

## Mortuary Rites for Inanimate Objects

### The Case of *Hari Kuyō*

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*In Japan, as in other industrialized countries, old and broken objects mostly end up in the trash. Some items, however, end their “lives” with a special ritual. This article is the first serious Western-language treatment of mortuary rites (kuyō) for inanimate objects. The history of these rites, the Buddhist and Shinto justifications for them, and the motivations of the participants in them are among the topics about which little is known. In an attempt to enhance our knowledge of kuyō, this article examines mortuary rites for needles—objects which are emblematic of women. The goddess connected to the rites is introduced, and mortuary rites for needles performed today at three locations in Tokyo are described.*

**Keywords:** inanimate objects — *hari kuyō* — mortuary rites — needles — Awashima

IN JAPAN, RITES OF SEPARATION are performed not only for human beings and animals, but also for inanimate objects. In most cases, the term used for these rites is *kuyō* 供養. This is the Japanese translation of the Sanskrit *pūjā* or *pūjanā*, which means “to bring offerings.” Originally, in the Buddhist context, the term stood for offerings and other acts of worship directed toward the “Three Jewels” (*sanbō* 三宝): the Buddha, the Buddhist teaching (Dharma), and the Buddhist monastic community (*sangha*). Nowadays the word *kuyō* is used mainly in connection with ancestral rites, and it is also used in the terms *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養 (mortuary rites for aborted fetuses or stillborn children) and *petto kuyō* ペット供養 (mortuary rites for pets). By the use of the term *kuyō*, religious rites for inanimate objects are directly linked to rites for humans and animals. We can call these rites “mortuary rites for

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inanimate objects,” a bit different from LAFLEUR, who calls *hari kuyō* 針供養 “funerals for needles” (1992, p. 143) and RICHIE, who describes *hari kuyō* as “a needle mass, i.e., a requiem service for broken needles” (1978, p. 6).<sup>1</sup> In this article I will first make some general remarks on *kuyō* rites for inanimate objects, and then discuss the case of *hari kuyō*.

*Kuyō* for inanimate objects are by far the most varied type of *kuyō*. It needs to be emphasized at the beginning that these rites are not as universal or as prescribed as *kuyō* rites for the deceased; rather, only people who are in a special way concerned with the objects in question observe such rites. However, *kuyō* rites for objects are not isolated cases but are part of a wider phenomenon, linked to the emergence of *mizuko kuyō* and the increase in *kuyō* rites for pets and other animals. MATSUZAKI Kenzō, one of the foremost Japanese ethnographers working on the topic, speaks of a “*kuyō* boom” (1996a, p. 162).

*Kuyō* rites for objects are presently carried out for items as diverse as needles, chopsticks, combs, dolls, clocks, personal seals (*hanko*), knives, shoes, scissors, and semiconductors. While some of these rites are conducted for objects used for religious purposes, such as rosaries and *butsudan* 仏壇 (Buddhist ancestral altars), most of the rites are for everyday objects. Some of the rites are observed throughout Japan, others only locally. Bidding a fond farewell to old objects that can no longer be used is an important part of these rites. Participants often cite the wish to express their feelings of gratitude toward the object as their motivation for observing the *kuyō*. Guidebooks to annual events and brochures distributed by temples or shrines likewise stress the element of gratitude. In some cases, an event is also called *kanshasai* 感謝祭 (thanksgiving festival).

*Kuyō* rites for objects are observed either by setting up memorial stones and/or by holding a ceremony. Sometimes the monuments are large natural stones onto which an inscription has been carved; sometimes they are elaborately crafted monuments. Around the Benten-dō 弁天堂 in Ueno Park in Tokyo there are several of these monuments (see ŌSAKI 1995a). Because the goddess Benten is the patron of the performing arts, some of the earliest stones placed here are related to these professions. We can, for example, find a memorial stone for folding fans called *ōgizuka* 扇塚, erected in 1949 by a group of kabuki actors in Tokyo (Figure 1). Another monument, called *itozuka* 糸塚, was set up in 1951 by a group of musicians as a dedication to the strings of musical instruments. A spectacular memorial stone for eyeglasses is

<sup>1</sup> Although *mizuko kuyō* has received a great deal of attention from Western scholars, mortuary rites for inanimate objects have scarcely been discussed. LAFLEUR (1992) does provide a brief description of *hari kuyō*, but his main topic is *mizuko kuyō*.



**Figure 1.** *Ōgizuka*: a memorial stone for fans.



**Figure 2.** *Megane no hi*: a monument for eyeglasses.

*megane no hi* めがねの碑, which was set up in 1968 by various professional associations of opticians, frame-makers, and lens-makers (Figure 2). A *kuyō* ceremony for eyeglasses is held at this site every spring.

A memorial stone sometimes becomes the ritual site for periodical events, but it is not a prerequisite for the performance of *kuyō*. In most cases, *kuyō* rites for objects take a Buddhist form, with the chanting of sutras by priests, the burning of incense, and sometimes a flower-throwing ceremony (*sange* 散華). However, *kuyō* rites for objects are not necessarily held in a Buddhist environment. There are *kuyō* rites performed in Shinto shrines, with Shinto priests officiating. One example is the Shinto-style *kuyō* for chopsticks held annually at Hie 日枝 Shrine in Tokyo. Moreover, *kuyō* rites for objects are not necessarily conducted on a sacred site; *kuyō* rites for needles, for example, are sometimes held at businesses and sewing schools, although in these cases a Buddhist priest is usually called in to conduct the ceremony.

The various *kuyō* rites for objects have different histories, with some of them being much older than others. Religious rites on behalf of some tools, such as needles, have been performed for centuries, while other items have only recently become the object of these rites. It is generally thought that *kuyō* rites for inanimate objects started in the Edo period, with *hari kuyō* and *fude kuyō* 筆供養 (for writing and painting brushes) being the earliest cases. New *kuyō* rites were established in the second half of the twentieth century, many of them originating in the era of rapid economic growth. These newer rites in many cases have been created at the instigation of professional associations.<sup>2</sup>

One calendar of annual events lists a total of 283 commemorative days, most of them for objects or inventions (SANSEIDŌ KIKAKU HENSHŪBU 1992). The honored objects are varied and include parts of the human body (Tooth Day), food (Soba Day), and technical inventions (Elevator Day). Some of the more important occasions, such as Ear Day, receive attention in schools and in the media, and are therefore generally well known, but the majority are known only by people with a special connection to the particular object. While the existence of these commemorative days might be said to illustrate an awareness of the importance of objects, it also shows that it is not necessary to hold *kuyō* rites in order to honor an object. We must therefore ask whether a certain type or group of items is likely to become the focus of *kuyō* rites.

In general, the implements used in the traditional Japanese arts are frequently honored with *kuyō* rites. There are rites for calligraphy

<sup>2</sup> For rites that have been created or revived by professional associations, see KOBAYASHI 1987 on clocks, MATSUZAKI 1996b on shoes, and ŌSAKI 1995b on dolls.

brushes, *chasen* 茶筌 (whisks used in the tea ceremony), kimonos and fans used in the performing arts, and the strings of traditional instruments. All of these objects can be considered *mingu* 民具, the tools and objects people have used for centuries in daily life and in religious practices. While *kuyō* rites for *mingu* may be the most typical, rites for objects that are neither traditional nor widely used also exist. Apparently any item can become the object of *kuyō* rites if there is a group of people willing to take the initiative to create and support such an event. Such a willingness might be especially strong among those practicing in the traditional arts and within professional associations of people whose living depends on the production or sale of certain objects.

### *Explanations of Rites for Objects*

Mortuary rites for inanimate objects might seem out of place in today's world, inconsistent with the demythologized universe of our electronic age. We might try to explain these rites by referring to the Japanese Buddhist idea of *sōmoku jōbutsu* 草木成仏 (literally, "the enlightenment of grasses and trees"), and it is important to note that this phrase is commonly understood to refer to all inanimate objects, not just plants. Two other phrases, *mujō jōbutsu* 無情成仏 and *hijō jōbutsu* 非情成仏—both meaning "the enlightenment of inanimate objects"—are also used. Many important Japanese Buddhist thinkers, such as Kūkai 空海 (774–835) and Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), are understood to have subscribed to this idea. Indeed, it may have been Kūkai who coined the phrase *sōmoku jōbutsu*.<sup>3</sup>

Indian Buddhists do not seem to have credited plants with the ability to achieve enlightenment (see SCHMITHAUSEN 1991a, 1991b), even though Chinese and Japanese Buddhist thinkers sometimes cited Indian texts, especially the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Ta-chih tu lun* 大智度論, and the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* 大日經, in support of their contention that plants could achieve buddhahood. While some Chinese thinkers took the idea seriously, it was in Japan that the doctrine of the enlightenment of plants took root and blossomed. In fact, one scholar goes so far as to say that the doctrine that inanimate objects can achieve enlightenment is a Japanese Buddhist "slogan" (ITŌ 1996, p. 21). Essays on the topic include *Sōmoku hosshin shūgyō jōbutsu ki* 草木發心修業成仏記, attributed to Ryōgen 良源 (912–985), and *Sōmoku jōbutsu ki* 草木成仏記, by Nichidō 日道 (1724–1789).

<sup>3</sup> See Fabio RAMBELLI, forthcoming, for details on the topic of the enlightenment of plants in Buddhism.

I think, however, that there are two weaknesses in the argument that the motivation for holding *kuyō* rites for inanimate objects can be traced to the idea of *sōmoku jōbutsu*. The first problem is that we have no proof that such *kuyō* rites were held before the Edo period. If the *sōmoku jōbutsu* idea were truly the inspiration for such rites, then we could reasonably expect some evidence of their performance in earlier eras of Japanese Buddhism, when the idea was much discussed. Second, people who attend *kuyō* rites for inanimate objects today do not specifically cite *sōmoku jōbutsu* as their motivation.<sup>4</sup>

It is easier to make a case for the sentience of plants than for needles and brushes, and therefore the appropriateness of mortuary rites for them. However, in Japan, *kuyō* rites for plants are extremely rare, whereas rites for material objects are quite common. So it is perhaps not the buddha-nature of plants, but the human-nature of the objects that inspires the performance of *kuyō* rites. All of the objects (so far as I know) that receive *kuyō* have been man-made, and thus transformed from their natural state. They can be properly viewed as products of culture, not nature. It is, I think, precisely this human investment in the object that moves people to perform *kuyō* rites. This was certainly the case for the literati painter Tanomura Chikuden 田能村竹田 (1777–1835) who erected a *fudezuka* 筆塚 at his house near Ōita. Chikuden believed himself to be following a Chinese precedent and had his calligraphy carved into a stone (the brushes writing their own epitaph). For Chikuden, the brushes were an extension of his own physical self, invested with his creative energy. Because they were not just ordinary objects, they merited special attention at the end of their useful life.

Japanese ethnographers play down the influence of Buddhist teachings on memorial rites for inanimate objects. Instead, they emphasize age-old animistic beliefs as the reason for *kuyō* rites for objects. According to this interpretation, a person might have a latent fear that an object is endowed with a spirit. If such an object is casually thrown away, the spirit might be offended and even curse the human. Therefore, the spirit must be pacified before the object can be discarded (this is, for example, the explanation found in the recent *Nihon minzoku shūkyō jiten* [SASAKI et al. 1998, p. 559]). The chief priest of Awashima Kada Shrine, who performs *kuyō* rites for inanimate objects, especially dolls, expresses this sentiment: “[People] come to the shrine... to dispose of dolls that might bring evil upon them.... It

<sup>4</sup> Of course, some contemporary Japanese intellectuals are familiar with the teaching of the innate buddhahood of non-sentient objects. For example, the engineer Masahiro MORI, in his book *The Buddha in the Robot*, states, “I believe robots have the buddha-nature within them—that is, the potential for attaining buddhahood” (1985, p. 13).



seems very cruel to treat [the dolls] as mere garbage" (*Mainichi Daily News*, 9 September 1999).

It is not difficult to find Japanese people who are comfortable with "animism." Takanishi Atsuo, a professor of mechanical engineering at Waseda University, told *Time* magazine, "My grandmother believes even a small stone on the road has a soul inside. It's not a big leap to believe the same thing about a machine. In Japan, we don't distinguish between organic and inorganic things." Takanishi's colleague, Hashimoto Shuji, a physics professor, expresses a similar sentiment: "We can find personality in animals and trees and mountains. So it is not surprising to find a soul or a heart in a machine" (*Time*, 1–8 May 2000, p. 25). The statements of these two scientists are surely a bit extreme, and we cannot rule out an exaggeration aimed at making Japanese people seem uniquely sensitive to the natural world.

Besides underlying religious concepts, more secular motivations also play a part in the performance of *kuyō* rites. As we have seen, some professional associations have instituted *kuyō* rites for the tools of their trade. In addition to the wish to express gratitude for current affluence and to pray for continued business success, a professional organization might also want to establish an annual event for public relations and to strengthen its ties among members. Still, we cannot exclude religious motives on the individual level. There are not many sources on *kuyō* rites for objects, but from what material is available we know that at least some of these new *kuyō* rites have been created at the instigation of a single individual. One example is the case of *kuyō* rites for scissors, created by Yamano Aiko 山野愛子, head of an institution for beauticians and the founder of a major conglomerate of beauty product firms (ŌSAKI 1997). The involvement of individuals (and their businesses) can also be observed in some *kuyō* rites for animals that had to die for the benefit of humans (ŌSAKI 1995a). Such an involvement led to the establishment of memorial stones near the Benten-dō in Ueno Park. Some of these memorials are now no longer cared for, because the person who had taken it upon himself to look after them is no longer able to do so. From this, we can conclude that the initiative of individuals—sometimes not immediately obvious because they act within an organization—can play an important role in the creation of *kuyō* rites.

Because the disposal of old objects plays such a prominent part in these rites, we can say tentatively that, for the individual, the motivation might be an attachment to a particular object and an unwillingness to simply throw it away. The method of disposal depends upon the composition of the object. Most items are burned or buried. Burning is more common for both religious and practical reasons. Burning

symbolically eliminates impurities and, moreover, it mimics human cremation. On a more practical level, burning leaves behind fewer remnants to be dealt with afterwards. In the case of objects that cannot be burned, *kuyō* is performed by interring, as with needles and other metallic objects.

In some cases the objects, after receiving ritual treatment, are recycled rather than eliminated. This is a recent innovation. A good example is the Awashima Kada Shrine in Wakayama, which conducts Japan's most famous *ningyō kuyō* 人形供養 (memorial for dolls). The shrine receives about 300,000 dolls every year. The dolls were all burned in an incinerator. However, recently more and more of the dolls received are not the traditional *hina-matsuri* dolls, but Western-style dolls made of vinyl chloride. When burned, the vinyl chloride produces dioxin, a deadly toxin of great concern to Japanese people today. Consequently, the shrine has decided to donate the plastic dolls to children's charities (with the owner's permission), after the dolls have been ritually purified (*Mainichi Daily News*, 9 September 1999). In another case, a woman who had created a forum for *kuyō* rites for dolls in her home town of Kanazawa remarked that she planned to separate out new dolls and send them abroad or recycle them in some other way (*Hokkoku shinbun*, 12 May 1997). Similarly, there are now kimonos and *obi* that after *kuyō* rites are refashioned into garments, tablecloths, or bags (*Mainichi shinbun*, 6 April 1997). Of course, most recycling in Japan is done without any *kuyō* rites. Time will tell whether a greater concern for recycling will lead to an increase in *kuyō* rites for inanimate objects.

Since *kuyō* rites for objects vary tremendously, theoretical constructs seldom apply to all cases. In order to better understand these rites in the context of other religious practices, I will next examine the specific case of *hari kuyō*, one of the oldest and most well-known examples of *kuyō* rites for objects. *Kuyō* rites for needles have frequently blended with local traditions, and as a consequence have developed in a number of distinctive forms; but, within the performance of these different forms, there are many common aspects. By examining *hari kuyō* in all its complexity—its murky history, its performance, and its practitioners—we may gain a better understanding of other cases of *kuyō* rites for objects.

### *Hari Kuyō: Mortuary Rites for Needles*

Since *hari kuyō* is comparatively well known, short articles can be found in Japanese encyclopedias (see, for example, KAMATA 1981 and



TANAKA 1990), and some information can be gathered from calendars of events or guidebooks to annual festivals (see NISHITSUNOI 1989; SHIOIRI 1994; WASHIMI 1989). Two articles on *hari kuyō* have been published by the Japanese ethnologist NAGASAWA Toshiaki, focusing on *hari kuyō* as it is carried out at two temples in Tokyo: Shōju-in 正受院 in Shinjuku Ward and Sensō-ji 浅草寺 in Asakusa Ward (1988, 1989).

*Hari kuyō* has been practiced since the beginning of the Edo period and seems to have reached its apex in the middle of the Meiji era. Afterwards, its importance declined. In the twentieth century, the event was revived by the professional organizations of the tailoring business. Currently, *hari kuyō* is observed mainly by people who regularly do needlework, either as a profession or as a hobby. *Hari kuyō* is usually performed on fixed dates, in most cases the eighth of February or December. Nowadays, the common practice is to bring needles to a temple or shrine where the ritual is performed. As mentioned above, in some cases *hari kuyō* is carried out not in a temple or a shrine, but in a business or a sewing school, with one or more priests coming in to perform the ceremony. Some people perform *hari kuyō* privately without attending a religious ceremony by sticking needles into a soft material (e.g., tofu or *konnyaku*), so that the old needles' final task of piercing is an easy one. During *hari kuyō*, worshipers also pray for safety while sewing and to achieve greater skills. Traditionally, no needlework was done, or is done, on the day of *hari kuyō*.

Regional variations in *hari kuyō* used to be greater, and special ways to dispose of unusable needles were more prevalent in the past; *hari kuyō* as we know it today developed during the first half of the twentieth century (NAGASAWA 1989, pp. 124–25). In former times, after sticking their used needles into a block of tofu or another soft substance, people either took the needles to a temple or set them afloat on a river or in the sea. The rituals performed on such an occasion were at least partly carried out at home or at the workplace, not in temples or shrines. Moreover, the practice of disposing of old needles almost exclusively on a fixed date seems to be a recent development. Nagasawa found that the records of Sensō-ji mention that there were several stone boxes on the temple grounds into which old needles could be put at any time. It seems, then, that people used to dispose of needles as soon they had become unusable, a custom that had the practical benefit of ensuring that the needles would not be left around and accidentally hurt someone. If there was no needle-receiving temple or shrine nearby, there was often a local custom for the disposal of needles. For example, an elderly woman who had worked as a teacher of Japanese-style tailoring in Mie Prefecture told me that in her youth people used to stick old needles into the soft trunk of a *sotetsu* 蘇鉄

tree that stood in a temple garden.

Perhaps most responsible for the transformation of *hari kuyō* into a public performance has been the involvement of professional organizations connected with the tailoring business. As a result of their efforts, and aided by the mass media, rites for needles have become increasingly standardized. Today the usual practice is to stick needles into tofu or *konnyaku* in the company of others who have a special connection with sewing.

Although *hari kuyō* nowadays is performed almost only for sewing needles and pins, other kinds of needles can also receive ritual attention. In the past, needles used for acupuncture, for tattooing, or for making tatami mats were more frequently included. A leaflet distributed by Sensō-ji states that in former times fishermen also offered fishing hooks. This is not to say that non-sewing needles are completely excluded from *kuyō* rites today. In fact, Meiji Shinkyū University 明治鍼灸大学 in Kyoto, a university that trains students in acupuncture and moxibustion, annually performs *hari kuyō* for acupuncture needles. In this case, the rite is performed inside a university building by a Zen priest who is himself an acupuncturist and a graduate of the college. NAGASAWA remarks that some years before he attended the event at Sensō-ji in 1989, the offering of used syringe needles had stopped, due to the fear that they might be infected (1989, p. 124). In the meantime, *kuyō* rites for syringe needles have been revived: the Sensō-ji leaflet reports that nurses working in the temple-affiliated hospital now perform *hari kuyō* by offering new, unused syringe needles.

### *The Koto-yōka Days*

As mentioned above, *hari kuyō* is usually performed on the eighth of February or December. Both days bear the name *koto-yōka* 事八日, a word that refers to the eighth day of the month. As a rule, in the Kantō area and northward *hari kuyō* is held in February, whereas in the Kansai area and westward the date is in December. In Ishikawa and Toyama, where *hari kuyō* takes place on 8 December, it is also called *hariseibo* 針歳暮, as it is held during the year-end *seibo* season. Both 8 February and 8 December are special “eighth” days, called *koto-hajime* 事初め (the beginning of things) or *koto-osame* 事納め (the ending of things). It is not set, however, which of the dates is *koto-hajime* and which is *koto-osame*. Since the point of reference could be either New Year’s or the yearly seasonal cycle, both days can be viewed, from different perspectives, as the beginning or ending of things. The choice depends upon regional traditions.

In some regions *hari kuyō* is held on both *koto-yōka* days. The popular Buddhist connotations of the eighth day of the month might also contribute to the auspiciousness and appropriateness of this day (SHIOIRI 1994, p. 76). The Buddha is said to have been born on 8 April and to have died and attained nirvana on 8 December. In some rare cases, *hari kuyō* is observed on 3 March, *hina matsuri* (Girls' Day), or on the thirteenth day of a month, because the thirteenth is the *ennichi* 縁日 (festival day) of the deity Awashima 淡島, who is (as discussed below) connected with *hari kuyō*.

For poets of haiku, the word *hari kuyō* serves as a season-indicator word (*kigo* 季語), signifying spring for 8 February and winter for 8 December. One well-known haiku about *hari kuyō* was written by Iida Dakotsu 飯田蛇笏 (1885–1962):

<i>Furutsuma ya</i>	古妻や	Oh my wife
<i>hari no kuyō</i>	針の供養	performs <i>hari kuyō</i> .
<i>kodakusan</i>	子沢山	We have so many children!

(KAMATA 1981, p. 355)

As we shall see, *hari kuyō* is strongly linked to the female sphere, often centering around traditional female work (such as sewing), a happy marriage, fertility, and the raising of healthy children.

Both *koto-yōka* days were in former times holidays on which supernatural forces were believed to be present (WASHIMI 1989, p. 97). These days were marked with special taboos, mainly abstinence from certain kinds of work that might involve contact with spirits, such as working in the forests or mountains. Abstinence from certain foods for ritual purification was required on such days, and it was appropriate to prepare a special soup called *koto-jiru* 事汁, *mushitsu-jiru* 六質汁, or *kenchinjiru* けんちん汁. As a special decoration, an openwork basket (*mekago* 目籠) was fixed to the eaves of a house. Thus, *hari kuyō* was one of a whole range of practices that took place on *koto-yōka* days. (*Hari kuyō*, however, is the only one of these practices to have survived into modern times.) WASHIMI mentions speculations that the origins of *hari kuyō* might lie in a festival held in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907) when ancestors and agricultural deities were worshiped and all work, including needlework, stopped (1989, p. 97).

In the Hokuriku area, where *hari kuyō* takes place on 8 December, there is a local explanation for the date of the festival (TANAKA 1990). The sea is usually rough at that time of the year, and around 8 December a balloonfish called *harisenbon* 針千本, literally “one thousand needles,” is said to come near the coast. To attach this fish to the roof of a house was believed to ward off evil. There is also a legend that says

that a bride who was ill-treated by her mother-in-law committed suicide by drowning, then turned into the *harisenbon* fish, jumped out of the water and bit the mother-in-law in the face. In Fukuoka, hundreds of miles from the Hokuriku area, *hari kuyō* is also connected to a legend about “a strange fish with needles” called *hariboku* 針ぼく, which approaches the beach around 8 December (NISHITSUNOI 1989, p. 664).

### *Awashima Worship and Hari Kuyō*

The *koto-yōka* holidays are one important factor in the origins of *hari kuyō*, but another, probably more significant factor, is the cult of the female deity Awashima. Worship of this deity is centered in Wakayama, and the main shrine is located in the small seaside town of Kada 加太. This shrine, called Awashima Kada Shrine, houses four deities. The main deity is nearly always referred to as Awashima-sama. Concerning the identity of this deity and the origin of the shrine, two legends exist (WASHIMI 1989, pp. 100–101). The first version presents Awashima-sama as a local deity, called Sukunahikona-no-mikoto 少彦名命, who helped Empress Jingū 神功 when she was stranded on her return journey from the Korean state of Silla. In the second legend, Awashima-sama is the wife of the god Sumiyoshi 住吉, named Barisainyo 婆利塞女 (also read Harisaijo or Harisainyo).<sup>5</sup> It is significant that the deity worshiped in the Kada shrine is, according to both legends, a female deity. She also has a Buddhist name, Kokūzō bosatsu 虚空藏菩薩 (Skt. Ākāśagarbha, “Bodhisattva Storehouse of Emptiness”), a very Buddhist name indeed. But she is usually not called by either her Shinto name or her Buddhist name, but rather by the more intimate and affectionate “Awashima-sama.” She can be found in both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples.

Originally Awashima-sama was a deity for healing and for seafaring. Over the course of time she attained a special reputation for healing disorders specific to women, as well as for granting prayers for a good marriage, conception, and safe childbirth. There are legends of Awashima-sama revealing the right points for moxa therapy in a dream, and of her delivering people from disaster at sea.

The illnesses suffered only by women were traditionally attributed to impurity (*kegare* 穢), and Awashima-sama was a deity who could help women in that situation. Women used to hand over needles and tainted clothing to wandering priests devoted to this deity who were

<sup>5</sup> Note that the first part of this name, Bari, evokes *hari*.

called *Awashima gannin* 淡島願人. It is not clear whether needles were regarded as unclean, or whether they were given to the priests for other reasons. But it is certain that the *Awashima gannin* collected needles as they traveled and spread the *Awashima* cult throughout the country. Even today, at *Awashima Kada Shrine* women use underwear as votive objects on which to write prayers for conception or the healing of gynecological illness, and hang the underwear at the shrine. There is also a needle memorial stone at the shrine. However, the shrine is most famous for its ritual disposal of dolls (another type of *kuyō* rite connected with the female sphere).

*Awashima-sama* is not always found in a temple hall or shrine devoted exclusively to her worship. Often she is enshrined together with several other deities. In some cases, *Awashima* halls are part of larger temple complexes and are not easily identified. Before the Meiji era the number of temple halls throughout Japan dedicated to *Awashima-sama* amounted to 3,000. However, as a result of the edicts proclaiming the separation of Shinto and Buddhism (*shinbutsu-bunri*) in the years 1868 and 1869, and the subsequent suppression of Buddhism, many *Awashima* halls were abolished.

### *The Practice of Hari Kuyō*

I will first discuss the case of *hari kuyō* at *Sensō-ji*, based partly on the observations I made in 1996. For the historical survey, I rely on NAGASAWA (1989). There is an *Awashima-dō* situated west of the main temple hall at the outer edge of the *Sensō-ji* temple grounds. The *Awashima-dō* was built in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. After the edicts proclaiming the separation of Shinto and Buddhism, a “Shinto” deity could no longer be revered in a Buddhist temple, so in 1869 *Awashima-sama* was transferred to the *Asakusa Shrine*, and the *Awashima-dō* was renamed *Kokūzō Bosatsu-dō*. The public, however, did not use the new official name, and the hall was popularly known as *Awashima-dō* and continued as a place of veneration for *Awashima-sama*. During the first decades of the twentieth century, young girls used to assemble in the temple hall to study sewing with the wives of the *Sensō-ji* priests. At one time the *Awashima-dō* (then called *Kokūzō Bosatsu-dō*) was without its own resident priest, and it was looked after by a lay volunteer. After World War II, the hall reverted to its original name, *Awashima-dō*, and since 1949 it has had its own resident priest. A statue of *Awashima-sama* was destroyed in the war, but a new, identical statue was made and installed in the temple hall. This building, which had survived earthquakes and war,



**Figure 3.** “A monument to memorialize the spirits of needles.” The white pillars bear the names of seamstress organizations that sponsor *hari kuyō*.



temporarily served as the main hall of Sensō-ji for a period of about ten years after the war until the main temple hall was reconstructed. In 1994 the Awashima-dō itself was reconstructed.

*Hari kuyō* has been held at Sensō-ji since the Genroku era (1688–1704). Since 1935, it has been performed in cooperation with the Tokyo Association of Sewing Teachers for Japanese-Style Sewing (Tōkyō Wafuku Saihō Kyōshikai 東京和服裁縫教師会). In the years soon after World War II, the event was a modest one, using just one small block of tofu for the needles. With Japan's growing economic success in the 1950s and 1960s, the ritual became more elaborate. On 17 October 1982, at the suggestion of the sewing organization, a memorial stone for needles (*hari kuyō no tō* 針供養の塔) was erected in front of the Awashima hall (Figure 3).

In 1996, on the days prior to the event, posters announcing *hari kuyō* had already been put up in the temple grounds. Numerous needles, stowed in old medicine bottles or empty film containers, had already been brought to the temple. On the morning of 7 February, the forecourt of the Awashima-dō was decorated with cylindrical paper lanterns with red and white stripes and with the names of donors written on them. More public notices and vertical cloth banners announcing the event also had been put up.

The grounds around the Awashima-dō were rather crowded on the morning of 8 February. Most of the visitors were women, some of them were wearing kimonos. In the yard, candles and incense were sold by women in kimonos who seemed to belong to the Sewing Teachers Association. Shortly before 11 A.M. the priests conducted a ceremony in front of the memorial stone for needles, which was adorned on both sides with large flower arrangements. After the priests had finished, people lined up in front of the monument to burn incense and put their hands together and bow their heads in prayer. It is worth noting that the incense-offering has definite funerary associations.

In the Awashima-dō, in front of the railing that separates the inner sanctuary from the rest of the building, two low tables had been set up, each with a large block of tofu in a bowl. Some women went up and inserted their needles into the tofu. Others placed their needles in a cardboard box beside the low tables. Money offerings could be made and two press photographers were present.

Next, two stands for incense were brought in and placed beside the tofu. Most of the women stuck several needles into the tofu, then burned incense, and lastly clasped their hands and bowed their heads (Figure 4). Afterwards, they seated themselves on the tatami mats of the temple hall. Among the needles brought to the temple—most of



**Figure 4.** Worshipers at Sensō-ji putting needles in tofu.

them pins with colored heads—there were many that to my eyes looked undamaged. The women were relaxed and they chatted with each other. I heard one old woman tell her neighbor that needles were scary (*hari wa kowai*). Meanwhile, the temple hall was so crowded that people had to stand outside. Then, at 11 A.M., the ceremony began.

After a gong was struck many times, about ten Buddhist priests in colorful robes entered the temple hall. They held gold-colored plates from which hung three strings: one colored orange, one white, and one green. On the plates were pastel-colored artificial leaves that the priests, while chanting a sutra, first lifted up to their foreheads, then scattered on the ground before them. The priests started to intone another sutra. One of them beat a gong; another beat the rhythm on a large drum. When the priests ended their intonation, a bell was rung once again. At this point, some of the visitors bowed and left the hall. Others went up to the front and picked up the pastel-colored leaves.

One of the priests gave a short speech. He called *hari kuyō* a Buddhist event (*bukkyō gyōji* 仏教行事) and mentioned that it was held on the old Japanese holiday of *koto-hajime*. In explaining the reason for *hari kuyō*, he said what is often said: namely, that the needles, which had worked so hard during their “lifetimes,” now for once got the

benefit of piercing a soft substance. He then mentioned the name of the shop, right in the neighborhood, where that day's tofu had been specially made. The priest said that *hari kuyō* had been held in Sensō-ji since the Genroku era, and that Awashima-sama had originally been a deity for healing, with her main shrine in Wakayama. He concluded his speech by once again emphasizing the purpose of *hari kuyō*: to give thanks to the needles (*hari ni kansha suru*). The whole ceremony had taken about thirty minutes.

Outside, long lines of visitors waited to enter the temple hall. As the entrance area was blocked, an official on duty had to repeat again and again that the way out was via the temple annex building.

When I asked the priest who had made the speech what would happen to the needles and the tofu after the ritual was over, he told me they would be buried on the temple grounds: "they go back to the earth" (*tsuchi ni modorimasu*). To make his point quite clear, he used two English words: "recycling *dewa nai*, reincarnation" (this is not about recycling, this is about reincarnation). He said that he expected 600 to 700 people to attend the event. The priest stressed the importance of Awashima-sama as a deity of healing, especially in former times, when doctors were scarce and medicine was unreliable. He also commented that sewing was a female task and, therefore, needles were symbols of female work. On the day of *hari kuyō* women had the opportunity to rest.

When I left the Awashima-dō courtyard around noon, many visitors were still waiting to enter the hall. When I returned about four hours later, there were still a few visitors arriving at the temple to stick their needles into the tofu, give money, burn incense, and buy amulets. The crowd of the morning, however, had dispersed. The stalls where candles and incense had been sold had already been taken away and so had the flower arrangements in front of the memorial stone for needles.

As an indication of the kind of people who attend *hari kuyō*, I would like to sketch some of the people with whom I spoke. The first person was quite a surprise. He was a young man, dressed casually, who turned out to be a professional tattooist. On this day of gratefulness to needles, he had brought to the temple some of the needles used in his work. This was his first time to participate in *hari kuyō*, but from now on, he told me, he would participate in the rite every year. The next person I spoke with was a young woman who had just started sewing as a hobby and had come to pray for greater sewing skills. A vigorous-looking man told me, upon my question, that no, he hadn't come to perform *hari kuyō*, he was after all a man. A bent old woman stressed the fact that nearly all needles brought to the temple nowadays were good, undamaged ones, and then she talked about the old

days when people used to bring broken needles. A middle-aged woman had heard about the event of *hari kuyō* on television and, having recently moved to the neighborhood, she had come to see what it was like. An elderly woman who made a living by sewing had come to observe *hari kuyō* “with a feeling of gratitude” (*kansha no kimochi*). A young seamstress wearing a kimono came along to perform *hari kuyō*, as she does every year. Next, I spoke with a group of women who sew kimonos as a hobby and who participate in the rite at the temple every year. I also spoke with a group of kimono seamstresses. A young mother, accompanied by a girl of elementary school age, told me she made her living sewing kimonos and was just dropping by. An elderly man who came to the temple to perform *hari kuyō* said he made his living by sewing on a machine. The last visitors with whom I spoke were a haiku teacher and his two pupils, who had come to compose haiku using the word *hari kuyō* as a season-indicator word. Most of the visitors with whom I talked came every year, most were women, and most had a specific connection with sewing.

The expressions used by all participants, priest and lay alike, to explain what they were doing, were *hari ni kansha suru* (to give thanks to needles) and *kansha no kimochi* (a feeling of gratitude). This feeling of gratitude voiced by the participants is also found in the written sources on *hari kuyō*. Further evidence of the primacy of the feeling of gratitude (at least on the level of verbalization) can be found in the songs sung at the annual *hari kuyō* held at Hataeda-bari 幡枝針 Shrine in northern Kyoto. As with the temples in Tokyo, the rite at this Kyoto shrine is sponsored by two organizations connected with needles and sewing. A loosely organized group called Hari o Ai Suru Kai 針を愛する会 also devises some of the activities for the rite. In addition to a specially created folk dance based on the hand movements of sewing, the participants sing two songs. The words of the songs highlight the feeling of gratitude.

### Song of Gratitude to Needles

*Hari kuyō, hari kuyō:* thanks to you, O needles, we can lead a happy life.  
 Thank you, needles.  
 Let us all pray to the needles forever.  
 Needles, needles, needles.

### *Hari ni kansha suru uta*

*Hari kuyō, hari kuyō, o-hari no o-kage de watashira wa tanoshii seikatsu dekiru no yo*  
*hari-san, hari-san, arigatō*  
*minna de hari-san ogamimashō itsu itsu made mo*  
*hari hari hari yo*

## 「針に感謝するうた」

針供養 針供養 お針のお陰で私等は 楽しい生活出来るのよ  
 針さん針さん有難う  
 皆で針さん拝みましょう 何時何時までも  
 針々々よ

*Hari-kuyō Song*

December is the month of a happy *hari kuyō*.  
 You and I have both come to Hataeda [Jinja]  
 to worship and express our gratitude to needles.  
 O, my precious needle.

*Hari kuyō no uta*

*Shiwasu wa tanoshii hari kuyō*  
*anata mo watashi mo hataeda e*  
*hari ni kansha no o-mairi ni*  
*watashi no takara no o-hari sama*

## 「針供養のうた」

しわすはたのしい針くよう  
 あなたも私もはたえだへ  
 針に感謝のおまいりに  
 私のたからのお針さま

The Sensō-ji *hari kuyō*, as I observed it in 1996, was very much as Nagasawa describes it for 1989. The only difference was that there were far fewer participants in 1996, assuming NAGASAWA is correct in describing a crowd of 5,000 (1989, p. 122). Even if there were more people than the 600 or 700 estimated by the priest, it is reasonable to conclude that either *hari kuyō* reached a peak of popularity in the 1980s and has since declined or that the crowds now attend the event at another location.

SHINGAN-JI *HARI KUYŌ*

Besides Sensō-ji, two other temples in Tokyo celebrate *hari kuyō* in style. One of them is Shingan-ji 森巖寺, located in a quiet residential neighborhood in Setagaya Ward. Like Sensō-ji, Shingan-ji has an Awashima-dō in which *hari kuyō* is performed. This temple, by the way, is famous for its moxa therapy, a fact that points to Awashima-sama's position as a goddess of healing, especially for those who practice acupuncture and moxibustion. The 1996 *hari kuyō* at Shingan-ji was performed in a ceremonial style, but at the same time there was an



**Figure 5.** Worshipers at Shingan-ji sticking needles into tofu.

intimate atmosphere (Figure 5). Only about thirty worshipers, most of them members of a local sewing club, had assembled to attend the priest's sutra-reading. Afterwards, children from the temple's pre-school and their mothers joined the group, while the priests performed a ceremony in front of the temple's memorial stone for needles (*harizuka* 針塚).

#### SHÔJU-IN *HARI KUYÔ*

The third temple in Tokyo, Shôju-in in Shinjuku, has become a site of *hari kuyô* as an organized event only in recent decades. This temple does not have an Awashima-dô, but the event is held here, in part, because of a statue of the deity Datsueba 奪衣婆. In Japanese folklore, Datsueba is an old woman who takes away the clothes of the dead as they cross the river into hell. Her name means "clothes-snatching granny," and she is an ugly old hag who exposes her long, hanging breasts. However frightening the legend of Datsueba might originally have been, over time she came to be regarded as a deity with miraculous powers to heal and to protect children. In the immediate postwar era, belief in the Datsueba of Shôju-in was at a low point, but the popularity of the deity suddenly took an upward turn in connection with *hari*





**Figure 6.** Ceremony at Shōju-in for interring needles. The needles are lying on the paper in front of the earthenware pot.

*kuyō* (NAGASAWA 1988). Representatives of the professional associations of sewing teachers and tailoring enterprises had been looking for a place to build a *harizuka* and to pray for the prosperity of their trade. It is not known precisely why Shōju-in was chosen, but there must have been an association between Datsueba, who removes a dead person's clothes, and the art of needlework. Moreover, Datsueba is a deity mainly called upon by women; therefore, her association with the female task of sewing is quite appropriate.

*Hari kuyō* has been held annually at Shōju-in since the building of the *harizuka* in 1957. The 1998 ritual, which I observed, was very well attended, perhaps due in part to the fact that 8 February fell on a nice warm Sunday. Men were present in about the same number as women. I was told by several men that they had accompanied their wives. In addition to stalls selling amulets, there were also stalls serving traditional festival foods and one selling sewing supplies. There were also special offerings on sale, consisting of a folded paper kimono on a wooden stick, decorated with pink plastic blossoms. Pre-paid telephone cards (which could double as amulets) were also available. The *hari kuyō* rite at Shōju-in differed from the other two locations in that

its atmosphere was more lively and relaxed, with many participants in a talkative mood. The festivities consisted not only of the priest's sutra-reading, but there was also a ceremony of interring needles (Figure 6). Whenever I asked someone why he or she had come, I got the same answers I had received two years earlier at Sensō-ji: to express gratitude to the needles; to ask for protection while sewing; and to pray for better skills in the art of sewing.

### Conclusion

*Hari kuyō* is not one of the big annual festivals of Japan. For one thing, only a very small percentage of the population is involved. Although it is a religious event with a history of several hundred years, it would probably not have survived into the twenty-first century if professional associations had not revitalized the practice. The professional associations can also be attributed with changing *hari kuyō* from an often individual practice into one that today consists of organized events with hundreds or even thousands of participants.

The practice of *hari kuyō* shows some of the familiar features of religion in Japan. One important characteristic here is the syncretistic nature of beliefs, combining elements of Buddhism, Shinto, and folk religion. This can be seen in the persona of Awashima-sama and in the fact that *hari kuyō* is performed at both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Another important point to be made is that regional factors determine the form of the festival. What is more, the content and atmosphere of the ritual varies from temple to temple, even among the three temples in Tokyo. Sensō-ji, Shingan-ji, and Shōju-in each carries out the ritual in its own way, reflecting its local circumstances and different clientele. At Sensō-ji, the traditional place for *hari kuyō* in the *shitamachi* of Tokyo, the participants are sewing teachers and the owners of small businesses in the area. Shingan-ji, also a traditional place for the performance of *hari kuyō*, is mainly visited by groups from the neighborhood. The third temple, Shōju-in, the only one to include the goddess Datsueba and with a *hari kuyō* history of less than half a century, is visited mainly by people connected to the business of sewing. While Sensō-ji conducts the festival in a grand manner, the celebrations at Shingan-ji, with the attendance of preschool children, are of a quiet and more intimate nature. The event at Shōju-in has the merry and busy atmosphere of a festival day, with special stalls selling food and sewing articles.

Taking into consideration the rituals as described by NAGASAWA (1988, 1989), we have to wonder whether a *hari kuyō* boom has already

come and gone. The decrease in attendance at Sensō-ji and the simpler celebrations at Shōju-in seem to point that way. However, the interesting thing in this case study is that the performance of *hari kuyō* has already undergone noticeable change during the twentieth century. *Hari kuyō* is a good example of the Japanese layperson's ability to shape religious events. Although *hari kuyō* is held on one of the old festival days, its performance is not carried out at the instigation of religious authorities, but rather on the initiative of professional associations. The fact that some of the needles brought to *hari kuyō* are nowadays new, undamaged ones shows a strong will to keep up tradition, and to perform *kuyō* even for needles that are not yet "dead."

As we have seen, it is possible to perform *hari kuyō* without going to a temple for rites conducted by priests. However, during the course of the twentieth century, the involvement of priests in *hari kuyō* has become stronger, not weaker. Thus, in the case of mortuary rites for objects, the role of the clergy has become more crucial—the opposite of the trend described for funerals, in the performance of which the authoritative role of the priest is often described as being eclipsed by that of the funeral director. While traditional sewing businesses in the *shitamachi* used to carry out rituals at their workplaces and visit a temple only as part of a wider practice, now the performance of *hari kuyō* has shifted to the public spaces of temples and shrines. At the same time, the group of people that the event binds together has changed from that of a single workplace community to the larger community of tailors in the city of Tokyo.

We have already touched upon the question of why some objects, like needles, are "memorialized" with *kuyō* rites, while others are not. The history of *hari kuyō* (connected with the *koto-yōka* days and the taking away of needles and tainted clothing by priests at Awashima) shows strong circumstantial evidence that *hari kuyō* was connected with the motif of purification. The purification element does not negate the sense of gratitude expressed today (or even in the past) but it gives it an additional undercurrent. But pollution is not a factor in the new rites or even in the relatively old case of *fude kuyō*, so there must also be other motives. In the case of needles, and more so in the case of writing brushes and tea ceremony utensils, they are not only items that one handles frequently, but are also tools that are used in an artistic, even spiritual, discipline. It is hard to discard things that, like needles or writing brushes, may even be seen as an extension of one's own body. The occasion of parting with such an object may well give rise to a sense of gratitude, the reason generally mentioned for the performance of *hari kuyō*. We should, however, beware of an overly sentimental interpretation of *kuyō* rites for inanimate objects. In most

cases, these feelings of appreciation and esteem are much rationalized and, in my view, can arise from a sense of duty as much as from sentimental attachment. Moreover, as we have seen, *kuyō* rites for objects are usually performed as communal ceremonies, organized by professional groups and performed in a formal manner.

It is possible that people perform *kuyō* rites for objects out of a fear of the objects—in the case of needles, because they can in fact harm people; in the case of other objects, because the spirit of the object has a malevolent power. Especially in the case of dolls, many Japanese people seem to feel that a doll, or even a stuffed animal or a ceramic statue, is not just a lifeless object, but might be the abode of an unstable spirit. Japanese folklore and contemporary popular culture (e.g., *manga*, *anime*, television shows) abound with ghost stories in which the “ghost” is the spirit of an inanimate object: a teapot, a doll, a vending machine, or a cell phone. When we remember that in premodern times needles were made from fish bones and thus were of animal origin, *hari kuyō* can be linked to rites carried out for slaughtered animals, aimed partly at placating the animals’ potentially vengeful spirits. One educational children’s book on annual festivals includes a fairly detailed description of *hari kuyō* with several mentions of how needles can prick children and hurt them (YAMAMOTO 1989, pp. 208–9). Part of the message here is no doubt a warning to children to be careful with dangerous objects, but there is also a ghost-story undertone that could send shivers down a child’s back.

Actual observation of *hari kuyō*, however, does not provide much support for the notion that fear is a prime motive. Only once did I hear anyone mention the frightening aspects of needles (the old woman at Sensō-ji quoted above). In the final analysis, I would say that in the performance of *hari kuyō*, the terrifying aspects of needles are insignificant. Instead, I would prefer to highlight the participants’ wishes to obtain *gense riyaku* 現世利益: blessing and profit in this world, not in the next.<sup>6</sup> Thus, goals like safety while performing sewing work, the achievement of great skills, financial security or job success can be salient motives for performing *hari kuyō*.

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<sup>6</sup> For a book-length discussion of worldly benefits, see READER and TANABE 1998.

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