Sacrament and Status by Death: A Look at Social Hierarchy through the Lens of Mortuary Ritual in Japan and West Africa

> What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; they are eaten—raw, cooked, or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of these ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is meaningful and expressive. [Huntington and Metcalf 1979:1]

Specific traditions and emphases vary from society to society so, though the terms "mortuary," "funerary," and "burial" can all be used interchangeably, "mortuary" seems to be the most accurate for use in the categorization of all cultural ceremonies following death because it neither refers to mourning or burial specifically, unlike the other two terms, but rather encompasses all types of practices for treatment of the corpse (Merriam-Webster). Both the treatment, or disposal, of bodily remains and the practices associated with death in a community comprise mortuary ritual. Though the archeological study of the departed occurs most often and most in depth, each of these two components proves equally important in the study of such ceremonies as, according to K. Maurer Trinkaus at the University of New Mexico's Department of Anthropology, "associated ritual behaviors also contain social information but are not always reflected in recoverable mortuary remains. Elaboration and form of mortuary remains are therefore an incomplete indication of elaboration and form of mortuary ritual" (1984:675). Complete mortuary practices, including ritual and physical evidences, greatly portray the operations of society within a culture; in fact, "[they] are structured by social relations" (Trinkaus 1984:674). Therefore, in-depth research and observance of mortuary ritual provides for ample information on the social dynamics of a people as well. Trinkaus claims even "the roles, or the social persona, of the individual are defined, as are the relations of living members to the deceased," (1984:674) as later discussion will exemplify in the analysis of mortuary rituals in Japan. On occasion, mortuary rituals do not end with the treatment of the body and preceding and following rites. In Japan for example, a funeral makes up the majority of the ritual, but not the entirety of it. It is in fact "followed by a series of memorial services for many years after death" (Tsuji 2006:392). Likewise, mortuary ritual of Haitian Vodou includes a burial and accompanying ceremonies, as well as another ceremony 366 days after the death.

Ceremonies of the dead range from casual, one-time, cultural customs to extended, rigid observances of spirituality; not all incorporate religion, but many find their origins in the convictions of a system of belief. The methods of Vodou burial ritual for example, arise from the superstitions of vodouissants, or Haitians who participate in this nationally popular religion. Reasons for specific practices vary, but some exist in a specific culture merely because of their association with a particular

religion either previously or continually present in the society. *Ossuary utilization*, or the use of a "depository for the bones of the dead" (Merriam-Webster), for instance, commonly accompanies the convention of *exposure* in Zoroastrianism—a religion native to the Middle East, accepted around 200-300 A.D. and 600-700 A.D as the state religion of Iran and Mesopotamia, and today found in small communities of Iran and India; "the orthodox Zoroastrian mortuary custom is exposure of the body until the flesh is removed by scavengers, followed by placement of the bones in a container" (Trinkaus 1984:676). Buddhists in Central Asia similarly employ ossuaries for the storage of remains which they prepare through the process of *cremation*, or the incineration of bodily remains. In some cultures however, religion does not necessarily dominate the ritual (be it religiously-oriented or not); rather, cultural values such as status drive the traditions of societies in which social prestige (per example) reigns—societies such as Japan and the Kuranko of West Africa.

One of the most notable cultures to consider in the investigation of mortuary ritual is Japan: "Japanese funerals cost nearly $30,000 on average, dazzlingly higher than the comparable figures of $4,500 in the United States and $1,800 in England" (Tsuji 2006:391). So why does Japan devote so much funding to funerary rites? According to Yohko Tsuji at Cornell University, the "funerary right not only embodies social order and cultural values but also enhances social integration and control of the individual by offering a stage on which to enact and instill such order and values" (2006:393). This "stage" provides an opportunity for attendees of a funeral to display their "three components of the Japanese self" (Tsuji 2006:420), thus shifting the focus of the customs from the deceased to the relatives, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances who come to mourn or pay respects (simultaneously *buying* their own respect). Tsuji terms the three parts of the self: "social embeddedness, obligations, and conformity" (2006:417). His research focuses more on attendance rather than performance because participation of visitors in Japanese mortuary ritual, much like in Sierra Leone, allows individuals in the culture to "define and confirm their identity" (Tsuji 2006:417), consequentially earning them a stable place in society.

Traditional mortuary rituals in Japan involve two main parts (which may or may not be combined in modern practices): a funeral ceremony known as *sôgi*, and a ceremony purposed "to bid farewell to the deceased" (Tsuji 2006:394), known as *kokubetsu-shiki*. The ceremonies generally only last an hour, and they usually take place at funeral halls or Buddhist temples. Hired funeral service companies often supervise, as the new proprietors of what was traditionally the significant role of neighbors in organization and planning. Buddhist priests begin the rituals with chanting of *sutras*, or Buddhist scripture, after which specific people give speeches and read notes of compassion. Then sutra chanting continues and incense burns as part of *shôkô*, another portion of ceremony. Finally, the primary bereaved person speaks and thanks all attendees of the funeral. After the funeral, *shukkan*, the handling of the body, begins by mourners viewing the body just before it is cremated and collecting the ashes into a container known as *urn*. The final part of the mortuary ritual consists of a dinner for family and any guests who helped with the ceremony.

Perhaps the number one reason for importance of participation in Japanese mortuary ritual is the concept of *giri*, "an important Japanese value that binds people by reciprocal obligation" (Tsuji 2006:392). This "social duty" drives an average citizen to great extremes such as frequently checking obituaries and taking far trips to attend funerals, even of people whom he or she has never actually met (Tsuji 2006:392). In fact, "only 30 percent of mourners at a Japanese funeral know the deceased personally" (Tsuji 2006:403). Because of one component of giri called *kôden*—an expected gift (usually monetary) presented to the mourning family during funerary functions, "developed as a form of mutual assistance to defray the cost of the funeral" (Tsuji 2006:395)—some members of Japanese society attempt to find ways around the responsibility of giri. Funeral attendees related to the deceased through blood (relatives), community (neighbors), and occupation (coworkers), initiate their participation (beyond attendance) in funeral rituals by giving (or intentionally not giving) kôden. Once initiated, giri implies an obligatory and continuous kôden gifting at mortuary events between two parties. Some people attempt to "shrink their giri circles" (Tsuji 2006:413), or even avoid creating new ones altogether, by avoiding or outsmarting the system of kôden, but many still are entirely motivated by the socially-inflicted burdens of giri. An important aspect of giri and the kôden ritual is the giving of a *kôden gaeshi*, or "return gift" (Tsuji 2006:396) by the family of the deceased. This gift must be sent "with a value of half the amount of their respective kôden" (Tsuji 2006:396), and it signifies the start of the cycle of reciprocity.

Mortuary customs explicitly reflect important values within a society. In Japan, some of these include "hierarchy, group orientedness, interdependence, gender differentiation, and a clear distinction between *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside), according to Yohko Tsuji (2006:399). Kôden exchanges highlight the weight of hierarchy and insider/outsider distinctions, with great attention on "who is obliged to give and what is an appropriate amount" (Tsuji 2006:399). "Appropriate" refers to whether or not a gift meets (as opposed to unacceptably exceeding or falling short of) a set amount based on relation of the giver to the receiver; "both too-large and too-small amounts are criticized" (Tsuji 2006:401). Kôden also emphasizes the status of the giver within business relationships with either the deceased or the bereaved, and within society as a whole. Shôkô similarly portrays a traditional Japanese value, as it reveals an emphasis on the difference between blood and non-blood relations with its separation of kin from the rest of the mourners during the ritual proceeding. Shôkô order also reveals disparities between genders in the culture (values of superiority) through the order by which men and women relatives take their turn at burning incense. Various other reasons bring mourners and non-mourners alike to Japanese funerals and, though giri proves to be the most inciting, many of them derive from motivations having nothing do with deceased and everything to do with the attendees themselves. For instance, many attend and even bring kôden, as a means to "create and sustain enduring social relationships" (Tsuji 2006:404) through the mutual duties of giri they initiate. This provides for them a sort of "social insurance" (Tsuji 2006:408), for any occasion in the future involving death of a family member. Others still come to secure or maintain business relationships, or even simply out of a tendency toward the culturally-praised habit of conformity. (According to Tsuji, conformity in Japanese culture equals "maturity and personal strength" [2006:418].)

Of course, as with any other mortuary ritual, some people come simply to "express condolences and affection" (Tsuji 2006:411) for the deceased. This emotional expression falls under the category opposite of giri, known as *ninjô*. Ninjô, "human feelings," always come after the prioritized giri however, be they conflicting, because "a person who neglects to fulfill giri, marks social disapproval and failure to live up to cultural ideals. Moreover, because giri is closely linked to one's social positions and roles, fulfilling giri signifies proper role behavior" (Tsuji 2006:418). True intentions however, (from an outside perspective at least), do not always seem so virtuous as obtaining approval and success, even when the socially acceptable requirements of giri are met. Often people attend the funerals and give kôden, seeing an opportunity to "parade [their] success, prestige, and high social status" or even to "renegotiate [pre-existing] uchi-soto boundar[ies]" (Tsuji 2006:413). Even the bereaved themselves seek to display their reputations, as they partake in a small rite known as *shikibi*—where the name and rank or title of each donor of kôden is presented publicly both to show the "social rank" of the mourning family (based on the amount and social rank of the donors) and to tell of the "prestige of donors" (Tsuji 2006:398).

Mortuary rituals of the Kuranko people in northeast Sierra Leone reflect a great emphasis on social standing as well. They also begin long before any formal occasion. According to an article in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines (*an African studies journal), a man deemed "seriously ill or at the point of death" (Jackson 1977: 273) must be left alone by his wives and daughters for the sake of his condition, which (according to Kuranko belief) may be worsened by their lack of sexual innocence. Much goes into bringing awareness once demise finally reaches the man; female relatives create sirens with their "loud and high-pitched wailing, crying and lamenting" (Jackson 1977:273), a gun fires, drums roar, and messengers break the news to surrounding communities. Sometimes people of no relation or connection to the deceased even participate in mortuary ritual, as popular myth says each star in the sky represents a single person in the world and when someone sees a falling star they repeatedly recite a line showing their acknowledgement of that person's life and, according to the nature of the star, death (Jackson 1977:273). Just before organized ceremony officially begins, preparation of the body occurs. First, friends and grand-daughters "wash the corpse in fresh water, anoint it with palm oil, then place it on a new mat wrapped in a shroud of white satin or countrycloth" (Jackson 1977:274), while men dig the grave hole and cut wood for *gravelogs*, or pieces of tree purposed for blocking off the lower part of the grave. Guests arrive bearing "sympathy gifts" (Jackson 1977:274) and, as in Japanese funerals, money—known as *kola*. Another interesting segment is the incorporation of entertainment, provided both by groups of women (known as *mamanianenu*) and men (known as *sanaku*) to "[deflect] people's attention from the gravity and sorrow of the occasion" and to prevent "inappropriate" and "dangerous" bursts of emotion (Jackson 1977:284-285). Tradition continues with the clearing (or resolution) of the dead man's debts, and finally, burial. During burial, placement of mats, gravelogs, and leaves on the lower portion, and then topsoil, clay, and heavy stones atop the grave portray measures of the Kuranko to prevent "the body from being exhumed (by animals) or the spirit [of the deceased] from re-entering it" (Jackson 1977:275); after burial, men pat the ground and say "Come," to call the spirit away from the site. Mourners and guests then proceed to a

snack of shared rice cakes, ceremonies of sacrifice, and readings from the Koran. For widows, a period of 40 days in isolation—known as *labinane*—occurs afterwards while "other bereaved kin observe [continued] mourning by binding threads of raffia [string made of leaves] around their necks" for seven days only (Jackson 1977:277). After all ceremonies and mourning practices cease, the final component of ritual known as *chefare* comes to pass. Chefare compares to the American custom of the reading of the will, as it serves as "the [formal] distribution of the hereditable property" (Jackson 1977:277).

An interesting factor in mortuary rituals of the Kuranko is identity within the community. Michael Jackson's article titled "The Identity of the Dead" focuses on this very aspect of death rites among this Sierra Leone people; he says the burial of a woman "is simply a 'family affair'," as "women have no politico-jural stats in the community" (Jackson 1977:279). His clear emphasis on status brings to light the similarities between the rituals of this community and those of Japan; both greatly emphasize status. Jackson continues with the discussion of death and burial of witches, children, and rulers. Referring to the extremely apathetic ceremonies of infant burial, Jackson claims, "the key factors are [their] *minimal-personality* and *marginal-status*" (Jackson1977:281). He proves the importance of status to the Kuranko as he describes how they remain impervious to the loss of insignificant members in their society. On the other hand, "the mortuary rites for a ruler or for a man of a ruling lineage are more elaborate, further prolonged and larger in scale" (Jackson 1977:282). Another key note in the elements of their ritual is the attempt of guests to emphasize their own statuses, just like the givers of kôden in Japan: chiefs in the Kuranko society give lavishly to display "how big and rich they are" (Jackson 1977:284). So even amongst those in mourning, dignity rules above all feelings of compassion and sorrow.

As Yohko Tsuji states in his article, "Mortuary Rituals in Japan: The Hegemony of Tradition and the Motivations of Individuals," funerals in Japan create a "stage where cultural models (e.g., of hierarchy) are brought down to the level of the concrete and the familiar (e.g., the amount of kôden), and sociocultural order is acted out by participating individuals and is instilled in them" (Tsuji 2006:404) This staging endures in the Kuranko traditions as well, as evident by the dependence of rite on identity and by the emphasis on esteem. According to Richard Huntington of Harvard University and Peter Metcalf of the University of Virginia (in their book titled *Celebrations of Death*, "the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. Life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed" (1979:2). As evident in the mortuary practices of the Japanese and the West African Kuranko, death brings to light the importance and value of social hierarchy.

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