Issues Related to the Body and Funeral Attendance

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From the starting point of the joint research theme, I looked at various aspects peripheral to so-called body/soul dualism as a basic means of reconsidering this theory. All sorts of issues emerge if we take a fresh look at how the body—one side of the dualism theory—relates to funeral customs. For example, what has long been considered the uncleanliness of the body of the deceased is not a big issue where Okinawan practices are concerned, suggesting that in Okinawa, the body of the deceased was regarded as being closer to the living. Okinawan funeral rituals also show conspicuous elements of fear with respect to the spirits of the dead, but these are thought to be archetypal elements unrelated to a desire to avoid contamination by the deceased. The transformation of burial sites into sacred sites was once widespread in mainland Japan, as was the custom of burying the deceased on farmland. The fact that cannibalism also existed in some parts, even if in limited form, suggests that the attitude of Japanese to the body was by no means simple. Pot burial was a special form of burial used by the living to protect the body of the deceased from the spirits of the dead, rather than confine the deceased. The body could also be divided into parts, and the many different ways of treating hair, nails, placenta, umbilical cord and other body parts demonstrate the huge diversity of practices related to the body. Seen in this way, there are many aspects of the treatment of the body that cannot be satisfactorily explained by conventional dualism theory. The body is too complex an entity to be interpreted by rigid, mechanistic theories. While we recognize the basic framework of body/soul dualism, I think we need to take a more flexible approach to it.

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