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Funeral Buddhism: A Religion in Crisis

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

In 1963 a Japanese scholar named Tamamuro Taijo coined the term “Funeral Buddhism” that came to be used to describe Buddhism in Japan as the religion engaged in funerary rites and removed from the spiritual needs of people. This essay attempts to look at that phenomenon in detail and answer the question whether, as the negative title would suggest, modern-day Buddhism in Japan is in trouble. From the historical perspective, the essay traces the origins of Funeral Buddhism and the beginning of the decline of the religion back to the policies of the Tokugawa government undertaken in the 17th century as means to fight the threat of Christianity. From the contemporary perspective, the modern Funeral Buddhism is analyzed through the background presence the religion has in the lives of the Japanese people. Finally, the essay presents the concerns that threaten the future of Buddhism in Japan.

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Introduction

Before I went on my exchange year in Japan to further develop my Japanese language skills and get a sense of what the real Land of the Rising Sun is like, I had made a list of places I wanted to go to and things I wanted to experience in the nine months I would be staying in the country that had so long fascinated me. One of the absolute musts was a visit to Mt. Koya, the center of Shingon Buddhism, and its famous millennium old graveyard where countless historical figures found their resting place. Even just the photographs that I saw prior to going to Japan bewitched me, and the actual visit exceeded all my expectations. It would be a fair assumption to say that many visitors to Japan, like me, turn their attention to famous Buddhists temples and Shinto shrines as those are vivid representatives of cultural heritage of the country which are able to attract cash paying tourists. Yet even a casual visitor would soon notice the abundance of temples and shrines, which might pale in grandiose in comparison to their famous counterparts but nevertheless seem to be a very persistent part of the landscape. This surely would lead the visitor to assume that religion plays a major part in the everyday life of Japanese people. By seeing the magnificent Buddhist temples, some of which have been around for more than a millennia, one would presume the respect felt by the laypeople towards this senior world-famous religion.

However, a surprising discovery, that in turn was the inspiration for this essay, awaited me as I learned more about Buddhism. My impression of religions was that of guidances for people to live their lives in the best ways possible. On the contrary, I was presented with the picture of modern-day Japanese Buddhism being centered around death rituals, with most people only having contact with the religion on the occasion of funerals and the priests being financially dependent on the ceremonies for the dead. The unexpected revelation both astonished me and sparked my interest in the phenomenon where one of the major world religions has come to be referred in Japan by the negative term of “Funeral Buddhism”.

Thus the question arises, is modern-day Japanese Buddhism then in trouble? This essay will attempt to answer the question by addressing both the historical background of the religion in Japan as well as the contemporary situation. The first chapter will examine the state of religion in modern Japan. The following chapter will briefly go over the 1400 years of history of Japanese Buddhism and will look at the role and status it held during different

time periods. The third chapter will trace the origins of concept of Funeral Buddhism and the tradition of temple-parishioner affiliation and examine the importance of ancestor veneration. The fourth chapter will discuss the modern-day perception of Funeral Buddhism to the Japanese people. And, finally, the fifth chapter will reveal the many problems and criticisms faced by Buddhism in the 21st century Japan. Through this historical and contemporary analysis it is hoped that the reader of the essay will clearly see the dangerous situation Buddhism finds itself in in modern-day Japan.

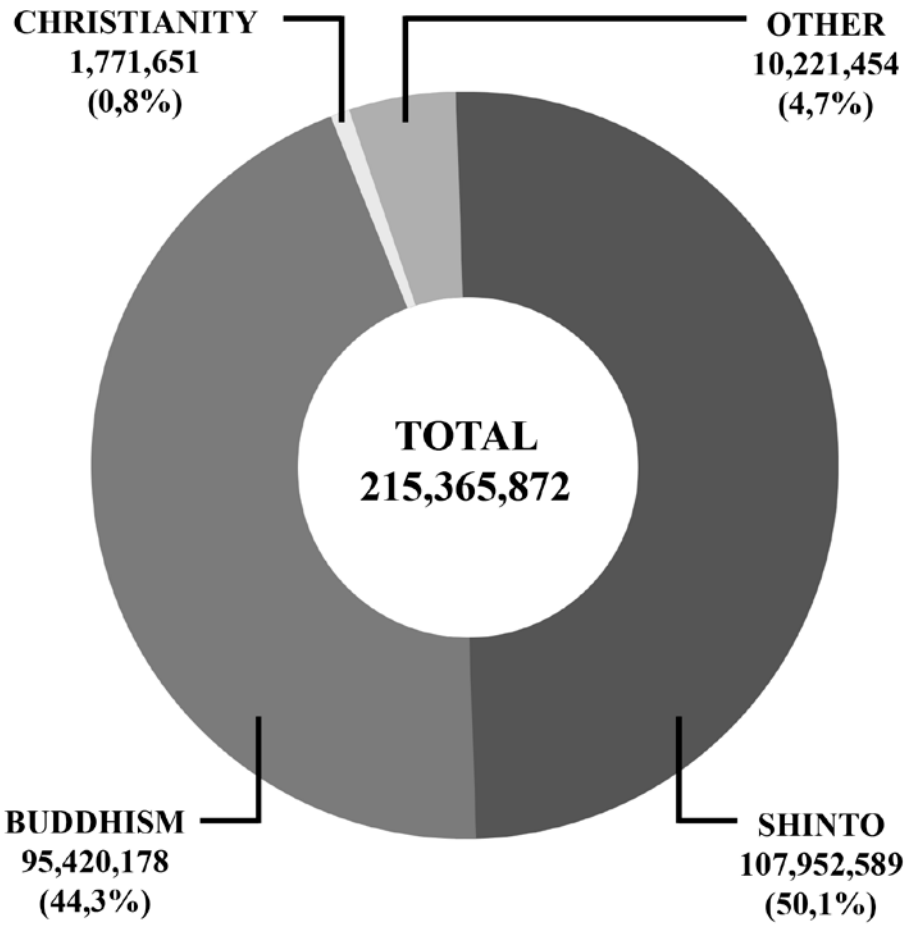
Chapter 1 – A Quick Look into Religion in Modern-Day Japanese Society

What is the actual religious situation in Japan like?

First of all, what very well might surprise a foreigner is "the large diversity of faiths". It is quite unusual for religions with different background and beliefs to peacefully coexist in the same society for a very long period of time however such has been the case in Japan. (Kishimoto, 1956, p. 3) In modern day Japanese society a Japanese person may go to a Shinto shrine for a birth ceremony, have a gorgeous Christian wedding in a chapel, receive moral guidance from Confucian teachings, believe in "lucky" and "unlucky" days or years according to Taostic beliefs, take part in and enjoy folk festivals and in the end have his or her funeral conducted by a Buddhist priest. (Karan, 2005, p. 70; Walter, 2009, p. 247, Reader, 1991, p. 7) This contradictory account of multiple religious affiliations surely would surprise any Westerner but what is even more fascinating are the clashing numbers of believers of the two major religions – Buddhism and Shinto. According to the data from the Religious Yearbook (an annual yearbook indicating the membership levels of religious organizations in Japan, published by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs), in 2001 out of the total number of believers there were 95,4 million (44,3%) Buddhists and 107,9 million (50,1%) Shintoists (see **Figure 1**). (Kreiner, Mohwald, & Olsghleger, 2004, p. 418; Reader, 1991, p. 6) The impressive numbers would indicate that half of the Japanese people are Shinto adherents and roughly the other half are Buddhists. However, a problem arises when all the numbers are added up and it turns out that the outcome of 215,3 million believers exceeds the actual population of Japan which was 126,7 million in 2001. This paradox, the number of believers accounting for 1,7 times the size of the population arises from the situation where practically every Japanese person has two religions. (Kreiner *et al*, 2004, p. 418) Yet interestingly that does not seem contradictory to the "believers" themselves. At first glance the two religions do not seem to have a common ground.

Traditionally Buddhism places stress on the sorrows and pain one encounters in this lifetime, teaching rejection of fleeting pleasures and the temptations of this world. It deals with death and decay and overall looks rather gloomy. In contrast Shinto, the so-called indigenous Japanese religion, focuses its attention on the joys of this world and the connection between humans and nature, while illness and death are viewed as the source of pollution. Despite these differences, the two major religions coexisted peacefully for most of the Japanese history after the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the 6th century. (Morris, 1964, p. 93; Reader, 1991, p. 25) To further illustrate this point, almost every Buddhist temple in Japan has a Shinto *torii* gate (a gateway to a Shinto shrine) at its entrance and is thus guarded by the *kami* (gods or divine beings in Shinto religion). (Perez, 2002, p. 47)

Figure 1. "Absolute numbers of 'believers' in Japan in 2001 according to the Religious Yearbook." (Kreiner *et al*, 2004, p. 418)



If one is surprised by the fact that hardly anyone in Japan seems to mind belonging to two religions at once, then one might be further confused with the revelation that, contrary to the number of believers, the majority of the Japanese people do not in fact regard themselves as believers in any religion. (Reischauer, 1988, p. 215) As Ian Reader, who has spent considerable time in Japan researching Japanese religions, observes, “Japanese people in general are quick to say they are not religious and to describe their society as one where religion either does not exist or has in some way died out.” (1991, p. 5) Indeed, looking at surveys, people who answered positively when asked if they believe in a religion accounted for a number between 30% and 35%. Old age, lower education and smaller size of the populated area one lives in reflect increase in the percentage. (Kreiner *et al*, 2004, p. 419-420) This does not mean that the religion is completely absent from the lives of the majority of people who “don’t positively believe in religion” instead, as Janet Hunter says, “religious practice consists of participation in certain rituals rather than adherence to a specific set of beliefs.” (1989, p. 183)

As stated above, 95,4 million people or 75% of the population in Japan were Buddhists according to government statistics from 2001. (Covell, 2005, p. 4) Also as has been mentioned most of the nation consider themselves irreligious. This begs the obvious question, “How could that possibly be?” To answer we shall first take a look at Ian Reader’s favorite story of two Japanese university professors, both well read and not religious in any way. The anecdote starts with the first professor asking, “What Buddhist sect do you belong to?” To which the second professor replies, “I do not know: no one in our household has died yet,” and adds that he has no knowledge about any doctrines or beliefs of any sects. Reader then points out that the first professor was sure his colleague would belong to one of the Buddhists sects when he asked his question. The second professor was sure he indeed did belong to one even if he did not have the slightest idea which that one might be. (1991, p. 3) Those two professors are not the exception but the rule. When one of the biggest and oldest Buddhist organizations in Japan, the Soto Zen sect surveyed its members it was faced with grim lack of knowledge about the doctrine and facts about the sect. On the other hand, the result showed that an immense number of members participated in memorial rites and yearly rituals for the dead. (Reader, 1991, p. 3-5) In fact, for more than a millennium Buddhism was the main player in administering Japanese rites for the dead. Today funeral and memorial services constitute the major social role of Buddhist priests and temples, which for some people constitues the only occasion to encounter or learn anything about Buddhism and the sects they belong to. (Walter, 2009, p.

1-2) With 94% of the funerals conducted with Buddhist rites it is no wonder that Ian Reader describes the reality for many Japanese people as “born Shinto, die Buddhist.” (Walter, 2009, p. 247; Reader, 1991, p. 7)

This “pervasive presence of Buddhism in the funeral context”, as Mariko Namba Walter describes it, has been the subject of much criticism on behalf of scholars, parishioners and even the priests themselves. (Walter, 2009, p. 247; Covell, 2005, p. 108) “Funeral Buddhism” is the pejorative term that was born from the influential work of Japanese scholar Tamamuro Taijo, first published in 1963. In his unprecedented study Tamamuro traced the history of Buddhist institutions in Japan in relation to their funerary rites. The purpose was to see how the present Buddhism arrived to its current state, which the scholar viewed as deeply problematic because this kind of Buddhism was “out of tune with people’s spiritual needs in this life and preoccupied solely with death.” (Walter, 2009, p. 1) “Funeral Buddhism” is the term by which Buddhism in Japan has become known. It is clear that Tamamuro Taijo was not the only person who saw the problem with the religion engaged in death and funeral rituals. Throughout the modern period in Japan organized Buddhism has been called both “corrupt” and “degenerate”. Popular movies like “The Funeral” and “I Have No Grave” have shown the faces of modern priests in a negative light reflecting the criticism of the very people the priests are supposed to guide. (Covell, 2005, p. 11)

What might come as another surprise about the religious life in Japan is that the original Buddhists teachings, in fact, have nothing to do with death. To put it briefly, Buddhism in its essense focuses of the philosophy of pain. There is only suffering from disease, old age, the uncertainty of life and eventual death to be found in this fleeting world. Suffering originates from earthly temptations and should be overcome in order to escape the cycles of reincarnations and to reach enlightenment and be born in Pure Land of Utmost Bliss (Paradise). (Challaye, 1933, p. 7-9) After being born in Pure Land one could volunteer to return to the world of suffering as a bodhisattva (a compassionate being who delays entering Paradise to help others with their own liberation) but for most Pure Land is the ultimate destination where no sufferings exists. (Walter, 2009, p. 6-7) The outcome of being reborn in Pure Land depends directly on the actions taken by the person during their lifetime. Whether someone will reach enlightenment depends on them practicing Buddhism during the course of their lives. (Walter, 2009, p. 270) The historical Buddha (Siddhatta Gotama) allegedly said about his own death, “Do not waste your time by holding my

funeral." (Ama, 2005, p. 23) Thus early Buddhism taught that human fate after death should be of no concern. In contrast, funerary rites performed by Buddhist priests in Japan help the deceased reach enlightenment after they had died regardless of what kind of life they have lead while still being alive. This is further illustrated by the unique to Japanese Buddhism tradition of naming the dead person *hotoke*, which means both "the deceased" as well as "Buddha". (Nara, 1995, p. 30-31)

Based on the above we can summarize that the large majority of the Japanese nation are practicing Buddhists who nevertheless do not consider themselves to be religious per se, and the large majority of whom only come into contact with the religion on occasions connected with the death of a relative or a close person. Thus, contrary to the original teachings of the historical Buddha, the religion in Japan has become known by the negative term "Funeral Buddhism."

In order to understand the historical developments that led to the current situation it is important to examine what role did Buddhism play in Japan before it came to be known as the religion concerned with ceremonies for the dead?

Chapter 2 – A Brief History of Buddhism in Japan

Buddhism has been present in Japan for the past 1400 years and for most of those years it was appointed a state religion and protected by succeeding governments. (Matsunami, 2004) According to Kojiki ("Record of Ancient Matters", the oldest extant chronicle in Japan written in the early 8th century) Buddhism was introduced to the country when Empreror Kimmei (509-571) received a statue of Buddha from the ancient Korean Kingdom, Paekche. (Sakiya, 1993, p. 107) As it often is with religion, the gift was political. However, by that time Japan already had an ingenious religion called Shinto and opinions separated on whether the foreign religion should be accepted. Two prominent clans, Soga and Monobe, fought in what was "Japan's only religious war." The Sogas, who backed Buddhism, had the support of the majority of the rich and powerful and won the war in the end. (Sakaiya, 1993, p. 109) The origins of peaceful coexistence of Buddhism and Shinto come from this time when *kami* (divine beings) and local deities were thought of as just another forms of buddhas and bodhisattvas. (Walter, 2009, p. 5) Thus instead of losing to the indigenous religion Buddhism emerged victorious and soon Prince Regent Shotoku (574–621) pronounced it as the state religion. Buddhism brought with it something new in

terms of “a systematic doctrine, an institutional organization, and a stunning ritual repertoire unequalled by any other religious tradition represented in Japan.” (Walter, 2009, p. 4) Unlike Shinto Buddhism could offer “moral and intellectual benefits. ” (Matsunami, 2004) Yet the success of the continental religion surely did not come from the doctrines alone. Buddhism was accompanied by new technologies. “New techniques in medicine, building, water use, agriculture and metallurgy” were brought by the Korean immigrants. (Sakaiya, 1993, p. 108) Accordingly, the lives of people improved. However, as the religious writings were in Chinese and only the elite could read, at first Buddhism was the privilege of court families. (Matsunami, 2004)

The new religion continued to flourish during the subsequent Nara Period (710-784) and the government supported the institutions and priests financially. Six schools of thought were studied at that time and they were all directly brought from China. (Matsunami, 2004) At the end of the Nara Period Emperor Kammu (737-806) decided to move the capital away from Nara with the intention of creating a new power center far away from the influential temples and court families. (Schirokauer, Lurie, & Gay, 2006, p. 46 and 56) Nevertheless Buddhism continued to flourish while Japan got its new capital for the next millennium - Kyoto.

In time the six schools lost their spotlight to two new prominent schools, Shingon and Tendai. Their founders established them during Heian Period (794-1185) after studying Buddhism in China. The “philosophical speculation” of Tendai and “the mystical ritualism” of Shingon, in the words of Kodo Matsunami, were very popular but yet again they were limited to court nobles, priests and scholars. At the same time the commoners were disheartened by the degenaration and corruption they saw among some of the priests. (Matsunami, 2004)

As old aristocratic court lost its place to a new military government at the beginning of the Kamakura Period (1192-1333), so did the religion. Buddhism, which was previously enjoyed only by the nobility, became for the first time “the religion of the masses”. (Matsunami, 2004) The Kamakura Period was also a time that saw many wars and natural disasters that in turn made people fear the end of the world was coming. Incidentally it was also the time of 1500’s anniversary of Buddha’s death that promised the disappearance of all his teachings, priests and enlightenment. (Bito, 1991, p. 380) As a result people were scared and that made a perfect soil for the emergence of new sects of Buddhism that would

address ordinary people and their worries. It is interesting to see how the change of social class in power went side by side with the advance of the religion to lower social classes. Osumi Kazuo writes that as Buddhists beliefs and practices spread "Buddhism in Japan came into full power." (1990, p. 544) The six new mainstream schools that arose during that time were the last of its kind as no new major schools have appeared since the Kamakura Period. (Matsunami, 2004) Jodo Shu (Pure Land Sect) was founded by an ex-Tendai priest who taught people that chanting *nembutsu* (simple invocation of Amida's name "Namu Amida Butsu") was the best and only road to salvation. Jodo Shinshu (True Sect of Pure Land) was founded by Honen's disciple who like his teacher believed that people must rely on the power of Amida because they themselves don't have enough self-power. Even chanting *nembutsu* is seen as simply an act of gratitude. Perhaps, such an easy and carefree approach to attaining enlightenment is the main reason Jodo Shinshu is one of the largest sects in Japan today. Ji Shu (also part of a Pure Land Sect) comes with a teaching that Buddha has already made his decision to grant everyone salvation and advocates chanting *nembutsu* while dancing. Nichiren, "one of Japan's most flamboyant religious leaders", founded Nichiren Shu, a sect purely of Japanese origin. He stressed that the salvation came from simple faith in Lotus Sutra (one of the most prominent Buddhist scriptures). (Schirokauer *et al*, 2006, p. 87-88) Two Zen sects, Rinzai Shu and Soto Shu, differed from Pure Land and Nichiren in their stress of finding enlightenment through one's own efforts and discipline. Soto Zen emphasizes meditation as the sole method of discovering our true selves and attaining enlightenment. Rinzai Zen adds the practice of *koan* (a paradox question that should be answered without using reason, for example "What was your original face before your mother gave birth to you?") to the meditation. (Matsunami, 2004) The demands made on practitioners of Zen were no less harsh than those experienced in military training. (Schirokauer *et al*, 2006, p. 89)

In the following Muromachi Period (1336-1573) political situation once again changed and so did the religious scene. Buddhist institutions now fought either against the government or each other. The famous sects of Tendai and Shingon, both located on mountains, now served as home to priest-warriors who were focused more on military and political force than their religion. (Matsunami, 2004) So big was their political threat that the first unifier of Japan in the Momoyama Period (1573-1603), a warlord called Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), actively suppressed his enemies and burned down the great Tendai monastery on Mt. Hiei killing an estimated number of 1600 people. (Schirokauer *et al*, 2006, p. 124)

After Japan was unified at the start of the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867), Buddhism faced a completely new page in its history. It is not surprising for the ruling class to view religion as a "vehicle for furthering the purposes of the state", as Janet Hunter observes (1989, p. 183) and the Tokugawa government controlled Buddhism and used it to control the entire population. To achieve that level of control the government used the pre-existing practice of temple-parishioner affiliation and made it mandatory for virtually everyone in the country to register at a Buddhist temple. We have seen how the access to Buddhism slowly expanded from just the aristocracy down to common people but theirs was a religion of choice. In contrast, in a very short period of time the Tokugawa government created a "whole nation of Buddhists" which was simply "unprecedented" in Japanese history. (Williams, 2005, p. 7) However, while Buddhism experienced never before seen growth of its institutions, enjoyed the state support and had an entire country to preach to, it stagnated under the tight control of the government that did not favor new ideas and prohibited the creation of new sects. (Hall, 1999, p. 371-372; Kishimoto, 1956, p. 8-9) As the result, despite claiming the whole country as its parishioners the influence of Buddhism weakened and it was no longer a "vital religion" from the 17th century on. (Matsunami, 2004)

After the Tokugawa Period Buddhism continued to decline. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 restored the Emperor to the throne after 800 years of military governments. As the Emperor was a living Shinto god, there was an attempt to make Shinto the state religion or even the only religion in Japan. (Schirokauer *et al*, 2006, p. 189) Consequently, Buddhism was heavily suppressed and many drastic measures were taken against sects and temples. (Covell, 2005, p. 26) The attacks were severe but the religion has already become part of Japanese culture and tradition in the eyes of Japanese people so it survived even if losing much if its influence. (Matsunami, 2004)

World War II resulted in the physical destruction of many temples and monasteries by bombardment. (Kreiner *et al*, 2004, p. 421) On the other hand, the failure to avoid the disaster of defeat caused Buddhism, Confucianism and even Shinto to lose their credibility (King, 1995, p. 305-306) In 1946 the occupying American authorities drew a new Constitution that separated religion and the state and granted religious freedom to all citizens. (Reader, 1991, p. 57) At last Buddhism in Japan was truly independent from the control of the state and forced to stand on its own two feet.

From the short overview of the journey of Buddhism in Japan from its introduction to the Japanese Islands to the present day, we can see how the religion gradually spread to all social classes, continually gaining momentum, until the Tokugawa Period policies began the trend of the decline of Buddhism in Japan.

What were those changes that took place during the Tokugawa Period and how did they influence the modern-day Buddhism?

Chapter 3 – The Tokugawa Period and The Origins of Funeral Buddhism

In the previous chapter we have followed the journey of Buddhism in Japan from its introduction to the present day. It can be presumed that it was gaining momentum up until the Tokugawa Period, during which the severe government control has stopped it from growing, and it has not revitalized itself since.

In actuality the Funeral Buddhism of today stems from the policies of the Tokugawa government whose strive for total control of the population still echoes in the lives of the many Japanese people today that "die Buddhist."

In order to understand the reasons behind the policies that the government undertook in the 17th century we must first go back in history to the events that preceded the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867). In the late 15th century Japan entered a century of constant internal warfare and political instability known as the Warring States. Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu finally unified the country in the period from 1568 to 1600. (Schirokauer *et al*, 2006, p. 101 and 117) By the time of the unification Buddhist institutions had gained a lot of power and independence. The first of the unifiers, a warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) rightfully considered the large Buddhist establishments as his military enemies. (Perez, 2002, p. 38) Brutal confrontations followed, of which perhaps the most famous example is the destruction of the Tendai monastery on Mt. Hiei. This hostility toward organized Buddhism played its role in the welcoming reception Oda Nobunaga gave to the first Jesuits missionaries. (Schirokauer *et al*, 2006, p. 124) Before the arrival of the Jesuits the Portuguese had already brought with them firearms that helped Nobunaga with his quest for the unification of the country. The ships of new visitors carried aboard them Christianity, which a missionary Saint Francis Xavier first introduced to Japan in 1549. The monotheistic religion did not seem too bizarre to the Japanese people. Initially

they regarded it simply as “another type of Buddhism.” (Schirokauer *et al*, 2006, p. 133) Regardless of its doctrines, Oda Nobunaga saw Christianity as a potential ally against Buddhism. (Perez, 2002, p 38) The accomplishments of the Western religion were enormous with 300,000 converts by 1614. Much bigger percentage of the population was Christians back in the early medieval Japan than there are today. (Reischauer, 1988, p. 212)

However, the initial success soon led to grave consequences. Oda Nobunaga’s loyal follower and successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) was initially favorable to the new religion but later came to see it as a danger. His lukewarm attempts to lessen the strength of Christianity were followed by more brutal actions by the first *shogun* (a hereditary commander-in-chief) of the Tokugawa Period, Tokugawa Iyeasu, and his successors, although Ieyasu initially was friendly towards Christianity just like Nobunaga and Hideyoshi. After Hideyoshi issued but not enforced an order to expel the Christian priests in 1587, Ieyasu continued to prevent new missionaries from coming to Japan but he did not prevent people who had converted to Christianity from keeping their faith. The lenient attitude only lasted until the government came to realize the threat that Christian faith presented to the political consolidation. Iyeasu called Chistianity the “evil religion” and prohibited it in 1613. Tokugawa Hidetata, the second *shogun*, expelled all missionaries and punished Christians who would not denounce their faith. The punishments become more severe with the next *shogun*, Tokugawa Iemitsu, but the Christian faith was not easy to defeat. People were subjects to torture. In 1616 believers became subject to death penalty. One of the methods for exposing Christians was called *fumie* and it involved stepping on a picture or tablet of Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. Supposedly hidden Christians would not be able to do such an act. This kind of testing was frequent and mandatory for all Japanese people to take part in. (Kishimoto, 1956, p. 103-105) We can see from the actions of the Tokugawa government that it was “determined to wipe out a dangerous doctrine”, in the words of Conrad Schirokauer. (2006, p. 138)

In order to understand the reasoning behind their actions we must look at the situation from the perspective of the Tokugawa government. The country had only recently come out from a century of civil wars. If anything it lacked social stability. The government was thus focused on creating, strengthening and maintaining the feudal system. The result was two hundred and fifty years of peace. An amazing achievement on one hand, it came with the price of severe government control. The authority lay completely in the hands of the *shogun* supported by numerous decrees. The government had made a decision to rule by

prohibition and tried to regulate all human activities. The ordinary people were supposed to blindly obey without being informed. The government chose Confucianism as their official philosophy to serve as an ethical system and a moral code. (Kishimoto, 1956, p. 8-9 and 101-102) If the Tokugawa policies could be described in one word it would probably be "control".

Not only Christianity with its new ideas had no place in the feudal system of the Tokugawa government, they also saw that the military power of the Buddhist institutions was one of the main causes of the wars in the century earlier. The late Dr. Hideo Kishimoto, head of the Division of Religious Studies of Tokyo University, wrote: "History demonstrates that military and political power alone can never successfully suppress faith. Religion can be countered only by another religion." (1956, p. 102) Two goals could be accomplished at once by using Buddhism to eradicate the threat of Christianity and by gaining complete control over it. The Tokugawa government successfully executed both.

In order to eliminate the threat of the foreign religion completely the government demanded that all the members of a Japanese household show that they were not secretly Christian by registering as parishioners at a Buddhist temple. Whether the people had any interest in Buddhism did not play a role at all. The affiliation between the parishioner and the temple used to exist before the Tokugawa Period but this was the first time everyone in Japan was affiliated with a temple. This system of temple registration was called Danka System (also known as Jidan System or Terauke System) where "*danka*" means "parishioner household". The Buddhist temple would provide its parishioners with an annual certificate proving that the people in the household were not secretly Christians. (Walter, 2009, p. 250-251) The people in return had ritual and financial duties to their temples, which consisted of taking part in funerary and memorial rites as well as providing monetary support for the temple and the priests. (Williams, 2005, p. 8-9)

The certificate of affiliation issued by the temple was more than just proof of renouncing Christianity. It functioned as an "identification card" and was necessary for things like "weddings, travel, changes of residence, and the employment of servants." (Kishimoto, 1956, p. 103-105) At the same time those documents were compiled into the Registry of Religious Affiliation. The certificates contained data on each individual and would then pass through many levels of authority until finally reaching the government itself. This

census of the population gave the Tokugawa government simple and effective means of monitoring its subjects. (Williams, 2005, p. 20-22)

It might seem like the bleak fate of Buddhism being turned into a political tool of control would be countered by the cheerful fact that the entire country became Buddhists. For the very first time the religion, which has been in Japan for almost a millennium, achieved such a triumph. Yet because the conversion to Buddhism had been artificial for many, it lacked genuine devotion. For some small number of people religious faith probably played a part in choosing the temple to affiliate with, but for the majority the decisive factor was simply geographic proximity. Many households registered with their local temples regardless of the sect or its doctrines. (Williams, 2005, p. 18) The affiliation chosen by the head of the household carried on from generation to generation, confining the families to a particular temple. (Williams, 2005, p. 8-9) This resulted in religion being inherited much like social status, trade or physical assets. (Perez, 2002, p. 44)

Nevertheless, even having an empty faithless affiliation to a temple was better than facing injustice without it. Temples were known for intimidating their parishioners for money by threatening discrimination if people did not pay enough (Covell, 2005, p. 26) Those threats were very real for the Japanese people who lived during the Tokugawa Period. If someone failed to maintain their membership at the temple, they would be accused of being "heretic", the term that survived long after Christianity was suppressed by the government. Even people who were simply descendants of Christians faced legal discrimination and rejection during the Tokugawa Period. Unlike everyone else they had to be registered in a separate register twice a year and it was not rare for them to be buried in the mountains instead of a temple graveyard. (Williams, 2005, p. 21-22) If a household could not secure or lost an affiliation to a temple all of its members were put into the Register of Nonhumans. Just like the name suggests, "nonhumans" were not even considered people, and they faced discrimination both in life and death. Hence parishioners went to great length to fulfill their reponsibilities to the temples and maintain their registration. Households who failed to provide their temples with donations or labor received the punishment of being "off register" for the next 10 years. Restoring the affiliation with the temple "required a written apology promising never again to disobey the temple, naming a guarantor who would vouch for the household, and offering to make a back payment on all dues and handling over an extra punitive fee". In addition to experiencing disadvantages in this life people were warned of "spiritual penalties" as well. (Williams, 2005, p. 25)

On the positive side, the policies of the Tokugawa Period regarding Buddhism resulted in the spreading of Buddhist funeral rites and traditions and the appearance of family graves for nearly the entire population. The funeral style for the parishioners developed from the Zen funerals held for temple abbots. We have learned about the Soto Zen sect and its insistence on the importance on mediation to gain enlightenment in the previous chapter. Interestingly enough, this sect's most profound impact on Japanese Buddhism manifests in fact in the creation of lay Buddhist funerals that have since become the norm. Soto Zen created the traditional funeral by absorbing local folkways and death rites and transforming the funeral for the abbot into a ceremony for laypeople with a bit of ingenuity. The role of the funeral prior to the Tokugawa Period was to transfer merit accumulated by the deceased during their lifetime in the hope of achieving better rebirth. What Soto Zen sect came up with was really innovative. Now the deceased was given a postmortem symbolic ordination that granted them *kaimyo* (a posthumous precept name) and immediate enlightenment. (Stone and Walter**,** p. 12-14) The death had ceased to be a temporary stop between the cycles of rebirths and became the end destination. The responsibility for the afterlife has also shifted from the person themselves to the remaining family and the priest. (Stone and Walter**,** p. 12-14)

During the Tokugawa Period the funding of more than 95% of all temples relied on their parishioners and on the administration of funeral and memorial services. It is therefore understandable then that people came to view them as funerary temples as they were so closely associated with the temple graveyards where their ancestors were already resting and the parishioners themselves would someday be buried. While the official name used by the government for the temples was *dannader*a or *dankadera*, the people themselves called their temples *bodaiji* (family memorial temples). (Williams, 2005, p. 20-23)

The Tokugawa government let Confucianism guide people in this life and let Buddhism control "the affairs of the other world". (Kishimoto, 1956, p. 102) Consequently, people came to regard their parishioner temples in terms of funerals and remembering the dead. Because the priests' role no longer required any religious functions as long as they managed Buddhist funerals and memorial services and because those services brought them financial stability, the priests were content with their new roles of graveyard keepers. (Covell, 2005, p. 15) The results, according to Dr. Hideo Kishimoto, were the stagnation and degeneration of the priesthood, which people started to detest. However, Buddhism in

the Tokugawa Period did not seem to be much affected by the criticism. (Kishimoto, 1956, p. 108-110)

In 1871 the Family Registration Law, which requiried all citizens to register with the government, replaced the Danka System. (Williams, 2005, p. 20-22) However, as we have seen from the Ian Reader's anecdote about the two professors who expected to learn what sect they belonged to on the occasion of death in the family, the tradition of being affiliated with the Buddhist temple continues to present day. The fact that Japanese people of the past did not break away from their parishioner temples after the Meiji government abolished the Danka System at the end of the 19th century can be attributed to the importance of ancestor veneration. Since by the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 the temples had already become home for the generations of past family members buried in the temple graveyards and the priests became their keeper, it would just not be acceptable to abandon one's ancestors. (Covell, 2005, p. 27) Ian Reader writes that ancestors, along with the *kami* of Shinto and the Buddhas of Buddhism, are "the most prominent spiritual entities of the Japanese pantheon." (1991, p. 40)

Indeed, even people who do not consider themselves practitioners of Buddhism value having the proper Buddhist funerals with the priest from their affiliated temple as means of guaranteeing the deceased will be well in the next world and out of respect for the generations of past family members who have continued to be buried in the graveyard at the family temple. Simply put, having a Buddhist funeral is the socially accepted method of venerating the deceased relatives even if the majority of the Japanese people nowadays cannot understand some of the complicated aspects of the ceremony. (Walter, 2009, p. 14-15, 251 and 277)

The ancestor worship goes back to times before the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the 6th century. (Sakaiya, 1993, p. 114) The success of the new religion depended on whether or not it could incorporate the native tradition of veneration of the ancestors into it. Going against the doctrines of continental Buddhism, Japanese people use *hotoke* to refer to the dead yet the first meaning of the word is "Buddha". (Nara, 1995, p. 37) It is not unreasonable to say that the flexibility and willingness of Buddhism to change and adapt into itself local customs and beliefs played a huge role in the prosperity it enjoyed during the first millennium of its presence in Japan. So it was only natural that when Buddhism

took on itself the responsibility of administering funerals and overseeing the parishioners' graves, it made the well-being of the venerated ancestors one of its priorities with the assurance that they will reach enlightenment and become benevolent protectors for the families who remained behind with the proper funeral rites.

The importance of ancestor veneration comes from an ancient Japanese belief that everyone has a soul, which would exist even after death. In the unfortunate circumstances where a person died without surviving relatives or grave their angry and miserable spirit, called *muenbotoke*, would cause all kind of misfortunes for the living. Naturally people would want to avoid being hunted by a malicious spirit and that can be done by pacifying the soul with Buddhist funerary rites. On the other hand, a Buddhist priest transforms the dead, who have the living kin to care of them, into "a guardian ancestral spirit" that is thought to protect and look out for its descendants as long as they continue to do things like taking care of the grave or making offerings of food, water and flowers. (Reader, 1990, p. 41-45 and 49)

The Tokugawa government's policies, that were implemented to destroy the threat of Christianity and to control the population, resulted in the hereditary affiliation to a temple that continues to this day. On the other hand, the people came to view their temples in connection with the funerals and the family grave while the priests focused on their new jobs of graveyard keepers. Buddhism diverted from its original role of providing spiritual guidance and became a religion concerned with death and the afterlife.

So what is the legacy of the Tokugawa Period policies for the modern-day Japanese Buddhism?

Chapter 4 – Modern Funeral Buddhism

In the words of Edwin O. Reischauer, "Contemporary Japanese life is full of traces of Buddhism as a sort of background melody, but it is not for many a leitmotif in either their intellectual or emotional lives." (1988, p. 207) We already know that the majority of Japanese describe themselves as being irreligious despite 75% of the population inheriting the affiliation to a Buddhist temple. The expression "Born Shinto, die Buddhist" portrays the real situation for many Japanese. (Reader, 1991, p. 7) Therefore, in order to understand the reality of Funeral Buddhism in Japan today we turn to traditions and customs associated

with it seeing as contemporary “funerals and memorial services are the primary business of temples”. (Covell, 2005, p. 166)

Wake, Funeral and Cremation

There are a number of major Buddhist sects in Japan. Nowadays, Tendai, Shingon, Jodo Shu, Jodo Shin Shu , Zen and Nichiren have all developed their own procedures for conducting funerals. However, even if they differ in doctrines, Mariko Namba Walter argues that “Japanese Buddhist death rituals share the same fundamental structure across schools and sects” (2009, p. 248 and 261):

A. Initiatory stage
    a) The pillow sutra
    b) The wake
    c) Funeral proper
B. Ordination of the dead
C. Leading the deceased to the other world
    d) Departure of the casket
    e) Cremation and gathering the remains
    f) Installation of the remains in the grave
    g) Memorial rites
D. Transfer of merit

Usually the bereaved family leaves the details of managing the funeral to an undertaker who oversees the preparation of the body and the arrangements for the wake, the funeral ceremony and the cremation. (Matsunami, 2004) Guests can attend either the wake or the funeral or both. Traditional color for the attire is black. Men wear suits with ties and women wear dresses with simple pearl necklaces. It is also customary for the guests to give the grieving family a special funeral envelope with condolence money, called *koden*, which is intended to help the family to cover the cost of the funeral. The amount depends on the closeness of the relationship to the deceased or their family and can range from ¥3,000 to ¥20,000. About ten days after the funeral the guest will receive a thank you gift with, for example, a collection of assorted tea. (McArthur, 1994, p. 134; Nakata, 2009) After the participants have paid their last respects to the deceased, the coffin is taken to a crematorium in a black hearse with a wooden roof resembling a portable shrine. The

cremation takes one to one and a half hours after which the relatives gather the bones with chopsticks and together with ashes those are collected in a container ready to be put in the family grave. (Matsunami, 2004; Sosnoski, 1996, p. 70)

According to the interviews conducted by Hikaru Suzuki, 50% to 70% of the annual funerals attended by Buddhist priests are those of the parishioners affiliated with their temples. On the other hand, the rest 30% to 50% come as requests from people not affiliated with the temple but wishing to have a priest attending the funeral of someone important they had lost. In such cases a funeral company will recommend them a priest but instead of it being a one-time commitment the people are expected to become the temple's parishioners and help to maintain the institution financially. For this reason priests try to stay friendly with the funeral companies with the incentive of being introduced to new clients. This is particularly true for priests of new temples who start out with only a small number of parishioners. (Suzuki, 2000, p. 167-168)

The main aim of the Buddhist funeral rituals lie in helping the deceased reach enlightenment and stability in the afterlife while allowing the people left behind to deal with the grief in a proper ritualized manner. (Walter, 2009, p 278) Thus the two main duties of the Buddhists priests attending the wake and the funeral are the reciting of the sutra and the administration of a posthumous precept name, *kaimyo*, without which the dead would not be able to safely proceed to the next world. (Suzuki, 2000, p. 167-168)

Kaimyo* and *Ihai

Originally precept names were meant for living people who wanted to become Buddha's followers and practitioners of Buddhism. Stephen G. Covell argues that unless taken while alive, those names are essentially "meaningless". (2005, p. 165) Yet in spite of the obvious logic of the Covell's words, starting from the Tokugawa Period parishioners could obtain *kaimyo* (posthumous precept name) for a certain monetary compensation that played the role of financially supporting the parishioner temples. Since the symbolic joining of the Buddhist order upon death would ensure one's good fortune in the afterlife the significance of it cannot be underestimated. And while the owner may have proceeded to other realms, their *kaimyo* continues to exist and play an important role in the world they left behind. After the funeral the bereaved family receives an *ihai* (ancestral memorial tablet) with the posthumous precept name written on it, which is then meant be taken and kept at home. For

some people *ihai* is either the place where the spirit of the deceased resides or comes to when the family makes daily offerings to it, for others it is a memento of their family's past members. Regardless of the different views people may hold, the memorial tablet's central role is making sure the deceased are not left out of the lives of their descendants. (Covell, 2005, p. 169)

Butsudan and Memorial Services

After receiving the *ihai* the bereaved family places the small wooden lacquered tablet in their *butsudan* (a miniature household Buddhist altar where the ancestors who watch over the family are enshrined) where they are usually kept for a certain period of time until it is thought the spirit had merged with the rest of the ancestors. At that point the memorial tablet can either be burned or given to the parishioner temple. (Covell, 2005, p. 169; Reader, 1991, p. 53) Ideally people are supposed to make offerings of food, water and flowers to the ancestors enshrined in the *butsudan* while they relate to them the latest news about the family (for example, "a good report card" from children or "a first pay receipt from a new job" from adults). Misbehaving childen would be told to bow and apologise in front of the *butsudan*. In this way the deceased remain part of their lives. A Buddhist priest is invited to come and chant the scriptures in front of the *butsudan* on the occasion of memorial services while the family sits behind him. (Matsunami, 2004; Nelson, 2008, p. 317)

In Japan the mourning period continues for 49 days after the death of the person. During those the bereaved family has the responsibility of helping the deceased reach the other world by holding funerary rites on every 7th day of the period until the karma of the person reaches a new state on the 49th day. Thereafter the first memorial service, called *shotsuki meinichi*, is held on the 1st anniversary of death. All the next services gradually grow apart in time starting with the 3rd anniversary and continuing for the 7th , 13th , 23rd and 33rd. Sometimes the rites continue even up to the 50th anniversary. (Matsunami, 2004; Naobumi, 2001, p. 182)

Haka Mairi, *Obon* and *Higan*

Haka Mairi is the name of a custom of visiting the family graves in order to show the respect for the ancestors, give them offerings and clean the graves. According to a survey,

this form of honoring the dead is extremely popular among the Japanese people with 89% saying they take part in *haka mairi* regularly. The two occasions when the visits happen the most are during *Obon* and *Higan*.

Obon is the biggest Buddhist festival and "one of the most important celebrations on the Japanese Calendar." The festival takes place in the summer in either July or August, depending on the region in Japan, and mobilizes tens of millions of Japanese people. Many urbanites leave the cities to return to their hometowns to visit the graves and meet the relatives. One of the most colorful traditions of the festival is the *Bon* dance that is performed on the streets by the local residents to the accompaniment of regional folk songs. (Karan, 2005, p. 176-177; Sugimoto, 2003, p. 257) The several days during those two summer months are examples of people describing their society as secular showing an outburst in religious activity even if they do so unknowingly. The reasons for *Obon* being viewed not through the lenses of Buddhism is probably because for most of the people it is the time for family reunions. In this way it is the social function that overshadows the religious meaning. Nevertheless, during *Obon* the reunited families go to the graves and temples to pay their respects to the ancestors, offering them food and flowers and burning incense. (Reader, 1991, p. 11) The first day of the festival is called *Mukae-Bon*, meaning "welcoming day", when spirits are believed to return to this world. Warmly received by their descendants, they are sent off in tiny boats filled with food on the last day called *Okuri-Bon*, meaning "farewell day", until another reunion comes next year. (Matsunami, 2004)

Higan is another Buddhist festival though it is not as grand as *Obon*. *Higan* is celebrated twice a year on Spring and Fall Equinoxes during which the night and the day are equal in length. Just as at *Obon* people bring food and flowers to the graves and visit the temples.

In summary, many Japanese people continue to participate in religious practices, like the huge festival of *Obon*, and are surrounded in their daily lives by religious objects, such as the *butsudan* and *ihai*, but it would seem that most do not directly connect those things with the religion. Instead the importance is placed on family ties and the respect for one's ancestors. The rituals are performed out of respect rather than for a deep rooted religious belief. Nevertheless the majority of Japanese people continue to hold traditional Buddhist funerals with an attending Buddhist priest and proper funerary rites.

Since it is precisely this preoccupation with funerary rites that led modern Japanese Buddhism to acquire the negative title of "Funeral Buddhism", it would be reasonable to address the problems and criticism the religion is facing in the 21st century.

Chapter 5 – Problems and Criticisms

"The only constant is change," wrote the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Nowadays we live in a world where things change faster than ever before. Therefore it is not unreasonable to suggest that, just like everything else, Funeral Buddhism is affected by the transformations that take place in the world around it. For many years Buddhism in Japan took upon itself the role of a funeral undertaker and a graveyard keeper for the parishioner families, who have inherited the affiliation with the temples generation after generation and continued to think of the membership as an important part of respecting their ancestors. However, things like social changes and new options for funerals pose a threat to the traditional bond between the temples and their parishioners. Since most temples and priests financially depend on the income from funerals and memorial services, they are directly affected by the changes concerning the ceremonies for the dead. In addition, Funeral Buddhism faces criticism for things like high costs of funerals and the corrupt image of priests, which only damages the religion's image further in the eyes of Japanese people.

Urbanization and Smaller Family Size

After the defeat in the World War II, Japanese people worked hard on recovery and achieved record exponential growth, known in other countries as "Japan's economic miracle". Consequently, the cities started to flourish and attract many people from rural areas. The urbanization resulted in changes in the traditional relationship between the temples and the households affiliated with them. Now the distance between them separated the two. Out of convenience people would turn to temples located near their new place of residence. Some second-generation city-dwellers even decide to move the family grave to the new location after their parents' death. (Covell, 2005, p. 32) Moving away from native villages also resulted in a split of extended families and a decreased family size. While traditionally multiple generations used to live in the same household, nowadays the majority of Japanese people live in nuclear families. Smaller family size means smaller living space, which makes the daily ancestor veneration in front of the *butsudan* difficult as

sometimes there is not even enough space to place it. (Reader, 1991, p.59; Covell, 2005, p. 34)

Lack of Knowledge and Time

As people moved to bigger cities and lost their relationships with the family temples, their exposure to and knowledge about Buddhism declined. A typical parishioner regards their temple as a place for ancestor veneration. The results of a survey by the Soto Zen sect conducted in 1975 showed that out of all the people affiliated with their sect's temples hardly anyone had any knowledge of the sect's history, doctrines or historical figures. (Covell, 2005, p. 38) That might be understandable for the religion that for many years focused on death and the afterlife. Yet what comes as a surprise is the situation where, in the words of Mariko Namba Walter, "For most lay people, the Buddhist significance of the funeral is no longer well understood." (Walter, 2009, p. 277) Furthermore, once regarded as an important ritual that was necessary to ensure that the deceased would get enlightenment and be reborn in the Pure Land, nowadays the funeral is viewed more as simply an opportunity to say final goodbyes. Even the *kaimyo* does not seem to be thought of as being important by many modern Japanese people. (Covell, 2005, p. 174) Moreover, due to the fast pace of life the funerals have become a lot shorter with a typical length of only one hour. The Buddhist priest only has 35 to 45 minutes to recite sutras and say prayers, which some priests view as simply too insufficient to understand and acknowledge the complex funeral rituals. (Walter, 2009, p. 276)

New Funeral Options

Starting from the Tokugawa Period most people found their last resting place in the family grave located in the graveyard of their family temple. However, nowadays the things are changing and more options are available for anyone who is not satisfied with the traditional way. People can make a contract with a funeral company that will allow them to decide the details of the service themselves before their death. (Naobumi, 2001, p. 74) A complete deviation from the practice of being buried in the family grave is a funeral that does not require a grave at all. *Shizenso* (meaning "natural funeral") is the choice of some people who wish to have their ashes scattered at seas, on mountains, from an airplane or even in space if one has the finances. (Covell, 2005, p.36-37; Nakata, 2009) Another popular new form of a burial, which has been discussed by various mass media, is called *jumokuso*

(meaning “tree burial”). The head priest of a Zen temple in the Iwate Prefecture invented *jumokuso* in 1999 and since then his idea has served as an inspiration to many others. Again, this form of burial drifts away from the traditional family grave. Instead, the cremated remains get buried in a forest under a tree with a simple wooden tablet indicating the name of the deceased. (Boret, 2013, p. 180)

Lack of Space and Concern for the Environment

The situation is grim for the people who prefer the traditional grave to the new options. The graveyards are facing a serious crisis due to the severe lack of space. This is most clearly seen in the Greater Tokyo Area, which in 2005 was home to an estimated 1/5 of the Japanese population. When in the year 2000 there were five people applying for each grave available at the four city-run graveyards that had any openings at all, the lottery was used to chose the person who got the place. The prospects of finding a plot in a temple graveyard are not too promising either. The situation looks even more gruesome due to the fact that although most people in Japan are cremated and a typical grave takes up less than a square meter of space there still is not enough space. Ashes of about one million Tokyo citizens are being kept at home by the relatives who could not manage to get a grave for the deceased. (Karan, 2005, p. 176-177) Some of the people who chose *jumokuso* understand that the lack of space requires more graveyards to be made and that in turn leads to further destruction of the environment. Japanese people, even those who live in the cities, are not unaware of the ongoing destruction of Japanese nature that started with the post-war’s exponential growth. Instead, being buried under a tree would be beneficial both for the environment and the future generations. (Boret, 2013, p. 182)

Competition

Traditionally when a death occurred in the family Japanese people turned to the priest from their parishioner temple to guide them through the processes necessary to organize and hold the funeral. However, since the mid-1980s funeral companies replaced the priest as the main person in administering the funeral. Now they often play the role of a mediator between the family of the deceased and the temple when they invite the priest to attend the funeral and perform the funerary rites. When the company introduces a priest to the potential clients, they get paid almost half of the money the priest receives for giving the deceased a *kaimyo*. This is not unexpected considering most people do not know what sect

of Buddhism they belong to and many do not remember the name of the temple they are affiliated with. (Covell, 2005, p. 145-146 and 35-36) It would seem more convenient to turn to a funeral company, which would take upon itself the responsibility of contacting the priest. Another example of competition concerns ancestor veneration. One of the largest and very competitive markets in Japan manufactures and sells *butsudan*. John Nelson writes that, while not obvious at first glance, there are "significant differences in decoration, ornamentation, architecture, colors, iconography, and so on" of the *butsudan* that vary depending on a specific Buddhist sect. If a priest came to perform memorial services and found a *butsudan* with a design that is not considered proper by his sect, he probably would not fail to mention it to the family. (Nelson, 2008, p. 305-306 and 314-315) Yet there are now companies, like the Yakigen Corporation, who chose to go over the boundaries of the guidelines set by the sects and make designs that fit modern homes and realize the individual wishes of the clients. (Nelson, 2008, p. 305-306 and 314-315)

Exceedingly High Prices

In the early 2010 a scholar of religion named Hiromi Shimada published a book called "Funeral are Unnecessary" which sold 260,000 copies in the first 3 months. In the book he did not argue for the abolishment of all funerals but directed his dissatisfaction at the unreasonable cost of lavish funerals that flourished after the economic boom of the 1970s. Along with the criticism of the funeral industry, Shimada was unhappy with Buddhist priests who took for granted that people must pay a high price for the *kaimyo*. (Suzuki, 2013, p. 226) According to Stephen Covell, people often have heard of someone who had to pay a large sum of money for a *kaimyo* and newspapers regularly print articles about this topic. (2005, p. 183) The success of Shimada's critical book only reflects the dissatisfaction people feel with regards to the regulated funerals that are available to them. (Suzuki, 2013, p. 226) Abe Naobumi gives this estimate of average funeral expenses (2001, p.73):

Total expenses – 2,060,000 yen
Fees paid to temple – 510,000 yen
Meal and reception expenses – 430,000 yen
Payment to funeral undertakers – 1,120,000 yen

The cost of the funeral increases with the rank of the deceased. For example, a funeral for a top-level executive would cost 15,000,000 yen and some funerals might even go up to

100,000,000 yen. The capital city, Tokyo, is not unexpectedly the most expensive place for a funeral. (Naobumi, 2001, p.73-74) To help shoulder such high prices the guests who attend the funeral present *koden* (condolence money or gift), to the bereaved family, which are meant to cover half the cost of the funeral. However, the problem of aging Japanese society and low birthrates brings with them the unfortunate result of having a much fewer number of guests at the funeral. As those trends continue the amount of *koden* will also continue to decrease. (Karan, 2005, p. 176-177) One of the reasons for the popularity of alternative funerals like *jumokuso* and *shizenso* is the advantage of the cost of the funeral being significantly cheaper than thta of the traditonal funeral.

Bad Image of the Priests

Nowadays Buddhist priests' are financially dependent on the income they derive from performing death ceremonies. Altogether they account for approximately 76,5% of their total revenue (35,5% come from funerals, 36,7% - memorial services and the remaining 4,3% are graveyard related). (Suzuki, 2000, p. 167-168; Covell, 2005, p. 142-144) Because when people seek a Buddhist priest for the ceremony they get introduced to one by a funeral company, some priest in big cities can be seen dining with the funeral undertakers to secure future clients. (Naobumi, 2001, p. 75) Most of the temples in Japan need about 200 to 300 parishioner households to generate enough income to maintain the temple, its head priest and his family. If the priests cannot earn the neccessary amount of money from the funeral services they are often forced to have second jobs. If a temple can no longer be sustained, like it happens in many rural areas, it might get abandoned and then the remaining parishioners have to look for services from some other temple in their neighborhood. (Covell, 2005, p. 23) Although many Japanese people hold the negative image of the priests being, in the words of Stephen Covell, "price gougers", the religious workers live in the real world and have monetary obligations just like other institutions. They must pay the utility bills, various insurances, the salary for the head priest and so on. (Covell, 2005, p. 31) Yet they continue to be viewed as corrupted. Because of the reduced role of the priests in the funerals and the weakened bond between them and the parishioners, both the funerary undertakers and the bereaved families came to show only perfunctory respect for the Buddhist priests during the funeral ceremony. (Suzuki, 2000, p 167-168) This can be further illustrated by the appearance of robot priests installed in some memorial parks who can chant sutras with a simple push of a button. (Covell, 2005, p. 186) Modern Buddhist priests face a serious challenge of generating enough income to sustain

their temple and performing their ceremonial duties for the parishioners while also battling the image of being greedy and corrupted "one-time hired professionals". Another concern for many of them is the situation where the parishioners associate the priests and the religion itself with death although Buddhism is supposed to guide people through life. (Covell, 2005, p. 186, 140 and 167)

For many years Buddhism in Japan functioned as the religion of the ceremonies for the dead, but nowadays more and more people want to see changes in the traditional funerals and many criticize Funeral Buddhism for the corrupt images of its priest. The growing role of the funeral companies and new options for burials create competition for the traditional source of income of the priests. Most importantly, many people no longer see the need for the expensive and meaningless funerals that lie in the heart of Funeral Buddhism. At the same time the religion has been associated with death for so long it does not hold its original religious significance in the eyes of the potential believers.

Conclusion

Even the casual visitor to Japan would not fail to notice the abundance of Buddhist temples that give the scenery of the country its own special charm. However, the familiar temple buildings and eye-catching robes of the priests might be in danger of disappearance because the old religion has come to be seen as too concerned with funerals and its priests perceived as greedy and corrupted. The mandatory temple-parishioner affiliation of the Tokugawa Period resulted in the tradition where most of the Japanese people die Buddhist but do not rely on the religion to guide them through life. Even the religious practices they perform are acknowledged simply as social customs by the society that frequently describes itself as irreligious. Increasingly viewed with contempt, Funeral Buddhism must look for ways to revitalize itself in the eyes of Japanese people, scholars and even some priests, so it can once again be treated with respect this religion deserves. Since the main source of the dissatisfaction lies with the unreasonably high prices of the funerals and the confusing rituals they involve, Buddhist priests must attempt to transform the traditional ceremonies to meet the modern needs if the religion is going to adapt and survive. The author of this essay believes that Japanese Buddhism has much more to offer to people if they could see past the usual image of priests chanting sutras at the funerals. The ways in which Japanese Buddhism could try to revive itself would make an interesting topic for another essay about this fascinating subject.

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