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DEATH IN PRESENT-DAY JAPAN: CHANGING THE IMAGE OF AN IMMUTABLE FACT OF LIFE

Ulrike Wöhr, Hiroshima

Introduction

This article focuses on the “moving target”¹ of death in the context of present-day Japan. The subjects of death and dying have recently come to the fore with countless publications on these topics in weekly magazines, and on the relevant shelves of every bookstore. The new interest in these matters has been called an epochmaking phenomenon in the cultural history of Japan (Yanagida 1997c:142). Below, I will discuss these developments, and trace the changes of value behind them.

The present discourse on death shall be viewed within the larger context of a religious revival which has been evident in Japan since the 1970s. My discussion of the change of the image of death will throw light on the nature of the “new spirituality movements” (*shin reisei undō*) which are the moving force in this revival. It will also allow for observations on the relation between certain academics and intellectuals and these movements.

This paper therefore is an analysis of an ongoing change in how death is being dealt with in Japan. However, it is also a case study, showing up general tendencies within the society and the intellectual discourse of present-day Japan. Particularly influential in this discourse has been the quest for a Japanese identity (*aidentitī*) often resulting in a “myth of Japanese uniqueness”² and a dichotomical concept of “Eastern” versus “Western” values. This article will show that the discourse on death is, at least partially, informed by such ideologies of Japaneseness (*Nihonron*).³

- 1 Cf. SMITH 1995. The author explains his metaphor of the “moving target” which he uses to describe the “fluidity” of the form of wedding and funeral rituals: “... we must avoid the trap of thinking of ‘a culture’ as an immutable set of practices, beliefs and meanings.” (p. 33)
- 2 Cf. the title of a book by Peter DALE (1986).
- 3 Besides DALE 1986, refer to WOLFEREN 1989 and AOKI 1990; see also the article by Derichs in this volume.

Death and Dying in a Changing Environment

In Japan, as in most other industrial societies, death has been banished from public as well as private life. To see even close relatives die has, in case of the post-war generations, ceased to be part of the common experience. High mobility and the tendency towards the nuclear family have separated the young from the old. A highly achievement-oriented society has, in Japan as elsewhere, made aging, that is, turning less capable and less productive, increasingly unattractive. In order to suppress the anxiety provoked by the thought of old-age, old-age itself has been pushed to the margins of society. Finally, the possibilities and achievements of modern medicine have made illness and death the concern of specialists who can successfully operate only within huge hospital organizations. Apart from leaving the individual with a sense of alienation and powerlessness, hospitalization tends to isolate the ill and the dying from their relatives and friends and, conversely, results in shutting out illness and death from the experience of the young and healthy.

In the United States where, in comparison to Japan and even to Europe, the process of rendering death invisible is more advanced and the anxieties about aging are greater than in Japan or Europe, the reflection on these developments and the efforts to resist them also started at an earlier point in time. In 1963 Jessica Mitford published *The American Way of Death*, a book exposing the funeral industry. Mitford's book criticized the business trading with death, but it also led many people to question the practice of passing the trauma of dealing with death into the hands of professionals. In 1969 the modern way of death was again taken up in the book *On Death and Dying* by the medical doctor Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Her now famous study was based upon interviews with hundreds of dying patients, most of them suffering from cancer. The tales of these men and women made a great impact. The book also demonstrated that often the dying are given poor counseling by medical professionals, who are primarily concerned with saving lives, and made a plea for a more sensible treatment of the dying patient.⁴

Only two years after it had first been published in the US, Kübler-Ross' bestselling book was translated into Japanese, suggesting the

4 For discussion of the influence of these two works in the U.S., cf. ARMOUR/WILLIAMS 1989:286 f., 293.

relevance of its topic. During Japan's high growth era of the 1960s, cancer had come to replace tuberculosis as the disease the diagnosis of which was almost tantamount to a death sentence⁵, leaving the victim and those close to him or her with a limited amount of time to prepare for the last farewell.

From early modern times when tuberculosis killed many of those living in poor and unhealthy circumstances – not only factory workers but also and typically poor young artists leading restless lives – it was not unusual for writers and poets on the deathbed to put their ponderings over life and death into words. The *tanka* written in the last stages of fatal tuberculosis by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) and Ishikawa Takuboku (1886-1912), for instance, have moved audiences ever since they were published.⁶ Another literary product of the struggle with illness and death is the autobiographical novel, *Kaze tachinu* (“The Wind Has Risen”; 1936-1938), by Horii Tatsuo (1904-1953) whose fiancée died from tuberculosis. Horii followed her to the sanatorium far from Tōkyō and stood by her until she died. *Kaze tachinu* is a record of the quest for the meaning of life and love in the face of death.

In the 1960s literary accounts of several writers' struggling with cancer appeared. Among these a collection of poems by Takami Jun (1907-1965), published in 1964, the year before the author died from cancer of the esophagus, received the greatest attention (Takami 1964). The diary that Takami kept through his final years was published posthumously, initially as part of his collected diaries (Takami 1975-1977). The fact that an abridged version under the title “Takami Jun's diary of the struggle against his illness” (*Takami Jun tōbyō nikki*) was brought out in 1990, indicates the current popularity of the issue.

To trace the history of that popularity, it is necessary to go back to approximately the year 1971 when *On Death and Dying* came out in Japan. Around this time the first so-called *tōbyōki* (“records of battling against a disease”) by people who were not poets and artists, but businessmen and businesswomen, journalists, medical doctors, scholars, housewives and

5 Death from cancer has since continuously increased to become the number one cause of death among Japanese in 1991. In 1995, 28.8% of all deaths among Japanese were caused by cancer (BUNGEI SHUNJŪ: 458).

6 See BEICHMANN 1986:116 ff. on Masaoka's poetic diaries, and Ishikawa's poetry collection “Sad Toys” (*Kanashiki gangu*, in ISHIKAWA 1985; German transl. ISHIKAWA 1994).

bureaucrats, made their appearance. Kübler-Ross' book certainly hit an already existing concern with the subjects of death and dying.⁷ But its records of the death of common people may also have contributed to the spread of the idea of the *tōbyōki* as a possibility for anyone faced with illness and death to come to terms with him/herself and his or her fate.

The first non-literary *tōbyōki* published in book form was the journalist Nakajima Michi's account of how she overcame breast cancer. After this debut in 1972, more and more *tōbyōki* were published. Up to then, it had been common sense to publishers that titles containing the word "cancer" did not sell very well (Yanagida 1997b:27). However, especially since the end of the 1970s, some *tōbyōki* have become bestsellers (e.g. Harazaki 1979 and Imura 1980), showing that a change has taken place in the attitudes of Japanese people towards cancer as well as towards death and dying.

The nonfiction writer Yanagida Kunio, who has been collecting non-literary *tōbyōki* ever since they first made their appearance on the Japanese book market⁸, has tried to explain the causes and the significance of the *tōbyōki* boom. Yanagida starts from an investigation into the authors' motives for writing and publishing their account of their own illness and dying process. His analysis shows that the central motive of most authors is their desire to assure themselves of their own existence and, at the same time, to leave some evidence of that existence. According to Yanagida reassurance in these matters has come to be of vital importance since the affluence produced by high growth in the 60s has brought about fundamental changes in the Japanese value system. Whereas, right after the war, nothing could have been more meaningful than having survived and lived at all, from the 1960s onwards the question of *how* one had lived gained more and more importance (1997b:32-35). To Yanagida, the *tōbyōki* boom indicates that we are living in an era that makes it necessary for people to create their own personal death (*jibun no shi wo tsukuru*

7 The psychiatrist Kashiwagi Tetsuo, pioneer of the hospice movement in Japan, is one of the people who had been groping for new ways to care for the dying, and were deeply impressed when *On Death and Dying* first came out in Japan (1996:8).

8 YANAGIDA claims to have gathered several hundred *tōbyōki*, including privately printed books (1997:15). He values them as the foremost category of current nonfiction writing (ibid.:22-23).

jidai). He interprets the act of making public one's dying and one's views on life and death (*shi no shakaika*) by writing about them as one important means to achieve this (*ibid.*:48).

As is demonstrated by the still ongoing debate of whether cancer patients should be told the name of their disease and the truth about their condition, informed consent still fails to be a matter of course in Japan, especially in the case of diseases that, like cancer, have the reputation of being fatal. Public pressure has, however, prompted the reluctant medical profession to approve of notification to a cancer patient under certain conditions.⁹ Such pressure can, of course, be exerted only when there is sufficient public awareness of the issue. The *tōbyōki* may have played an important role in creating such an awareness. One of the reasons for their popularity has certainly been their usefulness to other patients and their relatives as a source of information that was not to be gained from the secretive doctors (Yanagida 1997b:40-41).

Specialist literature on terminal care started to appear just a few years after the first non-literary *tōbyōki* (Kawano 1974, Kashiwagi 1978). More publications questioning the inhumane aspects of modern medical practice and advocating a "holistic" approach followed. During the 1980s specialists started to address the general public, meeting the demand for practical information that had so far been satisfied only by the *tōbyōki*.

From the beginning of the 1990s, publications on the topics of death and dying boomed. Most of the books published are concerned with what may be summarized as "death and modern medicine", the central issues being "terminal care" (*tōminaru kea*) and "medical treatment of the terminally ill" (*makki iryō*), "death with dignity" (*songenshi*) and "euthanasia" (*anrakushi*), and "organ transplantation" (*zōki ishoku*) in the case of so-called "brain death" (*nōshi*).

Terminal care and medical treatment of the terminally ill have made progress in close connection with the Japanese hospice movement which was initiated in the mid 1970s. Today, hospice personnel and doctors as

9 For an introduction to the current debate as well as for bibliographical sources, see BUNGEI SHUNJŪ 1996:450-461.

well as those taking care of a dying person at home, can choose from a number of “manuals” about how to proceed.¹⁰

Euthanasia first became a public issue and a legal precedent in 1961/62 with the conviction of a man who had killed his terminally ill father following the older man’s own wish (so-called *Yamauchi jiken*). In 1975, the Nihon Anrakushi Kyōkai (“Japanese Association for Euthanasia”, changed in 1983 to Nihon Songenshi Kyōkai, or “Japanese Association for Death with Dignity”) was founded, and started to campaign for the legalization of euthanasia (cf. Oki 1991). Thirty years later, in 1991, and again in 1996 two more incidents of active euthanasia (the so-called *Tōkaidai anrakushi jiken* and *Kyōhoku byōin anrakushi jiken*) stirred the emotions of the Japanese people. This time it was doctors who killed unsuspecting cancer patients, allegedly to relieve them of their pain. In the first case, the Yokohama district court found the accused guilty, but in view of “the ongoing debate about what medical care should be, and a change in the people’s perception of life and death” (cit. from Bungei Shunjū 1996:446), the court also revised the 1962 requisites for euthanasia to be considered lawful (see details about the changes in Bungei Shunjū 1996:446, 448). The 1991 incident and its causes have been minutely documented in the works of two journalists (Nagai 1995, Irie 1996), testifying to the public attention paid to the matter of euthanasia.

The two cases of euthanasia that became known in the 1990s stirred up public interest in the patient’s “right of self-determination” (*jiko ketteiken*). This is apparent, for instance, in the sudden increase after the incident of 1991 in the number of people who had their last or “living” wills (*ribingu biru*) registered with the Nihon Songenshi Kyōkai (Yanagida 1997b:51). The Japanese people’s distrust of the medical profession seems to have been aggravated by the fact that the two doctors both acted without their patients’ consent and that, especially in the 1996 incident, the doctor’s knowledge about modern pain treatment was insufficient (cf. Bungei Shunjū 1996:446, 448). The moral philosopher Katō Hisatake put it this way: “The question that confronts the Japanese people is how to prevent the [future] occurrence of euthanasia incidents involving doctors

10 See, e.g. KAWAGOE 1991, KASHIWAGI/YODOGAWA KIRISUTOKYŌ BYŌIN HOSUPISU 1992, and SATŌ 1992. Kashiwagi Tetsuo, himself the editor of a “terminal care manual” speaks of a “manualization” (*manyuaru-ka*) occurring in that field (KASHIWAGI 1996:8).

who do not know enough about the technology of pain relief, and who disregard the patient's will" (1996:35).

According to Yanagida Kunio, one important cause for the continuous distrust of the medical profession was the first Japanese attempt at heart transplantation carried out at Sapporo Medical School in 1968 (1997b:53). The Japanese discourse on brain death, the third of the above mentioned issues concerning death and modern medicine, cannot be fully understood without taking this incident (the so-called *Wada ishoku jiken*) into account. In this case, the recipient of the heart taken from a "brain dead" body died 83 days after the surgery. Following his death, doubts started to be raised as to whether the doctor in charge had really, as the media said, recovered "one life out of two deaths" or whether he had not rather led two lives, one that was not "brain dead" but only in a state of coma, and one that was not even acutely threatened by heart failure, towards premature death. The case was investigated for two years but was, much to the indignation of the public, eventually dropped for lack of evidence. The *Wada-ishoku*-incident raised serious doubts about medical doctors' ethical integrity, and demonstrated the actual immunity and unassailability of the medical community (cf. Tachibana 1991:298 ff.).

Since then, several kidney transplantations from the bodies of "brain dead" donors have been carried out in Japan, but no other attempt at heart transplantation has been made. The trauma of the *Wada-ishoku*-incident still continues to haunt the public as well as the medical world, and has rendered brain death a very touchy subject. The fact that in Japan legislation on brain death is still pending can ultimately be traced back to the events of 1968 that are yet to be cleared up. A law that would open the way to heart, liver, and lung transplantations by recognizing so-called brain death as equivalent to a person's death has so far been prevented by strong public resistance (Bungei Shunjū 1996:438 f.).¹¹

In the 1980s, public criticism mounted when, after more than ten years of cautious self-restraint, Japanese heart surgeons brought up the issue again, and when, in 1983, a group of specialists was granted government funds to do extensive research on the subject and come up with new

11 However, a bill proposing such a law was approved by the majority of the lower house of parliament shortly before the completion of this paper, on April 24, 1997. The introduction of this bill has taken the debate on "brain death" to a new climax (see, e.g., "Ugokidashita.").

criteria for judging brain death. Their report which only slightly modified the criteria formerly laid down by the Nihon Nōha Gakkai (“Japanese Electroencephaly Association”) was published in December 1985.¹² In September of that year, Nakajima Michi in her book about “the invisible death” (*Mienai shi*; 1985) had revealed the inhumane conditions to be found in intensive care units, and the abusive and rough way in which so-called “brain dead” were treated by doctors. She had also observed the contradictory situation of family members seeing a relative of theirs unconscious but seemingly alive while at the same time having to accept his or her death, and being pressured into donating his or her living kidney or heart. In November 1985, two months after Nakajima’s book had been published, the magazine *Chūō kōron* started to publish the journalist Tachibana Takeshi’s critical report questioning the scientific basis for judging brain death (Tachibana 1988 is a revised version of the report originally published in ten installments). Since then, the pro and con brain death groups have continued their controversy.

From the end of the 1980s, certain authors opposing the mainstream medical and political notion of brain death started to include in their criticism a reflection on modern civilization. Some of them have, at the same time, been emphasizing a cultural difference between Japan and “the West” supposedly leading to differing perceptions of life and death (see, e.g., Namihira 1988, 1991; Morioka 1991, first publ. 1989; Umehara 1992, first publ. 1990). One example will be discussed in the following section.

As we have seen, widespread distrust of the medical profession, as well as the alienation which a dying person and his or her relatives are bound to experience in huge hospital institutions, have fostered new interest in self-determination concerning medical care, and in the creation of one’s own personal death. This will to determine one’s own fate is also apparent in the matter of what remains after death. The “three trillion yen business” of Japanese undertakers or funeral parlors (*sōsaigyō*) is meeting with increasing criticism (e.g., Okamoto/Yamamoto 1996). Buddhist temples, most of which have been living on affairs relating to death from funeral to memorial services have not only been attacked for their greediness, but also for their services’ formalism and lack of “spirituality”

12 For a critical discussion see TACHIBANA 1988:192-304.

(*seishinsei*, e.g., Kadono 1993:32). Following the example of stars of show business and other celebrities such as actress Sawamura Sadako (who died in 1996), historian Maruyama Masao (who died in 1996) and Edwin O. Reischauer, the highly revered former American ambassador to Japan (who died in 1990), people have started to decree in their will how they would like to be laid to rest. Lately, much attention is being paid to funerals without the usual extravagance (known as *jimisō*, “plain funeral”), and to so-called “natural funerals” (*shizensō*) carried out by scattering a person’s ashes onto the earth or into the sea (cf. “Yūmeijin no shiseikan wa?”). The latter was declared legal only very recently, after the founding in 1991 of an “Association for Funerary Freedom” (*Sōsō no Jiyū o Susumeru Kai*). Still, 95 percent of the funerals are done the traditional way (Kadono 1993:41). However, people are being reminded that, as consumers, it is their task to put pressure on the suppliers in order to bring about change (Inoue 1993:85-87).

The demand for more freedom of choice is also about to alter the tradition of the family grave (*ie no haka*). As several studies (cf. Inoue 1990, 1993; Wöss 1993; Hashizume 1996; Matsumoto 1996 a, b) have shown, there is a growing tendency to buy one’s individual tomb or a tomb for pair occupancy rather than having one’s remains buried in the family grave. Such nonconformism had, for a long time, been kept within bounds by common religious belief. According to one concept, a person who dies without any descendants, or whose descendants fail to look after the grave and to carry out the appropriate memorial services, will end up as a lost soul compelled to haunt the living.¹³ However, the new demand for independence beyond the grave has been met by the creation of a new type of tomb sold along with the entitlement to “eternal memorial services” (*eitai kuyō*). Especially single Japanese women, but also married women who for centuries had no choice but to let themselves be interred in the tomb of their husbands’ family (*ie*), have been found to support the new trend. Many women nowadays want to share a grave with their husband only, rather than with his whole family. Obviously, they do not feel that by

13 These popular beliefs, which up to the premodern era had by no means been the only unchallenged way of thinking about the relationship between the living and the dead, were rendered official by the regulations of the Meiji Civil Code (1898) integrating them into the family system, and were confirmed by the new post-war Civil Code (1948) (INOUE 1993:106-109).

marrying their husband they have committed themselves to be buried with their parents-in-law (Inoue 1993:111-112, 117ff.). Here, too, self-determination seems to be evolving as a new value.

Changing Ideas on Death and Dying

This section analyses recent trends in the area of ideas and religious beliefs about death and life after death. As mentioned above, Japan has experienced a religious or, more accurately, a spiritual revival starting from the 1970s. What interests us here is one of the important features constituting this new phenomenon, namely a noticeable trend away from organized religion towards a more personal religious or, as many of the people involved prefer to call it, “spiritual” (*reiseiteki*) quest (Shimazono 1996:1ff. (foreword), 299ff.). Below, I will examine what this new “spiritual world” (*seishin sekai*) has to offer in regard to our subject, death.

The above mentioned lament over the absence of spirituality in funerals along with the condemnation of Buddhist formalism, as well as the religious or spiritual tone of many of the *tōbyōki*, indicate that the new preoccupation with death, however public its appearance (cf. Yanagida 1997c:142), is rooted in a very personal understanding of religion or spirituality.¹⁴ One female student of Hiroshima City University put it this way: “My notion of death may be influenced by Buddhism; however, it is rather vague as I do not believe in everything [that Buddhism teaches]”. A female classmate of hers wrote:

It may be just an invention, but, deep inside me, a god[dess] exists in whom I can always believe, even though I turn to him [her] only in trouble. It may sound crude, but when I am nearing my end, I expect that I will prepare for death by entrusting my life to this god[dess] of mine (*jibun no kami*).¹⁵

Accordingly, authors and publishers of materials on the “spiritual world” serving the individual seeker of “the way” have been offering a large number of books on dying, on death, and on life after death. A glance at the entry *shi* (death) of the “1997 Comprehensive Catalogue of the Spiritual

14 Cf. also Wöss 1992 for post-war Japanese beliefs about death.

15 These quotes are taken from term papers assigned to the students of my 1996 “Japanese Religions” class. The authors of the papers quoted are Ōto Miori and Ikenaka Shizu.

World”¹⁶ gives us 124 titles of books available on the subjects of death and dying (pp. 145 ff.). A notable detail is the fact that of the few books featured with a special introduction at the very top of the list, the first one is the translation of a book by Stephen Levine, a prominent figure of the hospice movement in the United States, and the second one the translation of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’ longseller *On Death and Dying*. Actually, 43 percent of the 124 books under the entry “death” are translations of foreign books, indicating a general trend in this field, and also in the rest of the “spiritual world”.¹⁷

As suggested by the two books mentioned above, terminal care is regarded as an important issue in the “spiritual world”. The concept of terminal care or hospice care as developed in Europe and America is a “holistic” approach which, by definition, involves the “whole” of a human being, his or her physical, psychological and spiritual needs which are considered to be inseparable. As mentioned above, this concept has been very influential in Japan. A private hospital based on these principles is introduced in the weekly magazine *Sandō mainichi* in a series called “Studying ‘life after death’” as follows:

At first sight it looks just like a normal hospital, but there is hardly any smell of disinfectant. Also, a gymnasium (*dōjō*), a prefabricated hut that serves as a smoking room, and a café are built in a row on the same site. These seem to have nothing to do with a medical institution, but most of the visitors there are sick persons. One may be even more surprised upon hearing that 80 percent of the 100 patients usually occupying the hospital are suffering from cancer. ... Every Wednesday night, the director, Obitsu Ryōichi, gives a lecture for the patients and their families. ... “In the matter of health and illness, coexistence (*kyōsei*) is important. This also applies to the cells that have gone bad. Everything together is creating this space called earth. As we are threatened

- 16 The yearly publication of this catalogue (BUKKU KURABU KAI 1997) introducing not only books, but also seminars, workshops, CDs and other products started in 1994 (SHIMAZONO 1996:14). It was actually the forerunners of this type of catalogue, comprehensive presentations of books and products featured since 1977 by the magazine *Za meditōshon* (“The Meditation”, published by Hirakawa Shuppansha, a company affiliated with Agonshū, one of the newer Japanese new religions) that first made the term “spiritual world” (*seishin sekai*) popular (ibid.:221 f.).
- 17 A quick look at the authors’ index of the Bukku Kurabu Kai catalogue shows that about half of the names are written in *katakana*, the syllabary used to transcribe foreign words and names.

when the bad cells predominate, we have to get along with them so they won't increase. If we succeed in doing this, we will overcome our illness. For me, the meaning of life lies beyond death. I can't wait to set out on the journey of 15 billion years. I live my life in order to make this a good journey." ("Shigo no sekai' kenkyū":144)

The above quote, apart from telling something about the usual image of hospitals in Japan, touches upon two central themes in the discourse of the "spiritual world". One is the topic of life after death which we shall come back to below. Another one is the concept of *kyōsei* implying the symbiosis or coexistence of all beings. This vitalistic idea which is, of course, not new as such,¹⁸ has been influential in the "new age" and ecology movements in the West, especially in the "deep ecology" movement initiated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess who, in the beginning of the 1970s, started to advocate a new ecological approach based on the idea of unity of the human race with nature (Naess 1973). The same idea is also present in other cosmological concepts of the "new age", as well as in new forms of healing. Many of these agree in judging the separation, not only of a person's mind and body, but also of humankind from the whole of nature and the cosmos, to be one of the crucial factors causing our physical and mental suffering.¹⁹

In Japan, the philosophy of a continuity of the "life force" (*seimei*) has been alive for almost two centuries in the teachings of the so-called new religions, the oldest of which originated towards the end of the premodern era (1600-1867). This vitalism (*seimeishugi*) of the new religions has been described as follows: The world or cosmos is seen as an eternal entity pulsating with the never-ending flow of life. This force is believed to manifest itself in "this world" (*genze*). Notions of another world strictly separated from or in opposition to this world are therefore rare. Personal salvation, also, is not to be achieved beyond death, but within this life, by the reconciliation of the self with the "whole" of the cosmos through a conscious unification with the life force thought to be

18 Cf. SUZUKI 1995 about the history and the European influences of "vitalism" in Japan.

19 It may suffice, here, to give an account of one personal experience with this type of healing. In 1992, when I went to get treatment from a kinesiologist in Germany, I was asked to memorize the sentence "I feel that I am one with all beings", and to repeat this to myself several times a day.

flowing through all things and beings. Death, therefore, is not interpreted as salvation, but merely as a return to the main flow of the vital force (cf. Nishiyama et al. 1979, and Tsushima 1990).

Konkōkyō, for example, a new religion founded in 1859, summarizes its founder's teachings on life and death in the following way:

Another thing to be felt with your heart (*kokoro*) or, to be more precise, to be understood through religious awakening is the fact that the cosmos (*tenchi*) is alive You will reach beyond your limited human existence and learn to pay attention to the infinite flow of time. (Konkōkyō honbu kyōchō 1993:23)

One of the things that can be called unique in this religion's teachings on life and death (*shiseikan*) is the idea that death and life of human beings both equally occur within the cosmos (*tenchi no naka*), that they are part of the workings of God (*kami no hataraki no naka ni okoru*). (ibid.:78)²⁰

There is no space here to discuss the implications in regard to social ethics of such vitalistic concepts.²¹ Important to note, however, is the fact that the ideas of *kyōsei* and *seimei* are often described as uniquely Eastern (Asian) or Japanese, possible influences of new ideas and movements occurring in Western countries being completely ignored.

A well-known exponent of this identification of vitalistic ideas with the Eastern or Japanese tradition is the renowned scholar of religion, Yamaori Tetsuo. About the "Eastern" understanding of life and death, he writes:

Lately, the word *kyōsei* is being used frequently. ... If there is *kyōsei*, there must also be *kyōshi* ("communal death"). ... Was this not, for example, the world view of original Buddhism? Or not of Buddhism, in particular, but of the Japanese people? The idea of coexistence implies that humans, animals, plants, the earth and the cosmos are all equal, but this means that all beings in this

20 I do not, in this translation, suggest that the "god" may also be a "goddess", as the deity of the Konkōkyō is definitely male. The title of the book quoted from above, "God and man. Living together" (*Kami to ningen. Tomo ni ikiru*), does, incidentally, not only take up the idea of "symbiosis" or "coexistence" (*kyōsei*), but, on the level of Chinese characters, reproduces it precisely: the Sino-Japanese readings of "tomo" and "iki" are "kyō" and "sei", respectively.

21 Japanese scholars of religion, it seems, have tended to value the vitalist tradition's egalitarian and anti-authoritarian aspects as well as its optimistic conception of (wo)man (cf. NISHIYAMA et al. 1979:96 ff., 104 f., TSUSHIMA 1990:226) rather than pointing out its totalitarian implications.

world are also equal in that they will all be dying someday. This, I believe, is the essence of the Eastern notion of the impermanence of worldly things.

A survivalist (*sabaibaru-teki*) conception of life concerned with having somebody or something remain, is rendered entirely meaningless by this way of thinking. Generally speaking, survivalist thought has been passed on and refined through the above-mentioned [story of] Noah's Ark, through the eschatology of Judaism and Christianity. (Umehara/Yamaori 1995:151f.)

Some Japanese scholars of religion, in the end of the 1970s, had diagnosed a "present-day crisis" of vitalism in the new religions' teachings (Nishiyama et al.:105ff.). However, the above quote from a publication of *Konkōkyō*, as well as the teachings of the so-called "new new religions" (*shin shin shūkyō*) emerging from the 1970s demonstrate that vitalist ideas have not been abandoned.²² Rather, it seems that *seimeishugi*, through the publications of the "spiritual world", has penetrated society, and has become popular among people not at all involved with new religions.²³ As the example of Yamaori Tetsuo shows, vitalism is a concept expounded even in the writings of scholars.²⁴

Above, the meaning of one important concept in the discourse of the "spiritual world", vitalism or *seimeishugi*, has been clarified. As has been demonstrated, the vitalist worldview has significant implications in regard to the conception of death. Below, I will explain about another central theme of the "spiritual world": the question of what comes after death. A large portion of the books published on the subject of the after-life (*shigosei*) deal with either the phenomenon of near death experience (*rinshi*

22 With regard to the "new new religion" of Agonshū (founded in 1978) cf., e.g., PROHL 1994:30. Revealing is the fact that Tsushima Michihito, one of the authors of the 1979 article on vitalism in the new religions (NISHIYAMA et al.), in his 1990 article in the "Dictionary of New Religions" (TSUSHIMA 1990) does not repeat this judgement concerning a decline of the idea of vitalism .

23 Cf. MORIOKA 1994:89ff. about vitalism as a major trend in contemporary thought.

24 See, e.g., "An invitation to vitalism" (1988) and "A reexamination of [our] view of life" (1994) by Morioka Masahiro, member of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Kokusai Nihon Bunka Kenkyū Sentā). See, also, the statement by SUZUKI Sadami, who is a member of the same institution, in his introduction to the anthology "Taishō vitalism and today" (1995): "Turning back to look at the traces of the vitalist culture and thought of that age [i.e., the Taishō era] will surely help us to put the culture and thought of today into its historical perspective and to bring forth a new concept of life" (p. 3).

taiken or *hinshi taiken*) or the concept of reincarnation (*rinne tenshō* or *umarekawari*).

What has been called near death experience became known in Japan when the translation of the American psychiatrist Raymond Moody's *Life after Life* (original edition, 1975) appeared in 1977. Since then, numerous Japanese authors have written on the subject, some of them on the basis of their own research. The most famous of these is probably Tachibana Takeshi who was mentioned above for his work on brain death. Tachibana also directed a national television (NHK) special feature on near death experience, and a serial on NHK educational television, both of which were broadcast in March 1991 and received a lot of attention.²⁵ Like his writings on brain death, Tachibana's documentaries on near death experience are not sensational but matter of fact, his declared intention being to follow the US and Europe in establishing serious scientific research on the subject (1994b:10).

Accordingly, Tachibana takes the view that we have no means to determine whether the so-called near death experience can be taken as evidence of the existence of an after-life or whether it is to be interpreted as a mere psychological phenomenon commonly experienced in the vicinity of death (1996:4). He stresses the universality as well as the particularity of the phenomenon. Near death experiences, that is, have been known to exist through time and in all cultures, and they show similar patterns. However, each account of near death experience has its own unique (*yunīku*) details, reflecting the variety of experiences and the diversity (*tayōsei*) of the human existence. According to Tachibana, what fascinated him most was not the typology of the near death experience but the uniqueness of every one of the stories he recorded.²⁶

The emphasis Tachibana puts on the singularity of the near death experience is of significance for two reasons. Firstly, it mirrors the claim to self-determination and independence to be found in the above analysed movements criticizing technological, social and political aspects of modern medicine, as well as in the new trend concerning burials and tombs, and, last but not least, in the new movements of the "spiritual world".

25 The former program got an audience rating of 16.4 percent (TACHIBANA 1994:11).

26 Cf. TACHIBANA 1996:6. See this volume also for the pictures which the author had asked his interviewees to draw in order to illustrate the vision they had.

Secondly, however, Tachibana's approach is opposed to the current trend, also to be found within the "spiritual world", to turn the quest for meaning into a normative "science".²⁷ In Japan, the name for this type of literature is "new science" (*nyūsaiensu*), a term introduced to designate writings by authors from Fritjof Capra (*The Tao of Physics*; 1975) to Rupert Sheldrake (*A New Science of Life*; 1981) and Stanislav Grof (*Beyond the Brain*; 1985), all of which were translated into Japanese within five years or less after they had first been published.²⁸ These writers quickly found their Japanese imitators who succeeded in breaking down, popularizing and Japonizing their theories.

One Japanese author notorious for this kind of eclecticism is Funai Yoshio, "reciter of the occult and mystic from which our contemporaries suffering from the after-effects of the collapsed economy ... are expecting salvation" (Saitō 1997:220f.).²⁹ Near death experience, in Funai's world of thought, becomes not only evidence of a world beyond, but also a source of mystical powers. In one of his recent books, Funai cites one Japanese environmentalist who, through an accident leading to an "out of body experience" (*taigai ridatsu* or *yūtai ridatsu*), claims to have acquired a "memory of the future" (1996:140ff.). Another author devoting himself to a "science of 'the other world'" ("*ano yo*" *no kagaku*) is Tenge Shirō.³⁰ Tenge asserts:

[The idea of the physicist David Bohm] that "this world" and "the other world" are two sides of one coin both together forming the cosmos, is in accordance with what the religions teach. However, through a model derived from physics

27 It is no accident that one of the "new new religions" calls itself *Kōfuku no Kagaku*, or "Science of Happiness" (founded in 1986).

28 According to Morioka Masahiro, "new science" was, at least in the beginning, understood to be synonymous with "new age" (MORIOKA 1994:97). This indicates the prominence within the "spiritual world" of this interest in scientific explanations.

29 The former Marxist Funai (b. 1933) emerged in the 1970s as a major management consultant said to be on good terms with the Japanese mafia. From the 1980s, he distinguished himself as a popular and extremely productive writer on "alternative" management and, more and more, on general issues concerning the future of the world and humankind. Today he is a charismatic leader of the *seishin sekai* drawing audiences of up to 25,000 people (cf. SAITŌ 1997).

30 Not surprisingly, Tenge's book cited here boasts a foreword by Funai Yoshio.

the relation between the two is defined more accurately and with greater mathematical precision. (1996:11)

The question of what comes after death leads us to the second of the issues mentioned above: reincarnation. Whereas books on near death experience in the above cited *seishin sekai* catalogue are listed under “death” (Moody’s classic on *Life after Life*, as well as Tachibana’s *Rinshi taiken* being specially introduced), reincarnation (*rinne tenshō*) has an entry of its own (pp. 214f.). Here, the influence of foreign authors (Brian L. Weiss, Gloria Chadwick etc.) is even more pronounced, translations of foreign books accounting for more than two thirds of the 32 titles listed. This may seem astonishing in the case of a concept generally considered to pertain, above all, to “Eastern” religions. However, one must be reminded that the “spiritual world” was, and still is heavily influenced by the North American and European “new age”. Moreover, the Buddhist concept of rebirth never gained much ground, in Japan, at the popular level (Reader 1991:84f.).

Specials of certain magazines such as the Spring 1992 issue of *Bessatsu Taiyō* which appeared under the title *Rinne tenshō*, or the special feature on *umarekawari*³¹ in the second issue (December 1996) of the newly founded magazine *Eba* (or: *evah*, in Roman characters) testify to the current popularity of reincarnation. The beautifully illustrated *Bessatsu Taiyō* volume starts with a contemplation on Tibet, the “actual site (*genba*) of reincarnation” (pp. 3-8). The effort to show reincarnation to be a universal concept is made in a 47-page article on reincarnation in various cultures and religions (pp. 17-63). For Japan, “the island country (*shima-guni*) floating in the Far East”, an extra 19 pages (pp. 73-91) are reserved. Apart from two or three other features, the rest of the volume consists of interviews or conversations³² conducted by Yamaori Tetsuo, who is also the author of the introductory and the closing articles.

31 In the headline of every page of the special the English term “reincarnation” is used as a catchword.

32 One of these, the conversation between Yamaori and Asahara Shōkō, the founder of Aum Shinrikyō (pp. 93-100), has, after the crushing of this group, already gained some historical value, and testifies to the fact that scholars like Yamaori, up to a certain time, sympathized with Asahara and his group.

Yamaori, who has been cited above, started in the 1970s to publish numerous articles and books on the Japanese concept of death and after-life (see, e.g., 1973 and 1991). Popular opinion, therefore, holds him to be one of the foremost authorities on this subject. Equally famous is the philosopher Umehara Takeshi who has been producing, among countless other works, popular writings on the Japanese concept of “the other world”. Umehara, along with Yamaori and others, has been described as a “spiritual intellectual” (*reiseiteki chishikijin*; Shimazono 1993:11 f.), a term referring to men³³ “not far from the mainstream of Japan’s academic and journalistic communities” who through their publications have “contributed to the growth” of the new spiritual movements (ibid.:20, cf. also Shimazono 1996:247 ff.).

Even before Umehara started, toward the end of the 1980s, to write about death and “the other world” more extensively (e.g., 1989, first published in 1988, and 1992, first published in 1990), he touched upon the subject in several of his works. In his widely read essay “On Japanese culture” (1976) he compares “Eastern” and “Western” images of death to elucidate the difference between “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations. In his view, the contrast between the depictions of the deaths of Buddha and Christ stands for the contrast between the two cultures. The brutal murder of Christ corresponds with the “bloody”, “aggressive”, and “wrathful” character of Christianity and “Western” civilization. On the other hand, Buddha’s peaceful entry into supreme enlightenment symbolizes the tranquility, gentleness, and peacefulness of the “Eastern” civilization (ibid.:54 ff.).

Umehara’s speculations about death and cultural differences have continued in that same vein. Around 1990, he had the chance to publicize his opinions as a member of a special inquiry committee summoned by the prime minister to investigate the issue of brain death and organ transplantation. Umehara was one of the few members openly opposing the

33 So far, no women have been included. Women like the molecular biologist Nakamura Keiko (cf. the interview in IDA 1997), the scholar of Japanese literature Tanaka Yūko (cf. “Interview Tanaka Yūko” in the above cited Bukku Kurabu Kai catalogue), and the anthropologist Namihira Emiko (cf. NAMIHIRA 1988 etc.) share some of the positions of the male “spiritual intellectuals”, but they do not seem to be able, in present-day Japanese society, to exert the same charismatic influence as men.

identification of brain death with a person's death (cf. Morioka 1994:145 ff.). In his discussions of the problem he refers to the differences between "East" and "West". It is Descartes' "cogito, ergo sum", the Cartesian concept of the separation of mind and body which, according to Umehara, makes it acceptable, in the West, to identify the death of the brain with the death of a person. Descartes' "I" is localized in the brain, controlling the "machine" associated with the body. Without the brain, then, the body is worth nothing. In the Japanese world view, says Umehara, mind and body, humankind and nature are not divided. Instead, humans are viewed as being part of nature, as merely one of the forms of life that the earth has brought forth, sharing their life force (*seimei*) with all other beings. To save our planet, we will have to abandon Cartesian thought, and, instead, turn to the world-view offered by Japanese Buddhism and "animism" (Umehara 1992).

Umehara's *seimeishugi* extends also into his view of how "the other world" was originally imagined by the Japanese. He stresses the interdependence and the similarity of "this world" and "the other world", and the free interchange between them (Umehara 1989:11ff., ref. also to Shimazono 1993:14 f., and Gebhardt 1996:158 ff.), notions that very much resemble the vitalistic world-view of the new religions. The normative import of Umehara's belief about what comes after death is evident in the following paragraph where the author refers to Yamaori's above cited notion of "communal death":

When I die, I will enter the grave of the Umehara family (*Umehara-ke*). To enter the grave of the Umehara family means to enter as a member of that family. To enter as a member of that family means that, some day, I will be reborn into that family. Here, again, we encounter the ideas of coexistence (*kyōsei*) and communal death (*kyōshi*). If this extends to the community at large, then coexistence and communal death are occurring within an even larger space. In this way, it will extend further and further, beyond the earth and into the cosmos. Is it not the recognition of these things that brings forth the ethics connecting one individual (*hito*) with another, connecting individual and society, individual and nation, individual and nature, individual and earth, and so forth? (Umehara/Yamaori 1995:157)

As the above quote demonstrates, vitalistic ideas which, by their nature, conceive of the singular and particular as a subordinate part of the whole, often carry ethical and normative implications showing the individual his or her proper place in society. In combination with the nationalistic senti-

ment apparent in Umehara's writings, this certainly brings up memories of pre-war totalitarian rhetoric. Another point to be made in regard to the paragraph cited here is Umehara's denial of the above mentioned trend towards independence and self-determination in the matter of tombs and funerals. That is, he establishes his world-view on the basis of values that are currently being questioned by a growing segment of society. His message, as well as that of many other "spiritual intellectuals" in Japan reads, "Back to original Asian spirituality!" "Back to Japanese values and a Japanese way of life!"

The reactionary and anti-Western tendencies in present-day Japanese thought, as well as the role of one section of the academic community in spreading and backing such concepts have been described and analysed by others.³⁴ In this article, these ideas have been introduced as pertaining to and reinforcing one of the two opposing currents to be distinguished within the present-day Japanese discourse on death and life after death. These may be described as an emphasis on self-determination and detachment on the one side, and a quest for unity and harmony on the other.³⁵ In the closing section, an attempt will be made to throw some light on the dynamics of these seemingly contradictory trends.

Independence versus Harmony, or Independence in Harmony?

To stress the global aspects of the "spiritual world" of Japan, Shimazono Susumu has coined the term "new spirituality movements" (*shin reisei undō*), meant to include similar phenomena in all societies of today (1992:234 f.). However, in his newest volume in which he focuses on this worldwide phenomenon, he introduces the variant "new spirituality culture" (*shin reisei bunka*). This is to indicate that in Japan (as opposed to the situation in Western countries) there is no tension in the relation between the "spiritual world" and the rest of society (1996:51 f.; 67,

34 Cf. SHIMAZONO 1993, and 1996:247ff., PROHL 1994:96, GEBHARDT 1996, and MISHIMA 1996 about the role of intellectuals. See also the article by Gebhardt in this volume.

35 Margaret LOCK (1997:129; 139) points out the same kind of contradiction in regard to the "brain death" debate. I only had access to her study when this one was about to go into print. Some overlappings between the two articles are therefore inevitable.

endnote 4). Also, the writings of the “spiritual intellectuals” are seen as one integral part of this “culture”, providing its conceptual background and greatly helping it to expand (1996:265).

However, an interpretation that overemphasizes the harmonious relation between “spiritual world” and society, as well as the unity of intellectual and “spiritual” cultures, does not seem quite accurate. Below, first, I will argue for taking into account the social criticism of the “spiritual world”. Then I will show the necessity of taking a separate look at the “movements” on the one side, and at the “spiritual intellectuals” on the other. This, I believe, is necessary to clarify the interaction and interdependence between the “movements” and the intellectuals.

It has been shown in the previous two sections that current movements and trends are challenging modern (technology, medical institutions, etc.) as well as traditional (funerary customs, established religions and their leaders, etc.) authorities and institutions. The incentive of a person such as Inoue Haruyo, for example, who criticises the Japanese people’s submissiveness towards the funeral business (1993:85), and of the women refusing to comply with the traditional custom of the family grave can only be called emancipatory. The same holds true for the authors of journals endeavouring to establish their own, personal death in the face of an anonymous and authoritarian structure ignoring the needs as well as the rights of the individual. In this respect, movements like the *tōbyōki* boom, the hospice movement, and the movement for the reform of funerary customs are in accordance with the “spiritual world”.

Certainly, the movements introduced above not only demand independence and self-determination, but are, as has been shown, also concerned about the negative sides of modern consumer society and about the atomization characterizing modern urban society. They are, consequently, pursuing a new “spirituality” (*seishin* or *reisei*), a new sense of belonging and unity. The above mentioned movements may, in this sense, be seen to constitute one part of the “spiritual world”.³⁶

Margaret Lock, in 1980, described *seishin* as a traditional concept “associated with the capacity to endure suffering and with being single-minded and serious”, aspects of which are to be found in many modern

36 This is also supported by the fact that books on hospice care and terminal care, as well as some *tōbyōki* are listed in the above quoted catalogue of the *seishin sekai*.

movements, including the “new religions”.³⁷ However, a glance at the above cited *seishin sekai* catalogue, and a more thorough look at the research of Shimazono Susumu (1996:1 ff. (foreword), 46 ff.) shows that the meaning of *seishin* must have changed with the development of the “spiritual world” since the late 1970s. Today’s understanding of *seishin* or *reisei* seems to be much closer to the “spirituality” expounded by the “new age” movements of people in search of the self and the meaning of life.³⁸

In Japan, this divergence in regard to the understanding of “spirituality” or *seishin* may account for the stagnation of the older “new religions” as compared to the movements of the “spiritual world”. Shimazono goes even further in describing the typical member of the *seishin sekai* as a person opposed to the “new religions” for their tendency to restrain individual freedom (*ko-kojin o sokubaku suru*) and to demand absolute obedience to the founder or leader (1996:19 f.). Shimazono shows that a process of atomization is not only occurring in society at large, but also in regard to religion. It is the same process which is held responsible by many of the authors introduced here for the disappearance of death from the lives of most people. This same atomization, however, creates a longing for a new unity, and also for new leaders. One indication of this is the susceptibility of people associating themselves with the “spiritual world”, to a religion of a totalitarian nature such as Aum Shinrikyō (cf. Shimazono 1996:4 ff., and Morioka 1996).

The “spiritual world”, according to the above, may be described as a conglomeration of movements critical of modern values and institutions, as well as of traditional values and authorities, that is, movements in pursuit of new values and of new concepts of community. Their goals include self-determination as well as belonging, independence as well as spirituality,

37 LOCK 1980:260. Lock is referring to a paper by Thomas Rohlen presented at a seminar in 1974, and to an article published by Rohlen and Robert Frager in 1976.

38 SUZUKI Daisetsu (Daisetz) (1870-1966), one of the predecessors of today’s “spiritual intellectuals”, clearly distinguished between *seishin* and *reisei* (1972:11ff.). However, present-day adepts of the “new spirituality movements” tend to use the two terms as synonyms.

without necessarily ascribing these to either “Western” or “Eastern” civilization.³⁹

This is not to say that the new “holistic” approach to life is never brought into relation with “Eastern” or Japanese traditions. East Asian medicine has been serving as a model for “holism” in Western countries, and the interest of foreigners from America and Europe has encouraged the revival of traditional medicine in Japan (Lock 1980:255). People like Dr. Obitsu, for example, who are involved in terminal and hospice care, are influenced by European or American models stressing the patient’s independence and the importance of his or her own free will. When talking about his conception of medical care, Dr. Obitsu likes to employ the term “holistic medicine” (*horisutikku igaku*; see “‘Shigo no sekai’ kenkyū”: 145). On the other hand, the concept of “holism” made him perceptive to the “holistic” traditions of Japan, and eventually led him to see “holism” prefigured in Eastern medicine (*tōyō igaku*; *ibid.*:144).⁴⁰ However, people with Dr. Obitsu’s experiences and intentions rarely conceive of “East” and “West” as opposing poles with incompatible value systems. Those are ideas typical of the writings of “spiritual intellectuals” such as Yamaori and Umehara, and of other charismatic figures of the “spiritual world”, such as Funai Yoshio.⁴¹

It makes sense, then, to treat the discourse of the “spiritual intellectuals” as separate from the “new spirituality movements”, and, in a second step, to look at how the two are connected.

Umehara Takeshi has been shown to be an unyielding champion of the concept of the incompatibility of “East” and “West”, and of the moral supremacy of the “East”. His worldview clearly rejects values like independence, self-determination and detachment. There are, however,

39 Also refer to DAVIS 1991 (especially p. 805). According to this author, the “new, pluralistic climate” of postwar Japan is keeping religious fundamentalism in check.

40 East Asian medical concepts do not, however, fully correspond to the new understanding of “holism” in alternative Western medicine. Cf. LOCK 1980:248 f.

41 An interesting aspect which cannot be explicated here is the parallel that can be drawn between the worldview of these leading figures of the “spiritual world” and the “East”-“West” dichotomy expounded in the teachings of many so-called new religions. As has been mentioned, the individuals constituting the “spiritual world” are usually critical of the new religions.

“spiritual intellectuals” advocating ideas which seem to be more moderate. The molecular biologist Nakamura Keiko, for example, appears to be advocating independence as well as unity, singularity as well as the importance of the “whole”. Nakamura is known to the public for her popular works centering on the concept of the genom, the “whole” (*sōtai*) of the DNA. In contrast to the universalistic and therefore reductionistic concepts of gene and DNA, the genom, according to Nakamura, conceptualizes the individual (*kotai*), bringing back to the science of life a feeling for the individual living being (*ko-ko no ikimono e no kanjō*). The idea of the genom draws attention to diversity rather than to commonness of structural and functional features (1994:9 ff.). On the other hand, when asked about the implications of the “genom” for the death of the individual, Nakamura refers back to the whole of the race:

What makes the individual an individual (*kotai o kotai tarashimeru*) is the genom. That is my [personal] genom. And yet, race (*shu*) is also [determined by] the genom. Death per human genom (*hito-genomu o tōshite*), then, brings up various issues like the death of the single cell, the death of the organ, the death of the individual, and, above that, the death of the race, and so on. As, for example, in the case of brain death, the problem emerges of what death at each level implies for the next higher stratum. ... If we think about death in this kind of hierarchical fashion, then life and death cease to be opposing concepts. (cit. from Ida 1997:188)

Even though Nakamura sets out to bring science back to human dimensions by introducing the entity of the individual, she ends up advocating ideas similar to Yamaori’s “communal death”, as well as to Umehara’s family grave and its cosmic extensions. However, there is no contradiction here if we understand her term *kotai* to imply particularity rather than independence or detachment. Also, we should take notice of the subjectivity (in contrast to “Western” scientific objectivity) of the “feeling for the individual living being” that Nakamura wishes to recover.

The ideas of the Jungian psychologist Kawai Hayao may serve to illuminate Nakamura’s position. Kawai is another recognized authority on death in Japan. As the following discussion of his ideas shows, his concept of the Japanese “I” (*watakushi*) implies subjectivity rather than detachment. Kawai likes to expound his theories by referring to the threefold concept of “death of the first person” (*ichininshō no shi* or *watakushi no shi*), “death of the second person” (*nininshō no shi*), and “death of the

third person” (*sanninshō no shi*).⁴² “Death of the first person” signifies the inescapable fact of one’s own death which has to be dealt with sooner or later in life. The “death of the second person” – a close relative or friend – is one occasion in a person’s life that will confront him or her with the inevitability of his or her own death. “Death of the first person” and “death of the second person” are therefore tied together inseparably. The “death of the third person”, in contrast, stands for the dismissal of any personal involvement or sentiment in the face of death. This corresponds to the attitude of the doctor and the scientist who are trained in the Western paradigm of detachment, of the separation of the self and the other eventually leading to the exclusion of death from our experience and thought.

Kawai points to the necessity of reintegrating death on a “transpersonal” level. The term “transpersonal” (*chō-kojin*) refers to “the commonalities connecting humans at the deepest layers, beyond [that of] the individual which until now has been valued by Western people” (1986:3f.). The author introduces the endeavours of the “new age” and “transpersonal” movements,⁴³ but also indicates that the “Eastern” worldview, and especially Buddhism offer what modern men and women are groping for (*ibid.*:30ff., 1997:331).⁴⁴ At a conference on the “Difficulty of Dying” held in the United States in 1990, Kawai was invited to comment on the topic from the viewpoint of a foreign culture. On the positive side, he emphasized the openness of the discussion among the American participants. However, he raised doubts regarding their approach of trying to find “universal laws” to go by in dealing with an “utterly particular”

42 Several Japanese authors refer to this model. Apparently, it is taken from Philippe ARIÈS’ *The hour of our death (L’homme devant la mort, 1977)*. However, the only author to explain this is YUASA Yasuo (1993:141). One other author who frequently talks about *watakushi no shi* is the above mentioned Yanagida Kunio. There is no room here to discuss this. However, his understanding of this concept appears to be different from that of Kawai as it is discussed below. The following paragraph is summarized from HAYAO 1986:25 ff., 1991:158 ff., 1997, and IDA 1997:191 ff.

43 KAWAI especially refers to the International Transpersonal Association the predecessor of which was founded in 1972 (1986:3 ff.).

44 KAWAI is, however, far from saying that the present-day Japanese and “Eastern” people have realized this “transpersonality”. Rather, he suggests that theirs may be a “pre-personal” stage (1986:32 f.).

(*kobetsuteki-na*) problem like that of one's own death (*watakushi no shi*). Kawai does not clearly state but implies here that the traditional "Eastern" way to deal with death is not universal, but particular (1997:320). The *watakushi* in *watakushi no shi*, then, is not to be translated as or confounded with "individual" in the sense of a detached entity or viewpoint, but is to be circumscribed as "particular" or "subjective".

The discussion of several "spiritual intellectuals'" views on death makes it clear that there is a strong tendency among these people to emphasize an opposition between "Eastern" and "Western" cultures and values. At the same time, a more or less explicit claim to moral supremacy and leadership of the "East" or Japan is made. Everything that is believed to alienate humans from themselves and from nature, everything held responsible for the wretched state of our planet, is identified with the "West". In the matter of death, the "Western" principles of universality, detachment, and mechanization are seen to have led to the inhumane and unnatural situation in which people in industrialized countries must die. But today, those who are adhering to these harmful principles are believed to have reached a deadlock.⁴⁵ Only the conversion to "Eastern" or "Japanese" values – oneness with the community and with nature – will bring salvation.

As we have seen, concepts that are easily confounded with "detachment" or "self-determination" are also introduced by "spiritual intellectuals". These ideas are centered around the concepts of "particularity" (*ko-tai* or *kobetsu*), diversity (*tayōsei*),⁴⁶ and the "subjective I" (*watakushi*). However, they are maintained to be traditional "Eastern" values, opposed to the above mentioned concepts constituting "Western" civilisation. They are, as was demonstrated above, conceived within the normative ideals of attachment, oneness, and harmony.

To conclude this discussion, I will now turn to the interaction between the "spiritual intellectuals" and the movements of the "spiritual world". As the above examination shows, there are overlappings as well as incompatibilities between the ideas expounded by the intellectuals, on the one hand, and many of the movements of the "spiritual world", on the other.

45 Cf., e.g. the conversation between Itsuki Hiroyuki and Tada Tomio in NAKAJIMA 1994:3 f.

46 Also, refer to the views of Tachibana Takeshi cited in the previous section.

Incompatible are the claim to self-determination and independence by movements and individuals constituting the "spiritual world" versus the denial of these same values by authors like Umehara Takeshi. Overlapping are the quest for a new unity and "wholeness" on the side of the "spiritual world", and the proposal of new communal values and new "networks" (Morioka 1996) by "spiritual intellectuals".

The above discussion of the phenomenon of the "spiritual world" suggests that atomization occurring within the movements as well as within society at large is instrumental in drawing "spiritual" individuals to the writings of the "spiritual intellectuals". Shimazono postulates unity of the movements and their intellectual leaders within a broad "new spirituality culture". However, his description of the "spiritual intellectuals" as "ideological supporters" (1993:15) and "theologians" (*shingakusha*; Shimazono 1996:250) betrays their true role within the "spiritual world".

The terms "ideological support" and "theology" imply that these intellectuals do not only sympathize with, but are, to a large extent, influencing and controlling the "new spiritual movements" through normative moral precepts. As is suggested by the positions of the authors introduced above, this influence takes the direction of a reversal of tendencies towards independence and of a return to "Japanese" or "Eastern" values. The emphasis on an "Eastern" concept of singularity or subjectivity, as seen in the writings of Nakamura and Kawai, may be explained as an incorporation of the "spiritual world's" claim to self-determination and self-reliance into these authors' writings. Without such a concession, the "spiritual intellectuals" may never have gained such influence. Nevertheless, their position must be described as conservative or even reactionary, compared to the emancipatory and nonconformist forces at work within the "spiritual world".

Conclusion

The influence exerted by academic or intellectual authorities in regard to the popular image of death can be traced back to the beginnings of the process of change which was described above. In the 1960s, it was Japanese academics and intellectuals who first made their deaths public. In the 1970s, their readers followed their example. They were also encouraged by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, another authority on death. Towards

the end of the 1970s, the new movements reconsidering death and dying joined forces with the “spiritual world” which began to form during those years. The end of the 1970s also saw the emergence of a new type of intellectual, the so-called “spiritual intellectual”, taking up popular themes of the “spiritual world”, but interpreting them as normative concepts.⁴⁷

Accordingly, the change in the perception and interpretation of death and dying must be examined by looking at two levels – the intellectual discourse on the one hand, and the “movements” on the other hand – and by analysing the interaction and interdependence between the two. The intellectual discourse reacts to individualistic tendencies and atomization within the “movements” as well as within society at large by resorting to a kind of carrot and stick rhetoric. While emphasizing the importance of the community and the “whole”, “spiritual intellectuals” also expound new concepts to make up for the tabooed “Western individualism”. Conversely, people adhering to the atomized religion of the “new spirituality movements” turn to the writings of these authors for guidance in a world of bewildering freedom of choice.

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47 See SHIMAZONO (1973:20) for discussion of this simultaneity of the emergence of the “spiritual world” and the “spiritual intellectuals”. According to him, 1979 is the year in which these new developments surfaced.

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