Death Customs in Contemporary Japan

It is abundantly clear to anyone interested in Japanese culture that the performative media—theatre, Kabuki, film, and storytelling (such as the kaidan banashi recitals)—are well stocked with stories which feature death, ghosts, oni, and other monsters, and which include the same emotions of revenge, fury, obligation, and frustration that figure centrally as motivations in the folk legends. A favorite among the many topics which form the content of these productions, death and anything connected to it continue to strike a responsive and meaningful chord in Japanese audiences. On the level of interest, popularity, and intellectual involvement of artists, death is foregrounded in performances which dramatize issues of enduring validity in Japanese society.

But death is more than a simple topic of intellectual interest: when we hear that a modern film director has visited the Tokyo gravesite of Oiwa before daring to make a film about her tortuous death and grim revenge; when we learn that actors and stagehands in the Kabuki theatre perform a ceremony to prevent bad luck and accidents which might
occur during the enactment of Oiwa’s story or that of Kiku (the servant girl who killed herself over breaking an expensive porcelain plate); when we find out that storytellers are concerned about the possible misfortune which may result from relating particular ghost stories; when we discover that Tokyo taxi drivers still talk about transporting ghosts—then we realize that something more deep and pervasive than academic interest is involved.

There are at least five important observations to derive from these revelations: (1) the seemingly older idea of ghostly revenge has been transported into modern situations and incorporated into everyday practice; (2) beliefs about one’s personal responsibility with respect to ghosts are still functional—even in the relatively “liberated” world of the contemporary performer; (3) the “verisimilitude” an actor adopts when assuming a traditional role is based on another—perhaps more real and personal—kind of logic than in Western culture (although there are parallel beliefs and taboos about Shakespeare’s plays among American thespians); (4) legends and their ghostly referents remain powerful and potentially dangerous through time; (5) the Land of the Dead is still thought to be nearby.

Similar observations can be made about modern fiction. For example, in Kawabata Yasunari’s short story “Fushi” (Beyond death), the two characters are the ghost of a beautiful young woman and an old man—her surviving lover—who dies during the story as they walk along recounting what separated them and led to her suicide. The logic or sense of verisimilitude in such a story is beyond the comprehension of a Western reader, as is the central issue of Kawabata’s story “Tabi,” in which a young girl recalls a red hat and white tabi being put into the casket of a dead teacher. Abe Kōbō’s “Shinda musume ga utatta...” (Song of a dead girl) is narrated in the first person by a young woman whose suicide takes place on the very first page; it is her ghost through whom we vicariously experience and recall the frustrating events of her limited life. In Hiraiwa Yumie’s “Yūgao no onna” (Lady of the evening faces), the unfolding of the first part of the story relates directly to the seventh-, forty-ninth-, and hundredth-day funeral observances by the main character for her departed mother. Not surprisingly, the young woman becomes involved in a “dead” marriage, but manages to extricate herself through the same kind of
solitary personal strength which brought her through the difficulties of her mother’s demise.

It seems that the same drive to experience a personal interaction with the mysteries and realities of the “other side” which motivated audiences in earlier times to flock to performances of the *One Hundred Tales* (during which it was believed someone in the audience might die before the hundredth story was told and the hundredth—and last—candle was extinguished) still draws people to modern rephrasings of the same cluster of values. Just as Fosco Maraini, in *Japan: Patterns of Continuity*, argues from visual evidence that older Japanese concepts continue to be rearticulated in modern media and experience, so it seems that a deep level of culture finds reexpression and rephrasing in modern oral forms as well.

But what are the values that are represented by these articulations? What are the assumptions about death and the human spirit that reach concrete or dramatic reality through vehicles like legend, belief, and custom? Obviously the topic is deeper and more complex than a brief study can encompass; nonetheless, Japanese folklorists and anthropologists have given us some good maps which lead into the territory, and we can explore them profitably by using careful observations of ongoing customs and legends as guideposts.

For example, we can infer something about the nature and location of the recently departed spirit by noting the custom, once widespread in Japan (and still found in many areas), of calling out the name of the just-deceased, sometimes from the rooftop, for a period of time after his or her death. Apparently the spirit does not go far, and may be ready to come back. Indeed the Japanese terms associated with the spatial aspects of the spirit’s location are based on the standard positional markers: _ko_ (here, this side), _so_ (there, intermediate distance), and _a_ (over yonder, behind, the other side). _Konoyo_, “this world here,” is the precinct of the living; _anoyo_, “the world over there, yonder” is clearly the other side, the long-term abode of the dead (note that there is no ambiguous middle ground called _sonoyo_; the dichotomy is clearly drawn). From “over there,” the spirit still retains a connection with and interest in the affairs of “this world,” for as it develops slowly into the local collective ancestral deity called _sorei_ and _kami_, it remains concerned about family identity, survival, and welfare.
But before the spirit gets all the way to anoya, which can take up to forty-nine days, it may be called back; unfinished business, unfulfilled obligations, a need for vengeance, feelings of jealousy, the desire for proper burial or more ritual, and the like may impede the spirit’s progress and keep it in the konoyo zone, where it will appear in the form of a ghost or cemetery fires or other striking phenomena. Understanding the legends in this book requires the reader/listener to understand and accept the values which are thought to keep a soul in this zone until a problem is properly resolved. In other words, it is not enough simply to acknowledge that the Japanese may believe in ghosts; ghosts are thought to express certain dilemmas which require culturally acceptable solutions. It is the values represented by these problems and reflected in their resolutions that the legends dramatize.

The concept of anoya, moreover, is not only literal but also metaphorical, for there are apparently a variety of “places” where spirits are thought to go on to. “The world over yonder” is said by some to be far away over the sea; for others, it is past the mountains; for others, it lies beyond a great river; and in the Kojiki, it is described as being underground. Some of these variations may be accounted for by the possibility that the beliefs in southern Japan were influenced by Polynesian cultures from “far away over the sea,” while many other cultural streams came into Japan from Mongolia via Korea, and the topography—plus Japan’s own mountains, which cover between eighty and ninety percent of the land mass—would account for the prominence of mountain imagery. Earlier local beliefs may well have been associated with particular lakes and streams which were thought to have their own power. Later additions, rationalizations, and reinterpretations by Buddhist, Confucian, and Shintō commentators have certainly complicated this mixture theologically, but the practical, everyday application of the concept can still be heard in the terms kanaya and anoya. The “yonder” world in almost all cases is final, and entry into it is preceded, for guilty persons, by some kind of judgment and punishment (which can be modified or softened by the sutras read on their behalf at the request of the survivors, according to more recent belief).

What seems to interest the Japanese imagination is the idea that the soul tends to stay somewhere close to konoyo if there is anything which binds it to this life: mostly this will not be a theological situation but a cultural one, in which the
The ghost of a blind musician crossing a river. Artist: Andō Hiroshige (1797–1858).
Ghosts and the Japanese

spirit’s orderly transition is dependent on finishing a task or fulfilling a culturally valid obligation. Dramatically speaking, then, the legend character who is confronted by a ghost who needs help to resolve an unfinished task is cast in the role of an observer or witness to the existence of both worlds interacting, as well as a living testimony to the validity of the resolution.

It may not always be possible for the character in the story (much less the listener) to determine at once what kind of ghost he or she has encountered. For one thing, there are two kinds of spirits: those from living persons, where a spirit has left a body momentarily but the person remains alive (no doubt this would be called a “near-death experience” in current parlance, but it is also thought to be caused by severe anger, a trance, or anxiety), and those from genuinely dead persons. The former are called seiryō or shōryō (and are amply dramatized in such works as The Tales of Genji and Konjaku Monogatari); the latter—which we deal with mainly in this study—are called shiryō.

Beyond that, the legend character may not be able to tell what kind of help would aid the dead spirit which is “trapped” on this side of the great boundary. Lucky for the character if the ghost can articulate a request that the witness can then fulfill; in many cases, the witness is an innocent passerby who is simply assaulted by a ghost whose uncontrollable passion results from the way he died, or the fact that the proper rituals were not observed in her behalf. But from the Japanese perspective, the apparently innocent victim may not be entirely exempt from involvement, for he or she is a member of the living, that group of people whose obligation it is to celebrate the souls of the dead. In this dramatic sense, anyone alive is fair game for the approach of a ghost.

What is there in Japanese cultural values, though, that has the power to keep spirits from moving to the other side, that justifies furious ghost attacks on living persons, that accounts for a dead mother nursing a living baby? The term on, with all its attendant implications, supplies one possible answer. On translates into something like “obligation” or “responsibility,” but it is infinitely more complicated, and colored with such a range of cultural attitudes and assumptions that a single, clear definition is impossible to articulate in either Japanese or English. Technically, on is the kind of obligation one assumes (in the Japanese idiom, one wears it)
when one has been the recipient of love, nurturance, kindness, favor, help, or advice—especially from a superior in the social system. On entails not only an awareness of having received a favor, but carries with it the absolute necessity to respond and repay. Some kinds of on debt, called giri, can be repaid in kind, or with work, money, or gifts which are in some way equal to the original favor. But the most difficult and far-reaching debts inhere in family relationships: within the immediate family, in terms of filial piety to one’s own parents; in the “vertical” family of ancestors and descendants; in the social systems (village, occupational) which are modeled on the framework of the family; in the relationship to the emperor, father of the culture (who, incidentally, “wears” his on to his own ancestors and to the kami). No one is exempt, and this familial on, in which the debt is called gimu, can never be fully repaid; Ruth Benedict says of it, “The fullest repayment of these obligations is still no more than partial, and there is no time limit” (1946, 116).

Each person has received so much in nurturance and help from others that one is always in a state of debt, and this is especially so among those who share an uchi (insider) relationship, which may range from an immediate family to a large corporation. By the same token, one expects to help others and bestow on upon them through love, concern, favors, and the like. Thus everyone up and down the social system experiences a keen sense of obligation. Since the system itself is a complex of status relationships (some of which may be fixed and others born of situation and context), one never has the sense of being caught up on all the debt; one always lives with an apologetic acknowledgment of being unequal and behind in one’s “payments.”

When a debt to another is not paid, people on both sides of the transaction may feel guilty, insulted, or outraged. Thus not only does the occasional act of doing a real or imagined wrong to another require apology and discussion, but also the omitted act of obligation may be interpreted as an outright injury. And because of all the potential imbalances in the situation, even doing someone a good turn may create such an obligation that an apology is necessary. The Japanese spend a good deal of time apologizing to each other for matters which would seem more positive than negative to an outsider.

Almost anyone who dies will expire, then, with many unfulfilled obligations to others, and the relatives of that person
will also be aware that they still have many obligations to the deceased. The resultant paroxysm of guilt and apology can be articulated and directed to some extent by the survivors’ commitment to the proper rituals, complete with the reading of sutras and offering of food. The recourse available to the deceased is, according to the legends at least, the possibility of remaining in the vicinity until the principal inequities have been redressed. The ghost may simply want more sutras read, or may feel the need for something more specific. If the deceased has been wrongfully treated, consciously injured, murdered, insulted, or the like, the ghost may wreak vengeance on the wrongdoer—or by extension, the culprit’s family, clan, village, or region, even for generations (just as there are no time limits for the debt to be paid, there are also none for some kinds of vengeance).

In literary terms, it is nearly irrelevant whether people actually believe a spirit can return, or if the ghosts are “simply” the public dramatizations of guilt felt by survivors: the ghost legends are powerful expressions of the obligations and niceties which the Japanese feel are incumbent upon themselves as they lead normal, acceptable lives within their culture. The outcome is the same in either case, for these legends ensure the kind of behavior which preserves the culture and its values, along with the proper relationships without which—in the Japanese view—culture would be meaningless.

The ritualization of these relationships and obligations can be seen vividly in Japanese funeral ceremonies. Originally Buddhism had no funeral as such, for the teaching of Buddha concentrates on the search for an understanding of the meaning in life and thus has little to do with death. As Buddhism came to Japan by way of China, the land of ancestor cults, it became slowly involved with ancestor veneration and was well received in Japan where ancestral deities were worshipped. But it appears that people in those days abhorred death and tried to avoid any contact with dead bodies, since death generically and dead bodies in particular were considered unclean and impure. Early Japanese simply disposed of the corpses where they could, or placed them aside without any ceremony at all.

Moreover, there is no evidence that the earliest Buddhist monks or temples concerned themselves with death or funeral ceremonies. Not until the Heian Period (the end of the eighth century to the beginning of the twelfth century),
during a great famine in which countless corpses littered the streets and were being eaten by animals and birds, did the monks bury people and read sutras for them out of Buddhist compassion. This seems to mark the beginning of funeral practices among the monks, and since that time, the Buddhist monks have been especially prominent in funeral rituals. At first, it appears that temples were built near the places where many people had been buried, so that the sutras could be more conveniently read for them; in later times, the custom of taking the deceased to a place where a temple was already located developed. Cemeteries within temple precincts, such as those described in many of our legends, are thus relatively recent.

Since the original religion of Japan considered death as unclean, the development of cemeteries took an interesting turn, for people began to erect two separate graves: one as the actual place where the corpse was interred, which no one would visit after the burial, the other as a memorial spot where family members would meet regularly and celebrate their ancestors. Today, since corpses are usually cremated, one grave is the rule.

But the complicated funeral practices developed by the Buddhists speak to the prior existence in Japan of an extensive set of beliefs about ongoing relationships with the dead. Why would Buddhism develop the multiday and multiyear funeral system when in fact Buddhism taught that the dying person immediately becomes a Buddha (or, if guilty, a member of a lower order of beings)? Apparently the Buddhists appropriated and helped to develop an extremely complex system which already had existed, without the help of temple ritual, for eons—perhaps in much the same way that the early Christian church adopted and adapted itself to local "pagan" practices, personages, and holy places. Yanagita and others have pointed out a number of indications for an early ancestor complex, which apparently became the matrix for present-day practices that may look Buddhist but actually stem from an earlier period in Japan’s cultural history. For this reason, Japanese Buddhism cannot be easily compared with other forms of the same religion, for it was deeply influenced by local customs.

The typical Buddhist funerals which are still celebrated in Japan were developed during the Edo Period (1603–1867), but are of course grounded on these older customs and concepts. Generally speaking (keeping in mind that
in different areas there may be distinctive variations), the
funeral consists of four primary areas of focus, plus other
commemorations during subsequent years:

1. *Tsuya* (the wake), literally, “to pass the night.” One night
before the burial or cremation, family members and anyone
else who had a particularly close relationship with the de­
parted remain with the body all night. Silence is observed,
though some occasional small conversation may take place.
The family altar is usually decorated with flowers, and a
Buddhist monk may read sutras to pacify and console the
spirit of the deceased. Rice, fish, vegetables, and sake may
be served to visitors.

Earlier, in some areas (like Nagaoka-gun in Köchi-ken), it
was called *tsuya* when people in a neighborhood met in a
Shintō shrine and prayed for a sick person in critical con­
dition. Later the *tsuya* developed into a prayer meeting for
the recently deceased. In various areas, there was also the
custom of siblings or other family members sleeping next to
the corpse on the first night after death. Or a person who
had recently lost a family member (within the previous year)
and was thus still in mourning and considered ritually “un­
clean” would stay the first night in the same room with the
corpse.

Food customs at the *tsuya* are also interesting, for what
is offered to visitors at the wake varies according to region.
Thus, though the overall funeral practice is standardized,
the particulars of deportment and food selection help to fore­
ground the local intensity with which both life and death are
experienced. Apparently elements from various religious
traditions have melded into a particularly Japanese funeral
ceremony.

2. *Sōshiki* (the funeral). Today it is common for a mortuary
firm (*sōgiya*) to construct a decorated altar in a room of the
deceased’s house (or in a hall, like a temple). The coffin
is placed in the middle of this altar, which is constructed to
look like a broad stair or raised platform. If the funeral is not
Shintō, a Buddhist monk reads appropriate sutras on behalf
of the deceased. Afterward each visitor goes forward to the
altar, offers incense, and prays. After all have performed
this ritual, men carry the coffin out of the house and put it
into a hearse, which brings the corpse to the crematorium
for burning. It is common nowadays for the closest family
members not to accompany the corpse to the crematorium;
instead they gather at a nearby restaurant for a catered meal.
The altar is dismantled by the mortuary and taken from the house.

The ashes of the deceased are preserved in an urn, the larger fragments of bone being passed from one pair of mixed chopsticks to another, and are kept on the household altar, accompanied by a small tablet with the person’s name, until the forty-ninth day ceremony, after which the urn is placed in a grave. Every Japanese, with the exception of Christians and Jews, receives a so-called posthumous name (kaimyō), and it is this special name which appears on the funeral tablet (ihai).

Rural funerals often still include housecleaning, making of clothes for the deceased, and home preparation of food for guests. Frequently a zuda-bukuro (pilgrim’s bag) is prepared by family members; into it go fingernail parings, personal articles (like a tobacco pipe), and a few imitation mon, an archaic coin also mentioned in a number of the legends, which will pay the spirit’s fare on the ferry to anoyo. The bag is placed around the neck of the corpse before cremation.

3. Shonanoka (the seventh day after death). On this day, a special ceremony called hōji is held, during which sutras are read (either at home or in a nearby temple), based on the belief that the spirit of a person returns home on the seventh day after death. Among Buddhist Japanese-Americans, the “seventh-day” ceremony is held on the afternoon of the funeral since family members are so widely dispersed that a second gathering a week later is an inconvenience.

4. Shijū-kunichi (the forty-ninth day after death). The ceremony for the dead is also performed on this day, for after the forty-ninth day it is believed that the soul starts its new life “on the other side” (unless its progress has been slowed as already discussed). Between death in this world and the beginning of a new life in the afterworld, the soul has remained konoyo, somewhere in the vicinity of its home, where it should have been honored, pacified, and consoled.

Many of the particular ritual days following the funeral (and the precise number varies, including in some areas the fourteenth, twenty-first, twenty-eighth, thirty-fifth, and forty-second, in addition to or instead of those already mentioned) focus on the reading of particular sutras, the purpose of which is to lessen the possibilities for punishment faced by the deceased in passing to the other side. According to the Chinese sutra Jizō-jūō-kyō, the spirit of a dead person must face ten judges, one after another. On the seventh day
after death, the deceased is brought before the first judge and closely questioned about how he has led his life. Then, on various key days like those above, he comes before the court again and again for nine more trials. On the forty-ninth day, the final verdict is handed down and the decision made as to which of six worlds (among them Hell, Animal, Insanity, Human, Heaven) the spirit must enter. The survivors, in order to obtain a milder sentence for the sinner (or to urge a pardon for someone who has received a heavy penalty), order sutras to be read. Even when a dead person has been consigned to heaven for having led a very good life, if the survivors neglect to have the sutras read, it can endanger his position and cause him to fall into hell anyway—at least according to the Jizō-jūō-kyō sutra.

After the immediate funeral arrangements have been taken care of, there remain the various important annual anniversaries of the death: the first, second, third, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-third or twenty-fifth, twenty-seventh, thirty-third, and occasionally the fiftieth and the hundredth (obviously these last are observed by descendants who probably did not know the deceased personally, but who feel an obligation to maintain proper filial relationships with the kami of their family). On each of these memorial days, a Buddhist priest may be engaged to read appropriate sutras in a ceremonial setting in a temple, or family members and close friends may gather at home and have them read there. Flowers and incense are offered on the family altar, and afterward a festive meal is shared.

Clearly such a calendar of events has the effect of organizing the life of a family over a period of years, and if several people in the family have died, it is not at all difficult to imagine much of the year devoted to fulfilling funeral obligations. In a context where considerations for the dead are so prominent, it is no wonder that death and many things related to it are such likely subjects for expression in narrative form; given the stress on unfulfillable obligations in family life, it is not surprising that an aura of guilt, unfinished business, and unfathomable debt permeates these stories and provides much of their characters' motivations. The ongoing beliefs and rituals connected with death, in concert with a deep-seated style of human interaction expressed in the on complex, surely create a rich and meaningful matrix for the ghost legends as a genre as well as for much of the everyday
activity in a family as it makes its way through seemingly endless rituals.

At the same time, such an intense, ongoing concentration on the welfare of the dead, and the unbreakable responsibilities which relate the living to them, continually engages the dead in the lives of the living, and thus preserves the dead within the present day—much as Yanagita suggested. Kishimoto Hideo comments that “for the Japanese, death is within life.” As long as we continue to ritualize the dead, they remain a part of our existence; although their spirits have presumably gone on, anoyō, some aspect of their personality, their function, their status (and thus the on that attaches to all of these) remains with us. As they slowly become kami, the local or national deities that bestow blessings, favors, and nurturance upon our affairs, we continue to make known the endless indebtedness we feel to them for all their trouble and concern.

In addition to the specific funerals and memorials celebrated by a family for particular individuals on this increasingly complex calendar, there is the annual observance of Obon, when all the deceased members of a family or community are entertained with feasting and dancing. Observed nowadays in August, the Obon, or Urabon Festival, was originally celebrated on the fifteenth of July on the older lunar calendar. On the first day of the festival, according to Japanese belief, the souls of the dead come back to visit their homes and families for two or three days.

Although practically everyone celebrates Obon to some extent, those families who have lost someone during the current year are especially involved in the preparations and festivities. On the first evening of the festival, a small fire is lit in the yard to light the way for the souls on their way home. People without a yard will light a candle, or perhaps some wood chips by the front door of the house; in some places, fires are ignited on nearby mountains. In older times, people lit torches or lanterns all the way from the cemetery or the nearby mountains (where spirits are also thought to dwell) to their homes.

An altar in the home is decorated with various offerings of food and flowers, as well as straw figures of horses and cattle, to honor not only the family’s dead souls, but those of others who no longer have relatives in the vicinity. Offering are placed before the tablets with ancestors’ names which stand on the family altar. Sutras may be read and
Ghost appearing in a snowstorm. Artist and date unknown.
other prayers offered. In many communities, a particular dance is performed, usually with everyone joining in. The *bon-odori*, performed during evening hours, is a dance which has developed from (or in conjunction with) the medieval *nenbutsu-odori* (literally, Buddha-invocation dance), and each locale has developed its own particular set of tunes and distinctive dance steps.

On the third day of Obon, the families send their spirit relations back to the "other side" with farewell fires, often in the form of small lanterns which are allowed to float down a river or away on an outgoing tide. The fires are believed to accompany the souls back to the world of the dead and oblige them to go.

Before the advent of Buddhism in Japan, there already was a custom of inviting the spirits of ancestors back to their homes twice a year, spring and fall, always in connection with a full moon; thus the basic custom possesses the character of an ancestor-veneration festival, which has much in common with the New Year’s observance. According to Buddhist beliefs, the *Ura-Bon-Sutra* (Sanskrit, *ullam-bana*) concerns the legend of Moku-ren, a student of Buddha, who wanted to rescue his mother from the world hunger devil, Gakido. Buddha instructed him to have all the monks make hundreds of food offerings; by so doing, he would be able to lighten the pains of seven generations. For Japanese Buddhists, the legend, of course, has functioned as a lesson in filial piety, as well as suggesting the indigenous relationships among family, ancestors, and food.

As an official celebration combining all these elements, *Urabon* was apparently practiced for the first time during the fourteenth year of the reign of Empress Suiko (A.D. 606); by 733, the festival had become a customary, courtly Buddhist holiday in Japan. Nonetheless, Yanagita has pointed out that its pre-Buddhist origins are suggested by the fact that *bon* is an earlier term for a plate for offerings to the ancestors; he felt that later Buddhist theologians, and the people themselves, had rationalized the two systems into one. Although the derivation of the term *bon* remains unresolved among scholars, it is intriguing to note that the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet was called *bon*, suggesting—if the term is not a wild coincidence—an ancient and widespread origin for some of these concepts.

Konno Ensuke, a Japanese folklorist, gives numerous examples of contemporary legends illustrating these values
and using these motifs; their content, mood, and logic are very similar to the somewhat older legends in our collection, and eloquently testify to the continuity of traditional stories into the present day. In one very well-known legend, a Tokyo taxi driver picks up a young woman in front of a hospital late one night. She asks to be driven to Hamachō, and when he inquires further about the address, she gives detailed directions. When the driver approaches the right neighborhood, however, he looks into the mirror and sees that she is not there anymore. He thinks perhaps she has fallen asleep or become ill and slumped down in the seat, so he stops at a traffic signal and turns around to find that she has vanished. He feels the seat and finds it terribly cold (a sign that a ghost has been there).

The light has changed, and the other drivers behind him start to blow their horns, so he drives on. Soon he hears her voice again, and she now asks to be driven to Aoyama. Later she asks to be taken back to Hamachō, and when he arrives at the desired address, he can smell incense from a funeral, but she makes no further sound or appearance. The driver stops people who are leaving the house and describes what has happened to him. They explain to him that a young woman of their family died the previous day in that hospital, and that they have just finished the first part of her funeral. The family pays the taxi driver for his trouble, but he is still puzzled, for he wonders why the young woman wanted to go to Aoyama. They conclude that she had a lover in that neighborhood and felt the need to visit him and say farewell.

Konno notes that the incident supposedly happened in 1950, and was reported in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* by a writer, Ishihara Shintaro, whose friend had ridden in the taxi shortly afterward and heard the story directly from the driver. The folklorist immediately recognizes this narrative as a classic example of the "vanishing hitchhiker" legend written about at length by Jan Harold Brunvand, and notes the attribution of the story to "a friend of a friend," the method of proof so common in legends. But such observations would not lessen the impact of this legend upon the Japanese audience, who hear in it a number of motifs which are so common that they "ring true" to cultural values and expectations.

In fact, when we recently asked a Tokyo cabdriver whether he had carried any ghostly passengers, he answered with relief that he had not, but had heard from several of his colleagues about their unsettling adventures with disappearing
passengers. "If you’re really interested in ghosts," he volunteered, "there’s a temple near here that’s absolutely full of them!" Some scouting in the area led us eventually to Zenshōan, which indeed owns a collection of some fifty portraits of ghosts which may be viewed by the public only during August, the Obon season.

Other contemporary legends mentioned by Konno include a phantom car which drives around without a visible driver, ghosts seen on airplanes, ghosts of accidentally killed people appearing at railroad crossings in the years right after trains went into service, stories about haunted houses, accounts of deceased persons (especially soldiers during wartime) appearing to their families to bid farewell, ghosts solving mysteries for police (by indicating the location of a hidden grave, for example), children’s sighting of ghosts which cannot be seen by adults, and out-of-body experiences described as dreams and omens.

According to one story, ostensibly reported in the newspapers at the time, a Shinjuku-Enoshima express train (one of the privately owned rail lines) struck and killed two sisters at a railroad crossing in 1940. Twelve years later, a third sister was killed on the same spot. After that time in 1952, the ghosts of the three sisters appeared regularly to the engineer on particularly dark nights. The family demanded that more safety devices be erected and also called upon the company to place a proper memorial on the spot. Since these measures were carried out in 1961, no more sightings have been reported.

In the 1950s, a newly trained and graduated stewardess, Miss Morita, was on her first trip from Tokyo to Hong Kong. As she finished her work, she felt someone had called her name, and began to experience a strange sensation. She looked out the plane window and saw a pale woman’s face outside; then she heard the woman call her. The woman wore a kimono, had shoulder-length hair, and looked soaking wet. Morita thought at first that she had seen her own face reflected, but then she recognized it belonged to a former colleague, Takagawa Tomoko, who had been murdered in Tokyo. She had been planning to be on this same flight. Later, in the Hong Kong airport as the passengers deplaned, a European woman came up to Morita and asked her where the other stewardess was, the one who had come out of the stewardess’s compartment during the flight to help her with
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something. But Morita had been the only stewardess on board.

Konno notes that legends such as these are being told in Japan by people of all ages and in every walk of life: poets and prominent people as well as professionals, workers, and country folk. Yanagita would conclude, surely, that the Japanese have brought their traditions with them into the present.

In any case, legends—whether ancient, Meiji era, post-war, or contemporary—give us actual texts we can deal with and respond to. More problematic for non-Japanese people are the many customs in contemporary Japan which are important to the Japanese because they are not practiced: taboos, which are observed by avoiding dangerous actions altogether. Since the outsider never (or seldom) sees these actions, they tend to remain unclassified, unarticulated, invisible. Thus it is that even the visitor who pays close attention to the cultural signals he can see and decode may remain unaware that his bed has been placed so that his head will not be toward the north. He will seldom, if ever, see chopsticks standing upright in a bowl of rice, and will very likely never see people passing food from one pair of chopsticks to another. He may never notice that his sushi has three or five or seven different colors in the middle, but never four (if he does notice it, he will probably attribute it to the Japanese preference for odd numbers in designs).

He will virtually never see these things, unless a child (or he himself) makes a mistake and is quickly corrected, or unless he gets invited to a funeral and suddenly sees all these in action, along with others. These matters are extremely important, for—unlike overt legends or rituals—they form the silent, understood matrix of everyday assumptions. This is information which any visitor needs desperately to know but will seldom hear; more importantly, these beliefs underlie the gestures we see in the legends and in prints, plays, films, and literature. If legends are the “literature” of cultural values, then these customs are the “dance” of culture. And the language in which both are expressed carries a tremendous symbolic load.

At the typical Buddhist funeral, the corpse normally lies with its head to the north, on the kita makura, “north pillow,” a position considered therefore extremely unlucky for the living. Nearby, on the altar, stands a bowl with one (ippon
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*bashi*) or two chopsticks standing upright in the rice. In earlier times, this was probably a signal to the deceased that he or she was now eating the “food of the other side,” *yomotsu hegui*, and was no longer a part of the circle of living persons. The rice is often called *makura meshi*, “pillow rice,” because of its position next to the pillow of the departed, ready for use as a lunch on the way to *anoyo*. The actual method of cooking and preparing the rice varies, of course, by region. The customary *ippon bashi* is a signal that the food is not to be shared with the living.

In the *Kojiki*, initiation into society was often signified by sharing the same vessels; since one wants to *avoid* the society of the dead, various visual and symbolic means are employed to sharpen the distinction between utensils and food used by the living and by the dead, even while the ritual deepens the relationships between the two. While the spirit of the departed person is served in this symbolic way, the living at the funeral ceremony are fed different, but equally meaningful, items, most often in the form of sushi with four colored ingredients in the center; the phoneme for four, *shi*, also means “death,” and such food is considered appropriate only for a funeral.

When the body is prepared for the funeral, it is bathed with “reverse water,” *sakasa mizu*, where hot water is added to cold, in contrast to the normal way of preparing a bath for the living, where hot water is cooled (if desired) by the addition of cold. The body is then dressed in a kimono which is folded opposite to the normal fashion, that is, *hidari-mae*, right over left (the way women’s shirts are buttoned in Western cultures). Needless to say, these procedures are considered inappropriate for living persons because per se they suggest preparation for a funeral.

Most Japanese avoid wearing shoes or *zori* while inside a house because of the *tatami* on the floor. Of course, on practical grounds it is cleaner for the house and kinder to the woven straw mats; but this custom also has to do with funerals, where only the corpse wears shoes or sandals, along with the bearers who carry the coffin out of the house at the conclusion of the ceremony. Numerical aspects of gift giving are also affected: normally one avoids giving things in even numbers, but in addition, one never offers anyone only one cup of tea to drink or one bowl of rice to eat or a single flower, for these practices are associated with funerals and may not be a part of everyday behavior.
These avoidances suggest the sense of sympathetic magic: an action, however symbolic, may actually bring about the reality it represents. Thus, using clothes, foods, or utensils in a manner reserved for funerals may actually precipitate a funeral; people who act inappropriately thus dramatize their own omens of death. In all respects, the behavior of the living is supposed to be clearly distinguished from that of the dead.

Actions, clearly, are powerful, but the same is true for words and phrases; one does not serve someone else three slices of anything because mikire, "three slices," also means "to cut the body." One should never write three pages of anything, or four pages (shimai, which also means "final end"). One never refers to a single slice of food, for hito kire also means "to stab someone." Departing on a trip on the seventh day (nanoka tabidachi) is unlucky since it suggests the seventh-day funeral observance. Because the words for four and nine (shi, ku) also are homophones for death (shi) and torture, agony, suffering (ku), people in many parts of Japan avoid uttering the phonemes for these numbers in contexts where the meaning seems ambiguous.

It is important to remember that these ambiguities exist in conversation and not in writing, because the characters for these words are indeed quite different. Thus, the word for "comb," kushi, when written, does not contain the characters for death and suffering but, when spoken, its sound triggers complicated cultural associations which are not part of the literal meaning.

Associations surrounding the comb (kushi) are numerous and rich, and are illustrated in several of the legends in this collection. Combs seem to take on the personality or spirit of their owners and so their appearance in connection with a ghost is more than a matter of fashion or decoration. Further, in combination with deeply held ideas about the importance of hair and hairstyle, the comb suggests imagery which cannot be grasped easily by outsiders. Consider: kami, used in reference to the hair of the head (more fully, kami no ke, "uppermost hair") echoes the word kami (local god) because it is also uppermost; kushi (comb) sounds like the older term for hair (ogushi or migushi, the prefixes functioning as honorifics); ku and shi, as noted, refer homophonically to death and agony. Put all these together orally (or visually in a picture of a ghost, for example), and the result is a reverberating cluster of implications more than adequate to infuse
a narrative with an emotionally charged load of cultural meaning.

Other associations with numbers lie more in custom than homophony, but they still exist in the fact that they govern everyday behavior. For example, in Nagasaki Prefecture, it is considered a taboo for two people to clean the house at the same time; in Oita, two people should not place things into the same container at the same time; in many parts of Japan, it is considered taboo for both parents to put shoes on the same child simultaneously; in Hokkaido, two people should not sweep the same room together; in several areas, two people should not wash their feet in the same tub together. The origins of such taboos are not clear, but since they are reminiscent of funeral practices (for example, usually two people remove the bones after a cremation and put them in one container), we can deduce that the avoidance is based—as in the cases mentioned earlier—on the feeling that language and actions related to the dead must be strictly separated from the everyday business of living.

This is not to say that every Japanese person today avoids these expressions and actions because of an immediate fear of death, for many of these "taboos" have become so common that they function chiefly as indications of polite behavior—just as many Americans say, "Bless you!" after someone sneezes without necessarily believing that the soul of the sneezer was in danger of being snatched by the devil. Nonetheless, most Japanese can explain why such customs are maintained, and children who start to pass food from one set of chopsticks to another will be quickly scolded with the comment that such behavior belongs only at cremations. Similarly, because the postcremation chopsticks for passing fragments of bone are intentionally mismatched (for example, one of wood, one of bamboo), using two different kinds of hashi to eat with is abhorrent, and parents will immediately correct a child who has inadvertently chosen an unmatched pair. Parents may or may not be able to explain why children who trim their nails after dark are destined not to reach their parents' deathbed in time, but the survival of the saying surely indicates that the filial obligation to be at that deathbed continues to be stressed (not following this maxim's advice suggests that one doesn't care about one's parents).

Whether these avoidance patterns are maintained today by some people for the sake of politeness, or whether they
still carry a heavy freight of meaning is probably impossible to assess accurately, for in actuality there is a great range of personal involvement with these cultural codes. Nonetheless, their persistence, along with a consistent use of ghost and death imagery in contemporary legend, literature, and film, does indicate a cultural richness which, if appreciated, might make us more aware of that “other side of the stairway” discussed in Part I.

For one thing, it may come as a surprise to the occidental reader brought up on those grim stereotypical accounts of hara-kiri and kamikaze attacks in World War II that in Japanese culture, there is a stress on the seriousness of death and the responsibilities connected with it, accompanied by an extremely delicate avoidance of actions and words suggesting death. Have we not read that life is cheap in Asia, that the individual counts for little, and that suicide is a common expression of Asian disregard for human existence?

Joseph Campbell, writing in *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, claims that regard for life on one hand, and disregard of death on the other, provide a cultural “watershed” that distinguishes Western from Eastern myth and culture. In his view, the apparent lack of deep concern over the deaths of individuals in the Orient (reflected in part by suttee in India and a high suicide rate in Japan) grows naturally from religions which have depicted the individual as relatively unimportant in comparison to the larger issues of nature and morality. Western religions, in contrast, concentrate more on the individual, keeping close watch over personal achievements and sins, and thus encourage the idea that the life of every person is sacred and worthy of maintenance.

Like many of Campbell’s generalizations, this one sounds reasonable enough until we encounter the mixed evidence offered by everyday life and expression; for quite unlike the elite myths which dramatize the concerns of religious leaders (often phrased in moving, but monolithic, terms), the “texts” and details of everyday life exhibit the pulse of what people are actually feeling. And these texts, whatever form they may take, are best decoded according to their contexts and not by superficial comparisons with apparently similar or diverse topics made by observers.

For example, it is possible to argue that suttee in India, far from being a barbarous practice exercised by a culture which considered life cheap, was a sacrificial action dramatizing exactly the opposite: that life is the most precious thing one
Ghosts and the Japanese can give. As another instance, we now recognize that suicide is probably as common in the United States as Japan (some have suggested the northern European rate is even higher); will this lead us then to argue that the West now pays less attention to the individual than it once did?

Japanese legends, literature, and film indicate that life may be viewed as so special that a murder can be even more abhorrent, more poignant, and more laced with guilt than it ever could in the West. And a Japanese suicide—far from being an expression of worthlessness or bleak despair (though it may be these as well)—can be seen as braver, more ironic, or more aggressive than it would be for a Western person. Campbell was correct in his insistence that attitudes toward death are culture centered, but perhaps his Western bias helped him overlook the complexity and delicacy of meaning in situations where surface similarities or contrasts may imply massively different assumptions and meanings.

The Japanese are surrounded by death imagery and taboo (whether deeply or superficially perceived) on just about every level of everyday life. If it is a question of “when the living let go of the dead,” it is the Western world which seems rather strongly disposed to have the funeral and get on with life, thus in a way reducing the importance of the deceased. A single funeral is held, or perhaps in the case of some Catholics a series of masses (subscribed to by the family but performed by proxy without the necessity of family presence), a notice is placed in the paper, and then the relatives go on with their lives and let the dead rest in peace. The Japanese, by comparison, do not let go. Their ritual, their behavior, their legends, their taboos remind them constantly of those enduring mutual obligations to family, clan, and nation. And their dead do not rest: they are busy helping the family.

Ruth Benedict and others have commented fully on these matters, but even the foremost scholars have tended to refer to historical documents and formal sources for their examples; and their discussion has been mostly in the language of intellectual history and philosophy, and not in the expressive genres of everyday oral tradition. This more widespread, more common dimension is a powerful one because it engages people’s emotions, loyalties, passions, experiences, and guilt better than it reflects their conscious philosophies, a fact which modern filmmakers have grasped more quickly than others. Films like Nakagawa Nobuo’s The Living Koheiiji,
A ghost who yearns for candlelight. 
Artist: Tani Bun’itsu (1786–1818). Born the son of a doctor in the part of Edo (now Tokyo) called Nihonbashi, the artist was later adopted by the painter Tani Bunkō.
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Shindō Kaneto’s Onibaba and Kuroneko, Kinoshita Keisuke’s Yotsuya Kaidan, Mori Kazuo’s The Ghost of Oiwa, Kobayashi Masaki’s Kwaidan, and Mizoguchi Kenji’s Ugetsu Monogatari not only testify to the fact that death and ghosts are still viable subject matters in Japanese popular films, but since these films are recognized as being among the finest of Japanese filmmakers’ art, they indicate the depth of creative possibility available to serious artists who avail themselves of their culture’s riches.

The evocative power seems to rest, as it does in the orally transmitted legends, in the ambiguity of interwoven worlds; there is little or no demarcation between the worlds of the living and the dead, family obligations do not cease with death, living humans may meet ghosts anytime, and people may see visions which only later are understood to have a meaning. The fields of illusion and reality overlap and interact, and may indeed not be distinguishable, and this allows for the kind of ambiguity and simultaneity which can thrive on anxiety and guilt, which can produce delicious ironies, and which can create the most stunning of tragedies.

Moreover, in the actions of an angry ghost, feelings of guilt, selfishness, jealousy, and betrayal can be acted out in metaphorical tableau scenes which would be repressed in everyday life. That is, human emotions which do indeed exist and animate much of the culture can be dramatized and perceived vicariously through a ghost character who represents in physical form the otherwise abstract and possibly embarrassing emotion which would normally be too volatile to express in personal interaction.

The repressed guilts, anxieties, and debts—along with their emotional expressions of anger and frustration—can also be released in laughter; an excellent example is the 1984 film The Funeral, directed by Itami Jûzô, in which the oppressive obligations of a funeral are so fully and ridiculously portrayed that Japanese audiences usually collapse in laughter.

Like Kabuki and Nô plays, the legend narratives dramatize in very intensely focused fashion a stressful moment in which individual desire is juxtaposed to social or cultural demand: the passions of a particular individual (a strong desire to see a loved one, to be beautiful, to get land, to travel somewhere, to catch a lot of fish) are played off against the cultural need for harmony, ritual, order, cooperation, and conformity. In Japanese legends, it is usually the community
value which triumphs in the end: a ghost is pacified and the village can rest; a child is ritualized into the community and becomes a monk who serves the religious needs of the area; sisters killed by a train are memorialized, and their ghosts no longer haunt the engineer.

In contrast, when the proper order is not achieved, the area and all those who live there or pass through it remain subject to the anxieties of the unresolved problem; so to speak, they are haunted by unfinished business—hearing strange noises in the mountains, seeing flames in the cemetery, feeling hunger in remote places, seeing a child’s sad face in the house rafters or the heads of drowned fishermen floating on the waters. It would be difficult to imagine a more effective system of reminding people of their unresolved debts and obligations and thus of the necessity of keeping dramatically alive the emotional foundations of a culture through recurrent narrative experiences. Japanese legends are powerful and enduring because they are a concrete articulation of important and deep abstract values; like poetry, they make feelings and ideas palpable.

Suggested Reading and Related Resources


Ichirō Hori discusses goryō and the nembutsu response to it in his Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 111–27. The various terms for aspects of the soul and parts of the funeral observances are covered by Hori in the same work; as well, see Matsudaira Narimitsu, “The Concept of


The heavy use of sevens and multiples of seven, according to Inokuchi Shōji, may derive from the subdivision of the lunar month, which provides a system for rituals involving death and childbirth: an essentially twenty-eight-day cycle is divided into four parts, two coming before the full moon and two afterward. These seven-day units seem to have become the means of measuring ritually important activity: for the first seven days after a death, for example, the family members are considered impure, and each succeeding unit of seven days—until the forty-ninth day—implements the process of purification. On the forty-ninth day, the family is freed from the strict abstinences associated with the funeral. Twenty-one days after birth, a baby is brought to a Shinto shrine by its mother. Preparations for religious rituals are similarly divided into seven-day segments betokening the units of purification or abstinence associated with the particular rite. Inokuchi suggests that this seven-day system, found prominently throughout Asia, might have been the origin of the seven-day-week concept in the west (Nihon no Zokushin [Tokyo: Kö bundō,
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Hori points out that while some families may honor the fiftieth or the hundredth anniversary of a death for symbolic purposes, the spirit of the dead person is believed to retain its identity only until the thirty-third anniversary (tomuraiage, "completion of the personal memorial service"), at which point the person has become one with the ancestral kami. Unfortunately, Hori’s important works are not widely available in English; his informative Folk Religion in Japan, already cited, is an excellent example of his command of vernacular belief and expression. A number of related insights can be found in his essay, “The Appearance of Individual Self-Consciousness in Japanese Religion and Its Historical Transformations," in The Japanese Mind: Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture, edited by Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 201–27. Kishimoto Hideo’s remarks on death being a part of Japanese life are found in his essay, “Some Japanese Cultural Traits and Religions," on pp. 118–20 of the same work.

The double grave and its historical connections are discussed by Mogami Takayoshi in “The Double Grave System,” in Dorson’s Studies in Japanese Folklore, 167–80; on pp. 181–97 in the same collection, the essay by Matsudaira entitled “Tamashii” includes a number of details about funeral customs, taboos, and nuances, including the inevitable comment on chopsticks sticking upright in the rice bowl. As well, Sunada Toshiko, in her informative pamphlet on Japanese food traditions, Japanese Food and Good Old Wisdom (Tokyo: Ajinomoto Co., 1985), takes care to observe that chopsticks are never to be used in a way that can connote death or constitute a bad omen (19). Yanagita’s comments on Obon appear in Senzo no hanashi (About our ancestors), vol. 10 of his collected works, Teiho Yanagita Kunio-shū (Tokyo: Chikuma-shobo, 1985) 78–84. See also Hori’s comments on Obon in Folk Religion in Japan on pp. 138–39 and 156–60.

Among Americans, a favorite book about everyday Japanese culture is the three-volume compendium produced by various writers for the Yamaguchi family, proprietors of the Fujiya Hotel; entitled We Japanese, it gives numerous brief examples of Japanese customs, festivals, ceremonies, and manners for the instruction and edification of travelers to Japan (Miyanoshita, Japan: Fujiya Hotel, various dates). The book provides a whole page of common customs and taboos related to death, supplying visitors to the country with information on proper etiquette (which is, no doubt, a benefit for visitor and native alike).

The contemporary legends mentioned in this chapter are among the many recounted by Konno Ensuke in Nihon kaidan-shū:
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Characters and motifs from ghost legends have been among the most popular subjects for painters and printmakers. On page 204 of James Michener’s The Hokusai Sketch-Books, (Tokyo and Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1958), there is a print of Kasane, an incredibly ugly young woman who inherits a plot of land from her mother. A peasant, Yoemon, marries Kasane in order to get the land, then murders her. Her ghost haunts the area until a monk, Yūten, exorcises her. Yūten later becomes a bishop, Yoemon a monk. Michener also has a print of The Ghost of Kiku and the Priest Mikazuki on page 205, an illustration of the legend and Kabuki play about the girl who is accused of breaking one of ten porcelain plates. In the convention of depicting ghosts, Kiku is shown with no feet. The catalog for a 1985–86 art exhibition sponsored by the Spencer Museum of Art (University of Kansas) provides a splendid array of examples: Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural, edited by Stephen Addiss (New York: George Braziller, 1985) displays hundreds of ghosts, among them Kohada Koheiji (the ghost of a betrayed husband; see color plate), Oyuki (the ghost of a young mistress), Okiku (accused of breaking the precious plate), Oiwa (the disfigured victim of her husband’s greed), along with the weeping rock, and sundry demons, goblins, walking skeletons, foxes, toads and monsters.

Joseph Campbell’s monumental four-volume work, The Masks of God (New York: Viking Press, 1959–68) raises as many questions as it answers; nonetheless, the second volume (1962) provides a sweeping view of the basic religious systems of India, China, Japan, and Tibet and brings many trends and processes into focus. On pp. 475–76, he reports a conversation between a western sociologist and a Shintō priest in which the latter insists that there is no articulated ideology or theology in Shintō: “We do not have a theology,” the priest says; “we dance,” thus emphasizing that it is personal involvement with nature which is important—the sense, as Campbell puts it, of “living in gratitude and awe amid the mystery of things” (477). Impressive as the comment is, it of course artfully overlooks the extensive theology of Shintō.

The films mentioned in this chapter remain popular in Japan, as well as in American film festivals and art-film series. Most of them were included in the University of California at Berkeley’s Pacific Film Archive series in 1986, and many appear regularly on cable television in California, where the great number of Japanese and Japanese American viewers keep them in demand.