



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan, and:  
Bereavement and Consolation: Testimonies from Tokugawa Japan  
(review)

Fabio Rambelli

Monumenta Nipponica, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 123-128 (Review)



Published by Sophia University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mni.2005.0013>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/182366>

to benefit in various ways from Mr. Fukuda's assistance. Most importantly, Partner met Toshié, a wonderful storyteller, willing to share her fund of warm and heartrending memories. Partner does not discuss "memory" in and of itself. Rather, he approaches Toshié's memories as an archive. Instead of transcribing her words in her own voice, as most anthropologists try to do, the author largely recounts Toshié's memories for us. While I wish we could hear more of her own voice, Partner's respect for Toshié's memories makes this book one of the best and most readable studies of twentieth-century rural Japan available. Toshié has two daughters: Keiko, whom she and her husband adopted, and Ayako, their natural daughter. The book ends with Partner's brief descriptions of the families of Keiko and Ayako. This time, again, Ayako adopted a husband (*muko*) into the Sakaue family. What will Ayako's life be like? It would be wonderful if someone, if not Partner, were able to follow her life and write another book on rural Japan in the twenty-first century.

*Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan.* Edited by Susanne Formanek and William LaFleur. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004. 536 pages. Softcover €69.78.

*Bereavement and Consolation: Testimonies from Tokugawa Japan.* By Harold Bolitho. Yale University Press, 2003. 226 pages. Hardcover \$35.00.

FABIO RAMBELLI  
Sapporo University

One of the main topics in the pseudoacademic field known as *nihonjinron* (discourses on the Japanese) is the Japanese view of the other world and the afterlife. Many treatments of the subject mix together Ainu and Ryukyu "traditional" cosmologies (investigated after modernization/colonization and thus on the verge of vanishing), folklore of remote areas in the Japanese mainland, and myths from ancient texts in an attempt to show that Japanese people have a distinctive and remarkably stable vision of the other world—something that sets them aside from other ethnic groups and at the same time signals a supposedly continuous spiritual communality. The proponents of this perspective argue that for the Japanese the dead live on mountains or beyond the sea and come back periodically to visit their descendants. As ancestors, the dead reward the good endeavors of their kin and punish their bad behavior. This vision supposedly does not require a formal religious cult; everything is taken care of within the family and the village community in the framework of a natural and spontaneous interaction with the sacred—without the influence of foreign religions such as Buddhism or interventions of the state and other political institutions. In other words, in *nihonjinron* literature, existence is configured as a tight community of the living and the dead intent on preserving spiritual values traditionally associated with the core elements of Japanese civilization. Echoes of this vision can frequently be found in mass-media treatments of Japan, from newspaper articles to anime, both in Japan and abroad.

These circumstances suggest that the discourse of the afterlife in Japan is a highly ideological pursuit. A sizable number of readers would seem to find its romanticized views pleasant and reassuring, but few of its claims rest on solid historical and empirical foundations. Anyone who has been in Japan for a while knows that virtually no

Japanese seems personally to hold to the ideas normatively presented in these books as a sort of obvious and natural, if not obligatory, form of belief and practice. On the other hand, it would be wrong to dismiss such accounts as merely the idiosyncratic and spurious concoctions of a few modern intellectuals. Contemporary discourses on Japanese views of the afterlife, in fact, derive more or less directly from the thought of Hirata Atsutane, which inspired the neonativism of the post-Meiji field of Japanese folklore studies (*minzokugaku*) as created by Yanagita Kunio and Origuchi Shinobu. Atsutane struggled with all kinds of sources and materials to articulate a purely Japanese vision of the afterlife; unfortunately, the sources he could find that were not influenced by continental thought, especially Buddhism, were also not very consoling. Atsutane thus ended up creating a folkloric vision of the afterlife that was, in effect, a sort of Japanese folk Buddhism without the most explicitly Buddhist features—hence its asystematic and fundamentally artificial nature.

Setting aside this intellectual pedigree and the pervasiveness of contemporary neonativist-based accounts of the afterlife, we are left with a different but substantial question: how do present-day Japanese actually envision the afterlife? And what are the historical and intellectual processes that resulted in today's conceptions? How are (and were) such conceptions represented and how do they relate to religious practice? The two books reviewed here are, in different but interrelated ways, valuable attempts to formulate meaningful answers to these and other important questions.

*Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan* is an impressive collection of essays edited by Susanne Formanek of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and William LaFleur of the University of Pennsylvania. It contains a substantial introduction by the two editors and twenty chapters on a wide range of topics organized in six sections arranged in roughly historical succession. Color plates and indices with Japanese characters conclude the volume. This is possibly the most complete and challenging book on the subject available in English. Its wide-ranging topics and broad interdisciplinary approach make it valuable for scholars and students alike. The editors explain the striking title, "Practicing the Afterlife," as meaning "'giving practical expression' to one's concern with the afterlife, whether it exists or not"; "'making use of' the afterlife, referring to the many goals that might be pursued in speculating about the life to come"; and "'constructing' the afterlife," in the sense that "any view of the afterlife . . . needs at least in part some active involvement, from ritual acts to speculation and fabrication in accordance with a wide spectrum of motives, from bereavement and the need for consolation to proselyting [*sic*] needs of priesthoods" (p. 25). In other words, the editors have chosen an explicitly polyhedral approach to the subject, based on the assumptions that belief in the afterlife is always related to practices and convictions pertaining to present existence, both of the individual and the community, and that such belief is represented in a variety of forms.

The editors point as well to the limitations of received scholarship's emphasis on a "this-worldly" orientation as a particular feature of Japanese religion; strictly speaking, Buddhism does not recognize an absolute Beyond, since even the "otherworldly" abodes of buddhas and bodhisattvas obey the same "law" that applies everywhere in the universe. On the other hand, emphasis on obtaining "worldly benefits" (*genze riyaku*) does not exclude postmortem beliefs and practices. Arguing that "'practicing the afterlife' has been an important part of Japanese life throughout the ages and one which deserves more detailed scholarly attention than has been given it in the past" (p. 27), the editors (and with them the contributors to the volume) have tried to open

up the discourse on the afterlife in Japanese culture to its multifarious sources, representations, and interpretations.

It is virtually impossible to summarize in this review the content of the individual contributions to this volume. Let me instead use the division into sections devised by the editors to indicate the major thematic areas addressed. The section “Early Developments” takes up prehistoric visions of death and the afterlife (Nelly Naumann) and the conflicting presence already in the Heian period of Buddhist and Daoist visions of the afterlife (Christoph Kleine). “Buddhist Transformations” contains essays on the preaching of Buddhist visions of the afterlife in the early modern period as seen in *Kumano kanshin jikkai mandara* (Kuroda Hideo), the ideas and practices related to the *Ketsubonkyō* (Kōdate Naomi), Ming Chinese concepts of the afterlife (Friedrich A. Bischoff), and two different visions of the afterlife in contemporary Japan, namely the “ambiguous” position put forth by Shin Buddhism (Galen Amstutz) and that underlying *kuchiyose* shamanistic practices in which the dead are called on and made to interact with the bereaved (Peter Knecht).

Next is “Shinto, Nativist and Confucian Interpretations,” which explores different Edo-period attempts to construe a non-Buddhist vision of the afterlife, with essays by Bernhard Scheid on the limits of Yoshida Shinto’s discourse on the afterlife, Mark McNally on Hirata Atsutane’s Nativist attempts to define the other world in positive terms, and Harold Bolitho on heterodoxical accounts of “life” after death. “The Afterlife as Metaphor,” with essays by Wakabayashi Haruko, Susanne Formanek, and Sepp Linhart, deals with the way in which the theme and representations of the Buddhist hell were employed in the medieval and early modern periods to address social themes and issues (foreigners, social order, morality, etc.). “Modernizing the Afterlife” presents three interesting cases of modernization influencing visions of the afterlife: Meiji-period sermons conducted by religious specialists after the anti-Buddhist persecutions (Hartmut Rotermund), the role of Western spiritism in modern Japan (Lisette Gebhardt), and the transformation of otherworld beliefs in Ryukyuan religion (Josef Kreiner). The last section, “Modern Outlooks—Traditional Concerns?” considers from several directions continuity and change in beliefs and practices concerning the afterlife in contemporary Japan: ancestor worship (Yohko Tsuji), comparative images of the soul and the afterlife as held by Japanese and French university students (Yamada Yōko and Katō Yoshinobu), representations of spirits in two recently established new religions (Inken Prohl), and bioethical debates on the definition of death (William LaFleur).

In their choice of essays, the editors have tried to address critically the dichotomies marring received discussions of the Japanese afterlife—soteriologically oriented/worldly benefit-oriented, this-worldly/otherworldly, Japanese/foreign, Shinto/Buddhist, popular/elite, normative/descriptive. In general, they emphasize “how sensitivity may be sharpened towards diversity, rather than trying to uncover typically Japanese patterns” (p. 45)—a welcome methodological orientation. Indeed, the general impression one receives from reading the book is the presence of many different visions and practices of the afterlife, often in mutual contrast, sometimes even in the same individual person. Not much is known about pre-Buddhist antiquity, but proponents of Buddhism in ancient and medieval Japan came up with several ways to “practice” the afterlife (cyclical reincarnation versus straightforward rebirth in a better existential condition; emphasis on hell versus a pure land; collective versus individual religiosity; etc.). The early modern period saw a deepening crisis of dominant Buddhist models, which

resulted in diffused skepticism; this was in turn related to the development of a religiosity virtually devoid of transcendence, as indicated by frequent claims that the performance of one's social obligations (toward the household and society, or at work) was itself the realization of a soteriological goal such as "becoming a buddha." At the same time, Tokugawa-period Japanese also tried to formulate new visions of the afterlife independent of Buddhism, but how effective these were in consoling the bereaved remains open to doubt.

Modernity brought a definitive crisis of traditional models and behaviors. Disbelief, formalistic performance of superficially understood "traditional" practices, a vague sense of spirituality (infused with Western occultism, spiritualism, and New Age ideas), and notions mediated by Christianity (dead children become "angels" [*tenshi*], the dead go to "Heaven" [*tengoku*], etc.) seem to be the most important ingredients in present-day Japanese discourse and practices of the afterlife. In this respect, it is a pity that no essay in the volume investigates systematically and in depth such diffuse contemporary images and ideas. This is just a minor reservation for a book that is in fact a major scholarly accomplishment.

Even though it is possible to posit a number of historical and intellectual trends dealing with the otherworld and the afterlife, the coexistence of contrasting practices of the afterlife raises the question of the appropriate way to study the subject. The present work suggests that to facilitate an understanding of a topic so dependent upon subjective considerations, a microhistorical investigation of various different individual cases might be indeed more productive than generalized extrapolations.

The second book under review, *Bereavement and Consolation: Testimonies from Tokugawa Japan*, by Harold Bolitho, is an important step precisely in this direction. It consists of a study and translation of three distinctive documents from the late Tokugawa period, each describing the death of someone close to the author. The Jōdo Shinshū priest Zenjō (1773–1822) tells us of the death of his child Mutsumaru in 1798; the famed poet Kobayashi Issa (1763–1827) recounts the death of his estranged father in 1801; finally, the Confucian scholar Hirose Kyokusō (1807–1863) writes about the death of his wife, Matsuko, in 1844. To these sources, Bolitho has added translations of other texts in which the three authors address their losses and grief; some of these are even more poignant, in content and style, than the central sources for the book. (Some of the material in this book is included as well in Bolitho's article in the collective volume reviewed above.)

An enormous amount of written records remain from the Tokugawa period, but few deal with personal bereavement and grief. Those few tend to be, especially to a Westerner's eyes, extremely cold and detached—or, in some cases, almost incomprehensible. Perhaps in part because of the dearth of texts that talk about bereavement, from the Tokugawa period the cliché that Japanese do not take death seriously gained currency in the West. Of course, in premodern Japan, as in premodern societies in general, death was a common presence. Life expectancy was much lower than it is today (perhaps around fifty years), and limitations in medical knowledge meant that the lives of children and women were particularly precarious. Even those at the top of the social and economic ladder frequently saw over half of their children die, and a man often lost more than one wife to childbirth. Tokugawa Japanese thus may have been resigned to a short life expectancy and may have been more receptive than we are to death. But, as Bolitho rightly suggests, it is also possible that some sort of self-censorship

restricted public display of emotions concerning death, including in textual form. Given this circumstance, the material presented in the book is a rare and valuable resource for trying to assess the extent to which people directly affected by the loss of a family member found something of relevance in standard doctrinal accounts of death and the afterlife—and, more specifically, how such accounts may have functioned as a source of consolation.

A common feature of the three main documents examined in the book is the absence of a clear indication of affection for the persons mourned. As Bolitho writes, “Plainly none of the three men could comfortably confess affection.” Yet the manifold strategies of intimate communication employed to represent affection indirectly indicate “beyond all doubt, that the writers cared for those they had lost” (p. 169). Children have a particular position in these stories of loss. In Bolitho’s words, “Nothing in their accounts suggests anything other than [that the authors] wanted their children, felt responsible for them, took pleasure in them, loved them, worried frantically when they took sick, and mourned them when they died” (p. 171)—an image quite different from stereotypical accounts of Japanese fathers and one that suggests the need to study in greater depth representations of fatherhood in history. Concerning the crucial question as to what consoled these men, we encounter a striking silence. We do not find any mention that a belief in the afterlife (as a blessed one in Amida’s Pure Land or as an ancestor) offered consolation in the face of bereavement. Even signs of grace at death mentioned in the accounts of Issa and Zenjō, the Shinshū priest, do not seem to have been of comfort. In these accounts we find references to a possible previous life, but not to a future life. As Bolitho puts it, even “Zenjō the priest . . . said nothing of his hope of meeting his son in Paradise, or anywhere else, ever again” (p. 183). Only Kyokusō, the Confucian, mentions the possibility (without discarding it as one might expect) that his defunct wife may have continued to “live” as a spirit and protect her son. None of the standard religious accounts and received visions of the afterlife seem to have provided comfort to these men: “none of these three men had any uniquely Japanese defense against grief” (p. 187).

What is perhaps most striking in these accounts is the lack of interiority; in them we find little psychological introspection and almost no inner life—whether in the writers/observers or in those whose deaths are described. Of course, this is not surprising: Buddhism denies the existence of the psyche, and the several “souls” posited by Chinese thought were essentially centers of life energy, not thinking/feeling “subjects.” Karatani Kōjin, among others, has argued that interiority is in fact a Western construct, introduced to Japan only during the Meiji period as one of the apparatuses of modernity. Still, it is revealing to read these compassionate and affectionate (in their own ways) accounts that cannot go beyond the most obvious sensorial dimension (what has been seen, heard, felt) to reach the realm of the psychic life of their subjects. (One possible exception is Kyokusō’s text.) These kinds of narration are precisely the places where we, modern Westerners, would expect to find expressions of interiority—albeit often disguised or overdone as sentimentality. This lack of interiority/subjectivity might shed light upon some elements of the thanatologies, such as the attempts to explain certain present events as consequences of occurrences in a previous life: the authors of these documents could attribute no subjective motive, no inner and autonomous agency to those they had lost or to those who had come into contact with them (themselves included). Yet, the authors cannot find consolation in the fact

that their losses, too, might have been the result of a causal chain originating in the past. This circumstance is perhaps the most powerful sign of both the interiorization of Buddhism that had occurred in premodern Japan and its limitations.

Each of these books in its own way helps to illuminate the ways in which religious ideas and practices concur in shaping people's understanding of the meaning of life and death—and the actual extent and function of such understanding. From them we glimpse the variety of visions of death and the afterlife produced by Japanese over the centuries, and we see that not all individuals may have assimilated these visions equally; at the same time, we are left wondering about the actual impact of religious ideas and practices on the subjectivity and interiority of individuals during crucial moments of life.

*Practical Pursuits: Religion, Politics, and Personal Cultivation in Nineteenth-Century Japan.* By Janine Tasca Sawada. University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 387 pages. Hardcover \$45.00.

BARBARA AMBROS  
Columbia University

Following up on her *Confucian Values and Popular Zen: Sekimon Shingaku in Eighteenth-Century Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), in her new book, *Practical Pursuits: Religion, Politics, and Personal Cultivation in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, Janine Tasca Sawada offers a meticulous foray into the minds of late-Tokugawa and early-Meiji thinkers across various religious and intellectual traditions and from different levels of society. One of the necessary limits of the study is geographic: the network of thinkers that Sawada examines centers in the western Kantō region (Edo/Tokyo and Kanagawa), a region whose nineteenth-century religious infrastructure has also been studied by Helen Hardacre in her recent *Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century Japan: A Study of the Southern Kantō Region, Using Late Edo and Early Meiji Gazetteers* (University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies, 2002). Like Hardacre, Sawada does not confine her study to one tradition; however, her focus is not merely geographic, but also thematic. Her decision to trace a particular theme through an era of Tokugawa intellectual history is, of course, not completely unprecedented. In his *Tokugawa Ideology* (Princeton University Press, 1985), for example, Herman Ooms noted the intersection between Neo-Confucian, Shinto, Buddhist, and folk eclecticism in the early Tokugawa period. To do this plurality justice while still maintaining narrative cohesion, Ooms, too, adopted the approach of focusing on a particular theme that can be followed across multiple traditions.

In this case, Sawada has chosen the theme of personal cultivation. She does not confine herself to thinkers of the highest level of political influence but also includes somewhat unlikely candidates: Neo-Confucian intellectuals who questioned academic textual discourse in favor of practicality, diviner/physiognomists, the founders of Misogikyō and Renmonkyō, and the Rinzai Zen abbots of Engakuji (Kamakura) and their lay followers. Her study yields fascinating insights into the religious and intellectual currents of this seminal period of Japanese history, including the theories of