

## Perception of life and death in Japan

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**Abstract:** *Whenever one talks about the perception towards life and death of a community, society or a race of people it is generally related to the religion or philosophy of that particular group. Japan is such a country which is often associated with death whether it is in form of its ritual suicides like harakiri and kamikaze or large number of deaths which occurred in the atomic bombing during the World War II or contemporarily, number of deaths occurring due to the natural calamities in the form of earthquakes, typhoons or tsunami. But when it comes to the question as to how do the Japanese perceive the life and death issues; surprisingly it is believed that an average Japanese does not think deeply about such issues. How can a society which faces death so closely due to their traditional and geographical conditions remain so aloof of such problems? This was a question which gave rise to an interest as to what actually is the perception towards life and death of the Japanese and what are the factors which influence such perceptions. This paper looks into these factors namely, religion, traditions and social factors. Then we study chronologically the perceptions of life and death in Japan in the various historical periods and in the end we look into the modern perspectives and the rise of the life and death studies in the twentieth and twenty first century in Japan.*

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### I. Introduction

Human beings are the only species on this earth who have capability of thinking and perceiving the mysteries regarding life and death. Of course 'death' is feared by all living organisms. It is a basic animal instinct that whenever one faces death, be it an animal or a human, the first reaction is to try to escape it. But in case of human beings, it is something more than that. A whole lot of emotions are related to death. Besides fear, there is anxiety for the unknown, sorrow due to separation, fear of pain, suffering and in some cases, it could also be a feeling of relief to get rid of the sufferings of this life.

But the question which arises here is when does one start thinking about death? Though the inevitability of death is known by all but when one thinks about one's own death, it seems to be a remote reality. In most of the cases, when an individual is young and healthy, he does not think about his own death, he sees it as a reality which he has to face 'someday' not in the near future. In most cases it is the old people or people suffering from a terminal, incurable disease, or else people related to such professions as medicine, psychology, religion and so on who think about death as a reality which is close to each one of us, irrespective of our physical and mental state.

According to Ebine Rie, it is this denial of death, which is responsible for the modern day problems which man is facing. According to him, "definitely death has a negative image as it arouses such feelings as extinction of one's existence, fear of unknown etc."<sup>1</sup> But at the same time there are also opinions like, "One of the reasons why man is leading an empty aimless life is because he denies death, by learning to be conscious about death the human beings can reach the final stage of growth." (Elisabeth Kubler Ross, 1975)

When we talk about the problems related to life and death, the first one as mentioned above, is how does one face death and deal with it? As Philippe Aries in his book, "The hour of death"<sup>2</sup> deduces that in the ancient times death was not feared by man, but with the rise in the sense of individuality, death began to be related to destruction of the 'self' and there was growing fear of the after-life too. Thus according to Aries, in the modern times the biggest problem of mankind is "How to face death".

But besides this there are many other issues related to death and life ethics in the modern times. One of them is the debate concerning 'brain death'. The issue, whether an individual whose brain has stopped functioning but his other body organs are still functioning should be considered to be dead or not, has arisen in the modern times due to advancement in medical science. One more such issue is whether organ transplant of such a person whose brain is dead should be considered to be ethical or not. Though such problems are directly

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<sup>1</sup> 海老根理絵、「死生観に関する研究の概観と展望」, Ebine Rie, "A view and outline of research related to perception of life and death" The graduate school of Education, University of Tōkyō, 2009, Repository.de.itc.u.tokyo.ac.jp/edu\_48\_17pdf.

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Aries. "The hour of our Death", Translated by Helen Weaver, published by Vintage books edition, 2008.

related to the field of medical science, but they are indirectly related to law, religion, sociology, ethics and a whole lot of other fields of learning too.

Needless to say, all these problems have a direct relation to the perception of life and death. In the ancient times one of the major factors influencing people's perception of life and death was religion. All the major processes in human life, whether it is his birth, coming of age ceremony, marriage or death, were related to and influenced by religion. But with the advancement of science, owing to the development of rational and scientific thinking and secondly moving away from religion, there arose many dilemmas regarding life and death. Things which were unquestioningly accepted till now came to be looked upon skeptically and it also gave rise to a lot of dissatisfaction and anxiety.

This phenomenon can be considered to be more conspicuous in Japan, where there was a sudden surge of scientific knowledge after its opening to the world after almost two centuries of alienation. This hunger for modern scientific knowledge seemed to affect the religious sensibilities too. Thus it is believed that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japan was so engrossed in absorbing the modern scientific knowledge of the West that it started moving away from religion. Consequently a whole lot of social problems arose. These problems became aggravated by the economic depression after the 'bubble bust'. The general dissatisfaction with life leads people to think more about life and death. It is at this time, that the life and death studies started as an academic field in Japan and was nurtured through deliberate efforts.

## II. Factors Affecting Perceptions of Life and Death

At the outset we need to answer the simple question that what does one mean by the term, "Perception of life and death?" Though human beings have been interested in the concept of 'death' since times immemorial but it was a mere curiosity and was not considered as a formal subject of research until quite recently. The so called, "Life and death studies" is a very recent research topic but is gaining a lot of impetus in the modern world. The interest of human beings in 'death' is actually the curiosity about "the unknown". The most fundamental question here being whether death is the ultimate end of life or is it just exiting from this life and moving on to some other life. Since ancient time religion, superstitious beliefs and traditions are providing us with some solutions to these queries, but none of them are totally convincing. Not only that, in the recent years some such attempts have been made by other fields of learning too like science and medicine, philosophy, psychology and so on. But whether we have been able to procure convincing solutions to such queries regarding death is questionable.

The term, "Thanatology" which means study of death and its surrounding circumstances arose in 1835-45. But the term "Perception of life and death" is a recent one, where one does not consider death in alienation but as a continuity of life. Life and death are considered to be the two sides of the same coin, and one cannot be studied without the other. Here life does not merely mean physiological life but as Shimazono Susumu has mentioned, "it includes individual's pains, feeling of heaven and hell, purity, god, good and evil, love, sorrow, eternity and a whole lot of other emotions"<sup>3</sup> Thus now when we talk about "Perception of life and death" in spite of our main interest and concern being in the concept of death, we have to understand it in relation to life.

As mentioned earlier too, though religion is the main factor in influencing the perception of life and death, there are other factors too which directly or indirectly affect it. In this section the working of these factors towards the development of such perceptions particularly in case of Japan, will be discussed.

### 1. Religion

The most ancient and indigenous religion of Japan is *Shintō*, though some scholars argue that *Shintō* is not a religion in the true sense. Neither does it have any religious scriptures nor does it have any fixed doctrine, and so it is more like a way of life which asserts on nature worship. Nevertheless it was the only belief in Japan before transmission of Buddhism in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. With the coming of Buddhism there was a change in the perception regarding the issue of life and death. *Shintō* is a religion which lays more emphasis on this world, considering death to be the ultimate end; Buddhism emphasizes more on cycle of birth and rebirth and also has a deep belief in existence of the other world. Besides *Shintō* and Buddhism, the third major religion which entered Japan from the West in 18<sup>th</sup> century was Christianity. So basically when we consider religion as a factor affecting the perception of life and death in Japan, we have to study regarding these three religions. Let us study about the doctrines of these three religions regarding the same.

#### *Shintō* (神道)

<sup>3</sup> 島蘭進、死生学試論—加藤咄堂と死生観の論述 (二)、東京大学グローバル COE プログラムの出版、2003年度。Shimazono Susumu, "Essay on life and death study-Katō Totsudō and his statement on perception of life and death, Tōkyō University Global COE program publication, 2003."

When we say that *Shintō* is the only indigenous religion or belief of ancient Japan, we see that many traditional Japanese beliefs and practices hark back to prehistoric customs, and most of these form the core of *Shintō*. Most of these local myths, customs and traditions were unified in the 8<sup>th</sup> century under a single belief, named *Shintō* which literally means ‘the way of God’. It was during this period when under the command of the Emperor the two most ancient Chronicles, *Kojiki* (古事記) (712AD, Record of ancient matters) and *Nihonshoki* (日本書紀) (720AD, Chronicles of Japan) were written. These are very important ancient Japanese chronicles which give an insight into the customs, traditions and beliefs of that period.

If we talk about the major features of *Shintō* as a religious belief, it emphasizes on nature worship, i.e. all natural things and phenomena are considered to have a direct influence on human life and are thus to be worshiped. Besides nature, the relationship between man and the sacred (*kami*) (神) is very close. The meaning of the term *Kami*, which is often referred to as ‘god’, ‘deity’ or ‘divinity’ is unclear. The *Shintō* pantheon consists of the ‘*yaoyorazu no kami*’, (八百万の神) literally, ‘800 myriads of divinities’. The natural phenomena- wind, sun, moon, water, mountains trees etc. are *kami*. Certain *kami* are divinized ancestors or great figures of the past, and until 1945 the Emperor too was regarded as divine. Each family had a clan *kami* too called the *ujigami*. (氏神)<sup>4</sup>

Another major feature of this traditional Japanese belief is the notion of purity and impurity (*kegare*, 穢れ) and procedures of ritual purification (*harae* 祓; *misogi* 禊) The traditional Japanese religion does not conceptualize ‘sin’ in the form that it is a violation of divine commandments, as it is in Christianity, but there is definitely the concept of impurity or defilement which separates the human beings from animals. Thus before entering a *Shintō* shrine people observe the traditional custom of rinsing ones hands and mouth which is symbolic of purifying oneself before coming in contact with *kami*.

If we talk about perception towards life and death in *Shintō*, as mentioned earlier too, it is a religion which lays more emphasis on this world and this life and in this respect it differs from Buddhism. The philosophy of life in this world as explained by *Shintō* is the existence of *tama* (霊) and *tamashii*. (魂) *Tama* is the efficient force which is endowed upon each *kami*; it is the object of religious activity and may be seen as violent (*aramitama*, 荒御霊) or peaceful (*nigimitama*, 和御霊). This *tama*, the force that supports all life, dwells in human beings as *tamashii* and departs at the time of death. The *tama* of a *kami* is invited at all ceremonies and offered, made to listen to the praises of the community and then sent back. During the ceremony the *tama* of a divinity is thought to invest itself in the sacred tree or stone, root, branch, sword, mirror or any other objects that are kept out of sight in a shrine.

The main sources of information of the ancient perceptions of life and death in Japan are *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*. It is from these chronicles that Jean Herbert has listed four worlds: *takama-no-hara* (高天原) the high plane of heaven, the residence of the *kami*; *Yomi-no-kuni*, (黄泉の国) the low and far away land, the world of evil and suffering, also referred to as the world to which the dead go; *Utsushi-yo*, (現世) literally it is the shifting world, it is the world in which we all live but have to leave it one day; and finally *Kakuri-yo*, (隠世) the hidden or the invisible world, the world of gods, also interpreted as the world after death. Thus if we take Herbert’s account into consideration we can deduce that firstly except for *Utsushi yo*, which is the world in which all living beings exist, the other three are worlds which no living being has seen. Secondly, two of these worlds, i.e. *Yomi-no-kuni* and *kakuri-yo*, can be interpreted to be the world of the dead. Further, *Takama-no-hara* and *Yomi-no-kuni* can be comparable to the Christian concept of Heaven and Hell.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the problem of where a soul goes after death, there are different theories and interpretations given by various scholars. The most common *Shintō* belief is that the soul goes to the *Yomi-no-kuni* after death. The basis of this belief is the account of death of *Izanami* (伊邪那美命)<sup>6</sup> given in *Kojiki*, who goes there after her death and then is followed by her lover *Izanagi* (伊邪那岐)<sup>7</sup> who goes there to look for her.

“At this time, *Izanagi-no-mikoto*, wishing to meet again his spouse *Izanami-no-mikoto*, went after her to the land of *Yomi*.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the translator, chapter 9 is one of the most interesting chapters in the *Kojiki* because it gives us our most concrete information on the ancient Japanese ideas about death and afterlife. Reading this chapter, one gets a mental picture of the *Yomi*; it has houses as is clear from the following line, “she came forth

<sup>4</sup> Kōdansha-The Encyclopedia of Japan, Published by Kōdansha International Ltd. Tōkyō, 1998.pp-506.

<sup>5</sup> David L. Doerner, “Comparative analysis of Life and death in folk Shinto and Christianity” in Japanese Journal of Religious studies 4\2-3 June- September 1977.

<sup>6</sup> According to Japanese mythology *Izanami* is a goddess and wife of *Izanagi*. For giving birth to God of fire, she got separated from her husband and started living in the *Yomi no kuni* (the world of the dead).

<sup>7</sup> *Izanagi-no-mikoto* is the male counterpart of *Izanami-no-mikoto* in *Kojiki*’s land creating myth.

<sup>8</sup> *Kojiki*, Book1, Chapter 9, (translated by Donald L. Philippe), University of Tōkyō Press, 1968, pp-61-62.

out of the door of the hall to greet him..." Its inhabitants were conscious, moved about and ate food, as is clear from the following lines of *Izanami*:

"How I regret that you did not come sooner. I have eaten at the hearth of *Yomi*."

According to Motoori Norinaga, the fire of *Yomi* was considered to be impure and as *Izanami* had eaten food made in that impure fire, she could not go back to the land of mortals. He believed in the concept of pure and impure fires, as given in the following words,

"...it is impossible to fathom why it is that there is pure fire and polluted fire; but to deny that there is so is to disbelieve the Divine words and to rely perversely on one's own mind."

But Matsumura counter argues this saying, "Although there may have been such recollections of impurity imparted by eating food cooked over an impure fire in the mind of the *Kojiki* compiler, the original meaning of the passage was that *Izanami*, by partaking the food of the land of *Yomi*, had become a person of that land." The idea that partaking of the food of the dead magically disqualifies one from returning to his native land occurs also in the Greek myth of *Persephone*, in the *Kalevala*, among the *Maoris* in China, and in the Ryukyus; the idea that one may not return home if he has eaten the food of any other world or society- such as world of the spirits, fairies, or gods- was also widespread. In primitive thought, eating or drinking together brings about a magical relationship, and Matsumura concludes that this myth merely reflects a belief in the magical cohesive force inherent in eating food in common."<sup>9</sup>

Though such a picture of the land of *Yomi* or the place where the soul departs after death has been provided in the *Kojiki*, but as Matsumura has concluded, in comparison with other ancient people, the Japanese were almost completely indifferent to the details of the afterlife. "The mental image of the land of *Yomi* is simple to the point of being astonishing" (*Nihon Shinwa no Kenkyū*, II, 415) The optimistic this-worldliness of the Japanese, living in their mild and sunny islands, made them indifferent to anything as uncertain and morbid as the life after death.

## Buddhism

Buddhism, a religion which originated in India and from there was transmitted to Japan through China and Korea is such a vast religion with so many different sects and their doctrines that it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss regarding all its thoughts and ideologies. So restricting to the original Buddhist teachings, it is worthwhile to see how Buddhism deals with life and death.

Basically Buddhism believes in the cycle of life and death and reincarnation. Death according to Buddhism is not the ultimate end rather it is just the end of the physical body, the spirit continues to exist and is reborn in one of the six realms- which are heaven, human beings, *asura*, hungry ghost, animal and hell. Where one takes birth is decided by the sum total of the positive and negative actions and the resultant karma. This cycle of birth and rebirth continues till one attains *Nirvana* or enlightenment. *Nirvana* literally means blowing out or extinguishing, thus according to Buddhism when one extinguishes the fire of attachment, aversion and ignorance the sufferings come to an end and one is released from the cycle of reincarnations and this is the state of nirvana. Thus the basic aim of all human beings who take birth on this earth should be to attain *nirvana*. This according to Buddhism can be attained by following the four noble truths, which according to Mac-Milan Encyclopaedia of Buddhism are: 1) The noble truth that is suffering; 2) The noble truth that is the arising of suffering; 3) the noble truth that is end of suffering and 4) The noble truth that is the way leading to the end of suffering.

As mentioned earlier too, *Shintō* does not assert much on the concept of death and afterlife. So till the coming of Buddhism into Japan, people did not ponder much upon the problems of life and death. It was during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) that people started thinking about it and perception of life and death came to be related to religion. As Prof Shimazono has pointed out, "the perception of life and death without any religious character does not have any value in the history of mankind" According to him "during the Kamakura period, the perception of life and death of the Japanese people was completed and it moved towards two direction, one moved through the common people and the other, through Samurai class".<sup>10</sup>

In the modern times the Japanese term for perception of life and death used is '*Shiseikan*' (死生観) but the original Buddhist term used was not '*Shisei*' (死生) but '*Shōji*' (生死). The former has the Chinese character (*kanji*) of 'death' (死) before the character of 'life', (生) whereas in the Buddhist term, "*Shōji*", (生死) the character for 'life' (生) comes before the character of 'death' (死) and the way it is read also changes accordingly. The original Buddhist term '*Shōji*' is related to "*Shutsuri Shōji*" (出離生死) i.e. to get rid of the

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp- 400-401.

<sup>10</sup> 島菌進、死生学試論—加藤咄堂と死生観の論述 (二)、東京大学グローバル COE プログラムの出版、2003年度。Shimazono Susumu, "Essay on life and death study-Katō Totsudō and his statement on perception of life and death, Tōkyō University Global COE program publication, 2003."

cycle of birth and death and enter the world of enlightenment. Further, it is related to “*Shōji soku Nehan*” (生死即涅槃) i.e. even the world where we repeatedly take birth is a part of the absolute world of *Nirvana*. Thus we can say that this term, “*Shōjikan*” which is the original Buddhist term has different connotations than the term “*Shiseikan*” which was used for the first time by Katō Totsudō in his book with the same title. The term ‘*Shiseikan*’ actually deals with the problems of life and death directly and aims to tackle such contemporary issues like, ‘How does one face death?’ and ‘Is there life after death?’ The reason why this term was not used earlier and came to be used conspicuously at the time and after World War II was precisely because during that time people started pondering over such questions related to death and after life.

Another very important doctrine of Buddhism, related to the perception of life and death is the concept of ‘*Ku*’ (空; *Sunya* in Sanskrit). This concept can be explained as the nature of impermanence of all matter on this earth, which includes human beings too. The other important metaphysical concept is that of ‘*Enki*’ (縁起) which says that all the things which have no fixed matter and no fixed form are continuously changing due to mutual relationship with each other. Thus we can say that ‘*Ku*’ and ‘*Enki*’ are mutually interdependent. And both these basic doctrines explain the meaning of life and death as explained by Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

In Christianity and the Western thought influenced by it, the existence of a human being has been explained by the presence of a fixed personality, which is considered to be a substantial entity and without which the ‘dignity of human’ ceases to exist. In contrast to this, Buddhism originally professes the principles of ‘*Ku*’ (impermanence) and ‘*Muga*’ (無我) (Selflessness). This is a viewpoint which does not acknowledge the existence of a substantial *Atman* which can be called the essence of the self. Moreover according to Buddhist thought all human beings are made up of five elements- materialistic existence, sensations, *sansara* or potential and emotional existence, *Vijnana* or discriminating power, *Samjna* or expressing things which one receives. Further, human beings are nothing more than a combination of four elements namely, earth, water, fire and air. Thus one cannot assume the existence of a substantial thing called personality in human beings.

Therefore the theory put forward by Christian ideology that when body and personality combine, a human being is created does not hold good in Buddhism. Not only that, here even the viewpoint of considering life as something substantial does not exist. It is not that originally the thing called ‘life’ can exist independently being separated from the body, it is also not that life has any kind of concrete shape or form. Life has the existence of ‘*Ku*’ or impermanence. At this point it is very different from the Christian theory which says that the origin of human life was reduced to a concrete ‘thing’ i.e. the breath of god.

It won’t be an exaggeration to say that ‘life’ does not exist in Buddhism. What is there is, just a fact that one human is ‘living’ or else a fact that human exists accompanying life phenomenon. Human beings use the expression that, “there is life” metaphorically for explaining this fact for the time being. Consequently this figure of speech is misleading and this assertion of the existence of life substantially can be said to be deviating from the basic viewpoint of Buddhism. The same thing can be said about ‘death’ too. The word ‘death’ is a figure of speech used for explaining the loss of phenomenon of life from body. Of course there exist different states like a certain person ‘is dying’, ‘dead body’ who has lost the phenomenon of life, or else ‘death’ as a result of medical examination of the body. But as in the case of ‘life’, ‘death’ too cannot have an independent existence away from the body of the human or does not possess a concrete shape.

Thus in Buddhist thinking, both ‘life’ and ‘death’ are not substantial entities which can exist independently. Due to this it is impossible to separate life and death. Rather, life and death are united and it is the continuous process of change in an individual.

### Christianity

Besides *Shintō* and Buddhism, the third religion which has influenced the life of the Japanese is Christianity, which was introduced into Japan in the middle of the sixteenth century. But then during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867) it was proscribed and its adherents were persecuted. Further, during the middle of the nineteenth century, it was reintroduced and has continued to exist in Japan since then.

According to traditional catholic belief, human beings after their death either get redeemed and go to heaven, or get condemned and go to hell. The latter is a place which is purgatory, an intermediate state of purification for those who still have sins to atone before going to heaven. The traditional catholic thought emphasizes on the otherworldliness after death. But reincarnation is not accepted in the traditional catholic doctrine. However, nowadays a lot of research is being done on reincarnation all over the world and therefore in the western world too, the trends of a belief in reincarnation and transmigration of souls are increasing.

<sup>11</sup> 木村文か輝、「生死の仏教学「人間の尊厳」とその応用」、法蔵館発行所、2007年度。B. Kimura, “Buddhist Study of Life and Death- Application to ‘Human Dignity’”, Published by Hōsōkan, 2007.

Ernest Valea, in his paper titled, “Reincarnation – Its meaning and consequences”<sup>12</sup> asserts that the evidence of the belief in reincarnation can be found in the Bible and it was accepted by early church. In the paper a number of Biblical texts which show sufficient proof of this belief have been given and discussed by the author. Secondly, there is also a hypothesis that Bible contained many passages teaching reincarnation in an alleged initial form, but they were suppressed by the clergy at the 5<sup>th</sup> ecumenical council held in Constantinople in the year AD 553. However, there is no proof that such a ‘purification’ of Biblical text has ever occurred. On the other hand, there are other passages in the bible that clearly contradict the idea of reincarnation explicitly or implicitly.

The idea of reincarnation has never been accepted by Christianity because it undermines its basic tenets, compromises God’s sovereignty over creation. Secondly, belief in reincarnation may affect ones understanding of morality and motivation for moral living. Thirdly, reincarnation represents a threat to the very essence of Christianity, the need for Christ’s redemptive sacrifice for our sins.

Irrespective of all these debates, though the major Christian denominations reject the concept of reincarnation, a large number of Christians profess the belief. In a survey by the Pew Forum, in 2009, 24% of American Christians expressed a belief in reincarnation.

In the contemporary times all these three religions are being followed by Japanese in some or the other form. And it will not be an exaggeration to say that there has been a great influence of all these three religions in whatever perception of life and death, the Japanese have today.

## 2. Social Traditions

After talking in details about the religious factors, which influence the perception of life and death, it would be worthwhile to look into the social factors. By social factors here we mean the traditions and the cultural activities carried out in a certain social set-up. The activities influenced by religion are generally traditional activities, i.e. they are being carried out from generations and do not usually change with time. But then there are other activities which are greatly influenced by the changes occurring in the society due to modernization and globalization. These social changes sometimes affect the traditional as well as religious activities. For instance many traditional activities like the marriage ceremonies, funeral services, festivals etc are simplified with passage of time and may finally get totally obliterated. On the other hand, due to the economic development of a country there could be instances when some social activity which might be very simple in the past, gets more and more grand when people desire to flaunt their wealth and prosperity and keep adding on to the bare minimum traditional ceremony. This section attempts to study what influence such social changes have on the perception of life and death in a particular society.

One of the most important social activities related to perception of life and death is the ‘funeral services’ held after the death of an individual. If we look particularly in Japan, nothing much can be said about the method of cremations in the pre-historic times due to lack of written records. But there is archaeological evidence that even in those days at the time of burial there used to be some kind of funeral services. The discovery of ‘*Haniwa*’ (埴輪)<sup>13</sup> and other decorative items in the graves during *Yayoi* Period (弥生時代; 300BC to 300AD) and periods after that are suggestive of such funeral services. *Kofun* Period (古墳時代; 300AD to 552AD), was characteristic in having large sized graves called, ‘*Kofun*’ which were only for kings and Nobles. In the beginning the King’s followers, vassals and other loved ones were buried along with them which was later replaced by *haniwa*. The common people had jar shaped coffins where they were buried. Though we don’t have much evidence, but even during that period, some kind of funeral services were held.

Before the World War II, Japanese used to bury the bodies of the dead, so everyone needed to have a separate grave, but after the war, with so many people dying, and shortage of space, it became difficult for each individual to have a separate grave, so the bodies started being incinerated and the ashes were collected into an urn and buried into the family grave. Thus each family had one grave where the ashes of all members were buried. But gradually this too started changing as the size of the families started reducing and people felt that they need not have a family grave; consequently they started taking graves on rent.

Further with urbanization, and migration of people towards big cities, the desire of the older generation, to be buried in their own hometown, too started fading and in present times, there are a number of old people who prefer to be buried near the place where they and their children are living rather than to be buried in their remote home town where their children would be unable to go periodically to pay their respect.

Further, besides religion and social traditions, folklores and legends too affect the perception of life and death. In Japan the pioneer in folklore studies, Yanagita Kunio, and his follower, Origuchi Nobuo, both

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Valea, “Reincarnation-Its Meaning and Consequences”  
[www.inplainsite.org/html/reincarnarion\\_world\\_religions.html](http://www.inplainsite.org/html/reincarnarion_world_religions.html)

<sup>13</sup> The haniwa are terracotta clay figures which were made for ritual use and buried with the dead as funerary objects during the *Kōfun* Period.

perceived that owing to folklore studies the roots of spiritual value of Japanese can be found. Yanagita Kunio through his folklore studies reached at a conclusion that the world of the dead is very close to the world of the living and the dead can come back in this world again, so this is a cycle which is repeated. He also asserts the existence of the two worlds coexisting- *Utsushi-yo* (the shifting world, i.e. this world where people keep coming and going) and the *Kakuri-yo* (the hidden world or the world of the dead.)

In contrast to this Miyazawa Kenji, believed that the dead move on to some remote land, the country of the dead, which is also the world of light, here the soul is emancipated from all the sufferings one has to bear in this world, which is said to be the world of dim light. Through his stories Miyazawa has tried to create his own kind of perception of life and death and he influences the modern reader too who in spite of not believing in any of the religious doctrines may develop some kind of perception towards life and death.<sup>14</sup>

### III. Historical Development of the Perception of Life and Death in Japan

In the previous section the factors which are responsible for developing the perceptions towards life and death particularly in Japan have been dealt with. Now keeping these factors in view, and based on specific historical facts an attempt to trace out chronologically the perception that the Japanese people had towards life and death can be made.

Due to lack of any written records in the pre-historic period, the perception about life and death of the people of that period cannot be traced back. The earliest record we have is of the period during the formation of the nation state of Japan, the *Yamato*<sup>15</sup> state. (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) During this period, the conflict for power among the nobles of various regions resulted in the formation of political power in the *Yamato* state. This was the period when Buddhism had not entered Japan and the only form of belief was *Shintō*, thus it was a period of nature worship, i.e. God was seen in all forms of nature, death was considered to be impure, therefore had to be followed by a purification ceremony. Till today there exists in the minds of the Japanese, a love for nature and hatred for mourning at the time of death and a spirit for purification.

Around 538 AD along with Buddhism, other forms of belief, like Taoism, Confucianism too were transmitted to Japan from China. Despite various disputes regarding worship of Buddha, under the reign of *Shōtoku Taishi* (574-622)<sup>16</sup>, Buddhism was adopted. Thus it can be said that with the arrival of Buddhism and its ideologies, the perception towards death and after-life too was influenced. Another evidence in support of the belief in after-life is burying of '*Haniwa*' or clay dolls and other items of need along with the dead during the *Kōfun* period. In fact initially vassals or followers were buried alive along with chieftains and nobles, so that they do not feel lonely and have people to serve them in the other world too. But later these were replaced by *haniwa*. Thus it can be surmised that death was not considered to be the ultimate end during this period.

During Nara period (710-794AD) and Heian period (794-1185AD) there was coexistence of both Buddhism and *Shintō*. But the influence of Buddhism was quite strong and its superiority was becoming conspicuous. There was a strong belief in the theory of *Honji-Suijaku* (本字垂迹), according to which Indian Buddhist deities choose to appear in Japan as native '*Kami*' (神) to save the Japanese. In early Nara period, *Honji* was considered more important and only later did the two come to be regarded as equals. This theory was pervasive and influential in harmonization of Buddhist deities and Japanese *kami*. During these periods and the following periods (Kamakura; 1185-1333 and Muromachi; 1333-1568) which can also be called the age of samurai, the spread of Buddhism in various forms was remarkable. In 1052AD there was penetration of the *Jōdo* (浄土) sect, when seven brilliant young priests descended from *Hiei* Mountain and propagated Buddhism amongst the masses. It was an exceptional period when Buddhism moved away from the difficult *Tendai* (天台)<sup>17</sup> doctrines and was caught on to the hearts of common people. (Kamakura Buddhism) The influence on the perception of life and death was the deep belief in the existence of *Jōdo* or pure land,<sup>18</sup> which was thought to

<sup>14</sup> 島菌進、「日本人の死生観を読む—明治武士道から「おくりびと」へ」、朝日新聞出版、2012年。Shimazono Susumu, "Studying the perception of life and death of Japanese- From Meiji- Path of the warriors to Departures", Asahi Shinbun Publ, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> *Yamato* is the ancient name of Japan.

<sup>16</sup> Prince Shōtoku was a semi-legendary regent and a politician of the Asuka period in Japan, who served under Empress Suikō. He was the son of Emperor Yōmei; his parents were relatives of the ruling Sōga clan. He was credited with promulgation of a seventeenth article constitution.

<sup>17</sup> *Tendai* Buddhism has several philosophical insights which allow for the reconciliation of Buddhist doctrines with aspects of Japanese culture such as *Shintō* and traditional aesthetics. It is rooted in the idea, fundamental to Mahayana Buddhism, that Buddha hood, the capability to attain enlightenment is intrinsic in all things. For *Tendai*, ultimate expression of *Dharma* is the lotus sutra.

<sup>18</sup> *Jōdōshū* (The Pure land school) is a branch of Buddhism derived from the teachings of the Japanese ex-*Tendai* monk, Hōnen. It was established in 1175 and is most widely practiced branch of Buddhism. *Jōdōshū* is

be the destination of humans after death. The Zen (禅)<sup>19</sup> sects of Dōgen (道元)<sup>20</sup> and Eisai (栄西)<sup>21</sup> too obtained a lot of believers mainly as Samurai.<sup>22</sup>

In the period of National unification under Ōda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, commonly called the Azuchi Momoyama period (安土桃山; 1593-1596), total segregation of religion and politics was decided to be strongly implemented. This period also witnessed propagation of Christianity, though at a very small scale and that too under concealment as it was oppressed by the shogunate after the Battle of Shimabara (1637). But the spread of Christianity during this period was so limited that it did not have any influence on the perception towards life and death.

Talking about the religious beliefs in the Edo Period (江戸時代; 1600-1868), Buddhism and Confucianism were at their peak, the former being devoted towards ceremonial activities like funerals and administrative works and the latter provided principles for politics.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the earlier periods *Shintō* and Buddhism were segregated from each other. Further, if we restrict ourselves to the perception of life and death, this was the period when the term '*Bushidō*' was coined and the principles of *Bushidō* were actively inculcated into the spirit of samurai. One of the main principles was preparedness for death. Though this was a period of peace, the samurai were ready to give away their own life or take away others lives on slightest provocation. This was the period when literary works like '*Hagakure*'<sup>24</sup>, '*Chūshingura*'<sup>25</sup> and works of Chikamatsu Monzaemon<sup>26</sup> became very popular.

After Meiji restoration, the nation tread towards the path of modernization, with the coming up of new ideologies like development of *Shintō* state, abolition of Buddhism, propaganda of slogans like, '*Fukoku kyōhei*' (富国強兵; enrich the country, strengthen the army) etc, the value system of Edo period was completely discarded. Towards the turn of the century Japan experienced two major wars, (Sino-Japanese war in 1895 and Russo-Japanese war in 1905) and was victorious in both but war always bring about lot of suffering and bloodshed along with it. Due to this there was a surging interest into the life and death issues. It was during this time when scholar and philosopher, Katō Totsudō, coined the term *Shiseikan* (Perception towards life and death) for the first time.

With so many political and social changes taking place in Japan during this time, there was a lot of dissatisfaction and anxiety among people and thus around this time many new religions, known as *Shinshūkyō*

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heavily influenced by the idea of *Mappo* or the age of *dharma* decline. Hōnen, through *Jōdōshū* teachings, sought to provide people a simple Buddhist practice in a degenerate age that anybody could attain enlightenment by devotion towards Amitava as expressed in the Nembutsu. Through Amitava's compassion a being may be reborn in the Pure land, where they can pursue enlightenment more readily.

<sup>19</sup> Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism, originated in China during the sixth century AD, from where it spread to Vietnam, Korea and finally Japan. The word '*Zen*' is derived from a Chinese word, '*Dzhan*' which in turn is derived from a Sanskrit word, '*Dhyana*' which can be approximately translated as 'meditative state'.

<sup>20</sup> Dōgen Zenji (道元禪師) (19Jan, 1200-22 Sept, 1255), was a Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher born in Kyōto. He founded the *Sōtō* school of Zen in Japan after travelling to China and training under Rujing, a master of Chinese Caodong lineage.

<sup>21</sup> Myōan Eisai (明庵栄西) (27May 1141-2July 1215), was a Japanese Buddhist priest, credited with bringing the *Rinzai* school of Zen Buddhism and green tea from China to Japan.

<sup>22</sup> 熊沢一衛、「現代日本人の死生観の形成—仏教の役割と提言」、(Kumazawa Kazue, "Formation of Perception of life and death of a modern Japanese—Role of Buddhism"), library.nakanishi.ac.jp/kiyou/gaidai(37)\01.pdf,p-8. Journal of School of Foreign Languages, Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, (37), 1-23, August, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Tokugawa Yoshinō, shogun of *Owari Han*, was an ardent fan of Confucianism conducted funerals, built graves and mausoleums also in Confucian style.

<sup>24</sup> *Hagakure* (literally meaning hidden by the leaves or hidden leaves) is a practical and spiritual guide for a warrior, drawn from a collection of commentaries by the samurai, Yamamoto Tsunetomo, former retainer to Nabeshima Mitsushige, the third ruler of what is now the Sōga Prefecture in Japan. The book records Tsunetomo's views of *Bushidō*, the warrior code of samurai.

<sup>25</sup> *Chūshingura* is the name for fictionalized accounts of the historical revenge by the forty seven *rōnin* of the death of their master, Asano Naganori, The story has been told in *Kabuki*, *Bunraku*, stage plays, films, novels, television shows and other media. Originally a *jōruri* (puppet) play in eleven acts in the *jidaimono* (history play) style, it was written by Takeda IzumoII, Miyoshi Shōraku and Namiki Shōraku in 1748.

<sup>26</sup> Chikamatsu Monzaemon, whose real name was Sugimori Nobumori, (杉森信盛; 1653-1725) was a Japanese dramatist of *jōruri*, the form of puppet theatre that later came to be known as *Bunraku* and the live actor drama, *kabuki*. His most notable plays deal with double suicides of honor bound lovers.



(新宗教)<sup>27</sup> emerged. One of the most significant one was the *Sōka Gakkai* (創価学会)<sup>28</sup> which arose in 1930. The basis of this sect was the *Nichiren* (日蓮) sect of Buddhism. It added modern pragmatism to the existing ideologies. Some of the other new religious cults were *Risshō Kōseika* (立正佼成会),<sup>29</sup> *Reiyūkai-kei* (霊友会系),<sup>30</sup> and *Hōkakei* (法華系).

All these new religions believed in existentialism i.e. all things have taken birth from 'life' (basic life). All are progenies of one parents and so all are brothers and sisters, this is true not only for human beings but for all living things on this earth. Both *Sōka Gakkai* and *Risshō Kōseikai* believe that the core of cosmos is 'life' and Buddha is the root of this 'life', all living beings came from this root and then got segregated. Thus ultimately all will be united with the 'cosmic life.'

According to this philosophy god created us because he wants us to live happily on earth, and we have to make efforts to make our lives happy by trying to remove our misfortunes. This we can do by emancipating ourselves from the 'Self' and being one with the cosmos. Death is starting afresh and as one has to go only to come back ultimately, so death is not the final destiny and should not be feared. Basically all these new generation religions believe that death is not a problem.

Traditional Buddhism too has the philosophy of transmigration but it is thought that as life on this earth is painful, the ultimate aim of attaining *nirvana* (enlightenment) is to get rid of this cycle of transmigration. But these new religions believe that taking rebirth itself is the biggest joy.

One more change towards the perception of death by the modern generation is the relationship with 'death' and with 'the dead'. People in modern times seem to keep death at a distance. They just perceive about this life earnestly and try to avoid encountering death. The Buddhist and *bushidō* ideals of medieval times lay more emphasis on the thoughts regarding death. This closeness to the dead in the medieval times came because of the closeness to the family and native place. They were more connected to their roots; this concept is breaking in the modern times. A religious organization called *Shūyō Danhō Seikai* (修養団捧誠会) influenced by the *Tenrikyō* (天理教)<sup>31</sup> inculcates a very strong consciousness for closeness to ones birthplace. This closeness also creates a feeling of oneness towards ones ancestors and descendents too. This feeling is considered to be very modern, ecological and universal, as the connection is not only in the horizontal plane but in vertical plane as well. This Japanese vertical connection can be called 'Expansionism.'

#### IV. Development of Life and Death Studies in Japan

The term, '*Shiseigaku*' or 'Life and Death studies' is a recent term and is being used in Japan since last thirty years or so. Initially the Japanese word, '*Shiseigaku*' was used as a translation of the English word, 'Thanatology' which literally means 'study of death.'<sup>32</sup> In Japan, it was Alfons Deekan<sup>33</sup>, who was the pioneer

<sup>27</sup> Japanese theologians classify all religious organizations founded since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as *Shinshūkyō*. Thus; the term refers to a great diversity and a number of organizations. Most of these are influenced by much older traditional religions including *Shintō*, Buddhism and Hinduism.

<sup>28</sup> *Sōka Gakkai*, (literally, value creation society) is a lay Buddhist movement linking more than 12 million people around the world. It is based on *Nichiren's* (13<sup>th</sup> century Japanese Buddhist priest) Lotus Sutra and is the Buddhist movement within the school of *Nichiren* Buddhism. It was founded by educator, Tsunesaburō Makiguchi in 1930.

<sup>29</sup> *Risshōkōseika* was founded by Nikkyō Niwanō and Myōkō Naganuma. Both were members of Buddhist sect, *Reiyūkai-kei*. *Risshōkōseika* places a strong emphasis on studying the Lotus sutra and the Buddha's teachings. They affirmed the basic teachings of Buddhism such as the four noble truths; eight fold path and three seals of law among their core teachings.

<sup>30</sup> *Reiyūkai*, (literally it means spiritual friendship association) is an organization founded in 1920 by Kakutarō Kubō and Kimi Kōtani. It is a lay organization- meaning there are no priests- associated with *Nichiren* Buddhism. *Reiyūkai* considers itself the grandfather of lay based new religions devoted to the lotus sutra and ancestor veneration.

<sup>31</sup> *Tenrikyō* a monotheistic religion originating in revelations to a nineteenth century Japanese woman named Nakayama Miki known as *Oyasama* by followers. The followers of *Tenrikyō* believe that the God, known by several names including *Tenri O no Mikoto*, expressed divine will through Nakayama's role as the shrine of God and to a lesser extent the roles of Honseki Izo Buri and other leaders. *Tenrikyō's* worldly aim is to teach and promote joyous life, which is cultivated through acts of charity and mindfulness called *Hinokishin*.

<sup>32</sup> In Greek, 'thanatos' means death and 'logos' means study, thus Thanatology is the study of death.

<sup>33</sup> Alfons Deekan, born in 1932, is a German philosopher of death studies, a professor emeritus at Sophia University, Tōkyō and a promoter of death studies in Japan. Presently he has retired from his post in the

in establishing life and death studies; he convened a “Seminar on life and death” in 1982. This was the starting point for establishment of life and death studies in Japan and in 1983 the ‘Japanese Association of Death Education and Grief Counselling’ (生と死を考える会) was set up. The association’s three main goals were to promote death education; to improve terminal care in hospitals and develop more hospice programs; and to establish mutual support groups for grieving people who have lost a loved one.<sup>34</sup>

The modern research related to life and death issues can be mainly segregated into two types, first being the research regarding the structure of the perception of life and death and the second is the criteria used for measuring psychology related to death. When we talk about the structure of the perception of life and death we are mainly concerned with the attitude towards death. Hirai Ya (平井他), who developed a criterion for measuring the perception towards life and death, infers that there are three main structural elements. 1) World after death. 2) Fear and anxiety regarding death. 3) Death as emancipation. Tange, (丹下) has tried to investigate the structure of perception towards life and death by classifying words associated with death according to the KJ method<sup>35</sup>. As a result of this research what is obtained is, firstly concrete types of death, secondly emotional reactions towards death based on culture and belief. The words which are associated with concrete death types are accident, calamity, happening, suicide etc which are external causes of death. This reflects that rather than focusing on the internal causes of death more weight age is given to these external causes which is given a lot of media hype too. Further regarding the emotional reaction towards death despite the fact that most of the reactions are negative, presence of some percentage of positive attitudes too cannot be denied and this according to Tange should be encouraged.

Then there is a study which attempts to clarify the structure of perception towards life and death of a particular generation. For instance in 1996, Kawa I. carried out research on finding out the old people’s attitude towards death and found out that compared to various other countries, the elderly in Japan are more scared or anxious about death. Rather than death itself, they are more anxious about the pain caused at the time of death. Further, he also investigated that rather than assessing the world after death positively, they have a tendency of accepting death as an avoidance of this world.

Similarly, Tange (1999, 2004) and Nakamura (1994) carried out independent researches on the attitudes of children and adolescents towards life and death. Nakamura interviewed about 205 children of the age group 3-13, both boys and girls. The conclusions he reached by their responses were, that the children in their infancy are indifferent towards life and death, they are not even aware of the difference between reality and fiction. Then in their early childhood, i.e. toddler stage they start understanding the universality and irreversibility of death and they start fantasizing and imagining about life after death. As they keep growing older, their ideas about the concept of rebirth increase and become conspicuous. Tange, on the other hand carried out most of his research on adolescents in their early and late stages. According to his findings in the middle and late adolescence there is a change in the attitude towards life and death, as along with a positivity towards death there develops a certain amount of negativity towards life. This according to Tange is a characteristic of adolescence, which during later stages of adulthood reaches its final stage when attitude towards both life and death becomes positive.

Further, there is a research which investigates the perception towards life and death of a particular group of people. Most commonly studied group is nurses and nursing students, medical and Para-medical professionals. Most of these studies reveal that in spite of being exposed to death and sufferings all the time these professionals too are not immune to it and think quite emotionally about death, after-life and rebirth issues. (Watanabe, 2001; Shinmi, 2002; Ōyama, 2003)

Finally there has been research work which deals with the relation between perception of life and death and other psychological elements. Takui (2001) tried to analyze the perception of life and death of contemporary Japan by finding out a relationship between modern man’s image of death as received by mass media and the historical change of Japanese society and social structure. Similarly Nakamura (2001) positioned people’s perception of life and death as a factor influencing their psychological sense of well-being and investigated what kind of influence it has on one’s way of life. As a result he found out that denial of religious acts is a factor

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University but is still actively delivering lectures in life and death studies and is also the chairman Japanese association of death education and grief counseling.

<sup>34</sup> Eriko Arita, “Priest Philosopher makes death his life’s work”, in *The Japan Times*, online, 4 September, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> The affinity diagram is a business tool used to organize ideas and data. It is one of the seven management and planning tools. The tool is commonly used within project management and allows large numbers of ideas stemming from brainstorming to be sorted into groups based on their natural relationships for review and analysis. It is also frequently used in contextual inquiry as a way to organize notes and insights from field interviews. The term affinity diagram was devised by Kiwakita Jirō in 1960; therefore it is called KJ method.

which keeps a person away from a life style which is colorful, cooperative and full of effort. And having a positive image of life as well as death increases one's consciousness of well-being.<sup>36</sup>

While carrying out research on psychology related to death and perception towards life and death, for grasping its structure (formation) furthermore for grasping various factors which influence its changes and procedures, till now a large number of criteria (yardstick) have been created. As the criteria used for measuring death psychology, firstly Templar's DAS (1970)<sup>37</sup> which focuses on emotions, and secondly, Wong's Death Attitude Profile- revised(DAP-R)<sup>38</sup> which deals not only with emotions but also with acceptance( activities or acknowledgement ) of death, are being used all over the world and are now also being used in Japan.

Templar's DAS is a criterion which is used to measure fear or anxiety of death and it can be said that it focuses on the negative aspects of the psychology. If we talk about the Wong's DAP-R, it does not only have a single aspect of fear or anxiety of death, but has specific characteristics of grasping from four aspects- 1) Approach oriented death acceptance. 2) Fear of death. 3) Escape oriented death acceptance. 4) Neutral death acceptance. But one cannot deny the fact that provisions in such aspects like death acceptance are restricted within a particular religious backdrop (e.g. Christianity). Thus as a criteria for measuring the death psychology of Japanese people, it might seem a bit biased. To overcome this problem there are methods like DAS, DAP which have been specifically revised for usage by Japanese. Another criterion which tries to grasp the multi-dimensionality of the perception towards life and death peculiar to Japan is Tange's criteria. Besides this there were also criteria formed by Hirai and Sakaguchi (2000), Fujimoto and Honda (2003).

If we make a general view of the existing criteria, we can say that the movement of viewing death in a multi-faceted way continued. Even if we consider from the education point of view, not only heeding to the negative feelings regarding death like fear and anxiety, it is also necessary to grasp the multi-faceted dimension of the psychology regarding death and it is natural to see such kind of change in the criteria.

Besides the two points regarding life and death studies mentioned above, i.e. the structural aspect, and the criteria for measuring perception of life and death, one more aspect which was considered to be very essential at this point of time was nurturing of the perception towards life and death. For this it was considered that one has to pay a lot of attention as to what kind of education is provided to the children so that they nurture their own perception towards life and death, which makes them think about living and dying, about how to live to ones best till the end, as all of us have to face death one day.

Following this awareness of the importance of life and death studies, in Japan since 1980 starting with medical and nursing science, religion studies etc, death education too is being imparted. But in recent years death education is not only a part of life long education or adult education, some educationists are also trying to experiment with starting such education at the school level also.<sup>39</sup>Till 1980s firstly, people of only a limited group- old or terminally ill people, people concerned with the medical profession like nurses and doctors- were considered to be the main objects of such life and death studies. Secondly only the negative aspects of death were focused upon. But then scholars like Deekan asserted upon the necessity of grasping the multi-faceted aspect of death. Thus in the recent years not only the nomenclature has been changed with the word, 'life' being added to it, but also it is being imparted with positivity.

## V. Conclusion

Death which is the ultimate truth of all living beings has been perceived differently in different periods of time, by different populations in different parts of the world. There have been various factors which affect the perceptions towards life and death. If in the past religion and traditional rituals were the main factors which

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<sup>36</sup>海老根理絵、「死生観に関する研究の概観と展望」, Ebine Rie, "A view and outline of research related to perception of life and death" The graduate school of Education, University of Tōkyō, 2009, Repository.de.itc.u.tokyo.ac.jp\edu\_48\_17pdf.

<sup>37</sup> Templar's Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) is a fifteen item scale which has been most frequently used to measure death anxiety. The DAS is shown to be based on a two factor model of death anxiety that includes psychological (internal) and life-experience (external) factors related to death.

<sup>38</sup> Paul T.P. Wong's work on meaning management theory indicates that human reactions to death are complex, multi-faceted and dynamic. His DAP identifies three types of death acceptances as neutral, approach and escape acceptances. Apart from acceptances, his work also represents different aspects of the meaning of death. The ten meanings he proposes are finality, uncertainty, annihilation, ultimate loss, life-flow disruption, leaving the loved ones, pain and loneliness, prematurity and violence of death, failure of work completion and judgment and retribution centered.

<sup>39</sup>海老根理絵、「死生観に関する研究の概観と展望」, Ebine Rie, "A view and outline of research related to perception of life and death" The graduate school of Education, University of Tōkyō, 2009, Repository.de.itc.u.tokyo.ac.jp\edu\_48\_17pdf.

influenced people's perceptions, with the modernization and scientific advancement on the one hand the influence of religion became lesser but at the same time science too has attributed to the development of life and death studies.

Whether it was the ancient and medieval ages when people were greatly influenced by religious and traditional values or in the contemporary period when it is science and technology which reign over the reasoning powers of an individual, it can be said that as far as perceptions towards life and death are concerned, there are three main perceptions towards death. The first perception holds that death is the ultimate end when there is complete annihilation of the being. This thinking is in conformation with the ancient Japanese religion-*Shintō* thought. The believers of this perception consider this world to be the only world and this life to be the only truth; they feel that there is nothing beyond death.

As an anti thesis of this belief is the perception that there is life beyond death too. This belief can be further classified into two, first one is the existence of afterlife in the form of another world where people go after death and the second is the belief of reincarnation according to which at the time of death it is only the body which dies, the consciousness which can be called the soul or the spirit continues to live and takes birth again in this world. If we talk about the religions which support these beliefs Christianity believes in the former and Hinduism and Buddhism in the latter.

Another factor regarding the perceptions towards life and death is the acceptability of the truth of death. How naturally and with ease an individual accepts the death- of oneself and others. The readiness with which we accept death depends upon how subjectively or objectively we look at the concept. Death of a stranger is quite easily acceptable, whereas death of an acquaintance is accepted with difficulty; more intimate the relation more difficult is the acceptance. Finally when one thinks of one's own death, even though we know about the inevitability of the fact, it seems to be a remote possibility, unless one terminally ill or very old.

Further, there are a number of emotions related to death. When one is facing death, whether it is one's own death or death of one's close relative, he can feel such emotions as fear, anxiety, sorrow, loneliness and others. How one is able manage all these emotions determine whether his attitude towards death is positive or negative. Till the medieval period it was the religion and traditional rituals which helped man face death and console him in his bereavement. In the contemporary world, when man is moving away from religion it is the endeavor of the life and death studies to help man tackle such problems.

When we specifically talk about Japan, both the dominant religions, *Shintō* and Buddhism have been instrumental towards influencing the perception towards life and death. Further there have also been a few traditional rituals and customs which affected people's perspectives. But it can be said that without any one dominant ideology towards this aspect, the Japanese do not have a very rigid or fixed idea about how they see life after death. Particularly in the present age when major part of the population comes under non believers, religion does not play a major role in these perceptions. It can be said that dominant factor affecting the perception towards life and death of the Japanese is modern science and technology on the one hand and western influence on the other.

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