

## Death, and After

*From Social to Ecological Immortality: Ancestor Worship, Ecological Cemeteries, and Identity in Contemporary Japanese Society.*

Sebastien Boret

Ancestor worship and the household (*ie*) have been known as two prominent icons of Japanese identity. Ritual for the ancestors at the family grave maintains the continuity (i.e. social immortality) and identity of Japanese families and its members. Since the 1990s, however, the *ie* and the ancestral grave system have faced the diversification of family values and structures, unprecedentedly low birth-rates and new ideas of identity and death. In response, a proliferation of new funeral forms is taking place. One of the most innovative ways of celebrating death is tree burial (*jumokusō*). For '*jumokusō*' the usual gravestone is replaced by a tree and the burial ground becomes a vast forestland (i.e. ecological cemeteries). This ecologically informed practice is not based on family ties but instead preserves the identity of the individual after death. This paper first examines the centrality of individual identity among adherents of tree-burial. Secondly, it argues that for tree-burial members social immortality (i.e. ancestor worship) has given way to ecological immortality.

*Death: Ritual Response to the Loss of Charismatic Leaders.*

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This paper examines the ritual response of the Buddhism-based new religion, Shinnyōen, to the death of its founder, Ito Shinjō. The death of a founder figure is a critical point in the life of any religion for it is at this point that most movements shift their focus from charisma to doctrine. This shift, if not handled properly may lead to schism or even dissolution. Based on analysis of both the media and Shinnyoen's publications, I will argue that Shinnyoen's ritual response to Ito's death *facilitate* such a shift making it a vital element of religious crisis management. Heavily influenced by the founder's own teachings about death, the response included formalizing changes to the ritual calendar and the pantheon as well as easing the shift to new leadership, effectively creating an environment that allowed the movement to survive the death of its founder.

*Vitality and Pollution: Scattering Coins in Japanese Mortuary Rituals.*

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In the Ibaraki prefecture, after the funeral and just before their departure for the grave, members of the bereaved household scatter coins (*makisen*) to the assembled people. As if it is a competition, the coins are picked up by community members, guests and onlookers. On their way back home, using the coins they managed to pick up, they buy soft drinks such as bottled green tea and fruit juice and drink them or take them home for other family members. By doing so, it is suggested that they will be blessed with good health, rejuvenation and a long life.

However, they must spend all their coins on that day and must never take them into their houses, because the coins are considered to be extremely contaminated by death pollution and thus, may cause harm to other household members. In this paper, I shall explore the action of scattering coins and its relation to the distribution of ‘vitality’ and ‘pollution’.

*Fields of Ghosts: Making Meaning of Religious Narratives, Memory and Identity in Contemporary Mutsu.*

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Mutsu むつ (Aomori Prefecture) is the closest city to Osorezan 恐山. This mountain is considered to be an actual afterlife, in which spirits of the deceased gather. This belief has produced a number of ghost (*yūrei* 幽霊) stories, set not only on the mountain, but also along the street that connects the mountain to the temple that manages it – Entsūji 円通寺 in Mutsu – and in particular places within the city. People in Mutsu debate ghost stories in public spaces, thus making them a part of public culture, representative of shared values, social memory and construction of identity. Stories of vengeful spirits symbolically identify liminal areas, that, in many cases, are linked back to a Korean presence in the area during World War II. Reporting the data I collected through fieldwork, my presentation will focus on this complex ideoscape, in order to understand how symbolic narratives and socio-economic dynamics determine the “fields of possibility”, in which the meaning of religious symbolism is negotiated in the interactions among people in contemporary Mutsu.

*Kuyō Egaku: Folk Visions of the Afterlife In Nineteenth Century Iwate, Rediscovered*  
Christopher Thompson

Since ancient times, Japanese have utilized a variety of talismanic objects to mediate their earthly existence with the spiritual realm. Among the most colorful and abundant of these are *ema* - votive portraits - found at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples all across Japan. Most Japan scholars agree that a majority of Japanese votive paintings, like those in other parts of the world, constitute a mode of problem solving, crisis prevention, and/or thanksgiving, rarely addressing the topic of death. Then, in 2001, a long forgotten variety of votive portraiture was rediscovered in a remote corner of northeastern Honshū. Dubbed *kuyō egaku* (“mourning picture frames”), this form of *ema*, once prevalent in central Iwate prefecture, challenges popular scholarly notions about the nation’s spiritual heritage regarding death, the afterlife, and the connection of the living to both. This paper articulates the significance of this finding for understanding, *ema*, spirituality, and folk culture in Japan’s northeast.

*The Osutaka Pilgrimage: Remembering the Victims of the Flight JL123 Crash*

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On 12 August 1985, Japan Air Lines flight JL123 took off from Haneda bound for Itami Airport. An explosion was heard 12 minutes into its flight. Some wrote final messages. The plane finally crashed 32 minutes after the initial explosion. 524 crew and passengers were on board the

Boeing 747. When rescue teams finally reached the crash site, all but 4 people were dead. JL123 is Japan's and the aviation world's equivalent to the *Titanic*. It remains the world's largest single plane crash in terms of human fatalities. Today Osutaka-no-one, as the crash site is now known, and the village of Ueno, in which the site it located, are the focal point for a variety of events which take place to mark the anniversary of the tragedy. This paper will look at the way in which the dead are remembered and consider a variety of issues relating to pilgrimage.