The Physical Practice of *Shisha-Kuyō* (spiritual aid for the dead) in Terms of a Personal Relationship

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This paper focuses on practices of *shisha-kuyō* which are so familiar to most Japanese that they require no explanation. I argue that understanding these practices requires a dynamic perspective that focuses on the physical practices involved in the communications between the living and the dead, and on the human relationships involved. Put another way, it would probably be difficult to develop a sufficient understanding of these practices if one's starting point is the dualistic body/soul model of humanity characteristic of modern Western thought or the view that the individual is a single, complete and autonomous entity. Modern research on religion, which has been heavily influenced by the Protestant approach to religion, shows a strong tendency to always uncover the ontological basis of belief, interpreting *shisha-kuyō* in terms of veneration of the dead and ancestor worship, and lacks concepts for explaining the positive and intrinsic significance of such practices.

Taking Okinawan mourning practices as an example, I first argue that past research with its emphasis on verifiability has in fact been strongly constrained by modern academic thinking focused on concepts such as primitive belief, spiritualism, and the afterlife. What is more important to most people is the form and conventions of practices for communing with the deceased.

I then look at similarities between the *shisha-kuyō* for those near and dear who have died and the "work of mourning" that has become a focus of interest in modern psychiatry and other fields. I argue that understanding *shisha-kuyō* as practiced in East Asian societies requires a dynamic conceptual framework focused on human relationships, rather than the kind of theories of mourning postulated by Freudian and other schools of psychoanalysis based on modern Western ideas regarding human nature. To this end, understanding such mourning practices requires switching from a focus on ontological belief to a focus on the actual interrelational practices.

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