

Book Reviews

Nature's Embrace: Japan's Aging Urbanites and New Death Rites.
Satsuki Kawano. Honolulu,
Hawai'i University Press. 2010.
ISBN 978-0-8248-3413-5
pp 220, \$27.00(Paper)

Satsuki Kawano's *Nature's Embrace: Japan's Aging Urbanites and New Death Rites* is an account of the production of a new mortuary rite, the dispersal of ashes into the sea or wilderness. This new mortuary rite is offered as an alternative to the interment of these ashes and, ideally, their perpetual veneration, in a family grave. In conversation with the growing literature on the emergence of a "new urban elder culture" (for example, Morioka Kiyoshi, 1994), Kawano persuasively traces the complex connections between this new ritual practice and Japan's low birthrate and mass longevity. The author elegantly illuminates how individuals' experiences of not only their late adulthood, but of their post-death trajectories are transformed by demographic change.

The book, based on some ninety interviews and extended participant observation, focuses on a single organization, the Grave Free Promotion Society (GFPS), a volunteer-run social movement founded in 1991. While conventional interment rests on the acceptance of the generation contract—the care of the dead is entrusted to the living, ideally to a married eldest son who will tend to and eventually inherit the family grave—GFPS encourages its members to forgo burial and instead "return to nature" after their deaths. This approach removes the burden of ritual care from the next generation, and thus reorders the relationship between the living and the dead on the deceased individual's own terms. Thus, Kawano suggests, the movement is significant as, through their mortuary choices,

GFPS members transform themselves from "future recipients of care in a strained system of reciprocity into rewriters of the generational contract [...] In other words, they contest their overdependence on the living after their deaths" (169).

A particular strength of the text is that, while Kawano carefully traces the connections between demographic change and shifting ritual practices, the story she tells is not one of declining filial piety; the feared neglect of the young does not solely drive the decision to abandon the family grave. Instead, it is the story of a lively social movement, of activism and agency. GFPS volunteering, is, Kawano suggests, "driven not only by members' wish to "return to nature" after their deaths, but also by volunteers' desire to find a new, meaningful place in society in late adulthood (108)." Kawano's analysis is nuanced; she points out that her interlocutors' conception of agency is complex. The choice to scatter ashes cannot be understood as a shift to Western-style individualism, Kawano argues, but instead reflects values of appropriate interdependence, and a distinctively Japanese articulation of personhood, and the family and its obligations.

While Kawano's overviews of historical transformation are consistently elegant (Chapters One, Two, and Five), the ethnography—in Chapter Three, on the day-to-day organization of GFPS, and in Chapter Four, on ash scattering ceremonies—is unfortunately sometimes rather thin. Beyond an extended description of ash scattering ceremonies in Chapter Four, there are few detailed examples and quotations. There are moments of real ethnographic richness, but the reader is left wanting more. In Chapter Four, for example, the author discusses the mixed reaction to the requirement

that relatives pulverize bones before they are scattered. While some GFPS members saw the requirement positively—as an act that literally put mortuary practices back into the hands of the bereaved, in contrast to commercial funerals that rendered them merely passive recipients—some relatives were horrified by what they perceived as violence against the dead. Ethnographic scenes such as this persuasively render the complex reactions to this new ritual form, but they were unfortunately rather few and far between.

The book is most valuable, I would argue, as a study of how civil society organizations function in Japan, and particularly as an account of the growing activism of urban elderly. However, because of the scarceness of ethnographic material, the reader does not get to know any particular GFPS member in detail. The book also lacks tabulated data, photographs, and interview transcripts, so the reader is left not only without a sense of what motivates individual GFPS members, but also unable to grasp how significant GFPS really is. Is the organization, as Kawano ambitiously suggests, a new subculture that marks a radical rethinking of the relationships between the generations? While the historical chapters persuade—clearly, an examination of mortuary ritual can provide a powerful lens through which to view a changing society—the importance of this particular movement is not always convincingly articulated. A further point of critique: while the book's title speaks of "Nature's Embrace," "nature" is entirely untheorized.

Ruth E. Toulson, Department of
Anthropology, University of Wyoming,
rtoulson@uwyo.edu

Book Reviews

Aging, Society, and the Life Course. By Leslie A. Morgan and Suzanne R. Kunkel. 4th edition. Springer Publishing Company. 2011.

ISBN 978-082611937-7 pp353, \$90.00 cloth, \$52. Kindle e-book.

Undergraduate coursework on topics pertaining to aging are housed in departments of psychology, sociology, anthropology, gerontology, and women's studies, as well as in interdepartmental programs or certificate programs such as "aging studies" or "human development." Accordingly, there are a number of texts on the market geared for both specific disciplinary audiences and general gerontology or aging studies classrooms. Morgan and Kunkel's text, *Aging, Society, and the Life Course*, now in its 4th edition, is framed as a sociology of aging text, but may be appropriate for both sociology and general aging studies audiences.

The current edition, written for an undergraduate audience, is comprised of twelve chapters on a variety of topics pertaining to the sociology of aging. The introductory chapter provides an overview of frameworks for thinking about age and provides a general understanding of the relationship between the sociology of aging to gerontology. Such a framing is important for undergraduates to develop an understanding of the breadth of the aging field as well as the role of sociology within. The second chapter of the text focuses on research methodology and is a substantive and thoughtful approach that I have rarely seen

in comparable textbooks. This is one of the strongest chapters in the volume and would be useful reading for undergraduates in any social science course. The remaining chapters take a more topical focus, and address traditional sociological subject matter such as demography, work, family structure, economics, healthcare, and governance. Each chapter presents a brief introduction to the topic, a chapter summary, key words, discussion questions, and web resources. Many of the chapters also incorporate an "applying theory" section which bridges theory with specific examples to help students understand the importance of theory in understanding gerontology.

The chapters "Global Aging" and "Aging and Health" may be the most compelling to an anthropological audience. The Transnational Aging chapter addresses demographic and cultural factors which affect the aging experience in three nations, China, Germany, and Kenya. This ethnological approach is accompanied by a brief section on the "exotic other", but lacks the depth an anthropology-authored text would provide on cultural relativism, race, ethnicity, and identity. The chapter on Aging and Health is nicely balanced and provides general information on health issues among older adults, variability in health outcomes, and healthcare financing. It avoids going into excessive detail on specific age-associated disorders and is accompanied by a thoughtful essay on anti-aging and consumerism in the U.S. context.

Overall the book has a number of design features that make it a good

fit for faculty and students alike. The chapter format of the text is easy to divide over a semester calendar; each chapter provides some useful discussion-generating questions that could be used for in or out-of-class engagement. Chapters also feature student friendly sections such as chapter summaries and key terms. It may be helpful to students if future editions provided a formal glossary rather than relying upon context for definitions. The book is nicely produced and the e-book version may be attractive to some students. The e-book version does have voice-to-text capability, which is an important value for students who are visually impaired. Anthropologists teaching general aging studies or gerontology courses will find this a good choice.

Samantha Solimeo, PhD, MPH
Formative Evaluation Core
Center for Comprehensive Access &
Delivery Research and Evaluation
(CADRE)
Iowa City VA Healthcare System

If you are interested in writing a book, film, journal or exhibit review for Anthropology & Aging Quarterly, please contact the Book Reviews Editor, Sherylyn Briller, s.briller@wayne.edu. Include your name, areas of expertise, current ation (research, professor, graduate student, e.g.) and any titles you would be interested in reviewing from the last three years.

AAQ does not accept unsolicited reviews.



Book Reviews

Remembering Home: Rediscovering the Self in Dementia, By Habib Chaudhury. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press. 2008
ISBN: 0-8018-8827-1
117 pp. \$20.00 (Paper)

Concepts of the “self” are a topic of much debate in the humanities and the social sciences. The process of negotiating a “sense of self” becomes particularly important for persons with dementia or other related diseases who may experience a diminished sense of self, especially in societies prioritizing cognition.

A diminished sense of self can come about for many reasons, including being removed from familiar surroundings. Environmental gerontologist Habib Chaudhury argues in *Remembering Home: Rediscovering the Self in Dementia* that memories of home can connect persons with dementia to their past and can be used to aid them in adjusting to present circumstances - such as a new living environment. Like many others, Chaudhury calls for a reframing of the relationship between caregivers and persons with dementia from a “medical-model” of patient care to a “person-centered” model. He asserts that understanding the person with dementia’s past experiences, gleaned from stories of home and photographs, can greatly help with relating to that person. Chaudhury contends that in order to create a meaningful living environment for the person suffering from dementia we need to identify the unique identities of the individuals as reflected through their personal pasts. Chaudhury suggest that this approach can be of benefit in two ways. “First, guided reminiscences can anchor residents in remembered places, activities, and events even as

their disease threatens to leave them adrift in a present they may no longer recognize or understand. Second, home stories can enable caregivers to better understand and engage residents as persons” (102).

Remembering Home is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters set the foundations for the Chaudhury’s argument presenting multi-disciplinary scholarship on place, aging, and concepts of the self. Drawing on these literatures, Chaudhury argues that the person with dementia should be viewed as a “whole” person, with a life, character and set of interests that predate the onset of dementia. Chapter Two focuses on home as one of the most significant “places” in persons’ lives with both psychological and emotional frames of reference. Memories of “home” – including childhood home, a home in which one may later create and raise a family in, and the neighborhoods in which they are embedded – are complex and layered as he argues that these places have become part of the self. Chaudhury contends that working with persons with dementia to recover a sense of self through memories of place supports, and possibly even improves, quality of life. He argues that this aspect is very important in the face of the many losses associated with dementia. In Chapter Three, themes in the recollection of homes and related life experiences are drawn from interviews with 13 individuals with dementia and members of their families carried out in four care facilities in Wisconsin. Here Chaudhury develops his concept of “home story” as a place-based, home-related biographical sketch including photographs and artifacts that synthesize a resident’s memories of home and serves as a tool for guided reminiscences. The goal is to avoid depersonalizing the

individual and to instead treat them with compassion, dignity, and respect while appreciating the self that is still there. Chapter Four presents five focused biographies using stories told by residents, family members, friends, and caregivers during guided sessions using photographs of past homes as triggers. In care settings, Chaudhury argues that these stories can be used to stimulate conversation and build rapport between staff and residents. In addition, specific prompts may trigger more memories which can add to the well-being of the person and aid the staff in developing innovative ways in caring for the person. Chapter Five offers practical strategies and suggestions for using home stories and biographies for caregivers who want to (re)connect with and enhance quality of life for sufferers of dementia.

Scholars in gerontology and social sciences may find Chaudhury’s theoretical arguments compelling. However, this book is also useful as a guide for health care professionals and activity leaders in long-term facilities, assisted living facilities, adult day centers. Family members and anyone interested in understanding and relating to people with dementia will also find it useful. For anthropologists, this book does not draw much on our discipline’s considerable writings on dementia and material culture studies but it is still worth reading to see how a scholar from another field approaches these topics.

Mary Durocher, Ph.D.
Anthropology Department
Wayne State University