

The Great Heisei Doll Massacre:

Disposal and the Production of Ignorance in Contemporary Japan

By Fabio Gygi, SOAS

Avidyā: "ignorance" in Buddhism, better translated as "unwisdom"; that which obstructs insight into the true nature of reality and being.

“For all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten.”¹

Adorno in a letter to Benjamin, 29. Februar 1940

The Picture that never was

“Don’t take any pictures of the dolls in the garbage truck!” It was only this warning from a senior member of the dollmakers’ guild that made me aware of what I was waiting for. After the monks who performed the memorial service for dolls (*ningyō kuyō*) had returned to the temple, the few participants and spectators left. I was the only person remaining, curious as to what would happen next. Most helpers were standing around indecisively, and I noticed a lot of side glances towards me, making me quite uncomfortable; I was definitely an undesired presence at this stage. I decided to walk up to the main hall of the temple to create some distance.



[Figure 1. Dolls waiting for their memorial service at Mongakuji, October 2019.

Photograph by the author.]

Earlier that day I had observed several volunteers of the dollmakers' guild in turquoise *happi*—the colourful overcoats that indicate group identity at Japanese festivals—painstakingly arrange a sheer endless number of dolls on a makeshift table made from cardboard boxes covered with a large piece of red felt. The effect was quite fetching: the temple gate and the guardian lion were surrounded by a sea of dolls dressed in auspicious red and orange colors. Small groups of dolls for the Girls' Festival (*hina-ningyō*) consorted with larger, more realistic Ichimatsu dolls, stuffed animals locked horns with the helmets of warrior dolls, elaborately dressed decorative dolls (*ishō-ningyō*) associated with plastic dolls in Western ball gowns, four identical Peko-chans with protruding tongues, mascots for the Fujiya bakery, congregated with a hairdresser apprentice's head. The variety reflected the continuing importance of dolls as nationally coded material culture: as toys, decorative objects, paraphernalia for festivals, markers of local identities, craftsmanship, and tradition.

The occasion was a *ningyō kuyō*, a memorial service for dolls that are no longer wanted. This ritual of disposal is currently practiced at temples and shrines all over Japan, usually in spring and in autumn. The Buddhist term *kuyō* is derived from the Sanskrit word *pūjā*, meaning a devotional offering to the Buddha, the dharma (the Buddhist law) and the sangha (the community of practitioners). As Ambros has pointed out, the merit of such offerings serves to honor the spirits of the dead and are thus closely linked to funerals in Japan (2012: 6). Performing such rites for inanimate objects posed interesting ideological challenges for historians and anthropologists alike: are such rites proof of an ancient animistic world view? Do they indicate that ‘the Japanese’ do not make the same distinctions between humans and non-humans as Westerners do? The historical and folkloristic record, however, shows that most of the memorial rites are a modern innovation, often driven by local craft guilds rather than by ancient beliefs about the soul of things.²

What is remarkable about the *ningyō kuyō* is that an established Buddhist ritual³ is used to facilitate the disposal of a category of objects that at first glance does not seem to be religious. In fact, the association is beneficial for all parties involved: temple priests, in Japan considered to be specialists for all kinds of funerary arrangements, open up a new stream of revenue; the dollmakers’ guilds who organize the events acquire added respectability by association with venerable temples; and the participants can rest assured that the disposal is undertaken with the necessary ceremonial flourish. By briefly drawing the dolls into the halo of a religious institution, they can be disposed of later, thus extending in the mind of laypeople Buddhism’s dominion over secular material culture.⁴

The aim of my research was to find out what the performative functions of these rites were. In other words, what did they *do* in the eyes of participants, officiating monks, members of the local crafts guilds and random visitors? How did they facilitate disposal? How did they turn cherished objects into disposable rubbish? To do that I spent the blissful autumn of 2019 traveling to observe such rites every weekend in the Greater Tokyo area, Osaka, and Kyoto. On this bright autumn morning, I had ventured out into Saitama, the province adjacent to Tokyo, to find the Mongakuji temple⁵ in the neglected suburbia at the fringes of the capital, among corrugated iron

walkways offering vistas of nothing but the endlessly repeating cluttered cityscape typical of the sleeper towns.

After the priest of the temple had chanted passages from Pure Land Buddhist scripture and the few participants—I counted 25 people, including the volunteers of the dollmakers' guild—had offered incense on the makeshift altar, the official part was over. A lull in proceedings followed. The members of the doll guild idly walked around and commented on different dolls. A white-haired member of the volunteers wound up all the wind-up dolls he could find: melancholic music box melodies filled the air, a last lament, swansong. When I returned from the main hall, I saw that the volunteers had all taken off their *happi* coats. Did they not want to make the *happi* dirty? Was it simply too hot? Or did they no longer want to be recognizable as members of the dollmakers' guild when disposing of the dolls? Everybody wore masks and white work gloves, apart from two men without masks. The men started removing metal horns from warrior dolls. This was the start of the rubbish separation (*gomi bunbetsu*): metal parts were collected separately because they belong to the category of 'resources' (*shigen*). One of the younger guys suddenly shouted "Ok, let's do it!" (*dewa yarimashou!*). The volunteers started opening the cardboard boxes that served as display tables, the red felt was ripped from under the dolls, and they tumbled into the boxes; those who fell off the tables were thrown in. It took less than thirty minutes for the carefully arranged sea of dolls to disappear. To my surprise, a blue Isuzu rubbish truck from the local authority drove backward directly up to the temple gate, and two rubbish men helped to tip the boxes into the truck. Every time the compressing mechanism was triggered, an avalanche of doll debris tumbled down the loading maw of the truck. I was the only witness; this is when I was warned not to take a picture.

This chapter revolves around the picture that was not taken, that could not have been taken. I did not realize it at that moment, but more than from the ethnographic description of the rite and my interviews with participants and volunteers, my interpretation of the *ningyō kuyō* is drawn from this interdiction. As an ethnographer, I was conflicted between my desire to know the objective 'truth' about the fate of the dolls, and the volunteers' wish not to divulge that 'truth.' How ethical is it to want to know what others deliberately conceal from you? More viscerally

relevant was the question of whether it was ethical to remind the participants who brought their dolls to the rite of what they likely knew but chose to forget.

When I wrote down my field notes in the evening, I returned to this prohibition again and again. What was it that I was not supposed to see? It was ok to take pictures up to that point. Why did I have the desire to take a picture of the ‘forbidden moment’? Imagining what such a photograph would look like, I could vividly see it in my mind’s eye: the delicate features of a tiny *hina* doll in the process of being destroyed in the maw of the cold, thoughtless mechanism. The stark contrast between the world of tradition, culture, refinement, and the category of that which is without value: rubbish, dirt, trash. The particular punctum of such a picture is the incommensurability of these two worlds: the world of rubbish that we are happy to distance ourselves from; and the world of dolls, of the home, the familiar, and beautiful. Such a picture would look incongruous and jarring, inducing a feeling of pity, suggesting violence done to the doll, or innocence destroyed. This is precisely why many of my interlocutors said that they could not bear to simply throw away their beloved dolls with the rubbish. The truth that the ritual renders invisible, then, is that the dolls end up simply being thrown away. To show this would make the ritual ineffective as a conduit to disposal. Or formulated in a more general way: one pays others to do what one does not want to do, so that one does not have to face own’s own cruelty and indifference and callousness.

The Production of Ignorance

What does the memorial service for dolls do? What purpose does it serve that could explain its popularity since the beginning of the *Heisei* era (1989-2019)? My argument in this chapter is that the rite can be fruitfully understood as a new social form that produces ignorance concerning the fate of one’s dolls; that it is this ignorance that enables the former owners to maintain certain notions about objects, consumption, themselves, and national culture. It may sound counterintuitive at first to grasp ignorance, commonly understood to mean the absence of knowledge, as something that is actively produced. Even worse, to argue that one’s own informants are actively fostering ignorance when they are supposed to be the “cultural experts”

to whom anthropologists defer may be taken as an affront against ethnographic decency. Such an understanding, however, is predicated on the unsustainable assumption that our informants are as interested as we are in the pursuit of some pure form of knowledge (Chua 2009). Mair, High, and Kelly (2012: 2) make ignorance itself the ethnographic object by starting from the premise that “under certain circumstances, ignorance has a substance of its own, as the product of specific practices, with effects that are distinct from the effects of the lack of knowledge to which the ignorance in question corresponds.” As Mair, High, and Kelly (2012: 7) assert, “sometimes people work to produce these states of ignorance in themselves, sometimes they produce them in other people” . This can make itself felt in a variety of registers: it may manifest as “structural ignorance” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008: 3) on the side of bureaucracies and institutions, or as “strategic ignorance” on the side of individual actors vis-à-vis social and institutional demands (Gershon 2000).

The production of ignorance can be framed as a psychological, cultural, and political phenomenon. In the case of the memorial services for dolls, the psychological aspect of “closure by ignorance” has effects that radiate into the social, cultural, and finally into the political sphere. The ignorance produced is both a desired good and a reflection of wider contradictions in Japanese relations to objects, self-images, processes of consumption, and essentialist ideas about Japanese culture. In Buddhist doctrine, “ignorance” or “unwisdom” is that which actively obstructs insight into the essential emptiness of all phenomena. In the example under discussion the ignorance is similarly productive: it keeps things in place that otherwise would fall apart.

Despite local variations, there is a clearly discernible order of proceedings for a memorial service for dolls, whether it takes place at a temple or at a Shinto shrine. At the latter they are usually called *ningyō kansha-sai* (“Doll Gratitude Festival”) or *ningyō shōten-sai* (“Doll Ascension Festival”) to avoid the more sombre and funerary associations of the Buddhist term *kuyō*. Many of my informants did not distinguish between the two terms, however, and used *ningyō kuyō* as a general term. For the purposes of this chapter I stick to the Buddhist terminology and to the order of service observed at the Mongakuji temple, also because the historical record suggests that the Buddhist form was the model for the corresponding Shinto ceremony, which only gained traction in the 1980s, quite possibly in imitation of the success of Buddhist rites.⁶

The participants bring their dolls, pay the fee (starting from 3,000 Yen, about twenty-eight dollars) at the makeshift reception marquee, and write their names on small pieces of paper shaped like a rudimentary human silhouette called *hitogata* ('human shape', the Japanese reading of the Chinese characters for doll, *ningyō*). These are then put on the altar together and are later burnt by the temple. This substitution is widely practiced both because it would be difficult to burn all the dolls given the increase in numbers since the 1990s, and because many of the more recent dolls contain plastic parts or polyester clothing that release toxic fumes when burnt. Such environmental concerns lead to a reshaping of the ritual in the 1980s and 1990s (Tanaka 2005). During my fieldwork it was common practice to only burn a selected number of old dolls made from wood, paper, and silk together with the wooden or paper *hitogata*, while the bulk of the dolls was disposed via compactor trucks into landfill.⁷

Apart from the eighteen volunteers from the dollmakers' guild, who were all wearing the turquoise *happi*, there were only seven other attendants, including me: a mother with her two grown-up children; a woman and a man who offered incense and wandered off; an elderly mother with her grown-up son who brought a large standing doll that looked fairly new; and an older man who took pictures on his digital camera. They waited until their dolls were arranged and looked at the display; most of those who left their dolls behind took a last picture. Many of the participants left before the service started at 1:30 p.m.

In front of the arranged dolls stood an altar covered in green felt, the main piece of which was a memorial tablet (*ihai*) with the inscription *ningyō kuyō-i* written under the Sanskrit syllable AUM, an incense burner and a metal box with a white banderole inscribed with the six syllables *Namu Amida Butsu*, "Hail to Amitābha Buddha." Two burning candles, two incense offering boxes and offerings of salt, a radish, tangerines and a whole sea bream, and a bouquet of flowers decorated the altar.

The abbot of the Mongakuji then appeared in the robe of the Pure Land sect of Buddhism and burned some incense before launching into the Buddhist service (*hōyō*) by intoning a sutra, which contained several passages in Sanskrit. There were two interactive elements: the offering of incense at the altar and the chanting of ten repetitions of the prayer *Namu Amida Butsu*, the core practice of the pure land sect of Buddhism,⁸ at the end. The head of the dollmakers' guild

briefly addressed the few stragglers, thanking everyone for participating. He was the first person to offer incense. We all then offered incense in pairs. The crows in the pine trees seemed to participate in the chanting and crowed in unison.

What was happening during a *ningyō kuyō* in symbolic or cognitive terms? Interviewing participants, members of the dollmakers' guild and officiating priests at different rites, I collected a range of different, sometimes even contradictory interpretations. As far as I could observe, the Buddhist services were not specific to the *ningyō kuyō*; that is, the sutras chanted and offerings made were part of a standard repertoire (slightly different according to sects) rather than a specific ceremony for the dolls. The connection was usually made in a brief address to the congregation by the priest or the ranking member of the local dollmakers' guild that referred most often to a sense of gratitude towards the dolls.

Priests were in general quite reluctant to elaborate on the details of the ritual, usually a standard Buddhist service with some elements of funerary practice added to it. The priests I talked to were careful to frame the rite as expressing gratitude to the dolls who had been playmates and companions, without elaborating on the more metaphysical aspects of the rite. Participants, on the other hand, sometimes took their cue from the similarity of *ningyō kuyō* to funerary rites and used religious phrasings to explain to themselves and others what happens: "The dolls are burnt and become Buddhas."

While many participants responded that they were saying "Thank you to the dolls" when bowing, when asked about the interior state of mind when offering incense, the majority characteristically answered that they tried to catch a glimpse of the person before them and imitate them as closely as possible. Do you bow first and then bring your hands together? Do you bow once or twice?⁹ Do you take the incense with the right hand and raise it to your forehead or not?¹⁰ Do you offer incense once or twice?¹¹ By emphasizing orthopraxy over orthodoxy, the ritual does not require verbal elaboration, internal states of mind, or indeed particular beliefs about what is happening. That is not to say that participants did not express feelings of gratitude or held certain beliefs regarding the dolls, but that these were not necessary for the ritual to work.

At the heart of the ritual is the act of making the doll itself disappear. This is achieved in two ways; I shall call them 'vertical' and 'horizontal' disposal. In the former, the dolls are burnt and the smoke rises to the sky, whereas the ashes fall to the ground. Implicit in this is the understanding that the emotional aspect of the doll ceases to exist and rises with the smoke into heaven in an example of sacrificial logic. The burning is viewed by the former owner in an act of dramatic witnessing; the doll literally ceases to exist in front of their very eyes. This, however, is rarely practiced today because of the toxic fumes that the burning of plastic and polyester causes. The 'horizontal' method works by removing the doll from the field of vision of the observers without destroying it. Needless to say, this second solution requires more nifty footwork than the final and dramatic burning. The contradiction that the ritual must address is between the wish to get rid of the doll and the enduring presence of the material object. The only way to do this is to obfuscate the materiality of the object. Like mass-produced Buddha statues that are mere matter *before* consecration (Brox 2019), the dolls *after* the ritual return to a state of empty vessel. This is achieved by clever manipulation of the temporal and spatial frames of the ritual itself.

It is useful to think of these ritual frames in terms of Goffman's (1974) frame analysis, as constitutive of experience and, thus, of reality. There is a vast literature on ritual frames and framing in anthropology, only a small part of which I can draw on here. Bruce Kapferer (2006: 516) notes that "the framing of [...] ritual action is created by the action itself and can operate as an invisible membrane surrounding the action, momentarily setting it off from the ongoing flow of life yet simultaneously pragmatically engaged with it.". Rather than more abstract recent elaborations based on Bateson's (1972) take on the frame that point towards the notion of meta-cognition (see for example, Houseman 2012, Handelman 2012, Robbins and Sumiala 2016), I want to go in the opposite direction towards the concrete materiality of the frame. In this, I am following Goffman's emphasis on the frame as a device that transforms reality:

Activity framed in a particular way — especially collectively organized activity — is often marked off from the ongoing flow of surrounding events by a special set of boundary markers or brackets of a conventionalized kind. These occur before and after the activity

in time and may be circumspective in space; in brief, there are temporal and spatial brackets. (Goffman 1974: 250-51)

These brackets, also called “transformation devices” by Nelson (2012), mark the ritual frame. The location of the *ningyō kuyō* at a temple or a shrine means that the spatial bracketing uses an already well established sacred space to operate within, together with a fully developed ritual language that is adapted to the particular case at hand. There is a particular flow to these proceedings that is marked by temporal brackets: the entering of the priests, often in the form of a procession from the main hall; bells, gongs, and other instruments that indicate the beginning; ritual incantations that focus the attention of the participants towards what is about to happen. The most important transformation devices for the *ningyō kuyō*, however, are the temporal breaks and the material devices that allow for a “break in presence” (Rettie 2004: 120) in the sense that the involvement of those present is directed away from the material presence of the dolls, which allows for a shift of the ritual frame.

Callon (1998), in an economics paper otherwise unrelated to the topic, points out that the framing that Goffman envisions can be understood in two diametrically opposed ways: either framing is the norm and creates closed systems of interactions that are isolated from the external world; or framing is ephemeral, and connections to the world outside the frame create overflow that always threatens to disrupt the frame. My understanding here is closer to the latter case, because this chapter deals ethnographically with a flow of material objects that have to be carefully hidden and/or ignored in order for the ritual to ‘work.’ As in Callon’s (1998) example, the efficacy of the rite is always threatened by the presence and the overflow of the things themselves.

To sum it up, the ritual frame deals on the one hand with intersubjectivity, the shared meanings and actions that establish the shared frame as a cultural event. On the other hand, it deals with interobjectivity, the fact that the enduring presence of the material world before and after the ritual both enables the framing of ritual action, but, especially in the case of *ningyō kuyō*, also harbors the potential for disturbing the frame. Latour (2007), who coined the neologism interobjectivity in a paper on primate research, argues that what is intersubjectively co-present

in face-to-face interactions is extended in time and space through material agents that both enable and constrain interactions in particular ways. The ritual is thus set up as an act of disappearance, during which breaks of presence are used to mask the fact that the dolls are being shifted horizontally.

Le Grand Escamotage

The first step to be considered is how the material object itself is rendered absent (Gygi 2018). The main object of the *ningyō kuyō* is to make the dolls themselves disappear, that is, to create the *illusio* in those who brought their dolls that they simply cease to be. This is not to say, however, that the previous owners do not know what this implies, but that they choose not to know. What the temples and shrines who provide these services do, is to aid and abet (that is, collude) in this *illusio*. At each stage, the participants can distance themselves from the act of disposal, both physically and mentally. The manipulation of spatial and temporal frames, as well as visible social identities, is crucial to achieving a smooth, staggered process of disposal.

The temporal structure of the different rites allow for a separation between the more symbolic and the more material aspects of the detachment/disposal process. A strict division of labor obtains: There usually is a temporal interval between the ritual, during which ritual experts perform symbolic actions, and the disposal, during which volunteers or *sagyōsha* (manual laborers) do the heavy lifting. These different frames of action are often marked by divergent atmospheres: the ritual frame with Buddhist monks and shrine priests evinces a sense of calm and reverence, even one of compassion, while the frame of manual work often feels quite violent, unceremonious, and unsentimental. These aspects rarely occur together, but when they do, as for example at the Kanei-ji temple in Ueno, the division of labor is upheld: the priests officiate and pray while the lay assistants throw the selected dolls into the fire. More frequently, I observed a strict separation: at the Ōi-shrine in Shimada, for example, the head priest prays in front of the dolls and then lights the torch, before returning to the shrine building. Only then are the remaining dolls on the altar thrown into the fire. At the Hōkyōji in Kyoto, the entrance of the

nuns and the abbess marked the beginning of the rite, but in this special case, the burning of representative dolls took place beforehand: their ashes were presented on the altar.

At the Tennōji in Osaka two completely different crews dealt with receiving the dolls on the one hand and the final disposal on the other; the latter arrived after a conspicuous time lapse of three hours. At the Mongakuji in Saitama described above, it was the same crew, but I noticed that they took off their *happi* coats and were mostly wearing uniform black underneath. With face masks and gloves, I could not straight away tell that they were the same people. I felt pressured to leave precisely because my own presence provided a continuity that extended the ritual frame and did not allow for the break in presence that would have been necessary to shift from the frame of ritual, in which the dolls were conceived as carefully handled objects of affection to a frame in which they were simply construed as rubbish.

The Meiji shrine, a popular tourist site in central Tokyo, oversees one of the largest and most recent of such events, the “Doll Gratitude Festival” (*ningyō-kanshasai*). Here, they manage to do the ‘escamotage’ in plain sight. When I attended in October 2019, an estimated 30,000 dolls were brought in and displayed all along the shrine’s perimeter. The event was organized by the Japanese Doll Association (*Nihon-ningyō-kyōkai*). I talked to several members in attendance, including the president (who talked about the rite—established in 1990—in terms of ancient Japanese culture), the academic head of valuation and chair of the society (who thought of the dolls more sociologically in terms of intergenerational links and inheritance), and two of the senior members who were tasked with identifying valuable dolls from the chaff of everyday knick-knacks (who emphasized the emotional aspects of dolls). They all professed ignorance as to what would happen to the dolls after the rite had ended. Acting as a hinge between the theoretical and the practical aspects of the ritual was Kitamura-san, the head of a Tokyo-based dollmakers’ guild who directed the group of student part-time workers. When I asked him what would happen to the dolls afterwards, he hesitated and gave me a level look: “They are disposed of (*shobun sareru*).” Tanaka-san, who was in the process of opening her own doll museum, took me over to the small exhibition space where the dolls considered worth conserving were held and displayed. When we walked back, I asked her plainly what would happen to the dolls, and she too replied she did not know. The surprise must have been apparent on my face, because

she added after a pause: “Well, later in the afternoon, a curtain will be drawn and then.... You can only hear an enormous whooshing noise!” Indeed, this is what happened. Kitamura-san and dozens of student volunteers started to draw ropes across the courtyard from the pillars and drew a large curtain made from baby blue and white-striped fabric called *hanmaku* (the color is a lighter version of the deeper blue of the auspicious *asagi-maku* that is used for land-consecration ceremonies). This complicated operation took quite a while. Many visitors, foreign and Japanese, lingered on to see what would happen, but the student volunteers formed a cordon around the curtain and asked people not to lift it up. Once the yard was concealed from sight, the volunteers disappeared inside, and there was a whooshing noise as thousands of dolls were swept off the tables and thrown into large, unmarked cardboard boxes. After some rain in the morning, the day started to brighten up, and brisk gusts of autumn wind occasionally lifted the curtain and revealed the scurrying of legs as the part-time student workers ran to get more dolls. Full boxes were sealed and lifted by hand or transported on small handcarts to the perimeter of the shrine, through the side gate out into the shrine woods, where they ended up carefully stacked on a parking lot. After one side of the shrine precinct was cleared of dolls, the curtain was moved to the other part. By now, newcomers no longer linked the boxes to the dolls, and even the most obstinate stragglers (apart from myself) had left. After the curtain was removed, the premises looked as before; it was difficult to imagine that only a few hours ago, thirty-thousands dolls were displayed there. The curtain came down again, and the part-time workers went on to a post-work party. The boxes had been piled three meters high and formed a precise, fort-like rectangular; they were left deserted. I originally planned to wait and see what would happen next, but when the shrine park closed at 5 p.m., I was politely ejected by security.



[Figure 2: Volunteers installing the *hanmaku* curtain that serves as material frame. Meiji Shrine, October 2019. Photograph by the author.]

To sum up: in order for the dolls to shift from being beloved objects of affection to simply being rubbish, it is important to disrupt the underlying material continuity of the object. This disruption is achieved by working with different sets of people and by temporal breaks during which the frame is left to decay, so to speak.

The other transformation device relevant here is the visual barrier that is created by the curtain. Such striped curtains are often used in Japan to demarcate ritual occasions, both religious and secular. At another rite in Kōnosu, a lilac colored *hanmaku* was used to give the jumbled boxes a more ceremonious look; when I observed more carefully, I saw that the curtain was strung directly around a large metal waste container, thus hiding the ‘true’ nature of the event. Or rather, the curtain was mediating between two different frames—both equally true—for the

skip is also a framing device in the sense in which the things thrown into the skip are rubbish because they are in the skip. Their 'rubbishness' can easily be undone by removing them from the skip.

The same is true for the curtain drawn across the yard. The curtain blocks out the gaze from the audience but also acts as a hinge: it not so much conceals reality,¹² but mediates between two different realities: the reality of the ritual and the reality of the material existence of things. In that sense, it is literally the frame that acts as a container and sustains a certain reality—that of the absence of the dolls—that the ritual is supposed to create. The *hanmaku* is thus the ritual frame itself that conceals the act of *escamotage*, that is, the removal of the dolls by sleight of hand. Needless to say, this requires the audience's collusion to a degree. From my observations it was fairly obvious that those trying to peek behind the curtains were visitors and tourists rather than participants in the ritual itself. Those who brought dolls to the Meiji shrine deposited them at the reception, paid the fee and waited until the dolls were put out and often took pictures; some attended the formal ceremony and then returned before the curtain was drawn.

What is Held in Place by the Ritual

The shift in ritual frames that allows the divestment from and then the disposal of the dolls as rubbish has important implications that I try to draw out in the following section. One may ask why the production of ignorance is so important for the efficacy of the ritual. The answer lies in the parallelism of ignorance/absence. On an individual, psychological level, the desire not to know what happens to the doll is precisely what enables a sense of closure even though the doll itself is not destroyed. The participants collude with the religious institutions to create ignorance in themselves and, to a lesser degree, in others. The ignorance thus produced also keeps in place certain self-beliefs/assumptions that would otherwise be threatened. These self-beliefs form three concentric circles and link in crucial ways individuals with society and the nation. The first and innermost circle contains beliefs that participants hold about themselves: that they are caring, considerate and sentimental. The importance of such emotional ties to dolls was often

explained to me by female participants and expressed in the language of cuteness (*kawaii*), pointing towards the sentimentalisation of material culture that went hand in hand with the rise of consumerism in post-war Japan. Men tended to frame their explanations in terms of “national culture” and *kokuminsei*, the supposedly unique ethnic characteristics of the Japanese. As I was particularly interested in the dolls as non-human actors, I initially interpreted such answers to suggest that the dolls themselves were social others. But just under the surface of such answers, which could easily be construed as an argument that the dolls were animate entities, there was consideration and care extended to other humans. This was especially true of the elderly participants who often told me that they brought their dolls to the *ningyō kuyō* so their children would not have to do it after their death. But my conspicuous presence as a foreign ethnographer usually triggered a first layer of responses in the frame of national culture, meaning that the *ningyō kuyō* would be described as embodying the ancient spirit of Japan and exemplified the care that the Japanese afforded their possessions. In the short time I was afforded, it was often challenging to leave these behind to reach a more personal motivation to participate. ~~dimension of meaning~~. Instead of bringing together similar quotes from different places, I shall here stay with one example from the site of the ethnographic vignette at the beginning.

I met Yoshi, a participant in his 50s, and his mother when I was waiting for the priests of the Mongakuji to appear. I had seen them earlier checking in at the reception and leaving a large doll in the care of the attendants before strolling around the temple grounds. He glanced at me with some curiosity and when I gave a smile, he came over and introduced himself in halting English. We quickly established that Japanese was the easier way to communicate. His mother retreated and hovered in the background. I really wanted to talk to her, too, but Yoshi made it quite clear that he was the spokesperson for both of them and that she was too shy to speak to a foreigner. He was intrigued that I came all the way from ‘my country’ to observe something as local as this. The first question was “Do you not have anything like this in your country?” When I answered in the negative, he said proudly that the Japanese have a particular proclivity to take care of things and that this was a national characteristic (*mono wo daiji ni suru nihonjin no kokuminsei*). When I pressed him mildly as to why they wanted to get rid of their dolls, if taking good care of their things is a national characteristic, he replied:

In cases when the grandchildren cannot take possession of dolls one is indebted to (*o-sewa ni natta ningyō*), it's better to let them become Buddhas (*jōbutsu shitemoratte*) than to throw them away. The memories will remain, and pictures will also remain. (*in English*) Hearts of memory! (*in Japanese*) We keep them in our mind. *Shūkatsu* is popular at the moment; instead of the grandchildren, one throws away one's stuff oneself.

When I asked him which one was theirs in front of the displayed dolls, he suddenly was not sure and did not venture to point them out. I seemed to remember that they brought the large standing doll that was very visibly displayed just in front of us. But it looked a bit too new and shiny, and thus contradicted the earlier statement that the Japanese are a people that treat objects carefully (rather than to just throw away fairly new things). We looked at it in a hesitant silence as we both became aware of the contradiction. He then added: "well, we look after things well, that is why they look so new." Listening to the conversations of the doll association volunteers over the course of the day, I noticed that many of them pointed out to each other that most of the dolls looked fairly new. I had asked the lady in charge about how to tell whether a doll was new or old, and she replied that the age was visible predominately in the material and the shape of the face; new dolls look more modern, and their clothes are shiny because they are made mainly from polyester: "Older dolls have a more faded look. There are quite a lot of new dolls this time." Indeed, when the golden autumn sunlight directly hit the dolls, I could see the difference: the older dolls seemed to absorb the light, while the new ones glistened and gleamed gaudily.

I chose for analysis this brief interview I had with Yoshi because it encapsulated much of the data I gleaned from talking to attendants and participants at similar rites.¹³ Yoshi's answer to my question contains in condensed form both the emotional economy of the rite: debt, gratitude, attachment, divestment, exchange. The doll that has fulfilled its duty as a companion and as a decoration in later years is thanked and treated as a real being that can "become a Buddha," meaning that its essence is separated from the physical object and dealt with in the Buddhist

grammar of funerary rites.¹⁴ But hidden within this discourse is a second level in which the dolls mediate between people and the consideration is extended to them: by taking care of emotionally charged objects such as dolls within their lifetime, they take an active stance and avoid the burden to pass them on to the next generation, who may not want it. The ignorance produced—in concrete terms the fact that the dolls that were carefully received and arranged for display and being thanked by the participants and chanted to by the priest were then unceremoniously thrown into the back of a rubbish compactor truck—helped participants to sustain a particular image of themselves as gentle, considerate and careful people. This is at the same time a self-image and a social perception that is sustained in others. In its ultimate consequence, it points to a nationally inflected understanding of oneself as Japanese and thus part of a long and uninterrupted line of a culture of care and compassion.

The Extermination of the Future

The fact that Yoshi spoke about grandchildren not wanting to carry on the material culture of their grandparents is significant for another reason as well. When I asked him whether he had any children of his own he briefly looked taken aback, then said that he was not married. Clearly this was an embarrassing, if not painful topic for him. But it also suggests that the reason why he and his mother participated in the rite that day, was that there was no future trajectory for the doll to be passed down to future generations. Thus, getting rid of the accumulated dolls before one's death becomes part of the practice of *shūkatsu*: the socially concerted effort on the side of the aged to retain as much agency for as long as possible in deciding matters of their own final years. Mladenova (2020: 105), in a paper that addresses *shūkatsu* as neoliberal technology of the self, argues that “death and dying are discussed with the premise that one has to think about it oneself, organize things and reduce the burden on anyone to a maximum extent.” This concern with being a burden or nuisance (*meiwaku*) to one's own descendants or unrelated others is consistent with what Kawano (2014) found in her ethnography of ash scattering ceremonies: the main motivation for this funerary innovation is precisely the fact that by “returning to nature,” there is no future caretaker for the grave required, an ideal solution for

the increasing numbers of people who have no children. Although in the final analysis, her material suggests that much about *shūkatsu* is marketing and that such desperate attempts to wring profit out of the end of life are not taken entirely seriously by the majority of an aging population, her participants clearly had thought about the implications of their own accumulation of material objects:

Mrs. Sanda (67), pointed out that they limited their preparations of their end-of-life to a couple of truly necessary activities, like their grave and funeral or by throwing away personally sentimental items, which would otherwise be burdensome for their children to do posthumously. (Mladenova 2020: 118)

Ningyō kuyō can thus be interpreted as part and parcel of this wider cultural innovation that is triggered by demographic shifts (Traphagan and Knight 2003): an increase of life span and a significant improvement to health in old age, a consistently low fertility rate since the 1990s, an increasing number of people who remain—whether willingly or not—single throughout their adult life (Ueno 2015). What marks the *Heisei* era (1989-2019), then, is that together with the economic recession and social and demographic change, the stream of material transmission is also thinning out. A dearth of newborn babies translates into a glut of dolls that otherwise would be handed down and only remain as a painful reminder of this end of the line (especially the *hina-ningyō* for girls and the warrior dolls for boy's day). They are then sacrificed on the altar of demographic change. There are indications, however, that this is not a permanent feature. At the Mongakuji, I was told that last year there was at least another row of cardboard boxes, and that the total number of dolls brought to *ningyō kuyō* are sinking overall. This was corroborated to me in other locations such as the Meiji shrine, too. What this seems to suggest is that while the fertility rate does not show signs of picking up, perhaps the thinning out of material culture streams is slowing down as people get rid of their dolls and do not replace them with new ones.

Conclusion: Sacralizing Disposal and Consumption

I called this chapter “The Great *Heisei* Doll Massacre” to point towards several paradoxes concerning consumption and disposal, attachment and detachment, ignorance, and ritual efficacy. Although first undertaken in the modern era in 1918, the practice of *ningyō kuyō* has remained a marginal phenomenon from the 1950s to the 1960s and has only picked up during the 1980s, with the number of dolls handed over for disposal increasing exponentially during the 1990s. It is significant that one of the largest events in terms of submitted dolls, the *Doll Gratitude Festival* at the Meiji Shrine, was only inaugurated in 1990, the first year of the era *Heisei*. As this era drew to a close in 2019 with the ascension of a new emperor, many organizers and participants alike told me that the numbers of dolls, although still substantial, was in decline overall. This suggests that the *Heisei* era, with its stagnating birthrate and declining number of marriages led to a similar thinning out in the material transmission of heirlooms from one generation to the other.

In this context, the rite’s function is to create a conduit of disposal in the face of contradictory and often opposing forces: the wish to get rid of an excess of inherited things that are difficult to accommodate in small dwellings is opposed by the sense of duty towards these inherited objects (of which dolls and mementoes form a large part). Members of the older generation, especially the married women who had to look after one or even two sets of grandparents (their own and their in-laws), are very aware of the burden that their own future frailty may pose to their children and their children’s spouses. Especially those who recently had to go through the pain of sorting through and disposing of their parents’ or in-laws’ accumulated stuff are often keen to start de-cluttering as part of their own final preparations. But how to get rid of these sentimental treasures without feeling heartless and cruel? Here the ritual provides an answer: by obfuscating the transformation of cherished objects into waste, people can bid farewell to their and others’ possessions without incurring a feeling of guilt. By providing a ritual frame that creates the illusion that the dolls simply disappear, their disposal is enabled and accelerated. The act of making the dolls disappear has its psychological equivalent in a double forgetting: those who bring the dolls chose to forget that they will be disposed like rubbish; those who handle them on the other side of the ritual must forget that they are emotionally charged objects of affection. It is through this double forgetting that the doll is freed from human

attachment and returns to being merely a thing. The ‘massacre’ of a large number of dolls is thus enabled by allowing participants to claim ignorance as to what is happening. As a result of this, the material flow becomes unstuck: dolls who have been waiting in alcoves for decades are on the move again.

These domestic struggles are mirrored on a larger scale in the contradictions of consumption more widely, where the imperative to be mindful of the environment and to keep, mend, and cherish things rather than to just throw them away is pitted against the promise of consumerism that to get rid of old things (that may or may not “spark joy”, see also Gould in this volume) makes space for the new, the exciting and the joyful. What the rite does on this level is to sacralize disposal and thus legitimise it, both in the face of the demands of sentimentality and the strictures of the environmentally-friendly. In negotiating these contradictory attitudes towards things and opening a channel for disposal, the production of ignorance proves to be its own kind of wisdom.

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Abstract (150 words)

This chapter looks at “memorial services for dolls” (*ningyō kuyō*), Buddhist rites of disposal in contemporary Japan. How does the ritual facilitate the transformation of cherished objects into waste? Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that the ritual produces ignorance about the fate of the dolls. In order to do this, ritual frames—spatial, temporal, and material—are manipulated to create the impression that the dolls simply disappear. I contend that this is necessary to mitigate the contradiction between feeling sorry for the dolls and the wish to get rid of them. The increase of temples and shrines offering this service in the *Heisei* era (1989-2019) and the fact that many informants who participated in these rites described them as “shukatsu” (end-of-life preparation), suggest that demographic changes are one of the driving forces behind the popularity of this practice.

Keywords: *ningyō kuyō*, memorial services for dolls, disposal, production of ignorance, ritual frames

¹ “Denn alle Verdinglichung ist ein Vergessen: Objekte werden dinghaft im Augenblick, wo sie festgehalten sind, ohne in allen ihren Stücken aktuell gegenwärtig zu sein: wo etwas von ihnen vergessen ist.” (Adorno and Benjamin 1999: 321)

² For aborted fetuses see Takeda and Hoshino 1987, for shoes Matsuzaki 1996, for scissors Ōsaki 1997, for needles Kretschmer 2000 and Guth 2014, for animals Nakamaki 1995, for pets Ambros 2012, and for corporate *kuyō* see Nakamaki 2005.

³ There are also Shintō shrines who organise ceremonial disposals, see below.

⁴

⁵ All names including the place (“Mongakuji”) that provide the material for this section are anonymised.

⁶ The Kada Awashima shrine in Wakayama has an association with dolls that goes back to the early modern period, but dolls were not left there to be disposed, but as votive offerings (see Gygi 2021 for a more in-depth analysis).

⁷ The Doll Burning Ceremony at the Oi shrine in Shimada, Shizuoka Prefecture, was the only rite I observed where all the dolls were burnt. The smell of burning plastic was overpowering and the priest confided to me that they receive complaints from neighbours every year.

⁸ Pure Land Buddhism was founded by the ex-Tendai monk Hōnen who brought elitist Buddhism to the masses by simplifying meditative practice and elaborate rituals to the repetition of the nembutsu prayer, which in the age of declining dharma is thought to be enough to guarantee salvation.

⁹ At Buddhist temples it is customary to bow once, while two bows and two claps to attract the deities attention are standard Shinto procedure.

¹⁰ In True Pure Land Buddhism, also called Shin Buddhism, the most widespread religious affiliation in contemporary Japan, the incense is not lifted to the forehead but directly strewn on to the embers, unlike in other sects such as Zen, Tendai and Shingon.

¹¹ The Shingon and Nichiren sects of Buddhism offer incense three times, others only two.

¹² “Concealing reality” would suggest a simple dichotomy between the ‘false’ surface and the ‘deep’ truth, a problematic rhetoric that has frequently been used to describe Japan as a place of smoke and mirrors, see Robertson 2005 for the adjacent metaphors of the mirror and mask.

¹³ I observed ten such rites at temples and shrines from 2013-2019, most of them between September and late November 2019.

¹⁴ There is some doctrinal basis in this, especially in Shingon-Buddhism (Rambelli 2001), but the version we just witnessed was Pure Land Buddhist rite. However, such theological points of contention often leave little impression on practitioners who find the ritual language too obscure to follow.