photo by hjl (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Fabienne Duteil-Ogata, Isabelle Jonveaux, Liliane Kuczynski, Sophie Nizard (Eds.)

Le religieux sur Internet / Religion on the Web

Proceedings of the Conference by the French Association for the Social Sciences of Religion

Institute for
Religious Studies

University
of Heidelberg

Table of Contents

New Funeral Practices in Japan

From the Computer-Tomb to the Online Tomb

Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

Translation: Gabrielle Varro

Abstract

Since the 1990's, Japan has seen its funeral practices become increasingly diverse. New forms appear which will simplify or replace traditional Buddhist practices. Less expensive, these new funeral practices stress the separation between the space of ashes and the space of worship practices, which means a dematerialization of the deceased person. The case study of computer-tomb becoming an online-tomb is a good example of this trend. After a quick overview on Japanese traditional funeral practices to illustrate the context of the computer and online-tombs, I examine in details the features of computer-tomb and online-tombs of several persons and answer to those questions. Are those practices considered as Buddhist practices? How can reality and virtuality be connected together? How is the absence of body managed by the computer-tomb and online-tomb? Does the grave-online appear as the ultimate answer to the funeral proceedings - on a physical and spiritual level - in the Japanese funeral approach?

Keywords

Buddhism, funeral practices, online tomb, Japan, ancestor worship, collective tombs for eternal Buddhist rituals

"And what would you say about ordinateur? The word is correctly formed,
and can even be found in the Littré as an adjective for God
putting the world in order."

Jacques Perret, professor of Latin philology at IBM France
(letter of June 16, 1955), p. 67 *in* Aurélien Bellanger,
La théorie de l'information Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

1　Introduction

Since the 1990s in Japan, funeral practices have diversified and new ways of funerary practices have emerged, though as yet they remain in the minority (Duteil-Ogata, 2012). Often the new ways depend on the fact that the space dedicated to the burial is separated from the space allotted to religious ritual, which ends up by generating a multitude of representations of the deceased. The computer-tomb with access to the internet – on its way to becoming exclusively an online tomb – is a case in point.

Based on on-going fieldwork, this article scrutinizes the two types of tombs. Do they actually imply new religious practices and if so, do they interfere with the ones existing off-line and how is the absence of body compensated for in the new ways of burying the dead?

After a rapid overview of traditional Japanese funeral practices (off-line) – which should allow us to visualize the environments of virtual and online graves – I will attempt to show the differences or on the contrary the continuity prevailing with respect to offline practices, as well as what the new systems are producing. My data is drawn from the evidence provided by the initiator of the new systems, or by the individuals who actually put them to use.

2　Traditional offline funeral practices in Japan

It must first be remembered that traditional Japanese religion is based on syncretism; over time it has assimilated the two major religious traditions, Shintoism and Buddhism. The first are animists and polytheists: in Shintoism, men, gods, nature and objects are all of an identical nature because driven by the same vital forces (*tama*), thereby creating an ontological continuity. Shintoism stresses the immanence of the world and concentrates on life on earth, even though according to its eschatology, the deceased becomes first an ancestor, then a tutelary divinity. The eschatology of

Buddhism is more elaborate, consisting in individual "salvation-liberation" wherein the deceased is usually designated by the term *hotoke*, a word that means both the deceased and buddha (every deceased person is a potential buddha). Buddhism thus takes over the burial practices that Shinto abandoned, considering death a state of extreme pollution in contradiction with the purity of its deities. The process of "ancestralization" is therefore a Buddhist competence; however, at the end of the ritual cycle, on condition the Buddhist rites were carried out according to rule, the ancestor can also enter the Shinto pantheon and become a protector of his/her original community and answer people's desires (Yanagita, 1988).

Thus, thanks to a series of ancestral rites generally lasting thirty-three or fifty years – depending on which Buddhist school of thought is being followed[1] – the deceased becomes an individualized ancestor. He/she posthumously takes on a Buddhist name and as ancestor, protects the family line. The various rituals allowing the process to be implemented are carried out by the monks in the Buddhist temples.

Traditionally, families affiliated from generation to generation in the male line to a specific Buddhist temple participate in its economic livelihood by contributing to funeral expenses (550.000 yens),[2] as well as to the ceremony confirming the posthumous name (*kaimyo*) (250.000 yens), to the many post-mortem rituals, and to tending the grave in the temple's graveyard (photo n° 1). The families generally form an association that, assisted by one of the monks, manages the goods of the monastic community.

Another reason why Buddhism was directly related to the treatment of deceased dates back to Edo period (1603– 1868) when the Tokugawa Shoguns legally decided to delegate the task of constituting registers of the whole population to Buddhist temples all over Japan, and requested that every household be affiliated with a local Buddhist temple and proceed to hold a Buddhist funeral and perform postmortem rituals (Tamamuro, 1997). The relationship between Japanese family and their local Buddhist temple still persists, being based on parishioner membership (*danka seido*, parishioner system).

Without going into details, here are a few indications concerning the basic funeral practices that punctuate the process of ancestralization. When a person dies, 98% of the time they are cremated (Picone, M 2007). After a mourning period of forty-nine days, punctuated by rituals every seven days, the urn (holding the ashes and bones) is placed in the family tomb in the graveyard of the Buddhist temple. A mortuary tablet (*ihai*), engraved with the posthumous name of the deceased, is then placed in the domestic Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) of the family home of the designated

---

1 Most of the Buddhist schools perform ancestral rites until thirty-three years, but Jôdoshinsû is an exception performing the last ancestor ritual to fifty years or one hundred years, (Shintani, T & Sekisawa, M, 2005, p. 275).
2 In 2013, one euro was worth *ca*. 145 yens. Thus, a donation for a funeral came to approximately 3,800 euros, a considerable amount in Japan.

religious heir (photo n° 2), along with the funeral portrait of the deceased (*iei*), both slightly above the rest of the display. Thus, the burial rites are carried out in two separate places: at the tomb on the grounds of the temple where the remains of the deceased are deposited (photo n° 1) and at the Buddhist altar of the family home (photo n° 2).

Post-mortem rituals guarantee the process of ancestralization. Honoring the ancestors at the Buddhist family altar and the "visit to the grave" (*ohaka mairi*) are the most important funeral practices. The number of visits to the grave and/or of rituals at the family altar of course vary from one household to the next, but generally speaking, the monk performing a ceremony at the tomb and/or in front of the family altar follows two calendars:

1.   the timetable directly connected to the anniversary of the death, which starts right after the wake and extends over a period of thirty-three or fifty/one hundred years, the rituals being carried out once a month the first year, then spread out over time: they are scheduled on the third, fifth, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-fifth, twenty-seventh and thirty-third year.

2.   the calendar of yearly rituals which is the same for all the deceased. They take place during the Spring equinox in mid-March, the Autumn equinox in mid-September, and during the "summer festival of the dead" (*obon*) on July 15th or August 15th (depending of area).

At the end of the commemorative rituals, the deceased has lost his/her individual identity, and the mortuary tablet enshrined in the Buddhist family altar is removed. It is donated to the Buddhist temple to which the family is affiliated, or buried in the graveyard, or thrown in the flames or the river (Shintani, T & Sekisawa, M, 2005). Also, the funeral photograph is withdrawn from the domestic space. Thus, only the tomb remains to perpetuate the trace of the deceased engraved in stone, and the actual presence of the body after the process of ancestralization.

The visits to the grave of the deceased can obviously take place on days other than those set by the two calendars, to burn incense, refresh the flowers, tend the grave and say a prayer. The same goes for worshiping the ancestors at the Buddhist family altar (offerings of tea, cooked rice, fruit or cakes, incense, flowers) that also take place every day. But it must be admitted that in our day the tomb is often located in the ancestor's place of birth, far from the large cities where the families in charge of worshiping the ancestors live, which means that such visits become less frequent. Also, the lack of space of urban housing hardly allows everyone to accommodate the Buddhist family altar (*butsudan*) (photo n° 2) in the room containing the tatamis (*butsuma*) (Duteil-Ogata, 2013), despite its size to be reduced to its most basic elements. Another factor challenging ancestor worship and other such traditional practices is the growing number of childless people or parents who do not want to impose long and costly customs upon their descendents.

3   The first virtual tomb with access to the internet (*dennôhaka*)

The concept of "virtual tomb" developed by the Buddhist monk Matsushima Nyokai, head of the Kudoku temple of the Shingon school in Tokyo and presented in his book *The revolution of the tomb on the Internet - Virtual tombs*, (Matsushima, N 1997) attempts to respond to these societal changes.

He explains in his preface that since the second half of the 1980s Japan has been confronted by a "cremation revolution". Technology permits raising the temperature to 1000° Celsius, so that the body is totally consumed, the bones decomposed and the DNA no longer identifiable. According to him, humanity is entering a new era: "a new time of funerals without bones", marked by the end of individual identification; tombs and cemeteries have become completely useless. To make up for the absence of individuality, he imagined a solution applying digital technology: the computer and the Internet allow recording individual memories and information thanks to sound, imagery and text. Personal data is thus archived in a virtual space, instead and in place of DNA. The "computer-tomb with access to the Internet" was born (photo n° 3).

Practical implementation

Available to all, without distinction of faith or creed, this tomb is placed in the precinct of the temple and, since 2006, offers unrelated individuals the possibility to subscribe to a personal, thirty-three year contract during their lifetime. The set price is kept down to a minimum (250.000 yens), and includes the safekeeping of the ashes, performing the "everlasting rituals", a 90-second personalized digital sequence, rights to access the tomb (by smartcard or password) and the choice of visitors. The option to access the internet has existed since 2009 but in 2011 only a dozen people had chosen to do so.

In other words, computer-tombs fall into the category of *eitai kuyôbo* "collective tombs for eternal Buddhist rituals" (Butsuji Gaido Henshubu, 2007), not into the category of family tombs. Therefore what we are dealing with here is the respect owed to the deceased but not the tradition of ancestor worship: no heir is assigned, no procedure of ancestralization undertaken; the everlasting rituals are simply performed by the monks in the temple the 3rd of each month, in order to appease the dead (photo n° 3). It should nevertheless be noted that the duration of the contract is fixed at thirty-three years, the traditional Buddhist time-span for the ancestralization process. Another consequence is that there is no association of families belonging to the parish of the Buddhist temple, nor any meetings organized – which does not make it easy for the ethnologist to make contacts …

One meter-twenty high, like a traditional headstone (photo n° 1), the tomb nevertheless has the convex shape of a contemporary grave. Part of the ashes of each of the subscribers are encased

in the collective receptacle placed to the rear of the computer. The rest is deposited at the main Kudoku temple in Beppu, in the island of Kyushu in the South of Japan. Despite its collective character, the person's individuality is at the heart of the system. The digital sequence, for instance, partly preformatted, gives the subscriber the opportunity to compose his/her own self-portrait using written and visual data.

The sequence representing the monk's dead mother can be freely accessed on the temple's website.[3] The first slide shows her given name, her posthumous Buddhist name, her dates of birth and death. Compared to a classical tomb, that is a first transformation. For, though generally those four elements of biographical information are engraved on traditional tombs, they are secondary and relegated to the rear or side of the headstone. What immediately appears on the face of a traditional tomb, in large letters, is not individual data but the name of the family, of the family group, of the house (*ie*).

Furthermore, on this computer-tomb the scriptural presentation of those four facts can be personalized:[4] the wallpaper can be selected among several depicting the beyond (clouds, the sea), or the seasons (floral patterns such as cherry trees in bloom, or reeds). Likewise, the direction of the writing can vary (top to bottom, following the order of traditional script, or left to right, following the order of modern writing), it can occupy both sides of the photograph or one side only. To this necrological information, the person is free to deliver, on a supplementary page, the message he/she desires, a sort of testimonial as it were.

The second element chosen by the subscriber is visual: the photograph. Two registers are available: the traditional funeral portrait (*iei*) and the photo album.[5] The portrait of the deceased can be framed in black as was the traditional funeral photo, or simply reproduced. It should be noted that choosing portraits to represent the human, highlighting the face (seat of the five senses), is meaningful: the deceased once again belongs to the world of feeling and, thanks to the magic of photography that captured a fleeting expression, lives on in the portrait. The other pictures, limited to four, are arranged on one page, like in a photo album, composing a visual narrative.[6] In chronological order, the series of photographs form a significant whole, illustrating different periods of the life of the deceased. The narrative generally focuses on the family or life in the neighborhood. The other parts of the digital sequence are preformatted and identical for all the subscribers. Access is available on the spot in the Kudoku temple by inserting a card in the computer-tomb or *via* the internet by entering a code.

---

3   Cf. http://www.haka.co.jp/CyberStoneInfo/profile/display.html consulted June 13, 2013.
4   Ibid.
5   Ibid.
6   Ibid.

Crystalline music accompanies the 90-second visit from beginning to end. Against a background of lotus flowers,[7] the visitor is instructed to insert his/her card or code. Four landscapes representing the four seasons unfold, that also symbolize the life-cycle: Spring by cherry trees in bloom, Summer by fireworks, Autumn by golden maple leaves, Winter by snow. At the end of the introduction –in which patience is recommended to the visitor – the self-portrait of the deceased appears (his/her photo, the name by which he/she was commonly known, posthumous name, date of birth and death). Then come the four photographs and the deceased person's message; they make up the longest sequence and that is when the visitor can mourn or pray. To terminate the visit, the lotus flowers return to the screen and a standard phrase thanks the visitor and wishes him/her a good return-trip home.[8]

A new representation of the deceased and new post-mortem practices

It must be said that, compared to the non-religious features such as the landscapes, the pictures of the deceased and his/her message, those 90 seconds clearly make little direct reference to Buddhism (one can just about glimpse a hint of symbolism in the lotus flower, and there is of course the posthumous Buddhist name). Even more surprising is the absence of offerings, omnipresent on the virtual tombs of internet websites (because they are very lucrative).[9] The offerings, which constitute the main part of ancestor worship, do not seem necessary in the case of the "computer-tomb" because the aim of the visit is not to contribute to an ancestralization ritual but to appease the deceased and build a new relationship with him/her. I encountered Madame M., 52 years old, and her daughter, 24, during the ceremony performed by the monks on July 3, 2011 (photo n° 3). They explained the choice of tomb as follows:

> "My husband died two years ago, after a long illness, and since we have only one daughter, it is not possible to carry on the ancestor worship (inherited along the male line). So we looked for a collective tomb for eternal worship, and since my husband and I liked this neighborhood, especially when the cherry trees are in bloom, we chose this place …"

Although we come to the temple every month, the 3rd for the ceremony and the 25th for the anniversary of my husband's death, the fact the grave is connected to the internet means we can visit him whenever we want. Internet is part of our everyday life. We can see him on our cell-phones." Her daughter then brought out her portable phone and showed me how easy it was to see her father right then and there and pay him a visit …

---

7   Cf. http://www.haka.co.jp/CyberStoneInfo/profile/application.html consulted June 13, 2013.
8   Ibid.
9   Be it in Japan or elsewhere, one of the economic features of the virtual tomb market is the profit margin of companies at the head of virtual tomb websites selling funerary offerings.

"It's me and my daughter who chose the photos, we chose the pictures before he fell sick. They're family pictures: our wedding, the birth of our daughter ..."

Like others, this declaration reveals that family members, rather than the person when alive, take charge of the pictures and the virtual narrative. Also, though the mediation of the internet does create a different relationship to time, *i.e.* a new temporality – on-the-spot visits to the grave at all hours of day or night, ignoring the rigid order of ritual calendars – people continue to attend the ceremonies on specific dates. Internet connections also generate a different relationship to space; geographic distances seem abolished or reduced due to the immediacy of the connection, physical displacements are theoretically no longer necessary. However, interviewees seem to care about the choice of place of internment (of the concrete tomb), access to the internet does not totally rule out physical displacements (for those who can travel) and virtual visits to the grave continue to take place along with actual visits *in situ* to the computer-tomb.

Concerning the content of post-mortem rituals, a visit to the computer-tomb is more like a remembrance ceremony than a religious ritual; it is the memory of the deceased that is being honored through his/her visual and scriptural representation, even if some religious attributes still endure such as the posthumous Buddhist name or the funeral photograph on the digital sequences, the rituals carried out by the monk in front of the tomb or the offerings of flowers and incense, rare nonetheless (photo n° 3).

4 The second computer-tomb

Having learned from his first experiment, the monk decided in 2009 to open another computer-tomb (photo n° 4). Like the preceding one, it is a collective grave for everlasting worship with a ceremony on the 8th of each month and a thirty-three year concession. Similarly, a part of the ashes is deposited in the computer-tomb in Tokyo, the rest kept in the main temple in Beppu. But differently from the first computer-tomb where accessing the internet was only an option, the second tomb includes access to the internet *via* a PC or portable telephone; it is a bit more expensive but the price remains very reasonable (500,000 yens) compared to a traditional grave. The digital sequence has been simplified, with only three slides remaining: the photo of the deceased – but this time without mentioning the posthumous name – the album of four photos-souvenirs and the deceased's written message. Between March 2009 and December 2010, 67 persons had signed up for this tomb. In July 2011, about 50 others had done so, *i.e.* a total of 130.

Madame K., 71 years old, is one of them. She explains that her husband died in 2010; then, taking a small cloth purse out of her handbag, she shows me her husband's portable mortuary tablet (*ihai*) (photo n° 5). "I have it on me at all times, she adds, he follows me everywhere." The little tablet is part of an option on the contract and quite a successful one according to the monk.

> "I chose this spot, she says, because with my husband we used to walk near the temple and he noticed the cherry trees in bloom. So when I heard about the grave with everlasting worship, I was overjoyed. Some tombs had an access to the internet and I thought to myself, that's the solution! Because my husband's brothers live in the South of Japan in Kagoshima (island of Kyûshû) and in Hiroshima, it's hard for them to visit his grave, one of them can hardly walk anymore. This way, they can visit his grave on-line, I gave them the identifier and the password and sent them to my nephews and nieces too. It's me who chose the photos. My husband loved cats, and that's one of the last pictures of him when he was healthy. For the photo album I chose a picture of him young, then a few more recent ones: his last summer, him and his taxi, he was a taxi driver, and then when he turned sixty (*kanreki*).[10] The message is mine too, I wrote it: 'Yochan loved kids, he was loved and respected by everybody. The fact you're here gives me joy, we became happy and nice thanks to you. Thank you.'"[11]

Here again the digital portrait (photograph and text) was not done by the person during his lifetime but by family members, the message however was meant for the deceased but for the family too. This time, in this new computer-tomb, Buddhist symbolism has completely disappeared: no traditional funeral portrait, no pictures of lotus flowers, no posthumous Buddhist name. But the fact that Madame K. has her husband's portable mortuary tablet (*ihai*) on her at all times – the new practice of handy funeral objects –(Yamasaki, 2007)[12] shows that being physically close to the symbolic Buddhist representation of the deceased remains important. In the same way, she continues to go regularly to the temple in Tokyo to attend the ceremonies if front of the computer-tomb. There again, as with Madame M., virtual visits to the grave are added to the visits *in situ*, they do not cancel them. Which is not the case for the other members of the family, for whom visits to

---

10 "Turning sixty" literally means "the return of the calendar". Originally a Chinese celebration, it marks the end of the cycle of the Zodiac of sixty years of life. On their sixtieth birthday, the person is thus entering the first year of a new cycle and in a way returning to babyhood, which is why they are given a red garment: the homophony of the term "aka-chan" that designates the baby and the color red (aka), is mainly a sort of cape, a bonnet and also a cushion.

11 Author's translation of the original Japanese message:□□□

12 Handy funerary objects belong to the new funeral practices of Japan. Cf. Fabienne Duteil-Ogata, Nouvelles technologies et pratiques funéraires contemporaines, *Japon pluriel* 8, Arles, Philippe Picquier, 2011, p. 302-307. Cf. Fabienne Duteil-Ogata, *L'espace funéraire au Japon, un espace diversifié en pleine mutation: vers un nouveau lexique?*, 2007, 16 p. http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgibin/prog/pform.cgi?langue=fr&Mcenter=colloque&TypeListe=showdoc&email=&password=&ID_document=434.

the tomb boil down to a simple internet connection and only a virtual and memorial visit to the deceased.

5   Cyberstone: the online tomb

Cyberstone aims to be a continuation of the computer-tomb. In 2012 it only attracted a fistful of subscribers. The ashes of the deceased can be placed in one of the temple's many graves for everlasting worship, or deposited in another temple, or scattered out of doors (in the sea, in mountain, river...), (Rowe, M 2003). The online tomb is different from the other two in that it is neither materialized nor associated to a physical computer-tomb and only exists virtually on the web, even though the ashes are enshrined somewhere or scattered in nature.

Though Cyberstone denies any religious connotation, since no cult is performed either *in situ* or virtually, the thirty-three year contract recalls, as in the previous cases, the length of the Buddhist ancestralization process. Cyberstone (200,000 yens) is therefore an internet website. In that, it is reminiscent of many other tombs, imaginary[13] or real (Gamba, F 2007). By signing a contract, subscribers benefit from a personalized homepage as well as an access to the website with identifier and password. And if they agree to leave their homepage on free access, they get a better price.

What is the information that the subscriber can request the temple put on their website? They can ask the temple to create their presentation, including photograph and text. The memorial page can be enhanced by a musical background conducive to meditation. As an option, it is also possible to obtain a page with one's profile laid out in a scroll-down format with pictures and texts, and extra pages with one's biography. A page for the photo-album and others for sound or video are also available, and a page containing information about a place usually located on Google map. This place may be where the remains of the deceased are deposited, or where he/she resided, or any other place. As an example, the demonstration page of the monk who launched the Cyberstone can be consulted on its website.[14] Altogether, the option permits adding 100 megabytes, *i.e.* 10 pages of text in A4 format, 20 photographs, 10 minutes of recorded material or 5 minutes of video. Color and page design are left up to the subscriber who can choose what they like. For the time being, the only

---

13 I should mention the recently published novel by Henri Gé, *Après.com*, Éditions Velours, Paris, 2012. The author imagines a website that would be livelier than a tombstone, where the deceased could deposit his/her voice, photographs, a video and a message so that everyone's life might be available even after their death and leave concrete traces for those who remain behind.

14 http://www.cyber-stone.jp/HP/about.html consulted June 13, 2013.

homepage accessible on the website is the monk's; the other subscribers have not given free access to theirs.[15]

The religious component seems to have completely disappeared from the online tomb; it is merely a homepage on an internet website. As for the second computer-tomb, anything pertaining to Buddhist symbolism has evaporated from the digital sequences: no more posthumous Buddhist name, no more traditional funeral portrait, no more pictures of the lotus. What is more, no Buddhist ritual is performed by the monks in the temple. The ritual has been trimmed down to a simple internet connection and become a memorial visit to the deceased. Buddhism as an institution simply plays the part of IT-manager, or webmaster. Can one still call this religious practice? Is it not simply a memorial service in which only the recollection of the deceased and their informational memory are reactivated and commemorated?

Could one not hypothesize that the monk Matsushima Nyokai and the subscribers have been converted to the cult of the internet, as Philippe Breton has suggested in his analysis (Breton, P 2000)? In which case, they must share the same view of the world according to which truth lies in information, and immortality in technology. In other words, are we not confronted here by a new belief or utopia, where technology alone is capable of immortalizing human beings in the form of computerized data?

6   Conclusion

Each of the three tombs possesses their specific features. All three, however, place the individuality of the deceased and his/her feelings, rather than the family's, at the center of their system. Resting on more diversified supports such as texts, visuals and sound, the representation of the deceased is more artistic and detailed than on a traditional tomb. The text is not limited to obituary data, it also includes copies of the deceased's personal writings or messages from the family, which makes it more intimate and moving. It is both a true narrative, formatted by the temple's webmaster but at the same time created by the person when alive or, more often, by family members, applying an aesthetics that is obvious especially in the layout and choice of wallpaper on the screen. Similarly, the visuals (whether still or moving images) taken when the deceased was still of this world, allow one to cancel out his/her death and bring him/her to life for the visitors, creating a visual narrative, in particular thanks to the use of photo-souvenirs arranged as in a photo album. Video activates another of the five senses: the voice. Because it permits movement, videos represent the body of the

---

15 The persons I asked did not allow me to consult their homepage, even after I reiterated my request to the monk. Such a circumstance complicates things for the ethnologist in the field.

deceased as if it were still alive. Mediation *via* the internet also engenders a different way of relating to time and space. Its immediacy does away with the annual rituals and the calendar of post-mortem rites. The ritual association to time is no longer cyclical, based on ancestor worship passed on from generation to generation; it has become linear and horizontal.

Geographic distance is abolished, one relates to the deceased here and now. The religious components in the systems proposed *via* the internet seem meagre, for little by little, as new versions of the computer-tomb appear, Buddhist symbols disappear. The internet connection comes closer to a memorial service than to real ancestor worship. In fact, it boils down to celebrating what one remembers of the deceased, the recollection of him or her. Yet, for people who live near a temple and can actually go there, the internet does not totally eliminate offline funeral practices. Our interviews show that online cults get tacked on to offline cults, that a continuity between them exists.

It should also be recalled that in Japan, objects, like people, possess vital forces: the mortuary tablet (*ihai*), in which the deceased is symbolically lodged, usually placed in the Buddhist family altar (photo n° 2), is now carried around in one's belongings (photo n° 5), as part of the new practice of having handy funeral objects readily available and desiring greater proximity. It is as if the presence of the deceased, through the *ihai,* is no longer supposed to simply protect the family but rather the person who carries it, like a talisman or relic. Are the computer or cellular phone, when connected *via* the internet to the deceased's homepage, also receptacles for their living presence?

Lastly, let us return to the hypotheses put forth by the creator of this tomb: have they been confirmed? Have graves and cemeteries really become useless? Has the disappearance of DNA been replaced by the digital? One cannot ignore the fact that the users of these new virtual tombs continue to visit offline graves, especially during the rituals; visits to the burial place *in situ* seem to have kept their usefulness. Online practices thus are added on to offline practices, but have not replaced them. In an era of funeral services became without bones or DNA, marked by the end of individual identification, digital technology has in fact allowed compensating for the absence of individuality by recording individuals' memories and information. Thanks to the storage in a virtual place of sounds, visuals and texts, survivors can access these post-mortem digital identities via the internet. Nevertheless, accessing this personal information depends on the evolution of technology over time. To remain accessible and permanent from one generation to the next, digital data require to be constantly converted and adapted to new operating systems and new versions of software. If not, the digital data and their contents will only enlarge the website cemetery and webpages, left fallow, being neither tended nor supervised,[16] will truly end up as "dead pages" (Merzeau, L 2009).

---

16 Cf. http://egoblog.net/2008/11/08/cimetiere-20-chronique-de-tmf-sur-france-culture/ consulted March 13, 2014.

photo n° 1: Traditional Buddhist tomb, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, Japan, May 2012, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata
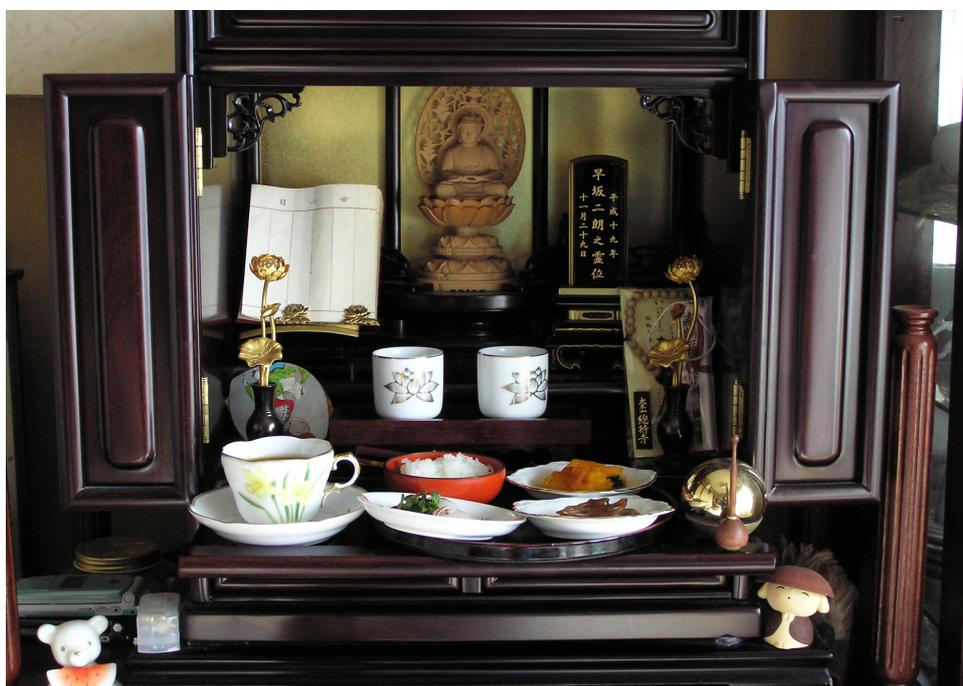

photo n° 2: Buddhist family altar (butsudan): to the left, slightly higher than the rest, the deceased's mortuary tablet (ihai); below, placed on a small table, offerings to the ancestor: tea, cooked rice, and food. Tôkyô, April 2009, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

photo n° 3: Monthly Buddhist ritual performed July 3, 2011 in front of the first computer-tomb, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

photo n° 4: Second computer-tomb, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, July 2011, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

photo n° 5: Madame K. showing me her husband's portable mortuary tablet, Kudoku Temple, Tôkyô, May 2012, photo: Fabienne Duteil-Ogata

Bibliography

Bellanger, A 2012 *La théorie de l'information,* Paris, Gallimard, 486p.

Breton, P 2000 *Le culte de l'internet*, Paris, La découverte, 125p.

Butsuji Gaido Henshubu, 2007 *Eitai kûyo-bo no hon* (Book of Eternal Memorial Graves)*,* Tokyo, Rokugatsu Shobo, 293p.

Duteil-Ogata, F 2007 *L'espace funéraire au Japon, un espace diversifié en pleine mutation: vers un nouveau lexique?* 16 p. http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgibin/prog/pform.cgi?langue=fr&Mcenter=colloque&TypeListe=showdoc&email=&password=&ID_document=434.

Duteil-Ogata, F 2011 'Nouvelles technologies et pratiques funéraires contemporaines' in Berliguez-Kôno, N Thomann, B (eds) *Japon pluriel* 8, Arles, Philippe Picquier, p. 302-307.

Duteil-Ogata, F 2012 'Emerging Burial Spaces and Rituals in Urban Japan', *in* Aveline-Dubach, N (eds.), *Invisible Population - The Place of the Dead In East Asian Megacities*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, p. 50-74.

Duteil-Ogata, F 2013 'Butsuma', *in* Philippe Bonnin, Nishida Masatsugu, Inaga Shigemi (eds), *Le vocabulaire de la spatialité japonaise*, (The Vocabulary of Japanese Spatiality)*, Paris, CNRS éditions, pp. 70-72.

Duteil-Ogata, F 2015 'Technologies and funeral practices in Japan' in Istvan Keul, *Asian Religions, Technology and Science*, New York, Routledge, p. 227-245.

Gamba, F 2007 'Rituels postmodernes d'immortalité: les cimetières virtuels, comme technologie de la mémoire vivante' *Sociétés* n° 97: 109-123.

Gé, H 2012 *Après.com*, Paris, Éditions Velours, 245p.

Matsushima, N 1997, *Saibâsuton.intânetto jô no haka, kakumei* (The revolution of the tomb on the Internet – virtual tombs), Tokyo, Mainichi Komyunikêshonzu, 191 p.

Merzeau Louise, Les données post mortem, *Hermès, La Revue*, 2009/1 n° 53, p. 30-31.

Picone, M 2007 'Cremation in Japan: Bones Buddhas and Surrogate bodies' *Études sur la mort* n° 132: 131-140.

Rowe, M 2003 'Grave Change Scattering Ashes in Contemporary Japan' *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* n° 30/1-2: 85-118.

Shintani, T. and Sekisawa, M. 2005 *Shi to sôsô kojiten* [Small Dictionary of Death and Funeral Practices]. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kôbunkan, p. 235-236.

Tamamuro, F. 1997 'Jidan: idéologie des rapports qui liaient monastères bouddhiques et familles paroissiales à l'époque d'Edo' [Jidan: Ideology of the Relationships between Buddhist Temples and Parishioners' Families during the Edo Period], in École Pratique des Hautes Études, Ve section (ed.) Cahiers d'études et de documents sur les religions du Japon [Book of Research and Documents on Japanese Religions]. Paris: Alpha bleue, pp. 87–110.

Yamasaki, J, 2007 *Ohaka no shinpai muyo temoto kuyo no susume* (No Need to Worry about the Grave: Recommandations for Close-at-hand Funerary Practices)*, Tokyo:Shodensha Shinsho,* 203p.

Yanagita, K 1988 *About Our Ancestors*, Santa Barbara, Greenwood Press, 193p.

Biography

FABIENNE DUTEIL-OGATA is currently a French associated researcher at The Institute of Interdisciplinary of Contemporary Anthropology at CNRS/EHESS in Paris. She obtained a Master's Degree in Japanese Language in and Civilization from Paris VII University and a PhD in Anthropology from Paris X University. Her doctoral thesis "The Religious life in a Tokyo District" focused on the impact of social changes in Japanese religious practices. Fabienne Duteil-Ogata was awarded the Shibusawa-Claudel Prize in 2004 for her PhD thesis She contributed to the four-year research project 2006-2010 entitled "FunerAsia: The growth of the Funeral Industry in north-east Asia: Economic, Spatial and Religious Challenges" in ANR (French National Research Agency).

Fabienne Duteil-Ogata
15 bis rue Jules Romains Bât. G3 Apt. 372
75019-PARIS
France
fabdutogata@yahoo.fr