“Ghosts, Spirituality and Healing in Post-Fukushima Literature: Yoshimoto Banana’s Bibliotherapy for National Recovery”

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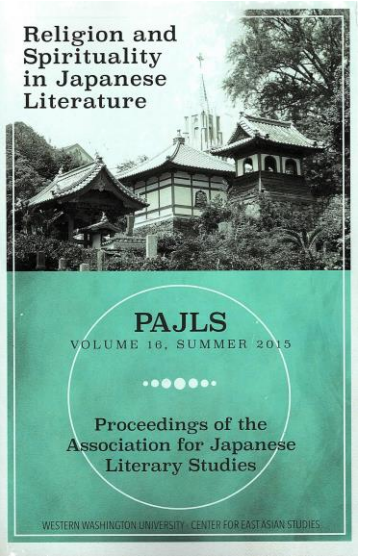

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Ghosts, Spirituality and Healing in Post-Fukushima Literature: Yoshimoto Banana's Bibliotherapy for National Recovery[1]

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The subjects: the meaning of life, religion and spirituality in Japan's contemporary culture and in contemporary Japanese literature

Since the consumption-orientated 1980s, a decade apparently suffering more and more from a lack of "meaning," there has been talk in the Japanese media of a self-determined death and of an authentic life with the use of the terms *shisei-kan* (notions of life and death), *jibun-shi* (dying your own way) and *tōbyōki* (illness diary).[2] Within the framework of a widespread Japanese debate on identity and orientation, which is still coming to a head after the "bursting of the economic bubble" (*baburu no hōkai*) and the period of the late 1990s before the end of the old century (*seikimatsu*), one also comes across the terms "other world," *ikai,* "comfort and healing," *iyashi*, and "way of life," *ikikata*.[3]

The discussions about mortality, meaning and the purpose of human existence are key elements of this significant, self-reflective, cultural discourse, as it is characteristic of contemporary Japanese society; the discussions are further fed by the current of the Japanese new age (*seishin sekai*)[4] and from

[1] The article will be published in German in Klaus Antoni and Birgit Staemmler (2016): *Geburt und Tod – Werden und Vergehen*. Lit Verlag (= Band 25 der Tübinger Bunka/Wenhua Reihe).

[2] See the article by Ulrike Wöhr (1997).

[3] The term *ikai* as the imagined "other world," which is yearned for and inhabited by native beings, *iyashi* (comfort and healing), as well as *ikikata* ("way of life"/ *ikikata no hon* = "instructions for leading a good life" in the popular self-help literature) are mentioned in the short articles in the literature and culture encyclopedia *Yomitai!* See *Yomitai!* (2012: 212, 213, 214).

[4] On the Japanese new age and a contemporary understanding of "spirituality," see the fundamental studies by Shimazono Susumu (for example 1992, 1993, 1996 and 2012) as well as Prohl (2000) and Gebhardt (2001). In these works, terms such as supernatural, psychic, magical, occult, paranormal, etc., are discussed.

experiences of destruction and threat in modern history. Among the recent tragic events are the Kōbe earthquake on 17 February 1995, the terrorist attack by the neo-religious community Aum Shinrikyō on 20 March 1995, and the three-fold catastrophe of 11 March 2011, the earthquake and tsunami which led to the reactor accident in Fukushima, the second worst such incident in world history.

Traced, framed and supported by "media intellectuals" (*bunkajin*),[5] the literati, philosophers, religious specialists, and critics as well as the so-called copywriters,[6] the discourse on death and authentic life as a trendy topic in the Japanese media and print media could be considered "lifestyle design" as a whole – in the sense of patterns of thinking, worldviews and ways of life which are presented in the media and are politically desirable. These can then often be observed in everyday life and can be interpreted as an expression of individual identity.

While the modern understanding of religion in Japan is complex and depends on the context, and while a myriad of "free floating" religious notions exist in the country,[7] it is important to keep in mind that assumptions regarding lifestyle held in the consumer and media society as well as the identity discourse of the nationally conscious Japanese elite must be taken into account when trying to define a contemporary "Japanese religiousness" or "spirituality."

In this context, therefore, "religion" constitutes not the quantifiable, sociological factor of the followers of a religious community, nor the philological interpretation of pre-modern texts, issues of interest in the social sciences and the history of ideas, but rather a flexible policy in cooperation with established institutions, new religious communities as well as explanations of religion that circulate in the media; among the latter we can include articles by the writing elite that can be identified as strategies for becoming more self-assertive, publishers who deal with the topic "spiritual consulting," new age

[5] "Media intellectuals" (*bunkajin*) is a pejorative term for the position of the public opinion-makers, who measure their remarks primarily based on what they can bring them in terms of public appeal and financial gain. Looked upon in an even worse light are the "patronized scholars" (*goyōgakusha*), who often support dubious ideas in exchange for payment.

[6] On a new generation of culture critics, see Gebhardt (2012a: 374). These are media specialists, "PR-pros," spin doctors, who dominate the social and cultural discourses of Japan.

[7] For an overview of the manifestations of "religion" in contemporary Japanese culture, see the compendium *Handbook of Contemporary Religions* (2012), edited by Prohl and Nelson.

tracts, or esoteric literature and writings by a variety of religious leaders. Also contributing to the formation of religiosity are political interests, or "cultural diplomatic" ambitions.

As mentioned earlier, a religiously coded "lifestyle design" could be observed in Japan, particularly starting from the 1980s. At the present time, which means following the events of Fukushima, there is an effort to look towards "rebuilding" (*fukkō*) and new prospects for the future or towards "hope" (*kibō*) for the country. It is especially the copywriters, the advertising agencies and the PR specialists who are currently trying to improve Japan's values, its spiritual orientation and its image around the world. They do this perhaps with special attention to the Olympic Games in 2020, but more generally to meet the needs which arose following Fukushima for comfort and words which will make it possible to comprehend the unfathomable proportions of the three-fold catastrophe of "3/11."[8]

This article on "Ghosts, Spirituality and Healing in Post-Fukushima Literature; Yoshimoto Banana's Bibliotherapy for National Recovery" seeks to prove the "spiritually"-filled bibliotherapeutic aspirations of Japanese authors, based on the example of Yoshimoto's "Sweet Hereafter."

Yoshimoto Banana published this story in November 2011 as her contribution to post-Fukushima literature. The thin volume tells the story of an automobile accident in which a young woman, Ishiyama Sayoko, is severely injured and her fiancé Yōichi, a gifted sculptor, killed. Immediately after the accident, the female protagonist feels alienated from life, having in the first phase presumably undergone a near-death experience. In several dreams she meets her dead grandfather and a beloved dog from her days in kindergarten, so that the next world appears to her as a beautiful place, where there is only peace

[8] This "task" for Japanese authors is formulated by, for example, Saegusa Ryōsuke in an essay published in German in the *Fischer Rundschau* (Saegusa 2012). The most important voices of the literary world in the post-Fukushima era are primarily: Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935), Ikezawa Natsuki (b. 1945), Takahashi Gen'ichirō (b. 1951), Kawakami Hiromi (b. 1958), Tawada Yōko (b. 1960) and Shigematsu Kiyoshi (b. 1963); representatives of the region of North-East Japan are Gen'yū Sōkyū (b. 1956; Miharu-machi / Fukushima), Wagō Ryōichi (b. 1968; Fukushima-shi / Fukushima), Furukawa Hideo (b. 1966; Kōriyama-shi / Fukushima), Henmi Yō (b. 1944; Ishinomaki / Miyagi) and Saeki Kazumi (b. 1959 / Sendai). Kakuta Mitsuyo (b. 1967), Abe Kazushige (b. 1968), Kanehara Hitomi (b. 1983) and Sakurai Ami also contributed to debates. In addition, interesting contributions come from Yū Miri (b. 1968), a well-known author of Japanese-Korean heritage.

and comfort. When she leaves hospital, she is even seeing ghosts in her daily "reality." In talking with the bar-owner Shingaki-san from Okinawa, she begins to unravel the mystery of her affinity to the next world, and when Shingaki reveals his own psychic inclinations, she no longer regards this as her personal stigma. In the end, the protagonist gains strength from her liminal experience. The text constructs a life-death continuum and a form of conviviality of the living and the dead, which is able to put the experienced loss into another perspective. Thus cured from her trauma, Yoshimoto's protagonist evidently functions as a figure of identification for the reader, who may find "comfort and healing" (*iyashi*) by reading the novel.

The hypothesis of this paper is that relatively quickly after the three-fold catastrophe, Yoshimoto succeeded in meeting the national demand for solace from the arts, offering up a way of working through the events which allowed for easy emotional identification. The narrative of "Sweet Hereafter" is, however, not about "Fukushima" itself, but about a car accident. I suggest that in this way Yoshimoto has avoided the risk of upsetting those affected by the reality of the disaster itself or of touching on sore points, such as the responsibility related to the reactor at the nuclear power plant Fukushima 1.

The foundation of the analysis is new insights in the field of Religious Studies (Shimazono), based on contemporary cultural science considerations of the literary representations of "Fukushima."[9] The question raised is which position the author Yoshimoto Banana (b. 1964) takes, and conveys through her protagonists, in relation to the death of a loved one; [10] that is to say, which notions of the hereafter and visions of life with and after death does she conceptualise? How does she portray people's interaction with the "hereafter"? How does she characterise a worthwhile approach to life and death? What distinguishes her concept? Is this characteristic of contemporary Japanese thinking about "being and ceasing to be"?

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[9] An overview of the positions that different authors take in their early remarks on "Fukushima" is provided by Gebhardt (2012 and 2012a); the articles describe an ambivalence in the attitudes between protest and attempts to provide comfort.

[10] Yoshimoto Banana 吉本 ばなな, actually Yoshimoto Mahoko 吉本 真秀子, is the daughter of the philosopher and critic Yoshimoto Takaaki 吉本隆明 (1924-2012); with her first texts Yoshimoto became a major figure in the category of so-called Japanese post-modern and, along with Murakami Haruki, revolutionized the literary scene in the 1980s in Japan.

The following are key concepts in the classification of Yoshimoto's text and her point of view as an author,[11] as can be derived from statements in interviews and from essays: the Japanese new age (*seishin sekai*),[12] comfort and healing (*iyashi*), bibliotherapy, psychoeducation, counselling (motto: "courage to live"), self-help books (*ikikata no hon*), national narrative and "spiritual" lifestyle design in the post-Fukushima era.

To characterise the perspective of the analysis once again, it should be noted that the following considerations assume an author-centric starting position; they place their focus on the position of the author as an actor in the sociocultural reality of Japanese culture and media operations. The "position" is expressed, so it is assumed, through the choice of terms – that means in the linguistic formulations, in the horizon of allusions and in the agenda which can be read. As a result, the text – together with the personal commentary of the actor (interviews, *taidan* roundtables, author profiles, epilogues among other things) – is interpreted as a diagnosis of the times. Primarily, the intention is to make the text understandable in its argumentative inner logic as an initial outline of meaning or world order so as to relate the text to the identity discourse which has developed in Japan following "Fukushima."

Yoshimoto Banana's concepts of the hereafter in the context of the Japanese "spiritual world"

Already before "Fukushima" the author, whose "esoteric" and "occult" interests stem from the *zeitgeist* of the 1980s, was well-known for enjoying exchanges with representatives of the "spiritual world" and also for possessing an affinity to the new age, the esoteric and the occult,[13] both in her work and in her

[11] The testimonies from the so-called "roundtables" (*taidan*), in interviews and in essays are barely paid attention to in Japan-related studies, although here the "position" (publically presented agenda) of a writer can be well- understood, independent of the whole picture of all comments made by the actors. Admittedly, there still remains a conscious or unconscious, undisclosed element of the performative which gives rise to justified doubt concerning the authenticity of the opinions expressed.

[12] On the Japanese new age, on the new spiritual movements (*shinreisei undō*), as well as on the "spiritual intellectuals" (*reiseiteki chishikijin*), see Shimazono, Prohl (2000) and Gebhardt (2001).

[13] On the attempt to provide a differentiated classification of terms, see Gebhardt (2001).

personal life (Gebhardt 2001: 177 et seq.).[14] Due to the damage to the image of the Japanese new age community because of the terror attack by Aum Shinrikyō in March 1995, Yoshimoto – who was already being criticised as an *okaruto bunkajin* (occult- minded media person)[15] – turned her attention towards the moment of comfort and healing represented by the term *iyashi* 癒し,[16] just as many other authors with similar interests did. It is worth mentioning that the concept has been a great commercial success in Japanese consumer society for a long time; [17] *iyashi* was a trend at the end of the 1990s and has become a central motif used by the advertising industry which one comes across very regularly in the media and in popular culture. In addition, it is a catchphrase of the socio-cultural macro-discourse in Japan and also an attribute of all contemporary Japanese branches of the arts.

In this respect it is no wonder that it was Yoshimoto Banana in particular, as a long-time literary "bibliotherapist," who succeeded in devoting one of the first comprehensive fictive texts to the 3/11 catastrophe. In the story we are at the middle point in the "healing" of a person who is suffering greatly, both physically and mentally. The healing of an injured protagonist is a topic that the author has already dealt with in the novel *Amurita* (1994) in which she tells the story of Sakumi, who learns to overcome the tragic loss of her sister in an accident with the help of people talented in the workings of the occult.

As is the case with Murakami Haruki (b. 1949) in *Nejimaki kuronikuru* (1995; The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle), "Amurita" by Yoshimoto displays a

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[14] Worth mentioning is the conversation with the artist and esoteric-follower Yokoo Tadanori (see Yokoo Tadanori and Yoshimoto Banana 1997).

[15] A critique leveled by the journalist Kimura Tatsuo (1998).

[16] Nakazawa Shin'ichi, well-known as an advocate of "spiritual discourse," states in a dialogue with Yoshifuku Shin'ichi: *"Aum jiken irai, supirituaritī no mondai ni kakawatte ita hitotachi wa, kore wa yabai to omotte 'iyashi' no ho e nigete itta no de, Nihon wa ano ato, iyashi buumu dattan desu"* "Since the Aum incident, the persons who were involved in the problem of spirituality thought this field a too dangerous one, and so they turned to healing. This is why Japan had then a healing boom." (Nakazawa 1999: 239).

[17] A look at the wide range of products which forms part of the *iyashi* offering in the Japanese goods market immediately confirms the assumption. There is a clear penchant for healing products in Japan since approximately the year 2000: From the cuddly bear Tarepanda (produced by San-X since 1998 following the Asian financial crisis; 1999 already saw a turnover of 30 billion Yen); to Asian-style *healing* home furnishings and the numerous beauty treatment counters in department stores; to *healing* music, *healing* gardening and *comfort* toys, the latter given a great deal of attention at the Tokyo Toy Fair 2003.

concentration of esoteric-occult topics. This marks a variation from the topics the author previously handled in a more easy-going fashion such as loneliness, loss, death and spiritual kinship. This does not necessarily benefit the text, which becomes an ambiguous play on associations. In "Amurita," the author loses her earlier artistic ease – which one might associate with the influence of the post-modern – and focuses more strongly, both in terms of content and of the author's intentions, as they can be perceived while reading, on the esoteric and the complex "need for meaning" and "healing." The volume *Naruhodo no taiwa* (2002; Dialogue of 'I see') confirms this tendency, documenting a meeting with Kawai Hayao (1928-2007; see Shimazono 1993), Japan's national psychologist and – alongside Umehara Takeshi (b. 1925) – the most famous of its "spiritual intellectuals." Incidentally, Kawai holds the view that modern Japan lacks a "companion for eternity" (*eien no dōhansha*), i.e., a lack of inner orientation (see Kawanishi 2009: 160).

In his Manga volume *Zetsubō ni kiku kusuri* (Medicine against Despair), the artist and editor Yamada Reiji (b. 1966) shows sketched scenes of encounters with encouraging people (among them Kawai). Yoshimoto is here portrayed as an author who in her role as a literary counsellor (*kaunserā*) devotes herself to fundamental questions: "why am I here?," "why does everyone have to die?" Although she belongs to the sensitive ones who harbour a secret misery and who are different from the masses, now she feels the urgent need to take on the bad situation in contemporary Japan. Yamada quotes the author with the following words: "At the moment everything is Japan is really strange; it can't go on like this" (Yamada 2006: 37).

With an increasing density of the esoteric and the emphasis on the motif of "spiritual healing," it becomes more difficult to regard Yoshimoto's work – for example the works *Karada wa zenbu shitte iru* (2000; My Body Knows Everything), *Ōkoku sono* 1 (2002; Andromeda Heights), *Deddo endo no omoide* (2003; Dead End), *Kanojo ni tsuite* (2008; Her Night) or even *Suīto hiaafutā* (2011; Sweet Hereafter) – as artistic products of a Japanese fantasy (*gensō bungaku*) or of ironic postmodernism. What we see is a turn towards popular new age teachings, particularly in the commentaries or her choice of who she will cooperate with in the framework of her own writing activity.

A very clear relationship to the esoteric milieu and to "spiritual healing" can be seen in a more recent[18] cooperation between Yoshimoto and the American "psychic channeller" (*saikikku chanerā*), William Rainen,[19] who operates in Asia and lives in Hawaii. In 2009, a volume was even published which documented their collaboration – *Chō-supirituaru jigen dorīmu-taimu kara no satoshi* (Lessons from the Dream-time in the hyper-spiritual Dimension), issued by the Tokuma publishing house. In November 2011, Yoshimoto and Rainen published the book *Jinsei wo tsukuru: kansha to ai to kiseki ni michite ikiru tame ni* (To Build One's Life: for living a life filled with thankfulness, love and wonder).

In his self-help books (*ikikata no hon*), Rainen promotes, above all, the pursuit of happiness, "Dream Healing," and a "spiritual" self-optimisation. Even with a rather random internet search one finds evidence of Yoshimoto's connections to the esoteric scene. The author seems to be interested in the seminars by Dr. Eric Pearl, who represents the teaching of "Reconnective Healing."[20]

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[18] Yoshimoto's personal contact with people from the new age scene or with "occult *bunkajin*" can be seen even at the beginning of her career; the author expresses herself in a *taidan* dialogue from 1991 (initially in the women's magazine *Fujin kōron*) to the effect that she had held a "religious occupation" in a previous life (*shūkyō kankei no shigoto*; Gebhardt 2001: 182-184), that she had perhaps been a "monk" (*bōzu*). Such statements can certainly only be interpreted as celebrity-esotericism, as it is known above all in the Anglo-Saxon scene; on the other hand, the statements possibly influence readers and have, as is the case with William Rainen, a publicity effect.

[19] Rainen was born in Massachusetts; date of birth unknown. On his homepage the information about him says: "At a young age William learned to communicate with the spirit world, animals and birds, trees and plants as well as our planet earth. William was licensed to preach by the United Methodist Church and ministered churches in up-state New York. During the years in church work William never stopped his practice of spirit communication. After leaving the Methodist church William and his family moved to Arizona where he studied with The University of Life Church. Native American interests and pre-production with TV commercials and documentaries played a large role in William's life. During the years in Arizona William was ordained a minister of the National Spiritualist Association. While living in Phoenix William co-founded The Universal Life Alliance, a spiritual non-profit organization." See: http://www.williamrainen.com/about/.

[20] Pearl, a former chiropractor and a charismatic person with a relevant "awakening" biography, is an advocate of the so-called Reconnection Healing, a new science method which aims to be recognized as a "mainstream" Energy Healthcare alternative healing practice. For more on the movement and on Pearl, see the homepage (http://www.thereconnection.com/). On the internet a reference to Yoshmoto can be

In August 2010 in the women's magazine *Gracia* she calls once again for the girls of her country "to get happy." Under the headline *Yoshimoto Banana no kōfuku-ron* (Yoshimoto's Discourse on Happiness) she states: *"Saikin no Nihon wa, dōmo iya na kūki ga jūman shite iru. Minna tsukarete iru shi, kibō mo mottenai shi, ittai shiawase dō iu koto?"* "The whole of Japan has been filled with an unpleasant atmosphere lately. Everyone was tired and exhausted, almost no one still had hope – what did happiness actually mean here?" (Yoshimoto 2010: 161).

With the events of Fukushima, the complaints of an unpleasant atmosphere in the country might have become superfluous. While Yoshimoto's dark premonitions turned to the worst case scenario in March 2011, the authors' "mission" – if they chose to accept it – grew to previously unimaginable proportions: it is no less a matter than healing a shocked, traumatised nation.

"Sweet Hereafter" (2011): "spiritual counselling" after "Fukushima"

Yoshimoto's *Suīto hiaafutā* tells the story of a young couple who have a car accident in which the 28-year-old protagonist, Ishiyama Sayoko, is seriously injured while her partner, Yōichi, dies. Yōichi had been a world renowned, talented sculptor with an atelier in Kyōto, and after his death, Sayoko falls into a depression. The despair of the first-person narrator is so intense that, in her damaged spiritual state caused by the accident, she believes that she can see supernatural apparitions. Only gradually is she able to find the strength to continue with her life.

In the afterword (*atogaki*) to the book, the author points out the allegorical connection between the accident described, which includes the loss of a complete life perspective, and the situation in Japan following the earthquake-catastrophe (*daishinsai*): "It may be very, very difficult to understand, but I wrote this text for those people who witnessed the huge earthquake locally or elsewhere, for the living and for the dead, I wrote it for all of them. (Yoshimoto 2011: 156).

Banana admits that she had thought about working as a helper in the catastrophe area because she had felt that a literary commentary would be too superficial. But on the basis of the many positive reactions from readers who felt "saved" (*sukuwareru*) by her novels, she decided to write a text after all. And if

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found: she took part in a seminar: "Banana Yoshimoto is a famous writer in Japan. She has participated in the seminar of Reconnective Healing" (see: http://pin3.matariki.jp/).

even one reader experiences a small amount of relief because of the text, then she would be satisfied with that (*watashi wa ii no desu*; p. 157). At the end of the afterword, very humble and modest, she stresses once again her deep thankfulness towards the readers (*tada, arigataku omoimasu*).

A typical *iyashi*-Text,[21] "Sweet Hereafter" is undoubtedly an expression of Yoshimoto's stated intention of wanting to do something good for people. The text revolves primarily around the topics of hurt and overcoming trauma and thereby develops at its heart a concept of conviviality. But beyond this, we see the following elements of paranormal experience:

- Following the accident, Sayoko has the feeling that she is being sucked into something "white" = first paranormal sensation; a meeting with her deceased grandfather (drives a Harley, used to be a hippy in California), clearly a near-death experience (*rinshi taiken*; Yoshimoto 2011: 18);[22] the hereafter appears in this regard as a "nice place" (*utsukushiii sekai*; p. 11) where there is only peace and security; while speaking to her grandfather she learns that she should continue to be active in the "earthly sphere" (*zokuyo*) in order to "cultivate herself through practising" (*shūgyō suru*; p. 14); her boyfriend, Yōichi, had led a fulfilled life and was able to quickly pass over to the "world beyond" (*atchikawa no sekai*; p.18).
- The dissolution of Yōichi's atelier, an activity which is not "material work" (*kono yo no shigoto dewa nai*, p. 30); the awareness of ghosts (*yūrei*) as coloured or semi-transparent apparitions (p. 37).
- Lessons from Shingaki, a bar-owner from Okinawa, who based on Okinawan notions declares that due to the shock, she has lost her "soul" (*tamashii*), in the Okinawan language *mabui* (p. 35); this hypothesis also explains her affinity to the hereafter, i.e., her strange in-between state following the accident and the reason why she is able to see ghosts. The first she encounters are the mother of Nishikata Ataru, whom she sees sitting in the window of an old house (p. 52), and then

[21] In the article "Sweet Hereafter," Ina Hein discusses the supernatural scenes of the protagonist's recovery in detail and views the connection between the world of the living and the dead, as it is portrayed in the text, as an important argument by the author (Hein 2014).

[22] The popularization of the so-called near-death experience can be traced back to the well-known Swiss/US psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004).

with the son Ataru she gets into conversation. In the end she rents a room in a house which has been condemned to be torn down and lives there in the company of a ghost, among others; at this point Sayoko even mocks her own need to be comforted by a ghost – this must be her end (*yūrei ni iyasareru yō ni nattara oshimai da*; p. 53).

- The revelation of the paranormal skills possessed by the man from Okinawa, Shingaki, whose sister's ghost sits in his bar and is seen by Sayoko. In his own words, Shingaki states that he possesses a measure of the psychic gift and is a seer (*sādaka*); his grandmother had been a shaman (*yuta*; p.147). People from Okinawa, according to the narrator, possess a special, recognised ability to see the other side (p. 149); the bar-owner admits that he sees his deceased fiancée from time to time (p.148); he further explains that this world (*kono yo*) and the other world (*ano yo*) were originally mixed and that in order to maintain an orderly division of the spheres, people must "work for their better self" (*jibun wo migaku*; p. 149) here in the "banal life on earth" (*tsumannai seikatsu no naka de*).
- The realisation that life and death, this world and the other world, form a unit (pp. 149, 64, 54); everything is interrelated = conviviality as a guiding principle and an ideological-spiritual orientation; the acceptance of one's own circumstances in life and "to be able to let go" (without any attachment to your own wishes), accurate judgement, tolerance and thankfulness for the "lovableness" of others.
- The influence of the Japanese and American media/pop-culture: Comparison with the Manga book *Hanada shōnen-shi* (The Story of Young Hanada), created by the illustrator Isshiki Makoto and published between the years 1993 and 1995; after an injury to his head during an accident, the boy, Hanada Ichirō, is suddenly able to communicate with supernatural beings. John Carpenter's horror film *Prince of Darkness* (1987; Japanese: *Paradaimu,* 1988) is also mentioned, the second part of his apocalyptic trilogy in which the protagonist always has the same recurring dream that supposedly acts as a warning of the return of evil. The idea of being aware of a ghost as an everyday occurrence or living

together with one also brings to mind more recent TV series like *Ghost Whisperer* (2005-2010) or *Being Human* (2011-2014).[23]

– The narrative of loss and "spiritual experience" is framed by elements from established Japanese religion or from everyday religious culture with direct use of vocabulary: *ohaka* (grave), *butsudan* (Buddha altar, p. 19), *jobutsu* (salvation; p. 379) and *shinja* (Shintō shrine; p.132).

Yoshimoto's significant supernatural, "spiritual" levels stretch across at least seven fields: the beautiful dream world in which after death one meets loved ones (1), the "spiritual world" of Okinawa as an "ethno-esoteric" zone (2), the world of ghosts which linger on earth (3), the world as a spiritual zone in which life and death exist as a unit and at the same time which defines the world "as a place of 'spiritual optimisation'" for people (4), Japan's religious culture and its everyday practice drawing on both Buddhism and Shintō (5), artistic representations of the religious such as the Manga mentioned above (6), and finally the religious-spiritual level, which the subject experiences in their state of emergency ("experienced religion") and is interpreted as something which holds meaning and thereby offers solace in part through interactions with a similar kind of people (7).

In "Sweet Hereafter," Ishiyama Sayoko does indeed experience a self-optimisation through the sorrow which befalls her and through her experiences following Yōichi's death. Firstly, she outgrows her role as a conformist woman, to which she had submitted in part at least to play the female role for her partner. Having reached her spiritual and physical limits, and no longer wanting to please anyone, she behaves more naturally and less constrained; thereby, Sayoko comes to the positive conclusion that she appears more attractive to others (p. 124). Secondly, she gradually comes to recognise the advantages of a completely new start in life. After the first year of grief she feels the "wind of freedom" (*jiyū no kaze*; p. 87). She appreciates the fact that she can make herself comfortable in her own flat and can decide everything herself. In the end, she has changed: she is more mature, stronger, and thereby more independent, just as she had found desirable (*motto tsuyoi jibun ni kawaretara*; p. 81).

From a literary point of view, "Sweet Hereafter" is a routinely written Banana text which holds no aesthetic or narrative surprises. The author's "philosophy" is also not new, but rather a continuation of the "spiritual" style.

[23] Apart from that there is also the film *Hereafter* (2010) by Clint Eastwood.

From the "spiritual" mission to the national narrative

Hallmarks of this "spiritual" style are the numerous references to common esoteric knowledge as it spread across the world from the 1960s to the 1990s. Central to this thought is the principle of conviviality, which the religious scholar Shimazono Susumu denotes as "spirituality of connectedness" in his recent article, "The Rise of the New Spirituality," using the example of Yamao Sansei (1938- 2001) (Shimazono 2012: 465 et seq.). The term "conviviality" lends itself to Yoshimoto's case, because aside from describing the other-worldly experiences of her protagonist, the author concentrates her essential arguments on the passages which speak of Sayoko's maturity and its association with the ideal of the collective. This implies that Yoshimoto celebrates the connection of the beings which were called temporarily into life as a community with a common destiny, but with individual consciousness, and on whom it depends to maintain the cosmic order. "Life" is almost a magical obligation that you (like it or not) must complete together with the other beings who are in existence at the same time, as long as you are present in the actual earthly sphere: The principle of conviviality ultimately requires a type of "positive herd behaviour" with which life can be led – a sort of dance to a pre-determined pattern. This interdependence demands that an empty spot is filled again in order to preserve the "right," stabilising structure – for this reason Sayoko shifts into the life of Shingaki, the Okinawan.

Ultimately, "Sweet Hereafter" is not a text which is primarily about near death experiences and eerie ghostly figures. Organized in the style of a learning exercise, it is rather created to show the path towards knowledge which the protagonist takes; the protagonist who in the beginning led a "too happy" life with her high-class fiancé (*shiawase-sugita*; p. 48). On the one hand, life had restricted Sayoko's personality. On the other hand, according to Yoshimoto's message, she had not been "spiritually" challenged enough – she had had to tread the difficult path to make spiritual advancements. From a nice girl, and a well-regarded daughter-in-law, Sayoko changes in the course of two years into a self-confident woman who, against all odds, learns to accept life with all its visible and invisible scars and contributes her part for the greater good of the community, beyond a mere couple relationship.

The "spiritual" maturing described by Yoshimoto in this story does not, however, take place in an individual way, but rather involves the collective. If we evaluate this as a point of view which only allows for happiness in collectivist harmony, tolerance and truly-lived conviviality, "Sweet Hereafter"

appears as an edifying instruction manual on "correct behaviour." The behaviour is, however, less that of the ego-centric new age spirituality ascribed to the West, than the "broad generosity" (in Chinese, *kuanrong*) of the Confucian tradition, which could also be understood as the – admittedly naïve "spiritually" enriched– Confucian model of the nation as family.

A somehow more conservative, moralising air arises if you read in the text that Sayoko, who used to work as a waitress, turns her back on the relatively elite, internationally active artistic circle in Kyōto, in order to find her way back to the milieu of the small restaurants and bars (*izakaya*) of lower city (*shitamachi*) Tōkyō. With the character Sayoko, who disengages from an ideal couple relationship, the author argues on an allegorical level that the exalted, avant-garde art (p. 27) which is exported abroad and often only known abroad, is a type of "art for art's sake" with which ordinary Japanese are not necessarily acquainted. In this reading, the idea of supporting one of the country's bar owners is better than spending her life at the side of an artist who makes strange objects. For the general population, the bar owner provides a secure, almost uterine space where one can submerge oneself in the nostalgia-filled past, forget one's worries, have relaxed conversations, and perhaps find new friends.

The use of metaphor characterises an avoidance of the phallic imagined art (the bars bored through Sayoko's body) and praise for the motherly provision and communication so characteristic of the bars; in idealized form, these are often depicted in contemporary Japanese literature as nostalgic retro-enclaves with qualities of supreme inspiration or as places of spiritual cocooning, individuals are apparently unconditionally accepted into a group of kindred spirits.

Sayoko renounces the nuclear family and the child of her own that she had always wanted from Yōichi. Instead of personal happiness, the changes compelled by the terrible circumstances led to an expanded idea of family, which now includes many other fellow human beings; the protagonist offers to take care of Shingaki's son – perhaps, the text suggests, a patchwork family might come into being.

If you read "Sweet Hereafter" as a post-Fukushima contribution, as Yoshimoto suggests and as we see in the works of other authors, you could infer that the catastrophe is an event which despite all the terrible happenings presents an opportunity to "become stronger." In the *shitamachi* milieu the protagonist serves the collective as a mature personality. Afterwards, a friendly hereafter is waiting for the well-behaved self-optimiser.

In this regard, the narrative recommends a psychoeducation as far as great selflessness and the feeling of deep obligation, and it is suitable as a national narrative of the post-Fukushima era: "Sweet Hereafter" tells the story of a young woman who leaves her "moratorium" to bravely confront the less attractive sides of life. The encounter with death, the self-conquest demanded by the difficult circumstances, the process of becoming stronger, as well as maturing towards tolerance and care for other human beings, could serve as a good example and "give courage": in gratefulness one's existence should give "light." The author suggests that happiness is even possible "after Fukushima" if you continue to develop yourself accordingly.

Ultimately Yoshimoto puts the main emphasis, as one could conclude, not on the "spiritual"– and not on its folkloric, ethno-esoteric variation of "Okinawan spirituality" – but rather on the "spiritually" shrouded insertion into a new social role. The generation of a "pure energy in the heart" (*kokoro no naka no kirei na enerugī*; p. 69), which is attained through virtuous, earnest striving (*gyō*, *shugyō*) and then needs to be passed on, appears as psycho-hygienic guidance for purifying the opaque energy flow in order not to hurt the collective. In this regard Yoshimoto's model moves towards the *ki*-teachings and the *kegare*-notions.[24]

The multifaceted, syncretic concept is supported, however, by a functionalist ideal which is not unrelated to "Ganbarism," i.e the maxim of perseverance and forging ahead in the Japanese achievement-orientated society. Admittedly, such advice is more or less a banal platitude which can be found in many self-help books, religious instructional scriptures and in the guiding principles of the new religions (*shin shūkyō*). It has remarkable similarities to the teachings of Funai Yukio (b. 1933), who as a religious founder is a proponent of the opinion that "this world is a place of spiritual training" (*shugyō no ba*; see Shimazono 2012: 469) or "this world is a place of learning and challenges" (*genze wa benkyō to shiren no ba*; p. 468). Spirituality is, therefore, closely connected to morality – it is, however, not realised in the discovery of

[24] *Kegare* means defilement, and implies a state of pollution and thus a form of *tsumi* (taboo violation) that has to be corrected through purification rites (*misogi*). *Ki* means some sort of ethereal energy released by an object or organism. *Ki* reflects the emotional state of a person and the measure of control has over it; it could also be seen as a sound and energized state of mind and body.

individual paradise alone, but rather requires social competences and active negotiation.[25]

Insofar as a reader adopts Yoshimoto's gentle instructions as help for organising their own life and may feel encouraged by the vision of the unity of the threshold between life and death, to be able to hold their ground against loss, pain and other adversities, then the author's "wellness" prose is probably doing a good deed. If you reflect upon the message of a person hit by suffering who diligently integrates themselves into the neighbourly collective, then the pathos of the sacrifice (of a young woman) evokes not so pleasant associations of the patriotic rhetoric of the ancient and more recent past.[26]

Yoshimoto's viewpoint cultivates inwardness. It is not about encouraging readers to ask critical questions about TEPCO (the Tokyo Electric Power Company), about the problem of radioactive contamination, about the "nuclear village," or more generally, about power structures and the responsibilities they bear.[27] The model of "spiritually" overcoming bad times that is exemplified here places hope in the regenerative ability of society; it demands an attitude characterised by humbleness, motivation and morality. The neighbourly collective helps the individual and gives them strength. At the same time, this construct lends form to the ideal of modest people who as members of a group submit themselves to fate. They do not rebel as citizens of a democracy, but rather remain diligently focused on improving their selves and their relationship to others.

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[25] The stated goal of many new religions is to teach people to take responsibility for their own unhappiness: "Personal misfortunes are considered direct consequences of an individual's wrong doing, a result of their disturbed relationships with the 'vitalistic' gods, a consequence of negative karma, or due to influence of malevolent spirits" (see Prohl 2012: 247); therefore the teachings of the new religions tend mostly towards *kokoro no naoshi* ("inner reform").

[26] The conservative (and often nationalist) point of view of the new religions is commented on by Wöhr (1990) for example.

[27] However, in an interview with Greenpeace, Yoshimoto Banana said that even in the time after Fukushima, she wanted to remain an author of healing. In no way would she get involved in political arguments: "As a writer I don't want to make any dull political statements. I rather try through my work – not only for myself – to capture the shining, light of life. What helps us in difficult times is people who we love, with whom we can share our meals, and not least music, films, books. We immerse ourselves in another world, allow our hearts to soar for a while, draw new strength and then return to the raw reality. That is a balsam for the soul" (Yoshimoto 2011b; see also Gebhardt 2012b).

In the time following "Fukushima" the Japanese government, led by the conservative Abe Shinzō (b. 1954), could not wish for better citizens than those who believe that they are supporting their little environment and the cosmic whole with their selfless devotion in the face of fate and "spiritual" cooperation.

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