Communities Preserving Traditional Crematoriums: Rapid Economic Growth and Reactions of Communities

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During the rapid economic growth period, Japan witnessed two significant changes in funeral customs: the establishment of municipal crematoriums and the development of the funeral business. This paper follows the developments of these new funeral customs as well as the reactions of communities to them, with a focus on changes in funerary practices in a district. The former Ōasa Town, located in the northwestern part of Hiroshima Prefecture, opened the first municipal crematorium in 1973 at the end of the rapid economic growth period (1955–1973). In the meantime, the town also witnessed the launch of the funeral business by private service providers and social welfare councils. In response to these significant changes, many of the parishes in the former Ōasa Town, including Ikadazu-shimo Parish in Ikadazu District, discontinued the community-operated traditional cremation services and started using municipal crematorium. Nevertheless, Ikadazu-kami Parish in Ikadazu District had continued cremation services at traditional crematoriums over four decades until 2011. Examining the establishment of municipal crematoriums and the developments of the funeral business in Ikadazu District as well as the reactions of the communities to these shifts, this paper reveals the following points: (i) social solidarity was stronger in Ikadazu-kami Parish than in Ikadazu-shimo Parish, which was the reason why the former maintained traditional cremation practices for a long period of time; and (ii) what the two communities had in common was that the parishes or chief mourners with authorities granted by the parishes decided which crematorium to use, municipal or community-operated, and the choice was made based on the intention to maintain the social solidarity of the community. Meanwhile, the spread of the funeral business brought changes to the funeral customs: (i) some customs were extinguished; (ii) some newly added; and (iii) some transformed but maintained. While society and lifestyle were changing during the rapid economic growth period, not only passive changes but also active changes made by funeral service providers were embraced as new funeral customs. It is however noted that this progress was not uniform. Each parish decided what to outsource to service providers and what to do by itself. Ikadazu-kami Parish’s continued use of traditional crematoriums was an example of the reactions of communities that tried to uphold the parish-based traditional funeral services.

Key words: Traditional and municipal crematoriums, development of the funeral business, desire of chief mourners and intention of parishes, solidarity of a parish, reactions of communities