

## Buddhism and the Manners of Death in Japan: Extending Aries' *histoire de mentalité de la mort*

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In 1974, Philippe Aries' Johns Hopkins lecture at the John Hopkins University was published as *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to The Present*. Thus was introduced to the English world an avenue of research into the manners of death that Aries, then a curator in a Museum, largely helped to found. Since then, his scholarship had been recognized by the French academia enough; he now holds a professorship. We shall use this small book to seek out the possibility of an Oriental parallel.<sup>1</sup>

Aries lists four modes of death (see *infra*). Although Aries did not intend his scheme to be applicable to the East, the fact that it may raise both theoretical and methodological problems. Aries' *mentalité*, being seen as irreducible to material factors,<sup>2</sup> and therefore culturally unique, should not be that easily duplicated in the East. If it does, it may point to more general, spiritual and material factors shared by East and West in their advance from the "Middle Ages" to "the Present." Though a short summary of Aries' small book would not do him justice, it is appended below to facilitate discussion.

Aries postulated four types of death: Tamed Death, One's Own Death, Thy Death and Forbidden Death, aligned roughly, not absolutely, with certain periods since the Dark Ages.

### *Tamed Death*

This mode, common to primitive cultures, lasted roughly in Europe up to the twelfth century—further for backwaters such as the Russian peasantry. It is marked by familiarity with death. Mortality is seen as natural, part of the rhythm of things, so well accepted and anticipated that the dying knew exactly when to summon the priest himself. Over such death, excessive emotions are not shown. In the French epic, Roland the knight could thus express sorrow at leaving this world but then, when the hour drew near, wipe away the tears in

preparation for the final departure. He forgave all and asked forgiveness in return from God. Death is tamed: it is a passage, not a break; a beginning, not an end. It is only in recent times, says Aries, that Death had become "wild" and uncontrollable (pp. 1-14).

Death was however also remembered as tabooed; it pollutes. This is an ancient and primitive notion. In both Greece and Rome, the dead could not be housed among the living. Burial of this dark horror was *ex urbe*, away from the city, far from the light of life. It is only during the Middle Ages, that the Dead slowly made their way back among the living. Christianity, a religion of death when compared with Homeric love of life, sanctified certain otherwise tabooed death into the holy and the purifying.

What I call Sacred Death began with Christ's triumph over mortal death. This extended itself into the cult of the martyrs. The latter were buried *ex urbe*, but in their own city, the necropolis, the city of the dead, in North Africa. Because of the belief in the atoning blood of such saints, ("it washes away sins"), there was eventually a desire to be buried close to them, *ab sanctos*. A decisive turn of events came in the passing away of Saint Vaast in 540. Somehow, as legend goes, the body of this bishop ("it grew suddenly so heavy") refused to leave its home church. Consequently he was buried in the compound. And since the church was in the city, this is the first case of burial *in urbe*, among the living. Other bishops followed, and, naturally, the royalty themselves in their private chapels (pp. 14-18).

Other Christians wanted to die in the womb of the Mother Church. To be buried close to or in it is to be saved. However, before the advent of the proverbial church graveyard for its parishioners, burial in the medieval ages was something else. For the commoners, burial meant simply dumping the bodies in ditches in the church courtyard, the atrium. The atrium was then the large open-air enclosure before what we now deem the church-building proper. Or the bodies could be dumped as easily in ditches running along its outside walls. When space ran out, old bones were exhumed and placed into the charnel houses, sometimes made into chandeliers or candle sticks for votive lights. The poor were buried anonymously; the wealthy patrons under flagstones but even their remains were regularly exhumed; only monks might have more lasting markers. (pp. 1-22) No one thought the exhuming of the corpses an undue disturbing of the dead. Even in Louis XVI's reign the Cemetery of the Innocent was so regularly recycled. Beggars, after all, cannot be choosers. It is the 19th century (p. 75) that suddenly found that custom sacrilegious.

Tamed death was familiar. Villagers would join whatever wakes that happened to pass by. Christian Death was edifying, so they attend the service to hear the Word. Nor were children shielded from the bedside of the dying. Church fairs and peddling could take place next to

funeral processions or exhumation in the same courtyard (pp. 23-25).

### *One's Own Death*

The Renaissance brought the light of greater individuality (for the elite at least) and the Reformation the darker despair over one's salvation. Both helped to foster Death as One's Own. Death is no longer fact but crisis; dying no longer easy resignation but anxious introspection, a matter of personal concern.

The individualization of the death as crisis is reflected in the changing funeral iconography. The earlier motif, ultimately more Jewish than Hellenistic, of communal resurrection at the eschaton (end of time) was being replaced by the notion of individual judgment immediately after death. Death was no longer peaceful sleep prior to the great awakening. Death is the precarious threshold dividing Heaven and Hell, Bliss and Damnation. Instead of a Doomsday Book for the whole world, now individual Christians carried a passbook of merits to the weighting of souls. This went with the new teachings. The popular preachers were then urging moral conscience. The Reformers would question the magical passage guaranteed by the Catholic last rite (pp. 27-29). Christ and the Devil are now seen hovering over the deathbed, perhaps battling for the man's soul, although Aries prefers to see in the disinterest of a watchful God above the drama of man's last decision for Good and Evil instead. On this last decision his fate hanged. Duly, the Counter-Reformation criticized this as over-reliance on a last gamble (pp. 33-37).<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of "life flashing before one's eyes at the moment of death," is a result of this 16th century moral anxiety. Mankind was not that biographically self-conscious before (p. 38).

The dread of Death (Reformation) went with a love of Life (Renaissance). In the arts, there appeared an obsession with the worm-eaten corpse in all its Gothic gruesomeness. Huizinga had taken this to mean that there was an abnormal horror of death in those last days of the Middle Ages, but Aries took it to mean instead a new attachment to life, an awareness of its transience and a nostalgia for health and potency (pp. 39-45). Perhaps, with the Dark Ages receding, the elite living in clover had cause to miss their good life on earth. They sought to carry, as it were, over to the other side their social distinctions and individuality secured on this side. Instead of anonymous burials, now there was the concern for more lasting monuments, personalized inscriptions, permanent sites, even life-like effigies (pp. 46-52).<sup>4</sup>

### *Thy Death*

Obsession with One's Own Death cannot last forever.<sup>5</sup> With the new bourgeois family came the new concern for the Death of Intimates.

Drawing on his other study,<sup>6</sup> Aries shows how with the emergence of the warm family, the departure of beloved one became a painful affair. Seemingly interminable emotional mourning that was alien to Roland's era went unchecked. Death is no longer natural or universal; it is a particular break; no longer a village, a Church, a privately spiritual affair; it is now, a family affair, the passing of an irreplaceable Thou.

The final entrustment by the dying was not directed at God or Church; his fondest wishes were lodged with his surviving family. Not the state of his soul but the welfare of his memory was the main concern. Aries admits that the legal last will and testament sounds cold, even manipulative, but he also points to an implicit trust by the dying in the survivors who would see to his welfare (pp. 64-45). Now great attention is paid to the cemetery, which is an eighteenth century creation. It has moved away from the grim church graveyard to the sunlit civic lawn. If one is the gateway to Heaven, the other is a reminder of this Good Earth, laid out in such a way, not for the visitation of angels but by family members. The personality of the dead is preserved through mementos, designed into the gravestone, on family plots held in perpetuity, and kept up by the vogue of family outings. The emotions of longing are genuine; widows remarried much less often in faithfulness to the deceased. And on occasions, one sees macabre obsession with the memory of the dead (pp. 63-68). The Romantic movement contributed its share of Death fantasies, as Eros, as Life's fulfillment, as orgasmic break.

Aries covered some noticeable culture-religious variations among different nations; we will skip this aspect too refined for our comparative purpose. Sufficient it is to note that as part of the new civil religion of the modern secular states, there is the universal commemoration of its national heroes in every park and square - our modern saints and saviours. This completed the trek of the Dead back to being among the living, refusing to leave, reminders of this-worldly callings (pp. 68-76).

### *Forbidden Death*

The romance with Thy Death remains with us but in the advanced industrial societies, a colder rationality is surfacing. Death became once more a tabooed topic in our midst. The dying now is banned to the sanitary hospital, and the young are shielded from this fact of life. The excessive grief of Thy Death lingers on but since the society frowns on a public display of it, it has been forced to turn in upon itself, not without taking tolls on the psyche (pp. 85-103). The present situation being fluid and changing, we will also skip over this stage in our East/West comparison.<sup>7</sup>

*An Appraisal of Aries' Schema*

Aries has been and can be easily criticized for his overgeneralizations but in my opinion he only highlighted fairly convincingly in the manners of death, the change of *mentalité* from the medieval to the modern. At that level of abstraction, he cannot be selectively faulted.

In one sense, what Aries did is to historicize Durkheim's sociology as related to the function and dysfunction in the rite of passage at death. Tamed Death is when Death is perceived as *passage*, and the *rite* functions smoothly to ease the trauma for both the individual and the community. So successful (so reintegrative) is the funeral ritual that the community of the survivors feels reintegrated in the process so that "there was no excessive mourning" (i.e. no disruption of community life<sup>8</sup>). It follows, neatly, that One's Own Death occurs when the Death passage to a Beyond was overshadowed by a Renaissance nostalgia for this life, and when the traditional Catholic passage offered was questioned by the Reformers. Once the outcome of the Death passage is in doubt, the communal or integrative is superseded by the individualized, the One's Own, the critical. What Aries sees as the uncontrolled grief in Thy Death is consequent to the spiritual individuation and subsequent to the rise of the primary *gemein*, the family (over the village, guild or Church). It marks the final disintegration of the old rite of passage and the old *Gemein*, the otherworldly Chistendom. The warm family—a bourgeois institution, some say—is flawed because the new intimacy prevents effective consolation of the bereaved. Dying became unstructured, because there is no secure Beyond; mourning became accordingly anomic. As Death is an end, instead of a Beginning, what was tamed is now, or can only be, wild.

If Aries' schema has this Durkheimian rationale, then it follows that in Japan, during a similar transition from her Middle Ages to early modernity, we can expect an approximate parallel. To this possibility and whatever amendments to Aries' schema as the data might offer we will now turn.

## IN SEARCH OF A JAPANESE PARALLEL

There are many books on Japanese funeral practices but no work has yet matched the comprehensiveness and historical observations of Tamamuro Taijo's *Soshiki Bukkyō* (Funeral Buddhism).<sup>9</sup> Page numbers entered in brackets henceforth refer to this study. Other supplementary references will be noted in the body.

It is well known among Japanologists that at present the major role of Buddhism in Japanese society is its near monopoly of funeral services for the dead. From this the temples draw their major income.

This cult of the dead is also tied to the ancestral worship as shown by Robert Smith's *Ancestral Worship in Contemporary Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1974). Unfortunately that association gives the impression that Confucian filial piety or Thy Death is timeless. The sentiment might be; the custom is not.

We will dramatize below this overall observation made by Tamamuro in his Preface to the book:

What Buddhism means for the (Japanese) people is (a) performance of services for the dead, (b) curing of the sick, and (c) promises of good fortunes. In the history of Japan, Buddhism first cured the sick, then brought good fortunes, and then finally from the fifteenth century on, performed funeral services. With this last specialization, Buddhism truly became the religion of the masses (p. 1). Buddhism cured the sick (cf. Nara), promised worldly goods (cf. Heian) before it saved souls (i.e. Kamakura) and popularized funeral (in Tokugawa). Before the last, Thy Death, gave form to filial piety, Japan had her share of the Tamed Death and One's Own Death.<sup>10</sup>

### *Tamed Death*

Death was hard to tame in Japan; the *goryo* (vengeful dead) haunted her down the centuries. Even the masses for the war dead in Kamakura were conducted more out of fear than respect. In ancient Japan and as preserved within the Shintō tradition, Death is one of the most polluting if not the most polluting *tatari*. It is known as the black taboo (as blood would be the red taboo). Similar to *funestus* or French *funeste*, a cadaver is a profanation, something deadly, an ill omen (Aries, p. 14). Dirt was sin *tsumi*. Nothing so deadly can be introduced into a Shintō shrine: a death in the family would automatically involve shielding the household shrine with a piece of white cloth; at one time, the imperial palace had to be rebuilt and relocated following any death therein. What all these point to is the fact that Shintō, the native religion of life and light in Japan, could not deal with his powerful negative reality. This also meant that little wonder Buddhism had a near monopoly of rites for the dying.<sup>11</sup>

Buddhism played the role parallel to Christianity; it too helped to sanctify Death which was not possible before. In the Yayoi period, a corpse was kept in place by a rock in fear of its returning to haunt the living. In the Kofun period, the giant tombs for the rulers were located away from the living (pp. 89-93). And tools used for the excavation were polluted enough to be abandoned at the site. Nowadays, peasants returning from a wake still throw stones over their shoulders to ward off the dead who were nostalgic for home. Even when Confucianism came in, the custom of burial *extra urbem* was probably observed, because the Chinese classic on rites (*Li chi*) so specified it.<sup>12</sup> Given the fact that the



sphere of the living is then the sphere of the local *kami*'s domain, both identified with the actual village itself, it is only natural that the dead used to be abandoned outside the village. The village gate then marks the boundary between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane. There a traveler on returning home would "wash away the dust" of his journey as his fellow villagers welcome him (receive him back into the sacred community).

Not all dead were polluted; clan ancestors were probably clan gods, *ujigami*. They deserved reverence. This respect was later reinforced by Confucian filiality. The worship of the dead went back to primitive association of such ancestors with the *ubusunagami*, protective fertility spirits and both with the coming and the going of the water from the mountains marking the arrival and departure of vegetation. Thus the *obon* festival has prehistoric roots; it celebrates harvest, return of the dead, release of the hungry ghosts from hell, visitation by ancestors altogether (pp. 87-89, 146-147). The dual feeling of fear and respect toward the dead is not incompatible<sup>13</sup> nor so irreconcilable. The *ujigami* was ancestor and god of the ruling *uji* clans. The common people were attached to the various *uji* but were not admitted to worship at the clan shrines. (Ise, the imperial shrine, was not open to the masses until Tokugawa.) Only the elite had divine ancestry well commemorated; the common people had only anonymous forefathers.<sup>14</sup>

The ambivalence toward the Dead is kept even nowadays. China, Korea and Japan had a two grave system (pp. 144-145). In Japan, the polluted ashes might be kept in the first grave site while formal worship goes on at the second grave site. It is not necessary to move the remains from the first to the second; when that occurs, the polluted dead is supposed to have been purified, sanctified, or, in common parlance, *jobutsu* (become or transformed into a Buddha; this involves a ritual rooted probably in Heian ideology).

What then happened to the commoner dead, or at least that foul aspect of the physical remains? As in the Medieval Europe, they were simply abandoned. The bodies were dumped in mountains, on hillsides, or on beaches (pp. 83, 143). Many words involving "abandonment" designates graveyard. Thus it is recorded that when the Korean envoy from Pohai was expected in 883 A.D., the court had to edict all corpses be removed from the roadside on the envoy's route (p. 96).<sup>15</sup> Modern Japanese (Confucian) sentiment might find this abhorrent just as eighteenth century Frenchmen found disturbing the Cemetery of the Innocent unforgivable. Yet what seems now impious was at one time the norm and the son in the Japanese folktale who had to carry his mother to the *suteruyama*, mountain for abandoning (the aged) was not less filial than later pious sons. Nor would the parents begrudge the sons on that account. This custom of leaving the dead outside the village was not changed by the Chinese (Confucian) influence. The Taika code would

like to see all citizens (meaning, at best, the elite) buried Chinese style, with fitting stelae listing the social service of the official and in designated sites to be administered by local officials. However, except for effectively outlawing once and for all the ancient custom of accompanied burial (called loyal death) and animal sacrifice, such Confucian formality hardly touched the mainstream of Japanese burial customs (pp. 94-96). The Taming of Death and the offering of holy rites for all was left to the Buddhists.

Buddhism originally showed little interest in funerals. Death being part of the cycle of rebirth, it was considered a profane matter, or at least a cold fact. When the Buddha was about to pass away, his instruction was to cremate his body, and to scatter his ashes, following the Indian custom. Death was seen in terms of the dispersal of the five Great Elements, something the knowledgeable ones would even welcome as one form of release. Circumstances however changed that, and, not unlike the Crucifixion, the Buddha's cremation became the first of the Holy Deaths. Disobeying the Buddha and appeasing the princes that came for some mementoes of the saint, the disciples decided to honour the relics (the ashes, bones) by building *stūpas* (the forerunner of the pagoda) which are half-domes for royal burials. Soon other *stūpas* followed commemorating the passing of Kaśyapa, an *arhant* as well as others of the Buddha's disciples. Of course, not every death was seen as a "holy death"; only the liberated deserved such honour. However, as a natural extension of this practice the granting of this sanctity reached more and more believers until in Japan all Japanese would be counted as *hotoke* at death (Buddhas: the term, uniquely Japanese, might go back to the word *hotoki*, a vessel for offerings).

Now it is commonly said that the divinization of ancestors went back to timeless past in Japan. Ideologically this is true. The human-divine continuum in Japan assumes fluidity between man and *kami* (gods) and it would only be a mere extension of that into a blurring of man and *hotoke*. However, again, we must insist that at first not all men became Buddhas at death; that universal Buddhahood requires time to be actualized. For example, the presently ubiquitous *sutoba* (the wooded *stūpa* marker on Japanese graves) has a beginning in time; its growth in popularity can be traced. At one time, such holy makers was preserved only for an elite.

To die a Buddha was no easy achievement. To die even properly as a Buddhist would takes some doing. The first case of a genuinely Buddhist burial in Japan is Dōchō's. Dōchō who died in 700 AD instructed that his body be cremated according to the Indian practice. This is 160 years after Buddhism entered Japan (p. 99). Dōchō was a student of the pilgrim Hsüan-tsang who went to India, bringing back, among other things, this custom of death by fire that was contrary to native Chinese practices.<sup>16</sup> Dōchō introduced fairly early cremation to Japan.



Japan also accepted it far more readily than China would.

It is not clear whether Dōchō's ashes were located, on site, removed to the second graveyard, or actually deposited in his temple *in urbe*. Given the Shintō taboo about death and the custom not to have cremation done near the living, it is doubtful that the cremation was carried out inside the temple. From later examples, it is doubtful also whether Dōchō, as the holy dead, could be housed so early in the main building. Even Kūkai's famous mummified body, a sign of a saint who would not die, was enshrined in a sealed cave away from the main temple. Still, it would be natural to honour the memory of eminent monks somewhere in the community. If it happened Christian monasteries, it probably happened here also.

What is telling is that soon after this renowned monk was so cremated, the status and prestige of that ritual/passage was such that in 703, 707, 721 and 748, the Japanese emperors followed Dōchō's footsteps in adopting this new mode of death (pp. 100, 105-108). Since the *tenno* was supposed to be a descendent of the Sun-goddess, he would be deemed a *kami* in death as he was so already in life. If that continuity is assumed for his Buddhistic standing, then he would have died a *hotoke*. Though the germ of that now familiar passage might be there already, I really doubt whether the cultic ramifications existed then. This is because, as we know, the inscriptions to donated statues in Japan at the time and the practice to have *sūtras* chanted on the dead's behalf (and on behalf of shrine *kami*) assumed that the dead were far from being liberated. They still required additional merits to attain that end. I do not want to overstress this, since the same still applies today to the departed.

Once the imperial house co-opted the monk's mode of death, it was not long after that the aristocracy followed suit. Smoke from these noble deaths rose from hills outside Kyoto. This we know from reading such works as the *Genji monogatari*. The Genjis had their own clan burial ground at a certain mountain outside the capital, and only they could be buried therein—not even spouses who married into the clan. This affirms the custom of burial or cremation *ex urbe*. It also alerts us to the fact that since only noble families owned such mountains, men without property (the peasant majority) could not claim any permanent site for their ancestral burial; they had a stick as marker at best. Having no land to their name, they had to use "the commons land" such as hillsides. So the commoner died anonymously and became at best anonymous fertility *kami* honoured anonymously by the surnameless village community.

The monopolizing of sacred death by the elite was very natural. As Aries noted in his book (p. 11), in the legend of King Arthur, only the clerics—especially the monks—received the supreme unction; the knights of the Round Table received the *corpus christi* at death. The monks deserved it because they led an angelic life unlike sentient mortals; the

knights because they had pledged themselves to Christ. The commoner might be a Christian, but he could not have received the supreme unction. There being so many of him, he would not be so well served at his deathbed—not until the popular preacher volunteered to come down to his level. So similarly, until and unless Japanese Buddhist monks moved out of their cloisters and willingly administered to the people, the peasants would be wrapping the corpse and bundling it off to hills without the fanfare of Buddhist rites and homilies. Generally speaking that age of popular *hijiri* and mendicant preachers came only in late Heian.

That monks were honoured at death by stūpas was current already in fifth century China. A yogin like Hui-shih might not have been cremated, but a small pagoda would commemorate him. If so, Dōchō should also have one to his name. It seems though that the stūpa erected for such elite dead stayed at the burial site. In the *shoji engishu* (Legends of the Various Temples), it is recorded that a son of the Fujiwara clan (he died in 714 AD) filially dug up the bones of his father and carried them to a ridge overlooking the valley. There he reburied them with a three story stūpa (pp. 150-152). This is but a decade or so after Dōchō's death. It seems that cremation did not occur originally and that the dead were buried in the hills; the son, a pious Buddhist convert, now relocates the bones on a choice site within view. That is as far as the dead could return. However, in 921 AD, the urn of the ashes of a nobleman-man, previously cremated, was deposited in a *shijiya* or "private temple." The monk Renshu became the overseer of this "private chapel," probably chanting *sūtras* too on the soul's behalf. Soon after, says Tamamuro, the practice to deposit the ashes, once considered polluting, in temples began (pp. 104-105). Because the *shijiya* may serve as a kind of Buddhist *ujidera* and the temple might be situated among the living, this change, though not as dramatic as St. Vaast's, marks the return of the Dead to being among the survivors. Now it was also a custom to build the *Nijugo-sammeito*, Hall of the Twenty-Five Trances, at grave sites specifically for the soul's welfare. The word *sammei* (Sanskrit *samādhi*) is now a euphemism for graveyard. Though both the *shijiya* and the *Nijugo-sammeito* might originally be located outside the city, both could and historically did seem to become habitats. The overseer monks lived there and perhaps whatever supportive personnel (farmhands, etc.) close by. Either because the city expanded into the hillside, or as the community around these private temples grew, the encroachment of the living into the dead or *vice versa* became an actuality. Death had been sanctified and reclaimed.

Buddhism does not have the Papal doctrine of salvation through the Church alone. (The Church is the Body of Christ, but the Sangha is a separate jewel from that of the Buddha.) Therefore, no exact parallel to the desire to be buried *ab sanctos* exists. However, Buddhism did

supply to Japan the magical rite of passage to Buddhahood at (or some time after) death. This was fueled in the Heian period by the doctrine of *hongaku*, a priori enlightenment for all beings. We are all Buddhas at heart; what is needed is an evoking of that reality (*jōbutsu*, a term mentioned earlier). As Buddhism is a universal religion, there would be built into it the impulse to grant such rites to all, when it is physically and/or temperamentally possible. In the Heian period, the ritual transition between humanity and *hotoke* status was afforded to a few and was made possible by special halls in Heian temples. The Tendai school provided the Hokke or Lotus Hall which was focal to Tendai mysteries. To a person, the Japanese emperors found their eternal rest there (pp. 100-102, 105-108). The aristocracy availed themselves to this or else the Jogyo Hall. The latter is for "Perpetual Practice," a meditative mode directed at the Buddha Amitābha or Amida of the Western Pure Land (p. 703). It was a Heian fashion among the nobility to chant Hokke (the *Lotus Sutra*) in the morning and the name of Amida (*nembutsu*) at night. However, increasingly with the growing despair about this world, the latter gained ascendancy because it promised a paradise beyond, a sentiment more transcendental than the more immanent Lotus piety. From this the cult of *ōjō* (birth in Pure Land) would take its cue. The Shingon school would not be outdone. It offered its own Kōmyō (Light) rites (pp. 108-112). In the thirteenth century, a monk would open up eligibility to its rite to any distant donor even.

Meanwhile, plebeian deaths went uncelebrated. A traveler, told in the *Nihon Ryōiki*, dreamt of a suffering ghost; it turns out to be a skull lying close by pained by bamboo sprouting through its eye sockets. However, even as the elite memory might be kept alive more formally, the elite's polluted remains were treated probably more lightly than we would think. In Sung China, the depositing of the dead at temples was current too. Ssu-ma Kuang, a Neo-Confucian who decried the barbaric practice of cremation (because this is harming the body put in our charge), noted:

Nowadays it is common practice to have the funeral service performed in the house of the monks, with no attempt to keep an eye on the physical remains.... Proper burial would not take place for years. Meanwhile, the urns might be broken into by thieves or thrown out by the monks themselves.

It is not that the monks were irreverent or careless. To the Confucian who loved this life and this body, the remains should indeed be properly kept, but to the Buddhist (like to the medieval Christian) who looked to a Life of the Spirit beyond, the body is ultimately inconsequential. Buddha/God can keep count of the dead without it.

*One's Own Death*

At the end of the Heian period, Japan experienced what would correspond to the spiritual crisis of late medieval Europe. 1152 was judged to be the dawning of the last age, *mappō* (to last 10,000 years though) and there was much anxiety about one's eligibility for salvation in this corrupted era. One's Own Death became men's overriding concern, and impatience about the immediate state of the soul a virtue.

Symptomatic of that anxiety and a decisive Either/Or is Genshin's *Ōjōyōshū* (*Essentials for Birth in Pure Land*), a best seller in late Heian that would trigger off the Kamakura "Reformation" headed by Hōnen's Pure Land sect (*Jōdōshū*). Typical of the *Ōjōyōshū* popular preaching is the polarization of potions at Death. The Buddhist had long believed in the six paths of rebirth, topped by leisurely gods and bounded below by Yama's halls. Such karmic fates are a basic staple of the *Nihon Ryōiki*'s morality plays. The *Ōjōyōshū*, however, belongs to a slightly different genre, the *ōjōden* (*Legends of Birth in Pure Land*).<sup>17</sup> It set up the opposition between Hell and Pure Land, damnation and deliverance. Although the *Ōjōyōshū* covers the traditional six paths in full, it is best remembered for its opening scary depiction of the various hells. Similar to the last decision for Christ or the Devil, the dying man now has to walk the strait (the canonical metaphor is "white") path.

Genshin followed the Tendai teaching. The death rite in the *Ōjōyōshū* is basically that of the *Nijūgo-sammei* of the Jōgyō Hall (pp. 113, 116). The dying man faces West, the direction of Amida's Pure Land, before a statue of the Buddha or a painting of that kingdom of bliss. A five-colored string is used to link the last breath of the dying man to the statue or the painting, symbolizing thereby his birth in that Pure Realm. The rite was in use before, but it grew in popularity. Also, what is new in Genshin's society for Buddha-name-chanting (*nembutsukai*) is his recruitment of commoners. The charter states that all the local members should attend the death of any member. The members then bear witness and chant in unison Amida's name as a send-off for a fellowman. Before, the Pure Land of the Heian aristocracy was more an extension of this world, a resort like their mountain retreats (*yama-zato*) laid out as a Pure Land (cf. the phoenix hall of the *Byōdōin*). The favorite iconic theme was the visitation by Amida, *raigō*. Now in true Pure Land piety, the preference went to the scene of *ōjō*, the willing departure from this polluted world to the Pure beyond.<sup>18</sup>

The Heian aesthetics had always known transience, *mujō*. But now despair about this world and fear of damnation raged enough to bring forth or to the forefront, from the late tenth century on, the flowering of Hell Pictures (*jigokue*) (p. 170),<sup>19</sup> with their share of worm-eaten corpses. The theme is ancient; the Buddha made rotting flesh the subject of sermons and meditations. But the gruesomeness of it is new,

more so with the crudities of popular art.<sup>20</sup> One is hard pressed to see in them the nostalgia for life (Aries' reading); there is more (Huizinga's stress on) obsession with death and judgment.

Such a bleak situation makes for radical decision. And it is Honen, founder of the Buddhist Reformation, who made "decision" the criterion of faith itself. His major work is on this very topic, *Senchakushū*. It is believed by this sect that birth in Pure Land is secured at that last moment through ten recitations of Amida's name.<sup>21</sup> Though the recitation is ritualistic (unlike the stress on faith by Shinran), the stress on the sincere mind and the elimination of surrogate chanting (by paid monks for example) helped to personalize this rite of passage.

Hōnen derived his radical teaching from the Chinese Pure Land master Shan-tao (Zendō) who has this to say about the proper way to die. In a piece, popular in Sung, attributed to Shan-tao, a certain inquirer thanks his master:

You, sir, have opened my eyes to the pious practice of chanting the name of the Buddha as the means to gaining birth in Pure Land beyond. Yet even as I understand the principle thereof, I fear that my mind might waver as I near my hour of death in my sickness. My family might disrupt my proper state of mind and I might lose hold of that means to birth (in Pure Land).

How, he asks, may one die properly to achieve the entrance to Pure Land? The answer focuses on the last minute attentiveness:

Let drop both mind and body. Arouse no further attachment to life itself. Though beset by ill, do not weight its relative severity. Only be singlemindedly open to the reality of Death itself. Instruct the family members, nurses or visitors to chant the Buddha's name and not to talk about things at hand or family matters. They need not comfort the dying with pleasantries for such are futile words in the face of Death. As illness grows more heavy and death is near, instruct family and relatives not to come forward in tearful laments. That indeed might disrupt the dying man's composure and proper (contemplative) state of mind. Rather they should look forward to (the Pure Land of) Amitābha, chant aloud his name in praise for the dying man's sake. Do that until he breathes his last. Then they might give vent to their emotions (i.e. cry) though it is better that some informed soul takes the occasion to explain the true import of the faith.

This document is important. It shows the dovetailing between Tamed Death and One's Own Death, between right ritual and right faith. With imagination, we can see why Roland died the way he did, with no tears; it is because it is his duty to prepare himself for the beyond in proper



composure and with no attachment to this vale of tears of a world<sup>22</sup> Through this we also see why Death can become anxious (One's Own) under stress. When the sacerdotal system that was Heian Buddhism collapsed in the age of *mappō* (which invalidated priestly prerogatives), personal decision became weightier. So would the import of the "last thought." Then a person, virtuous all his life, might still miss Heaven because of a last minute doubt, distractions, attachment to this life, etc. By making *nembutsu* for, *ōjō* imperative, Hōnen changed a one-time Tendai ritualistic Tamed Death into an anxious One's Own Death.<sup>23</sup> Now Aries went a bit too far to date thereby the genesis of "life flashing before one's eyes at death" to the 16th century. Personal conscience existed, if not etched as deeply or widely, in the records before. Certainly in the East! Karma has always been biographically defined and recollection of one's deeds in one's life time is found in common karmic legends: a butcher would at his deathbed supposedly see all the animals he had slain coming after him.

The discovery of One's Own Death and the concern thereby to make the means to *ōjō* available to all men unleashed the Kamakura Reformation, by the end of which everybody proverbially would be saved. However, in this recruitment of all men into deliverance, at work were also factors other than just the spiritual. The late Heian period saw the rise of the warrior, the *samurai*, the new rulers in the Kamakura era. Now, whereas the Heian nobility owned private mountains to bury their own, the warriors who used to be their clerks, did not. They began burials now in temple graveyards. (Temples had wrestled land rights from the aristocracy before this time.) The Hōjōs, for example, had their dead buried in their Toseiji in Kamakura (p. 148). Generally, warriors used more diversified, local, mostly Zen temples, instead of the old Hokke or Jōgyō Halls of the Kyoto schools. The warriors also introduced other innovations that changed the funeral practice. The local temples of the *myōshū* helped the proliferation of temple graveyards. Also, a portable Buddhist shrine they carried into battle led to the miniaturization of this sacred building until it became the present household *butsudān* in which the ancestral *ihai* namesheet is kept. The *ihai* itself went back to the Chinese wooden ancestral tablet, *mokuhai*, also a Zen and *samurai* introduction.<sup>24</sup> These effectively moved the Dead back not just into the city but into the homes themselves.

Something also happened to the status of the common dead when Kamakura Buddhism enfranchised the lowly, the ignorant, the most sinful and the most underprivileged. Calling itself the "easy path," the Pure Land school for example drew in emperors as well as peasants, offering to both alike *ōjō* to Pure Land. It means that the holy rites were no longer affordable only by emperors and the aristocracy; every man could and should have it. *Ōjō* became henceforth a synonym, a euphorism for death. With the breakdown of the lay/monk distinction - especially in



Shinshū - the former co-opted the prerogatives once limited to the latter. A very telling remark from a Kyoto gazetteer is cited by Tamamuro:

People (nowadays) buried and cremated are referred to as *obo*, but this term was originally intended for the tonsured monks and them only. It was the custom in our country to call the shorn monks *obo*. Recently however the term is used to refer to anyone buried in [what used to be] the monks' cemetery, so much so that now the unshorn layman is called also [posthumously] *obo*. (pp. 118-119)

At one time, only monks could be buried in the temple compound, because, having left home, their families could no longer claim their bodies or prepare for their disposal. However, in the Yōshū district now, says the observer, the layman was also so buried in temple plots—and as monks, that is, given the status previously reserved for the holy dead. I suspect this means receiving the Dharma-name.

Before Man is born equal (Rousseau's dream), Man first must die equal. The Reformation, West and East, made Death, theoretically the great equalizer, the truthful ritual equality. All sinners are saved; all evil men achieved *ōjō*, and by one single, simple means. Indeed, in the early *Ōjōden*, only monks and nobles were recorded as having attained birth in Pure Land; in the later legends, the man of street was finding his admission to paradise.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile though, custom died hard. Dead bodies still ended up outside Kyoto, yes, even in the second story of its famous Western gate, the Rashomon.<sup>26</sup>

### *Thy Death*

Modern Japanese funeral customs really began with Tokugawa. In 842, Kyoto officials had trouble with what to do with 5,500 such bodies (p. 96). In 1181, a similar problem surrounded 43,000 who had starved to death. However, the Pure Land sect now generously took care of them, saving souls in more than a nominal way (p. 119). Still, in 1279, a dozen youths died of plague and were similarly left in the fields (p. 97). (This might have involved medical consideration though.) However, says Tamamuro, as late as the early part of the fourteenth century, bodies were still abandoned in hills to be gnawed away by dogs and horses (p. 97). Filial piety needs certain material incentive to become "prim and proper." By the 15th century, the old abandoning of corpses became a barbaric practice of a forgotten past.

Several incidental factors aided the rise of the "proper" burial. First, the new religions of the Reformers abandoned the previous Heian Buddhist sale on this-worldly magical rites. It was a step in the right, rational, direction, but it also meant a loss in the traditional temple

revenue. Partly to fill the coffers, the temples now had to offer rites for the soul to the Beyond. Japan now has the most elaborate of memorial services for ancestors, lasting for up to 33 years (pp. 171-172). That the monks became more and more embroiled in this area of expertise has been shown by Tamamuro with reference to the Sōtō and Rinzai school; for example, monks taking care of such matters soon outnumbered the original emphasis on Zen meditation training (pp. 128-130).

Something else happened to the structure of the temple community during the Kamakura period. When the old manorial (*shōen*) system collapsed in the era of wars, that sizeable manor unit broke up into the smaller and autonomous village confederates known as *gō*, *shō*. These were headed by the *myōshu*, local warriors that aligned themselves to the new warlords. The Heian Buddhist schools used to build their economic basis on the old manors, but the spread of the new Kamakura sects is by way of these village confederates. Shinshū (Pure Land True Sect) for example spread by converting the local lords of these units. Once so converted, their village followers would be converted en masse. This seems to be the standard pattern; the gospel of personal salvation did not mean and did not have to mean individual conversions. (That came later, not unlike the spread of Protestant faith by regional units.) Within 200 years after the Ōnin war, the religious map of Japan was largely rewritten. From then on Japan was "parished" out by these new units to different sects.<sup>27</sup> The Tokugawa *bakufu* added the finishing touch to it by enforcing such temple *danka* affiliation by law, thus eliminating any unforeseen overlap, divided loyalty or unaffiliated temples left over from the warring period. By skillful means, Shingon had better hold of its old *shōen* loyalties than Tendai (partly absorbed by Nichirenshū) would. It offered the esoteric Kōmyō rite for the dead; this spread widely in the 13th century (pp. 109-110).<sup>28</sup>

Temple graveyard burial, once used by warriors, is now being offered to all temple members. By law, only *danka* members could be buried within the *dankadera* cemetery.<sup>29</sup> The Tokugawa regime was eager to make Confucianism normative for the behaviour of its subjects, so it aided the popularization of Buddhist services for ancestors. The census' offering of surnames to all Japanese might have indirectly created greater lineage consciousness.

In East as in West, private property and legal inheritance seems to go with the consolidation of the family or the household as the psychologically warm and legally tight unit. Private property and with it, family burial lots, did not come easy. During the Kamakura period following the collapse of the *shōen*-system, the peasant class began to own their tools, and for the better-off, even some animals and some land. These could then be passed down to the descendents. In Japan, primogeniture being the rule, the first son inherited whatever land leases the family might have. A symbol of his authority is the *butsudan*, the

Buddhist family shrine so entrusted to him. The main house, *honke*, keeps it. As the *honbakusho* became free yeoman in the course of the Edo reign, the *ie* became the basic unit. In this *ie* or household system (a subdivision coming from out of the *go* or *sho*), the ancestral list or *ihai* is kept in a drawer under the Buddha statue. As the first son is the beneficiary to ancestral property, we can be sure that whatever filial duty there already was is further reinforced by the patriarch's last will. These psychological and material factors created the "warm family."<sup>10</sup> It is no accident that all commoners' graves and their ancestral *ihai* genealogy (as used by Robert Smith) did not go back beyond Tokugawa.

Thus, it is only in the Tokugawa era that Buddhist funerals, temple burials and ancestral worship at home became realizable on a general scale. Japan still lives under that shadow, although signs of Forbidden Death are also appearing in this advanced industrial society. For our purpose, we will not go further into the more recent developments, except perhaps to note this: that it is in the Meiji period, in the new cities with a population uprooted from the village, that the government also created the beautiful civic lawns; Tokyo's suburban Tamaekoen is such a transectarian cemetery park. The honouring of national heroes at parks also became a vogue. Perhaps the Buddha statue made out of the war dead is the most complicated landmark in its *histoire de mentalité de la morte*.

## CONCLUSION

The coincidence of the manners of death East and West or the applicability of Aries' typologies to Japan is due, ultimately, to similar spiritual tensions and associated social changes in both cultures. The tabooed death is universal but a higher religion that looks beyond this worldly life and transcends death helps to tame this horror. The Church and the Buddhist *sangha* provided the necessary refuge, the ease of passage to the Beyond, in the medieval era. However, the crisis-faiths of their Reformation brought to focus once more the trauma of judgment or deliverance at Death. This personalized Death. However, as men turned away from the Heavens to the limited but legitimate joys of this life, as men celebrated the warmer human ties afforded by the sheltered and sheltering family/household, men also learned, in one sense, to put egoistic Death behind and relish or suffer (or both) this life and this death on earth. Like it or not, we inherited this recent tradition.

One pays a certain price for the modern mode of Death and at a time when Death is Forbidden once more, not because of taboo but because of certain seeming inhumanity and calculated indifference in the highly industrialized, overly atomistic, society, it is well to remember, perhaps to relive and reconstruct, saner Deaths that went before. Hopefully the above grand overview of an Oriental parallel might teach

us to *live differently* by knowing how it was possible to *die differently*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Program in Religious Studies. An earlier draft of this paper was read at the national conference of the American Academy of Religion at New Orleans in 1978. A revised version was prepared for a 1981 conference on Buddhism in Japanese Civilization: Humanistic Inquires, supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

More recently, a translation has been made of Aries' more detailed, original study in French. However he might be accused of overgeneralizations in his small book, his specific discovery of data and skillful interpretations thereof in his larger work stand well on their own. However, for our purpose, we will use only the shorter book. One cannot after all expect exact Buddhist counterparts to specific Christian motifs he uncovered; one can only stay with the broader outlines. Thus the essay is offered, not as any definitive history of Death in Japanese History—a task that would require years of work and volumes to fill—but, as a test of Aries' theory and method when applied to the rich data of Japanese funeral practices.

<sup>2</sup> In this, he is like his French contemporary Foucault who capitalizes on "epistémé," in a similar oblique critique of modern rational individualism.

<sup>3</sup> In his larger book, Aries notes how the idea of a second chance in the Purgatory became popular not before but during the 16th century.

<sup>4</sup> Since Aries noted how Rome too had such practices at one time, one must attribute the rebirth of individuality somewhat to the economic recovery then.

<sup>5</sup> The late medieval crisis can no more sustain itself than the Post-War existentialist despair over the demise of *Dasein*.

<sup>6</sup> *Centuries of Childhood* (English trans.; New York: Knopf, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Not because it is inappropriate; there are some very interesting studies being done on the New Japan's handling of the aged parents.

<sup>8</sup> Whatever excessive mourning can be duly institutionalized; thus the Chinese would have professional wailers; but the wake (esp. the Irish one) is typically one of celebration of life.

<sup>9</sup> TAMAMURO Taijo, *Soshiki Bukkyō* (Funeral Buddhism) Tokyo: Ōhōrin, 1964. Tamamuro, an historian of Buddhism, had written earlier *Soshiki hōyō no shakaishiteki kōsatsu* with Nihon shūkyōshi kenkyūsho (no date or other information noted in the bibliography of said book), a sociological investigation into funeral customs.

<sup>10</sup> I shall follow Aries in distinguishing the timeless physical family from the psychologically warm family; only the latter secures Thy Death.

- <sup>11</sup> Yoshida sect Shintō in Tokugawa did co-opt funeral services in part to combat that monopoly. See Tamamuro, pp. 275-285.
- <sup>12</sup> This I came across in the *Po-hu-t'ung*. In the T'ai-p'ing (Taoist) reign of Wei T'ai-wu, all corpses in the capitol had to be exhumed and reburied *ex urbe*. Compare Classical mode in "Death...." in the *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics* ed. John Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner & Son, 1962), pp. 411-511.
- <sup>13</sup> One usually associates fear with the more primitive reaction, as evident in African religion, but Confucian sentiments are strong; traditionalist Far Eastern scholars would insist that reverence is more primary.
- <sup>14</sup> This divine genealogy is told in the *Nihongi*. The pattern is similar to the Greeks whose noble houses also claimed always divine patrimony. Only the nobles had the civic rights to worship the city god; the plebeians did not. See also similar pattern in Egypt where the Pharaoh was buried like a god (he *was* a god) while his subjects, called his "cattle," only had primitive burial (with a stone on the corpse too). See Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1948). I doubt whether a dead slave in ancient Japan was referred ever as *kami*, since *kami* (though intoned differently) is known to stand for social superiors (*uesama*).
- <sup>15</sup> See list on p. 101 in Takeda Chōshū, *Sosen sūhai*, (Kyoto: Heirakuji, 1961).
- <sup>16</sup> From the *Sandai jitsuroku*.
- <sup>17</sup> When Neo-Confucianists in Sung sought to augment the same rational program in order to trim the barbaric Buddhist cremations, they left Ming and Ch'ing local officials with many unclaimed dead from poor classes left to rot.
- <sup>18</sup> It would appear that Buddhists in China did not adopt cremation that early. It became popular after the 10th century. In the fifth century, they were still customarily interred, following the Confucian norm. Even the Ch'an legend of Bodhidharma, a late one, gave him a coffin. It seems that Pai-chang who wrote the Zen monastic rules still only complained against the standard lay burials within monks' compound.
- <sup>19</sup> Cited in Wen Chih-t'ai, *Chung-kuo chuang-li* (Chinese Funeral Customs), a thin book from PRC (Hua-hsueh yen-chiao she; n. p.; n. d.) pp. 36-38. On cremation in China, see pp. 27-40. Ssu-ma Kuang might be referring to the practice to have ashes scattered into ponds or bones dissolved in acid baths. Economy dictated this as it dictated the exhuming of bones from Church atriums—to make space for more.
- <sup>20</sup> For an overview, see *Ōjōden no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kōten isan no kai, 1968).
- <sup>21</sup> Characterization above taken from well-known sources: Ienaga Saburō's judgment on Heian Buddhism, art historians' study of Pure Land paintings etc. that I would not need to specify.

- <sup>22</sup> The intentional contrast of Hell and Pure Land was already used by Shan-tao in China with great effect. More on the popularization of Hell pictures, see Nishikō Gison, "Jigokue no ryōkō nituite," *Ryōgoku daigaku Bukkyō shigaku ronshū* (1935).
- <sup>23</sup> Heian had some Hell Screens, but they were more sublime than even bizarre, in the tradition of Shingon mysteries.
- <sup>24</sup> Observations drawn from personal study of the *Nembutsu hongan sanchakushū* and prior scholarship on the Pure Land school in general. The "ten recitations at death" is not new; it is canonical. The popularization of decision is.
- <sup>25</sup> A forgery, but quite in keeping with Shan-tao's teaching.
- <sup>26</sup> From my full translation of the piece from the *Lung-shu ching t'u-wen* (T. 41, p. 287bc) and the same, with slight variance, in the *Le-pang wen-lu* (T. 47, p. 312ab).
- <sup>27</sup> Even if Roland cried his head off, pious recorders censored that relapse; all *Ōjōden* depict only peaceful departures. Thus this caution: Aries' scheme works in part because of the pious nature of the materials he was using. Identical genre in our time would depict Tamed Death still. One must then assess the representative nature of the records of death *vis a vis* the temperament of the era.
- <sup>28</sup> Note how "deathbed salvation" was not unknown before. Early Christianity and early Buddhism had accepted this.
- <sup>29</sup> I am thankful to Winston Davis for this reminder. His attention to the infrastructure is spelled out in "Toward Modernity: A Developmental Typology of Popular Religious Affiliations in Japan," *Cornell University East Asian Papers*, 12 (1977).
- <sup>30</sup> Nowadays, the lengthier that name, the more costly it would be to the surviving family. One expects the *sutoba* to go up along with it.
- <sup>31</sup> See *Ōjōden no kenkyū* cited.
- <sup>32</sup> Told in the *Konjakumonogatari* (comp. 1077).
- <sup>33</sup> See brief contrast in my "After the Reformation: Post-Kamakura Buddhism," *Japanese Journal of Buddhist Studies* 5, no. 4 (1978), pp. 258-284.
- <sup>34</sup> In 1264, the monk Hongaku popularized this by making it available to not just monks and nuns, or just those living nearby, but anyone who cared to register with some donation. This is part of the late Heian and Kamakura attempt on the part sometimes of improvised temples to rebuild a popular basis through such sales of *mamori* etc. (cf. Ise in Edo.) Such *ke-en* need involve no actual deposit of ashes in the home temple.
- <sup>35</sup> The *danka* system was created by Tokugawa in part for census and tax revenue purposes; henceforth the temple kept the record of the citizens and their land holdings; also to combat Christian heretics and to stop sectarian conflicts.



- <sup>36</sup> It seems silly to say that the “warm Japanese family” began only in Tokugawa when Confucianism had always insisted on the *innateninjo* (human feelings) fostered at home. However, following Aries’ 1962 book, one must stress the importance of a *physicalie* for any intimacy of the household members. Manor serfs who lived in communal male and female lodges in Heian with no real private life or claim to the life and livelihood of their offsprings do not lead “warm family lives.”