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Religion and Society in Modern Japan

Selected Readings

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Mark R. MULLINS

SHIMAZONO Susumu

Paul L. SWANSON

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pet cemetery for only three years; and so forth.

We can conclude with the comment that, although memorials for animals and tools by communities and professional groups continue as in traditional society, these kinds of memorials have split into two streams. The fact that memorials are now for pets and not merely "animals" is the most conspicuous aspect of such memorials in contemporary Japan.

NOTE

* This article was translated from the Japanese by Paul L. Swanson. It appeared originally as "Indebtedness and comfort: The undercurrents of *mizuko kuyō* in contemporary Japan" in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14/4 (December 1987): 305–20. The contents and statistics were updated for inclusion in this volume.

HOSHINO Eiki is Associate Professor at Taishō University in Tokyo, and head priest of Fukuzō-in, a Shingon Buddhist temple. TAKEDA Dōshō is Lecturer at Taishō University and a priest of Ryūsen-ji, a Jōdo Buddhist temple in Tokyo.

Pokkuri-Temples and Aging

Rituals for Approaching Death

Fleur Wöss

TO DIE OR NOT TO DIE—that is *not* the question. Do what we will, death is an inescapable accompaniment of life. The question of *how* we will die is one that all of us think about from time to time, however; not so much while we are young, with death a distant reality hidden by our future hopes and plans, but increasingly so as our remaining time grows short and the end of life confronts us. Interests gradually shift from the occupational to the personal, especially after retirement and the completion of child-raising duties. Declining health and the deaths of relatives and friends bring the old face-to-face with the possibility of long-term illness and suffering, and lend immediacy to the question of how they themselves will die. Such concerns are reflected in the following poem by Nonagase Masao, which depicts a comfortable life and death:[1]

> Longing for the western capital
>
> My teacher in Kyoto
> lived in a house in the woods
> What has he been doing lately?
>
> When you eat, eat amply
> When you sleep, sleep leisurely
> When you die, die suddenly.
>
> This is a "saying of Yamato," handed down from times past
> My teacher wrote it for me once
> My teacher, Master Shinyoto
> I follow the saying when I eat and sleep
> But how about when I die?

Ample eating, leisurely sleeping, and sudden death (*kuu toki nya tappuri, neru toki nya yukkuri, shinu toki nya pokkuri*)—these are the components of a happy life. What concerns us

here is the aspect of "sudden death."

Pokkuri shinu is an expression meaning "to die suddenly, peacefully, and without long suffering." Although the desire for a peaceful death is universal, in Japan it has given rise to special places where people pray to die in this way. These places are the so-called *pokkuri-dera*, temples where prayers for an easy death are, it is believed, likely to be granted. What makes the temples worthy of discussion is the enormous popularity they have attained in recent years, especially among the old. This essay examines the background of this popularity and analyzes the possible factors responsible for its development.

The mass popularity of the *pokkuri*-temples accompanied a growing interest in the problems connected with aging. In 1972 Ariyoshi Sawako published a novel entitled *Kōkotsu no hito* [A man in ecstasy] that dealt with the issues of senility and old age. The book became an immediate best seller, with over a million copies sold within six months. The mass media picked up on the new topic, producing numerous features on euthanasia, old people's homes, and *pokkuri-dera*. Television programs about the temples brought them wide exposure and publicity, turning many that were once impoverished into prosperous financial enterprises. Colorful festivals once or twice a year that drew tens of thousands of visitors to even small temples allowed television reporters to link the curious with the tragic. Sensational incidents involving old people were widely discussed, such as the story of an old couple who visited a *pokkuri*-temple in Shikoku, then drowned themselves in the Inland Sea.

Although *pokkuri*-temples are found in every part of the country, the most popular are concentrated in the Nara and Kyoto regions. Some have a long history as *pokkuri-dera*, others only recently acquired their reputations for easing death. Most of the "traditional" *pokkuri*-temples are associated with a particular holy person who, it is believed, experienced a peaceful death there. Such is the case of the most famous and often-visited of such temples, Kichiden-ji in Nara, located not far from Hōryu-ji. The temple is also called *koshimaki-dera*, because, it is said, the mother of the Pure Land Buddhist saint Genshin died peacefully there after having offered her *koshimaki* (kimono undergarment) to Amida Buddha.

Since Kichiden-ji has been discussed in detail by a number of Japanese scholars,[2] I will briefly introduce a less-known *pokkuri-dera* on the Izu Peninsula, one whose reputation was achieved rather recently due to the attention of the mass media.

ACTIVITIES AT A *POKKURI*-TEMPLE

On a hill in the interior of the Izu Peninsula, near the village of Yugashima, is a temple of the Zen sect named Kinryūzan Myōtoku-ji. It boasts an imposing main hall, but this is not what most visitors turn their attention to. The building that they consider most important is the smallest one on the precincts: the *tōsu*, or temple toilet. The tutelary deity of the structure is Ususama Myōō, a being whose reputation for warding off evil spirits and purifying the impure gained it a reputation for special powers of healing. The building is filled with natural stone and wood formations resembling male and female genitalia, donations from the temple's believers. At the entrance a huge stone phallus catches the visitor's eye; a signboard advises one to stroke it to guarantee the health and strength of the male members of one's family. The visitor is then urged to step over a hole (the former toilet), an act that is reputed to prevent abdominal diseases through the power of the deity Ususama. Before leaving the temple precincts most visitors buy a piece of underwear—available in all sizes and shapes—bearing a stamp with the figure of the Ususama Myōō; wearing is believed to guarantee the continuing effects of Ususama's powers.

明徳寺

Kinryūzan Myōtoku-ji was "discovered" in 1974 by reporters from NHK, the Japanese national broadcasting company. In a television program about *pokkuri-dera* they identified Myōtoku-ji as one of the many "fashionable" temples of this type, setting off the Myōtoku-ji's new and still-growing popularity. Most of the visitors that now flock there are actually on weekend trips to nearby hot springs, and stop by to pray for a healthy future. Even on the average weekday the temple can expect seven or eight busloads of visitors, and during the annual Ususama festival in August it is packed with tens of thousands of old people who gather to pray. The sale of underwear has brought unexpected profit and wealth to the temple and its family.

Efficacious underwear for sale at Myōtoku-ji.

How, then, is the belief in Ususama Myōō and his powers connected with our discussion of *pokkuri*-temples? The answer can be found in the type of requests that older visitors to the temple make of him. Let me quote several messages left by old women on *ema*, the small wooden plaques used by the Japanese to make their desires known to the deities:

> When my time has come to enter the other world I want to die easily and without long suffering.
>
> My daughter-in-law and I are on good terms. Yet I feel terrible when I think of how in the future she will probably have to help me with my bodily functions. When I come here [to pray that this will not happen] my mood brightens.
>
> Help me, that no one will have to help me with my bodily functions, that I will be free of suffering, and that I will be able to sleep well.

The Japanese phrase most often seen in these prayers is *shimo no sewa*. *Shimo*, "lower" or "below," indicates the private parts of the body, and *sewa* means "care." Hence the translation above, "to help with the bodily functions," usually

in the case of an illness that does not permit the patient to go to the toilet properly. Being ill, helpless, and confined to bed are the things that the older visitors to the *pokkuri*-temples fear the most.

Hence, when elderly visitors request good health from Ususama, they are in effect asking that they live out their lives without burdening others, and, by implication, that they die without the kind of extended illness that would require extended care. It was this aspect of Ususama worship that caused the NHK reporters to present Myōtoku-ji as a *pokkuri-dera*.

OLD AGE IN JAPAN

Similar desires are expressed by all adherents of the *pokkuri*-temples. According to a recent survey, the reason offered by most worshippers at Kichiden-ji (93 percent) to explain their visits was, "I don't wish to become bedridden and burden other people." The second most common reason was, "I don't want to suffer with a prolonged illness like cancer" (18 percent). The tragedy behind these comments is obvious. These old people—the majority of visitors are aged fifty-six to seventy—do not wish to end their lives as a nuisance to others.

More than 80 percent of the *pokkuri*-temple adherents are women. Is turning to *pokkuri*-temples for comfort an approach that suits women more than men? Why do women in particular fear becoming bedridden and having to depend upon others? Are there other reasons behind the wish for a sudden and easy death? Is the popularity of the *pokkuri*-temples related to the worsening circumstances of the elderly in Japan? To find the answers to these questions we must focus on the present situation of old people—particularly women—in Japanese society today.

The average age of the Japanese population has risen steadily in recent years. John CAMPBELL, in his recent book on aging in Japan, summarizes the situation as follows:

> Although the basics are the same in Japan as elsewhere, the problems presented by Japanese old people are different in some secondary but important respects. First, Japan has had an unusually young population for its level of GNP throughout the postwar period, with only about 5 percent age 65 and over in the 1950s, 7 percent in 1970, 10 percent in 1985, and 12 percent in 1990. Many European countries were around the 15

percent level in the 1980s. Second, a combination of healthy habits and medical advances has given Japan the highest life expectancies in the world: 81.8 for women and 75.9 for men as of 1989. Third, mainly because the birth rate dropped sharply after the postwar baby boom and has stayed low, population aging is proceeding more rapidly than in any other advanced nation. From 1990 to 2000, the share of people 65 and other is estimated to rise from 11.9 percent to 16.3 percent. By 2020, Japan will have about the highest proportion of elderly in the world, almost 24 percent 65 and over.[3]

Paralleling the increase in Japanese life expectancy has been the loss of many of the traditional roles that once made old people feel wanted and needed.[4] The traditions they are capable of handing down no longer command respect. Their once-valued advice has lost its relevance in today's fast-changing society. Changes in the content of education have deprived them of their ability to teach the grandchildren. Electrical appliances often intimidate them, so that they are of little use even for housework.

Complicating the situation for women has been the change in patterns of child raising. With longer lives and fewer children, Japanese women—who have traditionally been expected by society to regard the bringing up of children as their central purpose in life—find themselves condemned to idleness for the final three or four decades of their lives. New careers seldom provide an outlet for their energies: there is little interesting work available for middle-aged women reentering the job market. No wonder that the number of women claiming to have no purpose in life increases after the age of forty. The number continues to rise as women grow older, with a sharp jump occurring after the age of sixty; among women over seventy, more than 60 percent find no purpose to their lives.[5]

Old people in general, and old women in particular, tend to spend their final years with the family of one of their children, preferably that of their oldest son. Even those who do not do so by choice are frequently left with no alternative by their financial situation.[6] The national pension system does not provide anything beyond a bare subsistence income, and widows are entitled to only half of their husband's pension. This is insufficient to maintain an independent household.

In traditional farming communities this presents few difficulties—the houses are large enough to accommodate old people without crowding, and the old fulfill an important role by helping with the farm work. In the urban communities where the large majority of Japanese now live, however, the presence of aged parents burdens their grown children in two important respects: they drain the family's finances at a time when the grandchildren's educational expenses require much of the available money, and they occupy precious space in the cramped residences. A common saying reflects the situation in the average urban home: *Toshiyori to butsudan wa okutokoro ga nai*—"There's no room for the aged and the Buddhist altar." Urban housing is designed for two-child nuclear families, and provides no space for such nonessentials as old people and Buddhist altars. The older generations—the aged parents and the ancestors enshrined in the altar—no longer have an important role in the life of the family.

The ideal arrangement, of course, would be to have either a single house large enough for the younger members to live separately from their elders or a second house within a five-minute walk, but these solutions are far beyond the means of the average family. With space so limited, some families resort to the practice of passing their parents from sibling to sibling. An eighty-seven-year-old woman at a *pokkuri*-temple mentioned that every six months she is sent to live in a different child's home. The situation creates difficulties for her in finding friends, and is hardly designed to make her feel welcome by the respective host families.

An added difficulty for elderly women is their relationship with the wife of their son. Raised at a time when obedience and strict submissiveness were expected of a daughter-in-law, many mothers-in-law feel cheated now that women of the younger generation claim the right to their own lives and opinions.

THE PLIGHT OF THE BEDRIDDEN

If a healthy old person is a burden to his family, how much more so an aged relative who is not even able to go to the toilet properly? The possibility of finding themselves in such a situation seems to be of greater concern to women, who are generally more conscious of the state of their health than are men. A bedridden person is not only financially dependent

(as most old women are anyway) but also totally reliant on the help of family members. Caring for such people is still thought of as the sole responsibility of the patient's family—state institutions are so over-burdened that they can offer no help to anyone who still has a living relative, whether that relative is willing to care for the person or not.[7]

Since most old women live with their son's family, the nursing usually falls upon the daughter-in-law, who may be completely enslaved by the needs and whims of the bedridden person.[8] Old men in such a situation generally rely on their wives (who almost always outlive them), but in a recent survey not a single woman visitor at a *pokkuri*-temple thought of her husband as a potential caretaker if she should find herself confined to bed.

Women's greater awareness of the possibility of finding themselves in the complete care of one of their children—and their desire to avoid burdening them in such a way—does much to answer the question of why women adherents so outnumber men at the *pokkuri*-temples. When I asked visitors at Myōtoku-ji what they thought the reasons for the preponderance of women were, female adherents were almost unanimous in citing the desire of most women not to burden the members of their family (not a single male adherent offered this explanation). Japanese women are more sensitive to the question of dependency because it is a stronger element of their lives: as children they depend on their parents, as wives on their husbands, and as old women on their children. They also tend to be more concerned about family relationships, since most have been confined to the house for most of their lives. Moreover, they know from their own housekeeping experience how great a nuisance a bedridden person can be for the caretaker and for the family in general. A woman who becomes bedridden has not only lost her role and therefore her meaning in life—she is also keenly aware that she is adding considerably to the household chores.

All of this assumes, of course, that the old person has someone willing to care for her; for the increasing number of elderly who are not so fortunate the problems may be even greater. Thus the fear of solitude may rival the fear of dependency in driving women to the *pokkuri*-temples to pray for an easy death. More women than men find themselves alone in old age because of their higher life expectancy and because they tend to be younger than their spouses to begin with. Loss of their partner intensifies their estrangement from family and modern society. No longer is there someone around to share their everyday pleasures and worries; even children cannot provide the kind of understanding that a mate of the same age can. Many women find their purpose in life in caring for their husband; his death thus deprives them not only of companionship but of something to live for. The resulting psychological stress takes a physical toll as well: widows tend to have poorer health than women whose partner is still alive.

The number of people who live alone is particularly high among visitors to the *pokkuri*-temples. According to one survey, such people comprise 12.5 percent of all visitors, compared to 7 percent of the general population for women and 3 percent for men—a very high percentage indeed. Loneliness is thus particularly likely to be a problem among those who call at the temples. Even living with one's children, however, does not necessarily prevent a feeling of isolation. One old woman remarked in an interview, "I live with my son's family. My daughter-in-law is very sweet and does her best to comfort me, but somehow I feel like a guest." This woman walks two hours every day to a *pokkuri*-temple and two hours back.

The *pokkuri*-temples can provide spiritual consolation and companionship with people having similar problems. Sometimes one can see visitors on benches in the temple precinct, waiting for somebody to talk to.

A final reason should be mentioned for the preponderance of women at the *pokkuri*-temples: the religious factor. A certain amount of religious belief is necessary to undertake a journey to a temple—one must believe that it will be helpful to pray there. Women in general seem more inclined to feel this way. A survey among old people to find out how they use their pocket money has revealed that women over sixty spend the greatest amount on their grandchildren, followed by temple visits and offerings. Men in the same age group use most of their spending money on cigarettes; temple visits and offerings were in twelfth place.[9]

Religious faith provides the believer with the greatest treasure: hope. Old people whose future in the present world is short and bleak can look forward to a better life. Many of the

pokkuri-temples belong to the Jōdo-shū or Jōdo Shinshū schools of Pure Land Buddhism; to pray there for an easy death implies at the same time a desire for quick rebirth in Amida's paradise, a future that must seem considerably brighter to most believers than the one remaining to them here on earth. This suggests another reason why so many believers pray for a quick death in case of incapacitating illness, even if they are well cared for by their family. What they desire is a better future.

POKKURI-TEMPLES AND SUICIDE

In view of the desire for sudden death among the worshippers at the *pokkuri*-temples, one question inevitably arises: How does prayer at *pokkuri*-temples relate to suicide?

The suicide rate in Japan is characterized by the growing number of suicides in higher age groups. Some 28 percent of all suicides in Japan are committed by people over sixty, with the highest rate found among those over eighty.[10] The suicide rate for women over seventy-five was far higher in Japan than in any other country covered by the WHO statistics for 1988 (the USA, France, the former West Germany, Italy, the former Czechoslovakia, Sweden, England, and Wales); the rate begins to climb steeply in relation to women of those nations around the age of 65.

Yoshizawa Isao, a specialist in the field of suicide, offers several reasons for the high suicide rate among old people in Japan. Illness, he says, is the principal factor in the overwhelming majority of cases, due to the unwanted dependency and the loss of life purpose that it brings about.[11] The second main motive is the loneliness resulting from widowhood and the hostility that old people frequently sense from the family. The third main reason is the financial difficulties that accompany the lack of a pension system sufficient to allow a decent and independent life.

Yoshizawa's conclusions were supported by research in Hokkaido, which also found illness to be the major precipitating factor in suicide among the old; 65 percent of all suicides could be explained on this basis.[12] Yoshizawa blames the poor state of social services in Japan for the high suicide rates: more facilities should be provided for the elderly sick, he feels, and help should not be limited to those without relatives.

Hence the conditions that lead to suicide—illness, dependency, loneliness, and financial difficulties—are the same as those that motivate worship at the *pokkuri*-temples. The difference between the two responses may be one of degree. The difficulties feared by the temple-goers are usually still in the future, and the possibility of future difficulty may not be a sufficient reason for suicide.

CONCLUSIONS

The general situation of old people in Japan throws much light on the recent rise in popularity of the *pokkuri*-temples. Old age is a time when people begin to worry about prolonged illness, suffering, and confinement to bed. They fear that if they live with their children they will burden them financially, occupy needed living space, and trouble the daughter-in-law. If they live by themselves, loneliness and isolation become problems. In either case the elderly lack a sense of self-worth and life purpose. Severe illness increases their problems, especially in Japan where the social welfare system does not provide enough facilities for the bedridden. Incapacitating illness leaves the old person with two unwelcome choices: either to encumber their family or to be left lonely and unwanted in an institution. Greater life expectancies mean that more and more people will have to face such problems in the future.

Another striking feature of the *pokkuri*-temple phenomenon is the large number of female adherents. Women live longer than men, are more concerned with their health, and are more exposed to loneliness. They tend to be more sensitive than men to the possibility of burdening their children, since Japanese men can generally rely upon their wives for care. Finally, women are more likely than men to turn to religion for comfort.

The main tragedy of old people today seems to be their loss of a meaningful role. Their visits to the *pokkuri*-temples may appear to express a wish to escape from life, but may it not be an attempt to find a new source of hope and meaning? Elderly people whose lives no longer provide a sense of purpose turn to the next life. Hence the *pokkuri*-temples may be seen as simply another expression of the universal human desire for a better future and a more meaningful life.

NOTES

* An earlier essay on this subject appeared as "Escape into Death, Old People and Their Wish to Die" in Gorden Daniels, ed., *Europe Interprets Japan*, Kent: Paul Norburg Publications, 1984, pp. 222–29. Fleur Wöss is a member of the Institut für Japanologie at the Universität Wien.

[1] Nonagase Masao, "Rakusei kanjō," in *Yūhi no rōjin burūsu*, Tokyo: Kado Sōbō, 1981, pp. 78–79. Translation by author.

[2] See, for example, Inoue Katsuya, "Pokkuri shinkō no haikei," *Jurisuto* 12, *Sōgō tokushū: Kōreika shakai to rōjin mondai* (1978), pp. 200–204; Inoue Katsuya, "Rōjin no shiseikan. 'Pokkuri ganbō' no shinriteki haikei," in Inoue Katsuya and Nagashima Kiichi, eds., *Rōnen shinrigaku*. Tokyo: Asakura Shoten, 1980, pp. 188–202.

[3] See CAMPBELL 1992, p. 6.

[4] See, for example, Tanaka Yoshirō, "The Plight of the Elderly," *Japan Quarterly* 26 (1979), p. 68.

[5] Men lose their meaning and purpose in life after their fifty-fifth year, the time when most of them are forced to retire. See Fujin ni Kansuru Shomondai Chōsa Kaigi, ed., *Gendai Nihon josei no ishiki to kōdō*. Tokyo: Ōkurashō Insatsukyoku, 1974, p. 136.

[6] They make up about 60 percent of the total elderly population, a figure which is going down at the rate of about 1 percent per year.

[7] Not that being institutionalized is a welcome prospect to anyone. Although much less common in Japan than in the West, the institutionalization of the elderly is on the rise. The dying process now seldom occurs in the home: in 1947 only 9 percent of all deaths took place in institutions, while in 1977 the figure was 50 percent (55 percent in urban areas, 41 percent in the countryside). The percentage continues to rise. At present hospitals account for the majority of these "institutional" deaths, but it is predicted that the number occurring in old people's homes will increase in the future. Certain of the institutions for the elderly are so-called *sushiya-byōin*, private hospitals that welcome bedridden patients, assign a variety of diseases to them, and treat them accordingly. The more injections and special treatments they give for these supposed ailments, the more money they are able to extract from relatives and health insurance policies.

[8] A vivid account of the difficulties a woman has to tackle when she cares for a bedridden person is the novel by Okifuji Noriko, *Onna ga shokuba o saru hi*, Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982.

[9] See *Kōbe Jogakuin Daigaku ronshū* 21/1 (July 1974), pp. 62–63.

[10] See Yoshizawa Isao, "Rōjin no jisatsu," in Ōhara Kenshirō, ed., *Gendai no jisatsu*, Tokyo: Shibundō, 1980, p. 136.

[11] Yoshizawa, "Rojin no jisatsu," pp. 137–38.

[12] Ōhara Kenshirō and Yoshizawa Isao, "Sōrōnenki no jisatsu," in Ōhara Kenshirō, ed., *Jisatsu no shinrigaku, seishin igaku* (vol. 3 of *Jisatsugaku*, 5 vols.), Tokyo: Shibundō, 1978, p. 80.

Sōtō Zen Nuns in Modern Japan

Keeping and Creating Tradition

Paula K. R. ARAI

IN THE FALL OF 1987, as a travelling scholar of Buddhism, I sojourned to India. At this time I met Kitō Shunkō, an elderly Sōtō Zen nun returning to India for a final pilgrimage to the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya. As we walked around the Bodhi Tree her face glowed with the wisdom of enlightenment. Compassion emanated forth from her every motion. Her laughter resounded with the peace found in understanding life and death. I knew after our first conversation under the bodhi tree that I wanted to learn as much as possible about her way of life. She was a living model of all that I had been studying. This nun embodied harmony in its richest form. What teachings have helped her gain such wisdom? How did she train to be so compassionate? Where is the spring of her ebullient laughter?

As we walked along the Nirange river where Śākyamuni once walked, a brilliantly pink sun rose into the sky. She wove stories of the years she spent in India building the Japanese Temple in Bodh Gaya with poetry by the Zen master Eihei Dōgen Zenji (1200–1253) and information about a nunnery, Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, in Nagoya, Japan. We laughed heartily as the image of meeting again in this nunnery worlds away flashed through our minds.

NUNS IN PERSPECTIVE

Nuns have been a vital and important facet of Buddhism since the original Sangha was formed during Śākyamuni Buddha's lifetime (c. 566–486 BCE). To date, however, nearly all scholarly research has focused primarily on the male monastic experience and history within the tradition. Recently, however, there has been increasing attention to nuns within the Buddhist tradition.

The first ordained Buddhist in Japan was a nun named