

A Case Study on Reuniting with the Deceased in Funerals: Focusing on the Roles of Priests



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岐阜、千葉、沖縄各県の寺院における葬儀のケーススタディを通じて、故人と遺族を結ぶ仏教「法話」の役割を探る。著者・磯部美紀は大谷大学真宗総合研究所東京分室のポストドク研究員。

Abstract

In Japan, which is becoming a hyper-aging society more quickly than other countries are, people must increasingly face the bereavement of family members and acquaintances. This article aims to clarify the ways in which priests participate in the process of bereaved people's "reunion" with the deceased during funerals. Specifically, this paper focuses on "narratives" offered by priests at funerals that reconnect the bereaved with the deceased. The research is based on interviews with priests in Gifu, Chiba, and Okinawa Prefectures. This paper deals in particular with the case of practices by priests of the Jōdo Shinshō sect of Buddhism, who have actively employed "narrative" to connect the bereaved with the deceased. In these narratives, which are offered at funerals, priests treat the dead as a variety of different entities, giving them a multivalence that allows the bereaved to understand the deceased in new ways. For example, in the case of some Buddhist priests, the deceased is referred to as a single, precious, irreplaceable entity, as well as a way in which the bereaved can be connected with Amida Buddha or the Buddhist tradition. In this way, the narratives offered by priests may be seen as part of the process of helping the bereaved to reunite with the deceased.

Keywords funeral, Buddhism, priest, bereavement, narrative

1. Introduction

1.1 Aim

Japan has become a hyper-aging society more quickly than other countries have. Since 2018, its death rate has exceeded its birthrate (Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, 2019), so people must increasingly face the bereavement of family members and acquaintances. Additionally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, people had to say goodbye to the deceased without being able to experience any real sense of bereavement; instead they sensed an "ambiguous loss" and were deprived of a place to share the grief of bereavement with others. As a result of these experiences, there was a realization that a "proper parting" with the deceased would improve the subsequent relationship between the bereaved and the

deceased.

The loss of a loved one presents a tremendous challenge to survivors' identities and worldviews, significantly impacting their lives thereafter (Setou, 2016). Research on bereavement grief has been conducted in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, mortality, and sociology. In a Western study of bereavement, attitudes toward bereavement grief changed dramatically around the 1990s. Previous to this, the goal of coping with bereavement grief was to detach from the relationship with the deceased and to live a new life without the deceased (Marwit & Klass, 1995). But in recent years, the emphasis has shifted to "continuing bonds", in which the relationship between the survivor and the deceased is maintained (Silverman & Klass, 1996). In other

words, the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased now tends to be viewed as transformative but continuing.

The “Continuing bonds” model was developed further by Walter (1996). He emphasizes the importance of talking to others who had known the deceased. The process of sharing old memories with them, and learning new or previously unknown information enables the bereaved to develop a broader understanding of how the deceased influenced and contributed to the lives and identities of others (Walter, 1996). In short, the importance of talking to others about the deceased in order to examine the continuing bond between the bereaved and the deceased came to be accepted.

According to Ōkochi Daihaku, a priest of Jōdo shū, each time people speak with others about the deceased, they “reunite” with the deceased. Ōkochi explains that when people do so, they “reunite” with the deceased in way that differs from the connection held when he or she was alive, and a sense of continued coexistence is felt (Ōkochi, 2019).

Do priests participate in this process of reunion between the bereaved and the deceased through funerals? This article focuses on the “narrative” offered by priests at funerals that reconnects the bereaved with the deceased. Specifically, by focusing on *hōwa* 法話, a Buddhist sermon addressed to a congregation, I will clarify what kind of existence the deceased has, according to some priests, and which they use to refer to the deceased in the narratives they offer at funerals. By examining the ways in which priests refer to the deceased, I will suggest that the deceased is not just mourned unilaterally by the bereaved. Also, I will discuss the ways in which priests are themselves affected by the bereaved and the deceased.

1.2 Objective and Methods

Funerals are rituals that deal with death and the deceased. They involve not only the disposal of the corpse, but also a series of rites that span a certain period of time before and after the person’s death (Uchibori, 1987). In this article, funerals are understood as a system of rites that can span decades, from the deathbed period

to that of mourning.

This article deals in particular with the case of Jōdo Shinshū. This is because this sect has actively employed “narrative” to connect the bereaved with the deceased (Kawashima, 2011). Additionally, it understands the deceased to be an influential presence for the bereaved (Ōkuno, 2021). The research is based on interviews with priests in Gifu, Chiba, and Okinawa Prefectures. The interviews were conducted from March 2021 to October 2023.

2. Review of Previous Studies

2.1 Bereavement and “Narrative”

The “narrative” is a “thing that is alive, a thing that comes to life, a thing that is born,” and is “born in the here and now through co-generation between the narrator and the listener” (Yamada, 2021).

The “narrative” has also the function of building bridges and relating things (Nakai, 2016; Murayama, 2009). Are narratives needed? Psychologist Yamada Yōko states that loss is the most typical situation in which life stories are created. She points out that people tend to tell life stories when the crack between the self and the other grows larger, because a mechanism of the mind that makes some sense of self and other by connecting them is necessary (Yamada, 2007). Bereavement, a kind of loss, severs the previous relationship that was between the living and the living. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a new relationship between the bereaved and the deceased, or to find meaning that makes sense of the fact of bereavement. In other words, the bereavement is a situation where narratives are needed. Kawashima (2011), through his empirical study of Jōdo Shinshū priests in their old age, points out that Jōdo Shinshū priests use narratives about the Pure Land as a way of making sense of death, thereby creating the sense of connection between the living and the deceased and alleviating bereavement grief (Kawashima, 2011). It has been suggested that narratives such as “I will see the deceased again” or “the deceased is waiting for me” (in the afterlife) have the function of easing the bereavement grief of the bereaved.

2.2 Content Focused on in *Hōwa* at Funerals

Hōwa are given not only at funerals, but also at temple events, monthly visits and on various other occasions. According to the results of a recent survey, when a number of priests were asked which *hōwa* subjects they considered important at funerals, the most common response by survey takers was “the meaning of the deceased’s Buddhist precepts,” followed by “how to accept death and how to live in the future,” with both items accounting for nearly 60% each. “The teachings of Buddhism and other religious sects” and “the deceased’s life and lifestyle” were each selected by less than 50% of the respondents, while “explanations of funerals and sutras” and “where the deceased will go after death” remained in the 20% range (Isobe, 2023). In the funerals held immediately after bereavement, the *hōwa* tend to focus on the future life of the bereaved as well as their feelings toward the deceased, while also referring to doctrines and to the deceased before their death. Of the options in this survey, the three most common references to the dead were “the meaning of the precepts,” “the deceased’s life and the way he/she lived it,” and “where the deceased will go after his/her death”. It should be pointed out that there are various ways of referring to the dead, depending on the kind of image of the deceased that is held.

2.3 The Importance of *Hōwa* in Jōdo Shinshū

The funerals of Jōdo Shinshū differ in ritual structure from those of many other sects. The funerals of most sects consider *jukai* 受戒 (transmitting the precepts) and *indō* 引導 (guiding the deceased to Buddhahood) to be the central rites because the deceased is made a disciple of the Buddha and is brought to Buddhahood through the induction realized in these rituals. On the other hand, in Jōdo Shinshū, these are not necessary because all who sincerely trust in Amitābha are guaranteed rebirth in his Pure Land (Fujii et al., 1980). This difference is closely related to some doctrines taught by Jōdo Shinshū, for example *fuekō* 不回向 (no need for merit transference on the part of the practitioner), *furaigō* 不来迎 (no need to rely on Amida’s coming in welcome to be assured of birth in the Pure Land) and

genshō shōjōju 現生正定聚 (entering the company of the rightly settled in the present life) (Gamaike, 2013). According to these doctrines, priests do not give *kaimyō* 戒名 (posthumous Buddhist names) to the deceased, nor do they present teachings to the deceased aimed at guiding them toward realization of enlightenment, nor do they perform any rites that are thought to have that function. Funerals in Jōdo Shinshū are to all intents and purposes a place of gratitude and thanksgiving to Amida Nyorai for the salvation of both the deceased and the bereaved, and a place where the bereaved and members of the congregation encounter Dharma connections (Honganjī Institute of Buddhist Music and Ritual, ed., 2014).

Thus, it can be explained that in many traditional Buddhist sects, with the exception of Jōdo Shinshū, priests have the privileged position of transferring the deceased to the other world through the giving of precepts and guidance. However, in the case of Jōdo Shinshū, it is more difficult than in other sects to indicate the position of priests in funerals, because of the doctrine that the transition to the other world is guaranteed through faith in Amida Buddha and not through the ritual intervention of the priests. This difficulty, however, has also provided an opportunity for Jōdo Shinshū priests to demonstrate their significance to the people through their words, and has encouraged the use of *hōwa*. *Hōwa* at funerals could be seen as an important opportunity to provide people with narratives that encourage the reconstruction of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased.

3. Case Studies

This chapter discusses what each priest keeps in mind when offering *hōwa* at funerals. In particular, I will focus on the way they position and refer to the deceased in an existential way.

3.1 Cases of The Priests of Temples A and B in Gifu Prefecture

In this section, I discuss a case study from the Seinō region of Gifu Prefecture. In recent years, “family funerals” (private family wakes and funerals) have been

increasing in this area. In addition, some people in this area are conducting “direct funerals” or “non-religious funerals”, that is, funerals without religious officiants. On the other hand, there are cases in which funeral service providers have proposed funerals involving priests to a chief mourner who had initially opted for a funeral without priests.

The case of the priest of Temple A is discussed first: the priest of Temple A makes three important points. The first is that the deep suffering and grief experienced at funerals offers the greatest chance to encounter the Buddha and the Dharma. To put another way, the grief caused by the bereavement of an irreplaceable person can provide a point of contact between bereaved people and Buddhism. Second, the dead are the ones who convey important messages to bereaved people. Third, the bereaved may “reunite” with the deceased after the bereavement. What does it mean to “reunite” with the deceased here? According to the priest of Temple A, the deceased is a guide who leads the bereaved to the Buddha and serves as an intermediary in connecting the bereaved to the Buddha.

The following is a case study of the priest of Temple B. He also raises three significant points. First, he argues that the dead are beings who have exerted some influence on the bereaved through their involvement in life. Based on this view, he explains the origin of *hōmyō* 法名 (Buddhist name) in *hōwa*, conveying to the bereaved that the deceased affects the present state of the bereaved him or herself. Second, he points out that *hōwa* are opportunities for the bereaved to “meet” the deceased and, furthermore, to encounter the *nembutsu* teaching through the deceased. In the *hōwa* at the funeral, when the priest of Temple B encounters the deceased or the bereaved for the first time, he only talks about the origin of the *hōmyō* and some standardized topics. On the other hand, when he has become acquainted with the deceased through the monthly memorial service, he mentions in *hōwa* the personality of the deceased as experienced by him, which the bereaved family may not know. This is because he hopes that the bereaved persons who hear this will have an occasion to remember the character of the deceased. Third, he notes that he thinks priests act

as a conduit between *Hotoke-san* and people related to the deceased.

Thus, from the information given by the priests of Temple A and Temple B, it is possible to extract the keyword “reunite” (with the deceased) as one of the roles played by the priests in funerals. What exactly does “reunite” mean? In the next section, I will refer to the case study of the priest of Temple R, who spoke specifically about this.

3.2 *The Case of the Priest of Temple R in Chiba Prefecture*

In this section, I examine a case study of Temple R. Temple R is located in Sakura City, Chiba Prefecture. In this area, there are only a few Jōdo Shinshū temples; most are of other sects. Temple R began religious activities at its current location in 1994.

Because few people in the area understand the doctrine of Jōdo Shinshū, he explains in *hōwa* that Jōdo Shinshū takes a different view from other sects regarding “memorial services”. In particular, with regard to ancestral memorial services, many sects treat ancestors as beings who have not yet become buddhas. Only when bereaved people make offerings and perform good deeds can the deceased finally become buddhas. In Jōdo Shinshū doctrine, on the other hand, the deceased have already become buddhas. They are referred to as beings who have become “disciples of the Buddha” and relay to the living “teachings for leading their lives and the content of [Amida’s] aspiration”.

Furthermore, the priest speaks about the positioning of the dead not only in *hōwa* at funerals but also in Buddhist memorial services. Many sects teach that a deceased person becomes a Buddha only after all the sins of his or her life are erased through memorial services that take place up to the 49th day after death. In Jōdo Shinshū, in contrast, it is assumed that the deceased has already become a buddha and has delivered the teachings and wishes of Amida Buddha to the bereaved. By taking the wishes of Amida Buddha delivered through the mediation of the deceased who acts as a guide, the bereaved is able to consider how to live their lives without the deceased.

However, this priest had an experience of being at a loss for words when a bereaved person asked him the following question: Can a person who exhibited bad conduct in life become a disciple of the Buddha? His experience suggests the following: as a priest, he is in a position to understand and convey the doctrine. However, he is sometimes affected by questions from the bereaved that make him doubt what he has always believed, and this causes him to reconsider his previous understanding of the doctrine.

3.3 *The Case of the Priest of Temple H in Okinawa Prefecture*

In this section, I discuss the case of a priest of Temple H in Okinawa Prefecture. One of the characteristics of Buddhist temples in Okinawa Prefecture is that people do not have a fixed relationship with a specific temple. In other words, in Okinawa Prefecture, there is no hard and fast rule regarding the temple from which priests for funerals and memorial services should be summoned.

In Okinawa Prefecture, where the *danka system* 檀家制度 was not implemented, Temple H began religious activities in 1993. This article focuses on one of several priests belonging to Temple H. He is a male in his late thirties, who lost his father when he was only three months old.

First, we will look at episodes of his own experiences of reunion. He relates that he was once asked by a woman in her 80s at a funeral for his father's name. When he provided her with the name, the woman responded, "Just as I thought. I used to work with your father. Your father was" (such and such a person). As a person who had interacted with his late father, she recounted his father's life and the circumstances surrounding his passing. After recounting this episode, the priest said, "I reunited with my deceased father in such situation". He went on to say, "I wonder if people reunite with each other by hearing stories from priests and others. Both the deceased and the living." His statement suggests the following two points. First, the act of talking about the deceased causes a state of "reunion" between people. Second, when considering the matter of whom is reuniting with whom, it is assumed that it

may be between the deceased and the bereaved, or between bereaved people.

Next, I will examine in a little more detail the situation that he describes as "reuniting" with the deceased. He points out that "reuniting" with the deceased is not merely about being told previously unknown information about the personality of the deceased. His information suggests that there are at least two phases to the situation he refers to with the term "reuniting" (with the deceased). One of these phases is the acquisition of knowledge of a new aspect of the deceased. This is possible through hearing what others have to say about the deceased. The other phase is the experience of gratitude toward the deceased, gratitude for the fact that the present self exists at the end of a network of relationships that the deceased had developed with others, and that the deceased exists as a being that forms the present self. In this way, the priest of Temple H suggests that there are two phases of "reuniting" with the deceased.

4. *Hōwa at Funerals*

4.1 *Ways of Referring to the Deceased*

In this section, I will organize my findings regarding how each priest refers to the existence of the dead in his funeral *hōwa*. The priest of Temple R refers directly in his *hōwa* to the positioning of those who have passed away. He describes them as one of the myriad buddhas and as a disciple of the Buddha. He explains that the dead are beings that offer the bereaved the teachings and aspiration of Amida Buddha, that is, teachings and guidance for living their lives. In the case of the priest of Temple A, the dead are referred to as entities that will connect the bereaved with Amida Buddha. In the case of the priest of Temple B, the dead are said to be beings who have exerted some influence on the bereaved through their involvement during their lives, and who continue to influence the present state of the bereaved. He also points out that the dead are the connection by which the bereaved encounter the *nembutsu*. In these narratives offered at funerals, priests treat the dead as a variety of different entities, giving them a multivalence that allows the bereaved to understand the deceased in new ways. For example, in the cases of some Buddhist

priests, the dead are referred to as single, precious, irreplaceable entities, as well as one of the myriad buddhas and as entities that will connect the bereaved with Amida Buddha or the Buddhist tradition.

The testimony of the priest of Temple H sheds important light on the process of “reuniting” with the deceased: From his statements, we can see that there are two stages to it. The first stage is to discover new aspects of the deceased through what others have said about him or her. The second stage is a state in which one’s present self is shaped by the deceased and gratitude is aroused for their existence.

What emerges from the Jōdo Shinshū priests’ narratives is not only an image of the deceased mourned by the living, but rather an image of the deceased that influences the living. The dead are referred to here as beings that reveal the meaning of life through their own death to the bereaved persons who must continue to live on. Nor do the dead only influence bereaved people’s pasts through their pre-bereavement interactions. If past interactions are taken as constituting some part of the bereaved people in the present, the dead may even be considered as involved in their present. In this way, the deceased can be seen as an entity that is involved in the past, present, and future of the bereaved.

4.2 *Hōwa as Narrative*

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, bereavement of an irreplaceable person causes deep grief to the bereaved. The importance of the function of narrative in alleviating bereavement grief was mentioned in 2.1. Again, narrative is first of all an act of bridging as well as having the effect of creating new ways of relating. When narrative is used to create a new relationship, the form in which it is expressed is quite important. Even if the same content is conveyed, the impression received by the listener will differ depending on whether it is conveyed in a logical or an emotional manner. In funerals, the *hōwa* is told narratively, with both aspects. On the one hand, the priest speaks to the emotions of the bereaved, using anecdotes and references to the personal life of the deceased, or examples from other contexts, in order to help the bereaved

confront the serious fact of death. On the other hand, it is also necessary that its delivery be persuasive and logical. This is because a logical approach offers a way of accepting the death of an irreplaceable person. *Hōwa* are formed by interweaving these two elements.

Narrative is, secondly, a living thing that is constructed in the here and now. It is produced as a result of the mutual action of the narrator and the listener. *Hōwa* at funerals are seen as something constructed in the time and space of the funeral, which is a one-time event. The mutually interactive influences of the priest, the bereaved people, the attendees, and even the deceased result in the generation of an ad hoc *hōwa*. The case study of the priest of Temple B revealed that the contents of the *hōwa* were influenced by whether or not he had met the deceased or the bereaved. He mentions the meaning of the *hōmyō* in every *hōwa* at funerals, but he discusses the character of the deceased only when he knows the deceased or the bereaved well. The case of the priest of Temple R shows how the priest’s own understanding of the doctrine was shaken by questions from the bereaved family, forcing him to reconsider the teachings. *Hōwa* at funerals are formed at the time and site of the funeral and delivered in a raw language. Therefore, the tone in which it is delivered and the individual characteristics of the person who offers it are critical.

5. Conclusion

As described above, analysis of the data collected in Gifu, Chiba, and Okinawa prefectures revealed that a sense of a continuation of the bond with the deceased is maintained through the medium of narratives presented in funeral *hōwa*. In these narratives, priests treat the dead as multilayered beings. For example, in the case of one priest, the deceased is one irreplaceable deceased person, one of a great number of buddhas, and an intermediary between the Buddha and the bereaved family. Thus, the narrative provided by priests can be seen as part of the process of reunion with the deceased.

Although this article focused on *hōwa* by Jōdo Shinshū priests, further analysis of the content of *hōwa* by priests of other sects is required in order to compare

the results with those presented in this article. In addition, by interviewing bereaved people, it will be possible to examine whether they feel that the narrative function of *hōwa* contributes to the alleviation of their grief.

Note

A part of this article is based on Isobe (2022). It also benefits from a research grant from the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research and Research Activity Start-up Support (22K20204).

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