

Caring for the dead • affective relationship between people and human remains in Aguni, Okinawa

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

This essay will examine the affective relationships people have with human remains and, by extension, the souls of the deceased in Aguni, Okinawa. In conceptualising care, I will explore how *senkotsu* (bone washing) and other emerging mortuary practices, such as cremation, perpetuate and reconfigure the cycle of care between the living and the dead. The element of fear and disgust present in these interactions will also be explored, as such notions centre around these care practices. I demonstrate that with the use of senses such as touch, people forge intimate and affective relationships with the dead. Furthermore, I will explore how changing practices alter the ways people fashion caring and affective intimacy with the dead.

keywords: care, affect, human remains, *senkotsu*, Okinawa

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Aguni is an island that is part of the two-dozen Okinawan Islands that make up the southernmost part of the Japanese archipelago. It is located 60km northwest of the main Okinawan island, which is connected by a ferry that comes in and out of the island once a day. As one of the islanders reminded me after the ferry leaves the dock at 2:10 pm, the people remaining are the ones you are with throughout the night and until the ferry arrives again at 12:15 pm, the next day. The island has an area of 7.64 km², and the current population of the island is just under 700 people. It has one izakaya (1), three grocery stores, three restaurants, one clinic, and no crematoriums.

Due to this lack of crematoriums on the island, people in Aguni have historically, and still do to some extent, participate in the practice of bone washing, or *senkotsu*. *Senkotsu* is a practice which comes after a wind burial, where in Aguni bodies are put in individual coffins and stored away in the cave-like communal graves for at least 3-4 years. This is unlike other forms of wind burials,

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where the corpses are exposed to the elements for it to decompose. The remains are then brought back out to be washed individually with water by their family, friends, and sometimes neighbours.

Initially inspired greatly by the work of Krmpotich, Fontein, and Harries (2010) on the emotive materiality and the affective presence of bones/human remains, I wanted to seek out what it is that the bones *do* to people. However, as I furthered my research, it became clear that what I should be looking at instead was what it is that bones do *with* people, as they constitute intimate and affective relationships with the living. With this essay, I hope to further the understanding of the extensive relationship people have with the deceased in Aguni, Okinawa.

Care in the context of Aguni

A typhoon was coming, and the wind was strong. I was sat on the back seat of the car with Wada-san, a mainlander in his 30s who has been working on the island for a few months, and Satoshi-san, a 41-year-old man local to Aguni, driving. I was accompanying them to put the ashes of the father of one of the villagers to rest in *munchū* or a communal grave. The windows were opened to let in a mixture of the scent of sun-baked asphalt, the ocean breeze, and the faint scent of sugarcane that always lingers on the island. With the heat of the Okinawan sun blazing above us, I felt my thighs sticking to the leather seat.

Satoshi-san turned to me, visibly

amused. ‘ちなみにもうあの世だから。もう死者の世界に入ったよ’ - ‘By the way, we’ve just crossed over to the other world. You’re in the land

of the dead now’. A burst of astonishment issued from both Wada-san and me. Satoshi-san proceeded to chuckle cheekily, seemingly satisfied from receiving the reaction he expected.

As Satoshi-san made clear death is very close to home in a place like Aguni. From my outing with Satoshi-san, I found that it is only about a 10 minute drive from the villages. In Aguni, the living reside in the east where the sun rises, and the dead inhabit the west where the sun sets. As far as the villagers are concerned, it has always been like this. The dead and the living have cohabited the island for as long as they’ve known. People laugh at the occasional tourists who visit and marvel at the idea of ‘the other world’ existing on such a small island. However, there is also danger and risk that accompanies the villagers from having such space in close proximity. Many of the villagers would not go near the graves if there were no reason to and people who are deemed vulnerable, such as pregnant women and children, are advised not to go there for fear of ‘bad’ spirits. As a non-islander and an outsider, I was told multiple times to verbally introduce myself when I reach the graves so as not to alarm the spirits, and to carry bags of salt as protection. When asked directly no one made mention of a known evil spirit but everyone still showed great concern about an ‘outsider’ entering ‘in case something happened’.

The weariness directed towards me

(1) Japanese equivalent of a pub that serves both food and alcoholic drinks

was in contrast to how the villagers acted once they had reached the graves. People seemed relaxed, as they sat to eat and drink in front of the graves. They talked of their ancestors and recently deceased relatives and friends with great fondness. The tension and worry exhibited by the same people had vanished entirely. People expressed their need and desire to care for the dead out of affective and emotional motives, and yet believed that those they loved and cared for were also capable of harm and danger.

To prevent harm being inflicted, there are several rituals, varying from everyday practices such as serving tea to the deceased, to some that are ceremonially done at specific times and places. Through these practices, the ancestors may grant you things like good health or financial security, and yet the failure or misconduct of these rituals and communications may result in their rage (Higa 2010: 205). As described by Kawano, 'Although faith is not necessarily a primary reason for people to conduct rituals for *kami* (2), buddhas, and ancestors, the well-being of ritual practitioners and their families figures centrally as a motivation for ritual activity' (2005:21). Due to this, I would argue that the care provided for the dead is met with a return, completing a 'cycle of care' that perpetuates itself through people's actions and practices.

To conceptualise what care is in this context I take Fisher and Tronto's definition of care as a starting point:

'At the most basic level, we suggest caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (Tronto & Fischer, 1990:40).

I suggest that the definition is broad enough to include the living and their deceased counterparts, on account of their possession of a *mabui* (3) – a soul, and therefore a sense of 'self'. As they approach the topic of care from a feminist perspective, Fisher and Tronto were interested in looking at care activities that were understood as something invisible yet ever-present through the work of women behind the scenes. The definition characterises caring as a practice, as well as articulating the aspect of caring involving 'well-being' within interdependent relations. This aspect of well-being is paramount when observing practices of care in Aguni as social interactions with the dead centre around the very act of making sure of the dead's welfare and the protection and prosperity provided in return.

As Loaiza (2018) conceptualises, the notion of concern is also at the core in the trajectory of 'care' within the realm of social practices. This concern leads to the 'enactment of vital values' (Loaiza 2018:17), which I argue, in this case, is the maintenance of the relationship between the living and the dead. Loaiza (2018) observes the body as a locus of experience yet understands that bodies do not experience lives neutrally or privately. They are instead sites where future concerns are projected (ibid.). This is because bodies do not exist within a neutral vacuum but in a social environment, which is characterised by interactions. These dynamics of interactions create space for concern. Hence when people are caring, it is from a place of concern.

Traditionally in Aguni, it is believed that after a person passes away, the family is obligated to perform a set of rituals after the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, twenty-fifth, and the thirty-third year. Following the completion of the rituals

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after the thirty-third year, the deceased becomes a *kami* or god (Baksheev, 2008). As my informants insisted, the dead cannot complete their journey to become a *kami* alone since the living must execute the ritual practices. The dead are highly dependent and in need of living human actors to 'make' them into ancestors/-gods. The relations are established by both entities, the living and the dead, through acts of caring. However, as people in Aguni understand, caring is not just a matter of love but also of fear.

Fear of Mabui

Aguni's summer knows no rain unless it comes all at once like a bucket full of water turned upside down. Getting the timing right to hang your laundry is crucial. One by one, I picked up my freshly washed clothes to hang on the line.

'Oneēsan' (4) , piped up Satoshi-san, who lived next door to where I was staying. He was wearing his grey boiler suit and white rubber boots; he was coming back from tending to the millet field. He continued as he walked over the small cement fence between the two properties to get closer, 'I heard you're researching about *senkotsu*. Someone I know is laying the ashes of their father to rest on the 5th of July. You should join us if you want. It's not every day that we open the graves anyways'.

Excited by the invitation and in an effort to keep the conversation going, I thanked him and continued, 'It does look like hard work opening the graves'. Satoshi-san giggles and corrects me instantly, '大変とかじゃなくて普段は開け

ちゃダメだから' – 'It's not about hard work, you're not meant to open it unless it's times like this'. Still laughing lightly, he walked away, as I stood there, contemplating what he meant.

This conversation with Satoshi-san haunted me for a while, not knowing the meaning behind that comment. The graves in Aguni are quite particular. Being communal graves (or *munchū*) they are as big as some bedrooms. As Aguni is a volcanic island, the graves are dug into the malleable tuff, and the entrance is sealed with stones piled on top of one another. And to open said grave it takes at least two people to move the heavy stones one by one. When I made that comment above, all I had in mind was how tiresome it must be to open the graves. However, what Satoshi-san meant was something completely different. You are not expected to open graves without caution or purpose because of the *mabui* that reside inside.

As Takahashi (2015) observes, there are two types of *mabui*: one that inhabits the living and another that inhabits the dead. In Okinawan belief, the *mabui* is free-flowing and is prone to leave the body. Due to this, there used to be a practice in which two adult men would go up on the rooftop and shout '*mudutoō*' while they waved fans to try and bring the *mabui* back when someone was gravely ill and at the verge of death (Takahashi, 2015).

As there are *mabui* for the living, there are *mabui* for the dead. Again, there are two kinds of *mabui* for the dead: evil spirits - one that has not passed over to 'the other world' and brings harm to the living, and ancestral spirits, those that have gone to 'the other world' and

(2) *Kami* is a Japanese word for god or deities often (but not necessarily) associated with Shinto.

(3) The concept of *mabui* would be discussed in more depth further on in the paper.

become gods that protect the living (Takahashi, 2015). As Eduardo Kohn argues in his book, *How Forests Think*, which explores the complexity of human interaction with the surrounding ecosystem for the Runa people of Ecuador's upper Amazon, 'spirits are real' (2013:216). They are not only real because people take them to be real but because it can be used to inform existence. They are real in a way that affects people in Aguni and how they organise their lives, much as they affect the Runa in Ecuador.

As *mabui* are unpredictable as well as unstable, they could be dangerous and harmful. You are not supposed to open the graves if there is no need to because people fear upsetting the *mabui*. People should be cautious about being close to the graves. Some could be made gods, as 'gods emerge with human practice' (Kohn 2015:216), and some could turn evil. Hence, the living and the dead can mutually perpetuate the cycle of care, but it can be disrupted if the care provided isn't received successfully. This creates tension in the relationship with the dead; intimate yet distant, cared for yet feared.

Deceased entities are understood as relational beings with autonomous power to give back to the living. Furthermore, the completion and fulfilment of care by the living is what gives the dead the status and the capacity to give back. Due to the temperamental nature of the *mabui*, fear and anxieties are present in these relationships too. This creates some unease in the relationship established by the people in Aguni. However, I argue that affect and emotive motives sustain an intimate relationship between the dead and the living, especially through the employment of senses such as touch.

Affective relationships through the sense of touch

The sky is blue and dotted with big towers of clouds. I feel the breeze in my hair. It tickles my cheeks. Tanahara-san, a man in his late 60s who acts as a self-appointed guide to show occasional tourists around the island, and I are sat under a gazebo. It mimics the shape of a *hanagasa*, a large hat in the shape of a hibiscus flower that is worn during Okinawan traditional dances. We were at the Mahana observational deck, the highest point on the island, where you have a 360-degree view of the island and the sea that lies beyond. The open field is liberating, and the sounds of distant waves wash over me.

Tanahara-san said through frowned brows:

‘段々だんだん洗骨に手を入れて手伝ってくれる人がいないとかわいそうになる わけ’ - ‘I feel pity as there are fewer people who decide to put their hands in and help with *senkotsu*’.

‘When it [*senkotsu*] was done a couple of years ago, there were not any elderly people left, and when I saw the neighbourhood lady help...’, he looks down at his feet for a second. Looking back up again, Tanahara-san continues, ‘It's not something you can do alone. Two people can't do it either. You need five, six people at least. But it's not enough with there being five, six people’.

He utters with one raised brow:

‘本当にやってくれる人。触ってくれる人’ - ‘People willing to do it. People that are willing to touch it... When your mother passes away, and it's fine if she's cremated, but it's

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whether you're confident that you can pick up her now brittle bones one by one and wash it. It makes you think, doesn't it? Even though she's your parent'.

We maintain eye contact, his eyes searching. The silence only lasts a couple of seconds. Tanahara-san remarks, now with a slight smile:

‘だけど、最後の別れで気持ちよくちゃんとして送ってあげようという気持ちになれるかどうかの問題’ - ‘But it's a problem of whether you feel that you want to send them off and say your last good-bye properly and respectfully’.

Tanahara-san raises an important issue – and that is that *senkotsu* is a highly emotional process. And touch is employed to create intimate and meaningful inter-corporal connections. Here I will attempt to demonstrate that although touch is a sense often neglected by anthropologists (Blake, 2011), it defies and eases the boundaries between bodies (dead and alive), as well as dichotomies between subject/object. Furthermore, touch relates to care, but there is a common ambivalence. Caring comes with fear much like touch comes with fear or even repulsion.

Touch and the politics of 'putting your hand in'

All of my informants have mentioned at one point or another the physical and emotional hardship that comes with the practice of *senkotsu*. How 'well' the

flesh rots and how much decomposition is left on the bones is something people mention a lot when talking of *senkotsu*. When there is some rotting flesh left, like in the case of Noriko-san's father, who passed away 25 years ago, the emotional toll is much more predominant on their families. Noriko-san said, 'I didn't want to show his changed form to anyone else... and it made me think about what my father would think about how people perceived him when they saw him like that'.

Unlike the sanitised and 'bounded' body that is expected of dead and dying bodies in hospitals today (Lawton, 1998), the remains to be washed in *senkotsu* could come with various levels of decay and rot. A 'bounded' body is one that contains – one that retains control of their bodily degradation and odours (Lawton, 1998). Similarly to Lawton's study on the effect smells could have on the (un)desirability of dying bodies, Howes also makes a point about the sometimes offensive and unsavoury nature of smells. Modelled after the paper 'Percussion and Transition' by Rodney Needham, Howes parallels the connection between percussive noise and transition, to that of olfaction and transition. According to Howes (1991), smells are boundless, always transcending boundaries. They are evasive and 'out of place', and for these reasons, death is a 'dirty business' as it is highly unstable and liminal (Howes 1991:140). This is why people in Aguni talk about how much decaying flesh is still on the corpse. Because the 'unbounded' corpse with its evasive odour is repulsive. Their repulsion is a challenge people must overcome in order to care for the dead.

(4) Japanese word used to address women meaning 'big sister' or 'young lady'.

Due to these unpleasant characteristics, death becomes more medicalised and distant in Japan, as well as in many other parts of the world. Interactions with the dead are often left for professionals, whether they are doctors or funeral directors (Krpmotich et al., 2010). The disturbance people feel at the appearance and the smell drives them away from the practice.

‘手を入れる’ ‘To put [your] hand in’, was a phrase used by all of my informants to describe people participating in the practice of *senkotsu*. This points to the act of physically touching the bones. There is something highly destabilising about human bones/remains since they are located between being subject and object – person and thing (Harries, 2016). In discussing the Beothuk, people who were native to Newfoundland, Canada, Harries further illustrates this destabilising nature of human remains. As the presence of the exterminated Beothuk remains emerges the absence of their lives and what used to be also comes to the surface. As once dead and ‘vanished’ bodies/remains come to light, people are confronted with the absence of *the lives that used to be* (Harries, 2016). This nature of bones, once being ‘people’ and now without the same life force, places them in a precarious status. Due to its uncertain subjectivity/objectivity, people are torn between feelings of obligation to ‘do right’ and pay respect to the deceased by ‘putting their hands in’ and taking a much less labour-intensive and ‘clean’ way to lay a person at rest – cremation.

‘二度悲しむわけ’ ‘It saddens [you] twice’, said Sumiko-san, a woman in her mid-90s, as a great-granddaughter of hers fumbled around the room in search of her toys and one of her teenage grand-

daughters napped in the same room. ‘After the wind burial is done, you have to see the bones again, it brings back sad memories, so you end up suffering twice’.

She continued, leaning forward and with widened eyes, ‘I was so scared when I saw the skull, and that’s why I didn’t put my hands in for either of my parents. That’s why the younger generations won’t put their hands in either’.

This feeling of fear and discomfort is commonly shared amongst the people of Aguni. However, it is also true that not having enough people that would ‘put their hands in’ results in strong emotional responses, much like the sentiment expressed by Tanahara-san. These emotional responses are triggered by the emotive and affective relations people have with the deceased, and by extent, the bones. As Seigworth and Gregg conceptualises, ‘affect is found in the intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between those resonances themselves’ (2010:1-2). Persons and human bones develop and maintain strong affective relationships. It is seen by some that the politics revolving around whether ‘people put their hands in’ or not could result in the making or breaking of these relationships. Paradoxically, however, the emotional depth of relationships present when people are alive may be what bars them emotionally from ‘putting their hand in’. The closer people are and the more love they feel for the person the harder it may be to see them so drastically changed. Due to this emotional paradox, transformation of the practice was required to sustain the relationships into death.

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There is a Japanese expression, ‘心を打たれる’ literally translated to ‘to be struck in the heart’ and of which the English equivalent would be ‘to be touched (emotionally)’. Like seen in such colloquialism, touch is something that evokes emotions (Peloquin, 1989). As Montagu claims, ‘touch is not experienced as a single physical modality, as sensation, but affectively, as emotion’ (1971:110). Much like the osteoarchaeologists, who work without any barriers in-between their own bodies and skin and that of the skeletons they study, touching with bare hands create intimate inter-corporal connections (Sofaer, 2012). As Sofaer (2012) argues, this is also due to the nature of the skeleton being ‘inside-out’, lacking in a singular physical boundary that is constituted by the skin in a living person. This gives another sense to the ‘unboundedness’ of the skeleton, as the point at which the skeletal body ends is indistinct. This makes the act of touching skeletal bodies distinctly intimate.

Touch is also a sense that defies subject/object distinctions (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Touch always poses an ontological argument that contends the fact that one always touches another that touches back (Sofaer, 2012). To reiterate, ‘the pressure involved in touch is a pressure on ourselves as well as upon objects’ (Stewart, 1999:31) – even though in the case of a skeletal body or a singular bone, the deceased may not actively touch back or sense being touched. However, the very fact that you feel them implies that they (even involuntarily) touch you back, and therefore reciprocate (Sofaer, 2012:142).

Touching is not only intimate because of the act in itself but also because of the association it has to the care and comforts it provides. As Blake

(2011) finds in her ethnographic fieldwork in an oncology ward at a South African children’s hospital, touch was used both by the children who are hospitalised and the adults, whether they be parents or nurses, as a source of comfort and a medium to convey feelings of care. Touch was not only emotional but also utilised as a form of pain alleviation, which proved efficacious. Much like a kiss on an injured toddler’s knee by a mother, the performance of touch in itself retains power (Thompson, Ritenbaugh and Nichter, 2008). In Aguni, touch, by ‘putting your hands in’ to wash the bones, is essential not only because it instils a sense of intimacy but also because it is infused with the sense of care and comfort for the deceased. This employment of touch is in stark contrast to the mainland Japanese practice, where cremated bones are picked up by family members with chopsticks and touch is very carefully avoided.

Mediated change and new senkotsu

In an autobiographical book where Masao Nakazato writes about his *anmā* (Okinawan word for mother), he writes, ‘Elders say that cremation is like roasting chicken, and it is ‘murder’. It is the murder of the soul, and you become a murderer’ (2004, 108).

‘最大の親孝行はそのまま土に返すことにある’ ‘The best way to honour your parents is to give them back to earth’. Sumiko-san and many others in Aguni shared similar views with the elders mentioned in the book. Her great-granddaughter now sat quietly watching the TV. Sitting up on the sofa with her legs tucked in underneath her buttocks, she straightens her posture. ‘本当に本当に胸がさけるよう

な思いで、,’ ‘I really really felt like my chest was being ripped open...’ said Sumiko-san, firmly shutting her eyes - her shoulders tense. Sumiko-san continues:

‘When one of my siblings first said they wanted to be cremated and when I saw them go in the incinerator, I thought my chest was being ripped apart. When they came out, I couldn’t even tell what bones they were. Not even whether it was human or not. That’s why I didn’t like it, but 世は世に従え (proverb meaning ‘we must follow the order of the world’)’.

As Sumiko-san said, times are changing and so is Aguni. However, there are difficulties and unease that accompany these changes. As aforementioned, sensuous and affective intimacy, in touch as well as through different ritual practices, is important for the living and the dead. This intimacy, however, sometimes proves difficult - even repugnant. The real question then turns to what happens to these intimate and caring relations when change is presented.

Noriko-san and her family had decided to cremate her mother’s body and bring her ashes home in an urn, which would then be moved to the same urn as her husband’s. This relatively new process of cremating the body and moving the ashes from one urn to a special urn called *jīshigame* (one that is typically bigger from a conventional urn and adorned with decorations) is also called *senkotsu* today. It is also observed that people would sometimes wet the ashes with water or *awamori* (5) before moving it into a *jīshigame*. Noriko-san’s sentiment of traditional *senkotsu* being hard work, physically and mentally, is echoed amongst all of my interviewees. Due to that, most choose to do it the ‘new way’.

However, although the process is drastically changed, the central ethos remains the same - to rest them in their final stone homes or *jīshigame*. As long as that is done, the deceased can live a content afterlife, therefore giving them the chance to give back to the living and complete the ‘cycle of care’.

The final resting place matters. Stone dwellings, or *jīshigame*, in the West is where the dead would spend their afterlife, whereas the living inhabits the East. Furthermore, at the material level, cremation acts as a vehicle for generating a new form of human remains (Kujit et al., 2014). From a historical standpoint, in wider Okinawa, there had been a push for a transition to cremation by the local government for health and hygiene reasons just before the breakout of WW2 (Sakai, 2005). In post-WW2 Okinawa, the push for cremation also took the form of women’s liberation movements. The war, outbreak of malaria, and severe malnutrition lead to more death than Okinawa had seen before (ibid.). The communal village graves were overcrowded, and at the worst times, the bodies had to be washed hardly after a year (ibid.). Since in most places around Okinawa, *senkotsu* was viewed as a woman’s job (6), women were forced to conduct intensive labour, both physically and mentally. Consequently, the shift from *senkotsu* to cremation was well received, especially by the women, which made the bones ‘clean’ instantaneously (ibid.).

‘Burning of the body is a destructive act’ (Kujit et al., 2014:15). However, it also accelerates decay (Prendergast et al., 2006). This cuts off years for natural deterioration of the body, which takes at least 3-4 years in wind burials where in cremation it takes mere minutes. Although the transition to this more violent form of

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the mortuary rite was received at first with horror and apprehension, people in Aguni are starting to embrace this change. This is, however, mediated with the maintenance of more traditional ideologies that lie as the essence of the process of making gods and ancestors.

To cremate: a kinder act?

‘母がどうしても連れて帰りたいたいという気持ちが強かったので’ ‘My mother insisted on taking him home’ – her voice cracked. Noriko-san was sitting in front of me. She looked at me with her lips pressed hard together.

Noriko-san held back tears as she fiddled with her handkerchief in hand. Her father passed away twenty-five years ago in a hospital in mainland Okinawa, and Noriko-san knew that ‘if they [her family] didn't clean him, no one would’. However, this process wasn't mirrored for her mother when she passed away thirteen years ago, as cremation became more prominent and fewer people opted for a wind burial, which ultimately leads to senkotsu.

Still with her handkerchief in hand Noriko-san continued, ‘Senkotsu is hard work. And to be completely honest, my siblings and I never wanted to see our parents in a state like that’, she sighed. ‘We decided that we would clean her nevertheless, although it was different from what we did with our father’. The method of ‘cleaning’ that they opted for in the end was to cremate the body.

Traditionally, cremating a body is inhumane, disrespectful, and painful to

watch. However, times are changing, and more people are opting for cremation. Part of this is due to the change in where people pass away now. According to Koja et al. (2012), the death rate recorded in Aguni from 1986 to 2006 was 284, with 81 of them (28.5%) passing away within the island and 203 (71.5%) passing away outside the island. Within those statistics, 90% of those that passed away on the island did so in their own homes, while most of those that passed away outside the island did so in hospitals. With only a small clinic within the island, most people with severe or terminal illnesses would have to go to the main island to get treated.

There is only one ferry per day, coming in and out of Aguni. If the families of the deceased do decide to bring back the corpse to the island, they have two options: to organise the body to be carried on the ferry or to charter a helicopter for some privacy. Either way, it is a relatively cumbersome and potentially expensive process. In contrast, to have the body cremated and brought over in an urn on the ferry is a much more comfortable and discreet process.

Practical and financial convenience is one of the reasons that people may choose cremation over wind burials, and ultimately, *senkotsu*. However, that is not the only one. Yet again, revisiting what Tanahara-san said when families and friends don't volunteer willingly to ‘put their hand in’ and help, it induces an acute sense of pain and pity for those that are mourning the deceased. Following M. Rosaldo's argument that emotion is not

(5) Okinawan alcohol made out of rice

(6) The gender implications for *senkotsu* was less severe in Aguni, and men also participated in the practice although it was led by women most of the time (Koja et al., 2003)

something in opposition to thought, but as ‘*embodied*’ thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that ‘I am involved’ (Lutz and White, 1986), this affective response is vital to the changing tradition. Gaining insight from what my interlocutors have mentioned, the abandonment may be heartbreaking not only for the living but for the dead as well. This matters greatly. People in Aguni have (and still do to some extent) practised *senkotsu* out of highly affective motives –love, honour, and obligation. Many are choosing cremation for the same reasons. Hence, although there are practical matters that factor into the transition of *senkotsu* to cremation, I argue it is also out of the same care and concern for the deceased that drives the people to make the change, as well as make it a feasible and ethical option.

The materiality of the ashes is ‘dry’ in contrast to the ‘wet’ corpse (Hertz, 1960). As Hertz contextualises, through the violence of fire, the corpse is transformed and altered in substance to ashes, in which the deceased acquires ‘a new body’, ‘one which is stable and beyond further deterioration’ (ibid.). Furthermore, possessing the quality of dryness, it diminishes the ‘sorrows and dangers’ that the living may experience as a corpse decays (ibid.). Ashes are ambiguous in nature, being both a person and a corpse, yet not resembling either (Prendergast et al., 2006). However, this ambiguity and stable status of the ashes allow for the living mourners to interact with the deceased in a much safer manner. A deteriorating corpse invokes a strong emotional response in people that isn’t mirrored when interacting with ashes. Similarly, apparent from the concern voiced by Noriko-san, it may shield the deceased from feelings of embarrass-

ment or shame from exposing themselves in their decaying bodies.

However, this change in materiality and the lack of wetness alters the relationships people have with the remains. Previously, I have discussed the risk, disgust, and ambivalence that accompany the process of forging intimate relations and bonds. Dry ashes may aid to remove these negative emotions associated with interacting with the dead. However, it may also remove the element of intimacy. I argue here that feelings of fear and repulsion are not opposite or in contrast to intimacy, but intrinsic to it.

Durham formulates that, ‘Disgust creates intimacy, as much as the more common observation that intimacy creates disgust’ (2011:149). Durham, in discussing disgust in the anthropological imagination, expresses how disgust is dependent on proximity and hence intimate. For example, faeces become disgusting when we are faced with the prospect of having to touch, smell, or see it (ibid.). However, faeces in a contained space, out of reach, is unwanted, yet not disgusting (ibid.). The very act of feeling disgust is an impulse inhabiting both the body and the mind (ibid.). It is a ‘gut-feeling’ that is felt physically as well as something one imagines, through taking on the perspective of another or a different situation. The imagined idea of washing the bones may not be disgusting. However, to actually do it, and in some cases, the thought of having to wash the rotting flesh off of the bones, could be disgusting.

As Noriko-san said, *senkotsu* is hard work. Here, I would like to suggest that it is hard work because of its highly intimate nature. Of course, it is physically straining to wash all the 206 bones in the human body, but it is not merely the physicality of it. Intimacy is vulnerable. To

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engage in this empathetic endeavour to be disgusted, and therefore intimate, involves emotional labour. As a result, it may be that cremation is a kinder practice, both for the living and the dead. The dead are sheltered from the gaze of the living that would look at them in disgust, and the living are devoid from enacting such vulnerable, intimate practices.

The practice of *senkotsu* has changed drastically within the last couple of decades to accommodate the lives of the people today. Cremation, as it is much more convenient and immediate compared to the wind burials, has risen as the dominant form of the mortuary rite. However, some of the core beliefs that dictate the mourning process stay the same. This includes the importance of moving the remains to the final resting home. This core belief informs us on how the cyclical-ity and mutuality of care are enacted by the majority of the people today in Aguni.

However, the quality of intimacy is altered with the change in mortuary practices. Touch is no longer used, and the removal of repugnance towards a decaying body also removes a vital part of what made the relationship so intimate. Today, the mortuary practice of putting the dead to rest is still informed by more traditional beliefs, as people attempt different methods such as wetting the ashes, as mentioned above. These alternative methods of cleansing and purifying the bones such as wetting the ashes, provide a new way in which people interact and show care for the dead. I believe that these new ways of *senkotsu* still come from a place of deep affection and care. However, the quality of care presented is changed as dry ashes remove the possibility of intimacy. The juxtaposition of having care and fear, love and disgust, coexist was what made *senkotsu* so affective yet dan-

gerous. This quality is now changed, although the name *senkotsu* remains.

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