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“Who will care for me when I am dead?” Ancestors, homeless spirits, and new afterlives in low-fertility Japan

Abstract: A growing number of older people in Japan lack reliable future caretakers for their family grave. By performing numerous memorial rites and maintaining their family grave, the bereaved typically transform the family dead into benevolent ancestors. However, what will happen to those whose ashes are not interred in a family grave? In this article, I examine one alternative to the family grave system – the scattering of ashes conducted by a citizen-based group called the Grave-Free Promotion Society of Japan (*Sōsō no jiyū o susu-meru kai*). Contrary to the common assumption that it is usually childless people who decide on ash scattering, a number of the Society’s members in fact have adult children. What are the views of people who have adopted the scattering of ashes as a way of disposing of their own remains? Given that a grave remains a symbolic locus of familial continuity, the scattering of ashes seems to challenge the cherished ideas of filial piety and respect toward ancestors. By “returning to nature” through ash scattering and joining a benevolent force larger than their small family, older urbanites seek self-sufficiency in the post-mortem world and attempt to lighten the ritual burden of their survivors regarding the maintenance of their family graves.

Data for this study come from extended fieldwork conducted in Japan from 2002 to 2004. By using cohort analysis, this study shows that ash scattering meets the mortuary needs of those generations that tend to lack a ceremonial asset or a culturally preferred caregiver.

Keywords: death rites, ancestors, social change, low fertility, Japan

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1 Introduction

“I have no one to depend on when I’m dead. What will happen to my remains? I cannot die in peace.” – A 73-year-old woman

In contemporary Japan, a degree of uncertainty about “being in the world” (Giddens 1984) prevails both in aging individuals regarding their future and in the young with respect to marriage and family formation. These two life-course transitions – to full-fledged adulthood and to ancestorhood – were taken for granted in postwar Japan, but it is not easy to achieve them today. The life-course transitions of the young and the old may seem unrelated at first glance. However, this study will show that they are closely intertwined in low-fertility Japan. I examine aging urbanites who chose ash scattering offered by a civic group called Grave-Free Promotion Society of Japan (*Sōsō no jiyū o susumeru kai*; henceforth GFPS). The voices of these individuals reveal that their mortuary choices are made in consideration of younger generations.

In public discourses, ash scattering is at times constructed as an antithesis of the “traditional” interment of cremated remains in a family grave. The opponents of ash scattering attack the practice as “discarding” ancestral remains. They claim that the practice violates the ideals of family solidarity and continuity embodied by the family grave. A family grave is a culturally valued site for “contact between the living and their ancestors, a receptacle for the spirits of the ancestors, a site for ritual offerings to the dead and a symbol of family continuity and belonging” (Reader 1991: 96). Is ash scattering chosen because people no longer value ancestors? A different story emerged in this study. GFPS members, often with their spouse, plan to “return to nature” through ash scattering.

Though values and ideals behind ash scattering shape GFPS members’ mortuary choices, these alone did not make them turn to the practice of ash scattering. A person typically needs a ceremonial asset (family grave) and a caretaker (married son) to continue the veneration of the dead in a conventional manner. By using cohort analysis, the aim of this study is to show that ash scattering meets the mortuary needs of the generations that tend to lack a ceremonial asset or a caregiver. Personal beliefs in the existence of the deceased’s soul or its location vary, and these beliefs alone cannot fully explain people’s choices of having their ashes scattered in nature. While the constructions of “return to nature” among GFPS members offer rich ethnographic details about the ways in which they make sense of ash scattering, this study indicates that an analysis of their mortuary choice would be incomplete without the study of their access to the mainstream path of interment in a family grave.

2 Approaches to social change and mortuary practices

A number of previous studies on contemporary Japan have usefully linked the changes in mortuary practices with those in socioeconomic realms (Ambros 2012; Fujii 1993; Inoue 2003; Iwata 2006; Kawano 2003; Kōmoto 2001; Maki-mura 1996; Mori 1993, 2000; Morioka 1984; Nakamaki 1995, 1999; Rowe 2003, 2006; Smith 1974; Suzuki 1998, 2000; Tsuji 2006; Van Bremen 1998; Yamada 2007). As a society reaches a postindustrial state, the economy shifts toward service industry and information technology, which gives rise to new patterns of social relationships and institutions. The factors that have been examined in the studies of changing mortuary practices include commercialization, shifting family and community ties, urbanization, and demographic change. Commercial services increasingly replace rituals that communities and families used to perform, thereby leading to the loss of mortuary ceremonial knowledge in families and communities (Suzuki 2000: 216). Postwar urbanization brought many new migrants to cities, leading to a shortage of cemetery space in urban areas by the 1980s (Fujii 1993: 11–12; Mori 1993: 224). By the 1990s, the lack of successors to family graves developed as a social issue due to the nation’s dwindling fertility rates (Mori 2000: 73–75).

In addition to the above infrastructural and structural changes, the rise of new death ideologies shapes individual mortuary choices made today. While religious institutions used to play a major role in defining mortuary ideals and imposing culturally appropriate mortuary practices, new ideals regarding death emphasize the importance of individuality and choice in postindustrial societies. The new ideology of “revivalism” (Walter 1994) celebrates “dying in one’s own way,” which prompts an individual to make a personally desirable mortuary choice.

By scrutinizing social change and mortuary options and ideologies, scholars have offered valuable insight into their relationships by theorizing the larger trends of change in the realm of death practices (e.g., Ariès 1974; Elias 1985; Gorer 1955; Kellehear 2007; Walter 1994). Nonetheless, studies focusing on larger trends of change in a society do not necessarily illuminate individual responses to a new mortuary option. When a society changes and a new practice develops, old and new mortuary options will coexist at least for a while, even though the latter might eventually replace the former. Thus an in-depth study of mortuary choices at the individual level would further enrich the available research on changing mortuary practices in a postindustrial society.

3 Conventional mortuary practices in postwar Japan: a brief sketch

The mortuary landscape in early postwar Japan was characterized by the influence of Buddhist priests and institutions on the veneration of deceased family members. Though there were exceptions, many families were expected to affiliate with Buddhist temples, and priests provided ritual care to the dead family members, while members of their communities also offered ritual effort to send the deceased to the otherworld (Suzuki 2000: 40). The reciprocal tie between a family and a Buddhist temple was vital in taking care of the dead (Kawano 2010: 12–13). Though the *ie* system (the stem family system governing succession and inheritance) was legally abolished after World War II, in early postwar Japan the stem family remained strong as a conceptual framework when allocating ceremonial assets and ritual labor for ancestors. Unlike the nuclear family, the stem family presupposed the continuity of the family line and consisted of generations of succeeding couples as well as the dead and the unborn. The family, therefore, was an enduring social organization, and generations of succeeding children and their spouses were expected to support the Buddhist temple where they maintained their parishioner status.¹ The temple, also a permanent institution, provided ritual performances to send the dead to an appropriate Buddhist realm.

Ethnographic studies of ancestor veneration in early postwar Japan indicate that the family dead remained socially alive in the family life of the survivors (Plath 1964; Smith 1974). Ancestors were communicated with or talked about on a regular basis. The deceased family members were typically enshrined at the domestic altar (*butsudan*) and at the family grave, which is commonly located in a temple compound or a community cemetery. They were offered tea and freshly cooked rice and were greeted at the family altar daily. They were thanked for protecting the living and were given the latest family news. In addition, the family was responsible for arranging funerals, memorial anniversaries, and seasonal veneration rites for the departed family members to be gradually transformed into ancestors. Buddhist priests were called upon to perform appropriate rituals for the dead. Funeral rites prescribed in official Buddhist sectarian texts consist of posthumous ordination and the guiding of the ordained to a superior realm or an enlightened state, though some inter-sectarian variations exist in terms of procedure, sequence, and terminology (Walter 2008: 269).

¹ For a historical examination of this parishioner system, see, for example, Tamamuro (1971).

The dead did not become ancestors without the ritual care of their descendants. The living were required to invest time, money, and effort to transform a deceased person into a benevolent ancestor, which typically took 33 to 50 years after the death of the individual. Though there were variations, families commonly held 1st-, 3rd-, 7th-, 13th-, 17th-, 23rd-, 27th-, and 33rd-year memorial anniversary rites for the deceased (Smith 1974: 95). These Buddhist memorial rites were performed to transfer merits to the deceased (Walter 2008: 269, 277). For the bereaved, the newly dead were gradually transformed into benevolent ancestors through numerous anniversary rites. In short, peaceful rest of the dead relied on long-term caregiving by the living.

The dead were thought to suffer if no descendants cared for them. Deceased people without caretakers became *muenbotoke* or the ‘disconnected’ dead, held to be unable to achieve ancestorhood. Unlike ancestors, who were nurtured in the company of kin, *muenbotoke* were homeless souls in the state of misery and loneliness (Kawano 2003). They occasionally became the target of ritual veneration in a community setting so that they would not harm the living.

The conventional memorial care system in early postwar Japan worked well for families established in one locale that perpetuated their family line, maintained ties with a local Buddhist temple, and tended the family grave located close to their residence. However, in contemporary Japan, certain groups of people are much more likely to find no future guardian of their family grave, which has shaped the development of new burial systems for the past two-and-a-half decades. Those groups include permanently unmarried people, childless couples, and couples with daughters but no sons, as discussed in the next section.

4 Memorial care resources, demographic shifts, and cohort analysis

To continue conventional ancestor veneration at a family grave, one needs “memorial care” resources: ceremonial assets and caretakers (Kawano 2010: 12). Once established, a family grave supposedly remains in the family as long as the family line continues. A family grave in Tokyo is expensive, and could easily cost between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 yen. In contrast, the typical amount spent on a traditional funeral and burial in the United States ranges between \$ 10,000 and \$ 16,000 (Sack 2011). When buying a new grave,² one

² Technically, a person buys the right to use the grave plot and build a stone structure on the plot. The plot is not for resale.

must consider the caretakers in the future, as survivors are obliged to visit and maintain the place. Conveniently located graves – those reached in one hour or less – are particularly expensive in major cities. Yet, the location of the grave in relation to its cost is quite important, as it makes little sense to obtain a grave far from the homes of the survivors. Choosing the right location is all the more difficult when the adult children of the deceased maintain mobile lifestyles. Unlike a domestic altar, which is portable, a family grave cannot be moved easily.

Declining fertility rates pose a particular threat to the continuity of ancestor veneration revolving around a family grave. Unlike a house, which can be liquidated if desired by the beneficiaries, a grave would be abolished, and the plot would be “returned” to the grave provider with no refund if no successor in the family claims it. If no one pays the annual fees and maintains the grave for a specified period of time, the grave would be “cleaned up” by having the remains disinterred and dumped in the grave for homeless souls in a shady corner of a cemetery. The memorial care provided to the dead thus shapes the stratification in the otherworld, which consists of the landless underclass and “homeowners,” as in postwar Japan a family grave was often seen as the “house” after death (Kawano 2010: 65).

Cohort analysis provides insight into the relationship between the choice of ash scattering and the availability of memorial care resources to continue the conventional memorial practice. A society’s birth rate and mortality rate often fall as they go through demographic transitions (Johnson-Hanks 2008: 303). Mortality rates commonly fall before fertility rates decline, although there are variations (see Johnson-Hanks 2008: 304–305 for a review of fertility declines in Europe). This process of demographic change can be divided into three phases: the pre-transitional, the transitional, and the post-transitional periods (Itō 1994 [1989]; Ochiai 2000 [1994]: 87). In the transitional stage, high birth rates and lower mortality rates typically lead to rapid population expansion. In the case of Japan, sociologist Ochiai Emiko maintains that those born between 1925 and 1950 belong to the transitional cohort, whereas those born before 1925 belong to the pre-transitional group, and those born after 1950 belong to the post-transitional one (Ochiai 2000 [1994]). Fertility rates remained high until 1925, and rapidly declined between 1925 and 1950. For example, the total fertility rate in 1925 was 5.11, but it declined to 2.37 in 1955 and to 1.69 in 1987 (Cabinet Office 2005). In postwar Japan, as the above fertility decline indicates, a married couple with two children became a model family unit. While the above demographic framework minimizes the importance of the culturally meaningful cohort units such as the Showa single digits or the boomers (Kawano 2010: 4), this classification scheme is nonetheless useful in my discus-

sion of “memorial care” resources. Cohort analysis allows us to compare access of various cohorts to material and human resources, which structures individual mortuary choices.

Although individual situations vary, individuals born before 1925 as a group did not often encounter problems with securing a culturally preferred successor to care for their family grave – a married son who lived close to his ancestral grave in his hometown. Though mortality rates were high before 1925, birth rates were high as well. In addition, the adoption of children and adults for the purpose of perpetuating the family line was common. The custom of adopting the husband of one’s daughter (*mukoyōshi*) was widely practiced as a means to secure a successor. Consequently, members of the pre-transitional cohort were less likely to face a shortage of human resources to care for a family grave. In contrast, the transitional cohort members as a group are characterized by the limited availability of memorial care resources. Born between 1925 and 1950, the transitional cohort members have many siblings. For example, Katō (2006: 5) notes that people born in the 1930s have an average of 5.7 siblings, and those born in the 1940s have 4.5 siblings. Thus they have had no major trouble providing a successor to the family grave of their parents. Most of the cohort members, however, had no ceremonial assets to inherit from their parents, as only one child is allowed to inherit the ancestral grave. In postwar Japan, equal inheritance law replaced the one-child inheritance law of pre-war Japan, and non-ceremonial assets are easily divided equally among siblings. Yet, ceremonial assets are an exception. The present Civil Code stipulates that ceremonial assets must be inherited by only one successor, although unlike the Meiji Civil Code, the Postwar Civil Code does not specify the preferred successor (Ishikawa 1988; also see Mori 1993: 214–216). Furthermore, many transitional cohort members migrated to urban areas when the booming economy of Japan in the 1950s and the 1960s offered many wage employment opportunities in cities. Their siblings living with their aging parents in their hometowns typically inherited their family’s grave.

By the 1990s, members of the transitional cohort were beginning to retire. What should they do with their remains after death? Should they return to their hometown and secure a grave there, or remain in their city and build a new one? Childlessness is not a characteristic of this cohort group, as its members are typically married and have an average of two children. However, some have no sons. A daughter is not prevented from becoming a caretaker of her natal home grave. If she remains in the natal family by taking an in-married adopted husband, she will be in charge of memorial matters for the natal family grave, and she will join the grave when the time comes. Yet once a daughter marries a man who is a successor (typically the eldest son), she joins her hus-

band's family by taking his family name regardless of whether she lives with her in-laws. As an in-marrying bride, the wife is expected to care for the family grave of her spouse and will eventually be buried in this family grave. In this context, providing care for her natal family grave as a primary caregiver is considered an extra burden for a married-out daughter. Families generally consider it "unfair" to enlist a married-out daughter to provide the care for her natal family grave, as she will not join this grave in the future and has obligations to care for her marital family grave.

In addition to the limited availability of sons among members of the transitional cohort, the second demographic transition further diminished this cohort's memorial care resources. Their adult children – members of the post-transitional cohort – may not marry or have children and thus fail to provide a future caretaker for their family grave. Low marriage and fertility rates among younger generations have made it unclear whether their parents would reach the state of ancestorhood in the family grave system. A number of previous studies have usefully explored the social and economic consequences of declining fertility rates, such as labor shortages, rising pension contributions, and the provision of elder care (e.g., Coulmas 2007; MacKellar et al. 2004; Traphagan and Knight 2003). Declining fertility rates have made a critical impact on mortuary practices as well, and this notable reduction of memorial care resources among members of the transitional cohort has shaped the development of ash scattering, as will be discussed below.

5 The development of ash scattering as an alternative to conventional interment

Since the 1990s, Japan saw the development of alternative burial systems that require no successors. A non-religious non-profit organization, the Grave-Free Promotion Society (GFPS), offers an option of ash scattering. Founded by Yasuda Mutsuhiko, a former *Asahi Shinbun* journalist, the movement since 1991 has fought for the freedom of choosing a mortuary practice. Specifically, the Society promotes a "natural mortuary practice" (*shizensō*) to allow the deceased to "return to nature" by scattering their pulverized cremated remains at sea or on a mountain. As of 12 March 2009, the GFPS has conducted 1,406 ceremonies for 2,446 deceased persons and maintained nearly 15,000 members (as of 2011). Unlike a conventional family grave, ash scattering is inexpensive – costing less than 100,000 yen for certain ceremonies.

In addition to ash scattering, *eitai kuyōbo*, or graves with ‘permanent’ ritual care,³ is another type of burial system that emerged as an alternative to the family grave. Similar to ash scattering, this burial system requires no successor and is also inexpensive, often starting at approximately 100,000 yen. Like ash scattering, individuals rather than families obtain the right to be buried in *eitai kuyōbo*.

While the *shizensō* practice requires no personal or familial acquisition of a memorial place, *eitai kuyōbo* allows a user to obtain the right to be buried in a particular memorial structure, which may be shared with other non-family members. *Eitai kuyōbo* are often tied to religious organizations (usually Buddhist but sometimes Shinto), as they are legally classified as graves. Moyai no hi in Tokyo and Annonbyō in Niigata are well-known examples of *eitai kuyōbo* (see Inoue 2003: 229–240; Kawano 2003; Rowe 2006, 2011).

The funeral industry has commercialized ash scattering ceremonies developed by the GFPS. Thus for-profit funeral professionals now offer ash scattering, too, although the GFPS still remains a major organization known for this new practice. Similarly, various forms of *eitai kuyōbo* have been established and have spread to many regions, making them more accessible to people. Another new burial system called *jumokusō*, or burial in the woods, was initiated by Chisaka Genpō of Shōunji Temple in Iwate prefecture (for an in-depth study of this practice, see Boret 2012). In this system, the deceased’s remains are buried on a mountain without a stone monument or structure but a native tree is planted instead. This system allows the inheritance of the plot by a descendant, though it does not require a successor (Chisaka 2003: 166).

Despite these diverse developments, however, the family grave still remains the dominant mainstream destination for the dead in contemporary Japan.

6 Research methods

The data used in this study were obtained by conducting participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a survey between 2002 and 2004. President and executive board members of the GFPS kindly granted me official permission to observe and participate in the group’s activities for this project, and I was introduced to the GFPS members in its newsletter *Rebirth*.

³ The term *eitai kuyōbo* has also been translated as ‘eternal memorial graves’ (Rowe 2006) and ‘eternally worshipped graves’ (Tsuji 2002: 188).

The GFPS is a citizens' movement and its members aim to spread the ideal of choosing a mortuary practice. As a result, when I informed them that I wanted to learn about their practice, usually members willingly discussed their experiences. Between 2002 and 2004, I participated in the society's special events, including the annual business meeting, symposiums, movie screenings, consultation sessions, trips for members, and year-end banquets. I was also allowed to attend ash-scattering ceremonies. Although the majority of the events that I attended were held in the Tokyo area, I also took part in those hosted by the Sapporo, Sendai, Osaka, Nagoya, and Fukuoka offices, five of the society's twelve branch offices.

To express my appreciation and give something back to the organization, I helped staff and volunteers label and ship the society's newsletters, published four times a year. Initially, some informants used formal language and the suffix "*-sensei*" to socially mark my status as a professor when they spoke with me. However, as I spent time with them, they adopted a casual style of speech and the suffix "*-san*," a generic ending used for most people in the organization. Before the first year was over, I was invited to visit some members' homes, to go out for a drink or coffee, and to get together to see cherry blossoms and take a walk in Tokyo's municipal parks.

During the middle of the first year, I began conducting in-depth interviews with members and staff I got to know during participant observation. Semi-structured interviews with twenty members were conducted at coffee shops or in their homes, each lasting between one and three hours. In addition, open-ended, casual interviews with seventy members were conducted throughout the period of my research at the events mentioned above. While I talked to some members only once, I was able to obtain highly nuanced data from recurrent interviews with a set of individuals on a number of occasions at the main office in Tokyo, during special events, and during and after ash-scattering ceremonies. In order to recruit diverse participants, I interviewed office staff, ceremonial directors, executive board members, and general members. The majority of the interviewees lived in the Tokyo area, but I managed to recruit some people living in other regions of Japan, too.

To complement the qualitative data collected via participant observation and interviews, questionnaires were mailed to persons whose kin's ashes had been scattered by the GFPS. This survey focused upon survivors' reporting on scattering ceremonies conducted for their kin and the kin's access to mortuary-care resources. By using systematic random sampling, 120 people's addresses were selected from GFPS records of all the past ash-scattering ceremonies.

7 Who chooses ash scattering?

When I asked GFPS members why they chose ash scattering, common responses were “I am the second (or third) son,” “My husband is the second son,” or “I do not have a grave.” A number of informants revealed that they were in the position to establish their own memorial site, as their ancestral grave was going to be inherited by their own sibling or the sibling of their spouse.

In explaining why they chose ash scattering, some GFPS members stated that they only have married-out daughters. *Meiwaku*, or ‘nuisance’, was the term used to describe the memorial care responsibility given to a married-out daughter, who is a culturally inappropriate caregiver. These GFPS members chose ash scattering as they did not want to overburden their married-out daughters with the care for their natal family grave.

“I have a son but ...” was another common response from GFPS members when asked about their reason for choosing ash scattering. In some cases, a member has a son, but the son is likely to remain unmarried or has been married for a long period of time without having children. An unmarried son will presumably care for the grave of his parents while alive, but the caregiving in the next generation is uncertain. The sizable investment in a new family grave would be lost if no one in the family claims it in the future. In other cases, married sons lived far away or were highly mobile, thereby making the care of a family grave troublesome.

An earlier survey concerning 76 deceased persons whose ashes had been scattered by the GFPS further illuminates the problem of limited “memorial care” resources. Among the cases examined, 73 people had been married, with an average of 1.84 children, 0.77 sons and 1.06 daughters. Approximately one in two deceased persons (37) had a family grave that he or she could have used (Kawano 2004: 239). Considering the grave possession rate of 81.4 % reported in the 1998 national survey conducted by Mori (2000: appendix 8), those examined in the current study far less frequently possessed a family grave. The majority of the deceased in my survey (60) either had at least one son but no grave, a grave but no sons, or neither a son nor a grave. Those whose ashes had been scattered through the GFPS thus often lacked memorial assets and/or future caretakers. These findings are not surprising, given that the majority of my informants were born between 1927 and 1942 – they belong to the transitional cohort.

The case of Maeda-san, a 74-year-old man, illustrates the ways in which limited memorial care resources shape the choice of ash scattering. It also echoes common critiques of commercialized mortuary practices and a monop-

oly of mortuary matters by Buddhist priests. Maeda-san told me, “I could have bought a family grave but I did not.” This was an important point for a former professional such as Maeda-san, who does not wish to be taken as one who lacks the means to acquire a full-fledged grave. Similar to buying a home, for members of the transitional cohort obtaining a grave is a sign of middle-class success. Maeda-san then stated that he has no reliable memorial caretaker in the future: “I have a son, but he is in his forties and still unmarried. He does not even have a girlfriend!” He sounded discouraged and disappointed that his son was single. In Maeda-san’s generation, marriage and family formation were signs of maturity and taken-for-granted landmarks in a person’s life course. During our conversation, Maeda-san revealed that he saw no prospect of having a grandchild, the future successor of a family grave. Given this situation, Maeda-san reasoned that his investment in a costly memorial asset would make no economic sense. The grave would still be expensive by his standards, but if it was kept in the family for generations, he could have obtained it despite his complaints. However, in Maeda-san’s case, a grave would be far too expensive given the lack of a future caretaker. He quickly added, “I would rather not make Buddhist priests richer [by acquiring a new family grave that would not be used for generations].”

Maeda-san’s account illustrates the relationship between the limited memorial care resources and critiques of the high cost of graves, with Buddhist priests seen as profit-seekers for their services.⁴ Maeda-san did not present ash scattering as naturally superior to a family grave. Rather, *given the availability of memorial care resources*, ash scattering suited him. Similarly, other informants often rationalized their choice of ash scattering with reference to personal situations that made a family grave economically and socially unattractive, while at the same time criticizing costly mortuary practices.

Although the cost of mortuary practices does matter, one would be mistaken to make a simple economic argument about people who choose ash scattering. The ash-scattering movement attracts a number of middle-class professionals and former salaried employees who could well have afforded a conventional family grave in the Tokyo area. During my fieldwork I met many GFPS members who used to be white-collar workers and professionals, including a lawyer, university professors, civil servants, journalists, salaried employees of major firms, and former executives. The Society offers an inexpensive option when compared with a family grave, and some of the members are economically disadvantaged receiving public assistance. However, Maeda-san’s

⁴ These critiques are widely available in public debates. For a detailed discussion see, for example, Covell (2008: 314–316).

case illustrates an important point: it is not necessarily the low costs of ash scattering that determine people’s choice of this practice.

8 The construction of ash scattering

GFPS members considered ash scattering as “return to nature” and attribute diverse, positive meanings to their posthumous destination. Scattering ashes was sometimes seen as a conservationist act, as the Society emphasizes that ash scattering has environmental benefits. Yasuda-san used to work as a journalist specializing in water conservation prior to the formation of the GFPS, and his environmental concerns have shaped the practices of the organization. While investigating developmental projects in the area that supplied drinking water to Tokyoites, he developed an idea of conserving the forest by using it as an ash scattering site. He felt that he could solve two problems with this project – the high cost and the shortage of graves, and the limited availability of drinking water. Thus he named this idea *shizensō*, or a natural mortuary practice. In his view, unlike new cemeteries built on hillsides, scattering ashes in nature does not destroy the environment.

Nature as something to be preserved, however, was not the only image the Society members saw in ash scattering. Nature was also seen as Mother or the origin of all life forms. Some members discussed nature as a “place where we all originated” in an evolutionary sense, while others expressed their desires to return to mountains, rivers, or seas in their hometown through the process of ash scattering. This latter view was understandable given that most of my informants were at least sixty years old and had migrated to Tokyo at a younger age to build their careers and start families.

GFPS members often romanticized their endings by painting aesthetically pleasing destinations, citing rolling waves, cool breeze, songbirds, and bluebells. Many mentioned that a view of Mt. Fuji would be wonderful. Beyond these picturesque representations, nature was also seen as a place where life circulates. Some thought that their remains would turn into new forms of life such as wildflowers and trees, whereas others thought that they would fertilize plants. A woman in her sixties told me that her husband said he was going to be “food for tuna” by having his ashes scattered at sea. Tuna sashimi used to be his favorite food. Another woman told me that she would be “together again” with seagulls she often saw during her walk in a nearby park, as her remains would “melt” in the seawater and the birds might drink it. These members revealed their sense of continuity after death by attaining oneness with nature through ash scattering.

For a certain family member – for example, for a bride in an unhappy marriage or a person adopted into a family – his or her “return to nature” through ash scattering was sometimes seen as a way of escaping oppressive family relations. Inoue Haruyo (2003: 119–201, 221) examined women who wished to “get divorced after death” by having a separate memorial place for themselves away from their spouses and marital families. Some of my informants echoed these sentiments.

In sum, Society members constructed their “return to nature” in a variety of ways by defining nature as the postmortem destination. It is worth noting that nature’s potentially destructive powers – one might recall the recent earthquake in Tohoku – were largely ignored in their descriptions of scattering sites. The meanings given to nature in the context of ash scattering reveal the value of this practice beyond its social and economic utility. GFPS members see a sense of continuity and comfort in their “return,” which clearly contests their opponents’ views of “throwing away” the remains of the dead.

9 Diverse beliefs, a shared practice

Those who decided to adopt ash scattering maintain diverse beliefs and ideas concerning the otherworld or what might happen to the deceased after death. How does a “return to nature” fit in the conventional frameworks of posthumous transformation? Do Society members believe in a Buddhist paradise? Before addressing these issues, we must distinguish between the position of the GFPS as a civic group and its members’ personal views.

The Society is a non-religious organization, and as such, the founder of the GFPS firmly maintained that the group does not address issues of spirits or the otherworld. He told me that he avoids discussing “consoling or pacifying spirits,” “buddhahood,” or a Buddhist paradise. He presented ash scattering ceremonies as “journeys to return to the sea, a mountain, or the sky.” The deceased “return to nature” and “rest peacefully.” They are “reminisced and memorialized.”

Outsiders sometimes asked questions regarding the relationship between ash scattering and conventional Buddhist rites – funerals and memorial anniversaries – during GFPS lectures or information sessions open to the public. The common explanation given by the GFPS was that the Society only offers a scattering ceremony to its members, which replaces the interment of cremated remains in a family grave (*nōkotsu*). Thus, the individual is responsible for determining whether or not to have the funeral or memorial anniversaries con-

ducted. Unlike a funeral home or a Buddhist temple, the Society does not offer any services to conduct these rites. Beyond the above explanation, the Society does not provide a new framework that combines “return to nature” and conventional ideas of posthumous transformation. The Society does not pinpoint how “return to nature” might affect the soul of the deceased person or the attainment of buddhahood or ancestorhood. GFPS members I met were flexible and creative about combining the framework of “return to nature” and other frameworks of posthumous transformation without scrutinizing their contradictions (Kawano 2010: 136–137). Some Society members discussed their kin’s achievement of buddhahood, while others did not use such a concept. Despite these variations, survivors tended to focus on the well-being of the dead by discussing their “peaceful rest” in nature as the place where the deceased wanted to go, and their satisfaction in reaching this endpoint.

Whereas Yasuda-san was critical of commercialized Buddhist mortuary rites, his attitude did not prevent Society members from conducting diverse religious practices at personal and familial levels. Individual members were allowed to maintain their own religious beliefs and participate in institutionalized religious activities. Similar to many other urbanites in Japan, some were indifferent to religion or followed Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, or a New Religion (e.g., Sōka Gakkai) without a strong sense of personal commitment. Others were personally religious. One informant stated that she was a member of the Raëlian movement and regularly attended meetings.

During my fieldwork, I met a Buddhist priest who stated that ash scattering exemplifies the Buddhist ideal of nonattachment. Yet, some Buddhist priests were against the choice of their parishioners to practice ash scattering (for Buddhist responses to ash scattering, see Rowe 2003: 106–107). One informant told me that he was required to relinquish his parishioner status at a local Buddhist temple, as the priest was against ash scattering. Yet he told me that one does not need to belong to a Buddhist temple to be a “true Buddhist.” He said that rather than his institutional affiliation, what matters was whether he followed Buddha’s teachings.

Similar to non-members in urban settings, some Society members remained affiliated with Buddhist institutions, and Buddhist funerals and memorial rites were conducted for the dead family members whose ashes had been scattered in nature.⁵ After holding scattering ceremonies for the family dead, survivors sometimes memorialized them through secular memorial gatherings of kin and close friends at restaurants or hotels (Kawano 2004: 243–244). In everyday life,

⁵ George Tanabe (2008: 325) estimates that more than 90% of funerals and memorial rites are conducted as Buddhist ceremonies.

some deceased persons whose ashes had been scattered were enshrined at a domestic altar or memorialized on a non-religious shelf at home.⁶ Photographs were displayed at the altar or on the shelf, where offerings of flowers, tea, water, or rice were commonly made (Kawano 2004: 243). Some survivors visited scattering sites on land or nearby areas (in case of scattering in water), although these visits did not occur regularly. Given the limited number of such trips, one might wonder whether ash scattering allows no dialogue with the family dead. Such a thought is understandable, given that a grave visit is a culturally valued act to ensure the deceased's peaceful rest. As John Traphagan (2004: 146) has noted, the well-being of the family, of which ancestors are part, is "the ultimate concern of Japanese religious practice." Nevertheless, my interviewees did not present the lack of a grave as a problem. They came up with a variety of creative and conventional alternatives, as discussed above, to deal with this issue and did not rely on visits to scattering sites to memorialize their loved ones.⁷

Society members held a range of perspectives on the soul of the dead, the otherworld, and the afterlife. Some people stated that nothing exists beyond this present life. "I do not believe in souls" was not an uncommon statement. It was also common for people to be "not sure if souls or spirits exist," but nevertheless discuss the deceased in social terms – as if they continued to exist socially after death. The most common description of a deceased's situation after the scattering ceremony was that one would "rest peacefully" in nature and join other deceased family members whose ashes were previously scattered. During one ash scattering ceremony, for example, a woman called out to her deceased husband and told him that she would see him again (when she passes away and has her ashes scattered in the same bay). On one occasion, a ceremonial director who conducted a scattering ceremony for an older woman's deceased husband told me the following story: "At a ceremony, I gave a brief speech about how the deceased might travel with the Kuroshio Current. The widow said to me that she would be in trouble if her husband travels with the current and goes too far away from her. She said she plans to join him [in nature] when she passes away."

A few members offered extended comments on the existence of the soul or its location. For example, one member told me: "I always felt that the deceased

⁶ John Nelson (2008) points out that modern, stylish domestic altars lacking Buddhist symbols are now available, which match today's consumers' preferences and their home décor. The use of non-religious domestic memorial shelves among GFPS members is not inconsistent with this new trend.

⁷ However, some Society members told me that their kin disliked the idea of having no grave to visit after their deaths and did not accept their mortuary choice.

isn't there when I visited a grave.” Although she did not deny the existence of the soul, she was convinced that the graves she visited did not house the souls of the deceased. Nevertheless, she stated, “I feel that my loved one is always with me.”

Despite the above variations regarding the existence of the deceased's soul or its location, members tended to discuss worries regarding their personal deaths before joining the GFPS. These were largely resolved upon joining the group or having the contract made for their scattering ceremonies (Kawano 2010/2011: 377–378). A female member reported in the group's newsletter that she “felt blue when she thought about death” (GFPS 1994: 19) because she did not want to trouble her distant relatives or strangers. The woman clearly stated that she was not worried about her soul, as she did not believe in its existence. Becoming a homeless spirit, therefore, was not an issue. Rather, the source of her stress was her unwarranted dependence on others after her death, as she had no family to take care of her funeral or the interment of her cremated remains. This case is consistent with a number of other cases observed during my fieldwork: scattering ashes was adopted as a strategy to address a lack of culturally appropriate caretakers. Older urbanites examined in this study were unwilling to strain those who are not in the position to provide ritual care in the stem family framework. By having their ashes scattered and forgoing a family grave, the deceased-to-be intended to reduce the extent of their dependence on others, thereby revising their relationships with their descendants.

10 Conclusion

Ash scattering allows Society members to cope with their ontological insecurity in later life, as the conventional memorial care system fails to offer a promise of peaceful rest after death. Ancestor veneration symbolizes the cultural ideals of interdependence and intergenerational reciprocity. The living are obliged to provide care for deceased family members to transform them into ancestors, who, in turn, watch over the living and ensure their well-being. This system, however, does not work for all, thereby distressing those who are unable to maintain reciprocal relations expected in the system. Of course, once dead, people everywhere must depend on others to dispose of their bodies. However, in Japan today, disposal of the body is the beginning of one's long posthumous journey. In addition, the conventional memorial system demands the continuous investment from the living – they must pay annual fees, regularly clean their family grave, and perform numerous rites. The fear of failing to reach

ancestroidhood is thus not necessarily the only issue for a person who lacks a future memorial caretaker. Despite the diverse perspectives on spirits and the otherworld, Society members shared the concern of burdening others in an unjustified way. Their distress cannot be adequately understood without considering the social and material realities of memorial care imposed upon them by the family grave system.

A number of informants told me that by joining the GFPS they came to feel at peace and were no longer “worried about dying.” By “returning to nature,” the deceased-to-be reduce the extent of their future dependence on the living in the posthumous world. Through ash scattering, older urbanites thus adjust their relationship with younger generations in low-fertility Japan, and consequently envision new “afterlives” as well.

Acknowledgments: The Social Science Research Council – Japan Society for the Promotion of Science fellowship (2002–2004) generously funded the fieldwork for this project. I would like to thank Glenda Roberts of Waseda University for her kindness and generosity during my tenure of the fellowship, as well as the staff at the Asia-Pacific Studies Department. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Mutsuhiko Yasuda of the Grave-Free Promotion Society (GFPS), volunteers at the GFPS Tokyo Office, and other GFPS members who participated in this study. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, who provided useful comments and suggestions.

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