compressed in comparison with the past, it cannot be simply suggested that the notion of death pollution has disappeared. The socially and culturally established idea or concept of pollution through long-standing beliefs and practices cannot easily be eradicated or changed within such a short period of time. Moreover, although mortuary rituals today are highly compressed and shortened, the specific forms of ritual activities for the purification of death pollution are not easily changed because, as Bell notes, the “ritual activities generally tend to resist change and often do so more effectively than other forms of social custom” (BELL 1997, 211). It is consistent with what BLOCH (1986) demonstrates—that the content and form of the ritual may remain constant in the face of dramatic historical changes.

From my observations and my own experience of living and working with Japanese families, Buddhist priests, and undertakers, it is hard to eliminate or prevent the long-established social and cultural association between death and pollution in contemporary Japanese society. Throughout this article, I have attempted to illustrate the fact that many people still believe in the pollution of death, which exists in various forms in contemporary mortuary rituals, even though the fear of death pollution has somewhat subsided.

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#### NOTES

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three anonymous reviewers of *Asian Ethnology* for their insightful comments. I am also deeply indebted to the many people of Makabe for their generosity, time and friendship.

1. Makabe, located in the western central part of Ibaraki Prefecture within the central region of the main island of Honshu, is a small rural town of approximately 19,000 people and 5,700 households (as of 1 October 2005) occupying 37.75 square miles. Although Makabe is about fifty miles away from Tokyo and lies in the Kanto region, it is quite an isolated and remote inland town, and visiting the town is inconvenient because there are no direct train or bus services from Tokyo to Makabe—it takes more than two and a half hours to get from Tokyo to Makabe. Like many other Japanese rural towns, Makabe is composed of a town center and its peripheral hamlets. The town center has approximately 1,600 residents living in 500 households. All the public facilities such as the town office, schools, the police station, the bank, the post office, the health center, and the supermarket are located in the town center, and it takes less than half an hour to walk around it. There are about 20 hamlets of 70 to 1,600 people and 20 to 500 households each around the town center. Although some young people work as salaried employees in the town center or the neighboring big cities, most of the hamlets' residents are still engaged in rice farming.

2. There were six Buddhist temples in Makabe at the time of my fieldwork. Although these temples belong to four different Buddhist sects (Jōdo-shū 浄土宗, Shingon-shū 真言宗, Ji-shū 時宗, and Sōtō-shū 曹洞宗), it seemed that the ways of dealing with death, and their notion of death, were more or less the same because, as WALTER (2009) argued, Japanese Buddhist death rituals share the same fundamental structure across schools and sects.

3. Like other parts of Japan, the funeral halls in Makabe are normally considered abhorrent facilities. However, the new funeral halls are not located in the town center. They are located in a suburb, between the town center and its peripheral hamlets, and this is why there was no strong opposition to their construction.

4. During my fieldwork in Makabe, more than 70 percent of people died in hospital.

5. The term *tomobiki* is one of six terms (*senshō* 先勝, *tomobiki*, *senbu* 先負, *butsumetsu* 仏滅, *taian* 大安, and *shakkō* 赤口) printed on the Japanese lunar calendars that indicate the auspiciousness of a given day. This six-day cycle of fortune, called *rokki* 六輝, was imported from China in the fourteenth century and has since been adhered to in Japan (SHINTANI 2005, 58). *Tomobiki* (*tomō* 友, friend; *biki* 引, pull) translates as “pulling a friend.” It brings to mind the image of being pulled into death to go with your friend, and thus people avoid scheduling funerals on *tomobiki* (SHINTANI 2005, 58).

6. Although there are a variety of funeral packages at different prices, the undertaker usually recommends two kinds: one is a ¥335,000 (approximately \$4,224 USD as of 13 November 2012) package and the other a ¥395,000 (approximately \$4,981 USD as of 13 November 2012) package. The only difference between the two is the style of the coffin and the urn. These standard packages only include indispensable funeral accoutrements and items such as the funeral altar, coffin, mortuary tablets, urn, death robes, a photograph of the deceased, candles, incense, dry ice, post-funeral altar, and so on. The deceased's family usually have to pay more for optional extras such as flower decorations for the funeral altar (¥100,000 to ¥200,000), a grave marker (¥15,000 to ¥20,000), hiring of the funeral car (*reikyūsha* 霊柩車) (¥35,000) and bus (¥30,000), return gift items (*kōdengaeshi* 香典返し for guests; about ¥2,000 per guest), food and drink items for the commensal feasts after the wake and funeral (about ¥3,000 per person), and so on.

7. In many parts of Japan, *omimai* is used as a gesture of sympathy when people visit someone who is not well or in hospital (see also TRIAS I VALLS 1999, 118). This monetary gift is designed to enable the sick person to pay medical costs or to assist the family's finances if the person is unable to work. However, unlike other districts of Ibaraki Prefecture, in Makabe *omimai* is also given when people visit the deceased's family for the first time after a death. When I asked one of my informants why this is so, I was told that, in many cases, the deceased

may have been seriously ill and in hospital before they died. He pointed out that nowadays many people are very busy with work, and they may simply have missed the opportunity to visit the person when they were ill. Thus it has become common to give *omimai* after the person has died.

8. The sutra is a piece of Buddhist holy writing which is chanted at funerals and in the rituals following death so as to purify the spirit and to transform it into a state of enlightenment (READER 1991, 34).

9. During my fieldwork I often came across articles in newspapers or programs on TV that criticized the high fees for funerals and *kaimyō*. The *kanji* (Chinese characters) for these *kaimyō* are usually very old and rarely used, and few people nowadays can read and understand them. Even some Buddhist priests, especially young priests, tend to avoid explaining the detailed meaning of the posthumous name.

10. According to GORAI (1992, 1002), there was another purpose for performing the *yukan*: to wash away the deceased's past sins so that they would be able to achieve Buddhahood.

11. Even popular culture often reflects the social stigma attached to funeral professionals. For example, the recent Japanese film *Okuribito おくりびと* (*Departures*, 2008) directly addresses socially-stigmatized funeral professionals and their work.

12. It is believed that the spirit of the dead must cross the river on the way to the other world. For this reason, the river is symbolically interpreted as the boundary between this world and the other world. The money is meant to be used to pay for the boat trip across the river.

13. This may indicate an ambivalent attitude towards death. In other words, as MALINOWSKI (1954 [1925], 48) notes, the death of an individual provokes complex and conflicting emotions: on the one hand, a horror of death; but, on the other, a persisting love for the departed, and a desire to sever ties with the dead but also to maintain them.

14. If guests are close to the deceased or the deceased's family but unable to visit the deceased's house and if this is their first visit, they must give *omimai*. If this is their second visit and they have already given *omimai* on their first visit, they are exempt from the obligation of giving a monetary gift. However, if they are unable to attend the funeral, they are obliged to give *kōden*. If this is their first visit and they will not be able to attend the funeral they are obliged to give both *omimai* and *kōden* at this point. Additionally, if those who were not close to the deceased or the deceased's family are not able to attend the funeral, they only give *kōden* at the wake ritual.

15. There are two seating areas divided by the central aisle in the hall. Members of the deceased's family are seated at the first and second rows on the right, and the other relatives are seated behind them. Guests and members of the neighborhood association are seated on the left.

16. I witnessed several funerals for those who died tragically when I was working at the funeral home. For example, in the case of Ōsawa-san who died alone and was found ten days later, his badly decomposed body was put into a large black plastic bag which was then placed into a coffin. The lid was put on the coffin with special glue and then it was nailed down tightly to prevent leakage of the smell and bodily fluids. In addition to these practicalities to prevent substantial and physical contamination by the decomposed body, the Buddhist priest put *mayoke* 魔除け (paper amulets in the shape of a zigzag of white paper on which the word *kiyome* 浄め [purification] is written in both Sanskrit and Japanese) on the top and the four sides of the coffin. This is to purify or eliminate pollution that is emitted from the decomposed corpse and thus protect the living from this highly contagious and especially dangerous pollution.

17. The Adam's apple looks like a sitting Buddha because of its triangular shape (KENNEY 1996, 423).

18. Although the sutra chanting is the main feature of the funeral and it comprises half of the ritual, participants do not usually understand the meaning of the sutra. I was often told by my informants that it is always boring to listen to the sutra. I also witnessed some participants of the funeral dozing off during the sutra chanting.

19. As I noted earlier about the idea of transferring defilement from the corpse to its surroundings, *makisen* are also considered to be extremely contaminated by death pollution while placed beside the coffin. At the same time, they can also absorb vitality from the corpse because death due to old age contains not only pollution but also vitality.

20. There are usually two concrete shelves for urns in the compartment. The most recent urn is placed on the upper shelf and the previous generation on the lower shelf. When there is no space for the new urn, the oldest one is thrown in a heap on the bottom of the compartment.

21. According to elderly informants, the *kichūbarai* was originally held on the forty-ninth day after death (counting from the day of the deceased's death) to celebrate the end of the forty-nine day mourning period called *imiake* 忌明け (literally "the lifting of pollution"). It is now moved to the day of the funeral in most parts of Makabe, not only in the town center but also in suburban and rural districts, because nowadays many people work in the town center or neighboring cities as company employees and thus have to go back to work after the funeral. One of my informants told me that it is very inconvenient to both the deceased's family and the guests if the feast is held on the forty-ninth day.

22. The post-funeral altar is much smaller and simpler than the altar used at the funeral. It is a low table with two raised shelves and is covered with a white cloth. The photograph of the deceased, the *karihai*, the incense burner, a bell, a candlestick, two vases of flowers, a bowl of rice, and fruit offerings are usually placed on the altar.

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