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'YEARS OF CALAMITY': *YAKUDOSHI* OBSERVANCES IN A CITY

The secularization hypothesis—that religion declines in industrial, urban settings—was first developed out of studies in the West based largely on 'formal' religious behaviour as seen, for example, in church attendance figures.[1] Japan, as an industrialized, urban state with a non-Christian religious tradition, provides an important opportunity to test the applicability or otherwise of this idea in other cultural settings. However, there is no clear equivalent to a formal religious community or 'church' in a Durkheimian sense except among some of the new religious groups: Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples do bring people together for communal activities when organizing and performing certain festivals once or twice a year, but they hardly constitute the 'moral community' which Durkheim (1918: 47) calls a 'church'. On a more 'practical' level, in Japan 'the family of God is the family' (Plath 1964) because of the importance of Buddhist and Shinto household rites. There have undoubtedly been changes in this area, as discussed, for example, by Morioka (1984) or Smith (1974: 184–210), but these seem to be largely changes in the scope of included 'ancestors' and in some of the ways in which they are approached: when viewed in terms of the domestic cycle there is little sign of the rites being abandoned, as younger generations assume responsibility for the rites in their turn, as I have argued elsewhere (Lewis 1984: 180–2, 820). In the present paper, however, I wish to examine one of the less formal expressions of Japanese religiosity and to show how beliefs and practices relating to *yakudoshi*, certain ages in the life-cycle when one is thought to be

1. One of the more recent examples of such studies is that by Acquaviva (1979), but the essential framework and ideas contained in the hypothesis can be traced back to the attitudes towards religion of Weber, Marx and to some extent Durkheim.

especially prone to illness or misfortune, have persisted strongly in an urban, industrial area. The principal study available in English dealing with this belief is that by Norbeck (1955), who discusses how the *yakudoshi* complex might have developed and how there are many regional variations in it, but he does not provide a detailed study of the extent to which people conform to the belief in practice or express scepticism or belief in it.[2] His comprehensive material on local variations in the complex is based almost entirely on *rural* sources, much of it second-hand data collected by Japanese folklorists and ethnographers. Japanese writers have often classified *yakudoshi* as 'folk religion' (*minkan shinkō*)[3] as distinct from Shinto, but (even if some elements of the *yakudoshi* complex are derived from the Chinese divinatory system of Onmyōdō) nowadays in practice *yakudoshi* observances are inextricably fused with Shinto institutions. Their widespread persistence *in an industrial urban context* today indicates that it should not be taken for granted that such 'folk' beliefs necessarily decline in any of the three dimensions subsumed under the secularization hypothesis—those of past/present, rural/urban and pre-industrial/industrial. Neither are *yakudoshi* observances necessarily static in rural areas; as Kim reports (in this volume), *yakudoshi* feasts have greatly increased in scale in recent years.

The fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted in a city with a population of over 230,000 in the Kansai region of Japan. Two urban neighbourhoods were selected for study, one of them the company housing of a large synthetic fibres factory which elsewhere (Lewis 1984, in press) I am calling by a pseudonym; for the sake of consistency I shall retain the pseudonym of 'Ueno' for this city in the present essay. In both neighbourhoods studied the majority of residents are well-educated white-collar salaried and professional people plus a number of blue-collar and lower middle-class families.[4] It will become clear from the following material that anthropological techniques of participant observation and detailed personal interviews shed considerably more light on actual attitudes towards such phenomena than do statistical samples from a questionnaire, even though I did use such a questionnaire at the beginning to help establish my credentials as a researcher in the area and to

2. As recently as 1984 Ohnuki-Tierney could refer (p. 71) to Norbeck's 'detailed description of *yakudoshi*', her only other reference to a work on *yakudoshi* being an article in Japanese in the 1951 edition of the *Minzokugaku Jiten* (Dictionary of Ethnology), which is, incidentally, also cited by Norbeck (1955: 108, 116, 118).

3. See, for example, the Agency for Cultural Affairs (1972: 133), Inokuchi (1983) or the *Nihon Minzoku Jiten* (1971: 749), the latter using the term *zokushin*, 'popular belief', a term also used by Hōri (1968: 44, 46) to refer to lucky and unlucky years, *toshi-mawari*, a concept akin to that of *yakudoshi*.

4. Those in the company housing range from departmental managers (*buchō*) down to blue-collar workers (though suitably differentiated by types and size of accommodation), while those in an adjacent estate of owner-occupied houses consist of white-collar employees of large firms, a number of professionals such as a lawyer, a dentist or two university lecturers, and some lower middle-class people such as a professional bicycle racer, the local shopkeeper and the foreman/manager of a local garage who rents both the garage and his home.

obtain preliminary data on a variety of topics.[5]

Findings from any anthropological fieldwork are open to challenge on the grounds of representativeness, so it should be pointed out that five miles from the fieldwork area is a shrine I shall call Iwadani which is famous for selling protective charms (*mamori* or *fuda*)[6] against the misfortunes which are thought to occur in a *yakudoshi* year. However, Iwadani is only one of several such shrines in the Kansai area and there are many others throughout Japan. Each year thousands of people from as far away as Osaka or Kyoto visit Iwadani—the choice of shrine also being influenced by tourist and convenience factors—especially during the peak visiting period of January 15–17, many of them making use of the special shuttle service laid on by the Keihan Bus Company from the nearest railway station. The purpose of their pilgrimage is to pray for protection as they enter a *yakudoshi* and to purchase a protective *mamori* or *fuda*. Charms for protection in a *yakudoshi* can be bought at most Shinto shrines, and even though Iwadani was the shrine most commonly visited by my informants because it happens to be conveniently near, it was only one of ten different shrines mentioned in this context. While 34 out of 45 people had conducted such shrine visits, others who had not gone personally had received a variety of charms from relatives who had gone vicariously on their behalf.[7]

Iwadani's *gomeinichi*, the special day in the month for worshipping its deity, falls on the 17th, so in January it is conveniently close to the 'Little New Year' of the 15th when traditionally everyone in a community added a year to his or her age (Hanley and Yamamura 1977: 43, 209; Beardsley, Hall and Ward 1959: 295). This system has survived in the calculation of one's *yakudoshi* whereby a newborn infant was counted as aged one at birth and two at the next New Year, so this *kazoe* system does not correspond to the Western reckoning used for most other purposes in contemporary Japan. The ages counted as *yakudoshi* have varied both geographically (Norbeck 1955: 107–8) and historically (*Nihon Minzoku Jiten* 1971: 749), but all informants in Ueno are aware of those at the ages of 33 for women and 41 or 42 for men, many also knowing of the preceding or

5. I am grateful to Dr Katsuyoshi Fukui and Mr Hirochika Nakamaki of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka for enabling the questionnaire to be processed by the Museum's computers; the tape is available for comparative research by other scholars wishing to have access to the statistics. I would also like to express my thanks to the Economic and Social Research Council for their financial support for the research which included my first period of fieldwork (March 1981 to May 1982) and to the Japan Foundation for a Dissertation Fellowship, from May 1983 to May 1984, which made possible a second period of fieldwork.

6. *Mamori* are portable charms for safety, while *fuda* tend to be kept on a shelf or fixed to a wall in one's home, but functionally they are very similar.

7. A few had received 'substitute charms' which had not been bought from a shrine but were still held to be efficacious in protecting against evil. Examples include a pair of chopsticks made from *nanten* wood—since *nanten* can be written with characters meaning 'avoidance of disaster' (難転)—or a kimono sash containing five different colours and said to be a protection against evil. One man had been given by his mother a pair of decorative iron cooking-chopsticks bought from a shop in Himeji, a leaflet enclosed in the box explaining that according to a legend from the Himeji district such chopsticks expel evil.

following years as *yakudoshi*s too.[8] Those listed at a large shrine in the city, the Ueno *jingū*, are as follows, but I have taken the liberty of further sub-classifying the major *yakudoshi*s into 'principal' and 'major' ones and of distinguishing between those minor *yakudoshi*s which are differentiated by sex and those which are not.

Figure 1: Yakudoshi *Years for Men and Women*

	Men	*Women*
Principal *yakudoshi*	42	33
Major *yakudoshi*s	25, 61	19, 37
Medium *yakudoshi*s	24, 26	18, 20
	41, 43	32, 34
	60, 62	36, 38
Minor *yakudoshi*s differentiated by sex	18, 19, 20	24, 25, 26
	32, 33, 34	41, 42, 43
	36, 37, 38	60, 61, 62
Minor *yakudoshi*s undifferentiated by sex	1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 22, 28, 40, 46, 49, 52, 55, 58	

Four principal reasons for the choice of these various ages have been listed by Norbeck (1955: 116–19),[9] of which the fourth and to some extent the second were quite commonly reported by those interviewed in Ueno. These are as follows:

1) The Chinese calendar repeats the animal year of one's birth after every twelve-year cycle, and after sixty years returns again to the same combination of element and animal (more technically called 'stem' and 'branch' respectively). Therefore the repetition of one's 'year of birth' is a time of danger and uncertainty, especially the beginning of a completely fresh cycle after sixty years; so these ages in the life-cycle are times requiring particular caution and the use of special prayers or charms to avert danger. This theory accounts for the choice of the numbers 1, 13, 25, 37, 49 and 61, and for those 'medium' *yakudoshi*s associated with these numbers when these are 'major' *yakudoshi*s— i.e. the numbers 24, 26, 36, 38, 60 and 62. However, only three of these six numbers at twelve-year intervals are 'major' *yakudoshi*s, the other three being 'minor' ones—so the theory leaves unexplained many other *yakudoshi* years.

8. Although Japanese lacks a plural form for the word *yakudoshi*, I have added a final 's' in places for the sake of English style. The main *yakudoshi* is called the *honyaku*; those preceding and following are called the *maeyaku* and *atoyaku* respectively.

9. Norbeck gives three main reasons but a fourth is implied in his discussion of the relation between *yakudoshi*s and age-grades (pp. 107, 116–17).

2) A few *yakudoshi*s may be explained by homonyms, in view of the fondness which many Japanese have for such play on words. This arises from the fact that most Chinese characters can be pronounced in more than one way, either by a Japanese rendering of the Chinese reading or by the use of a Japanese indigenous word of the same meaning. Thus the number 'four' can be read by the Japanese word *yon*[10] or by the Chinese-derived[11] reading for the character as *shi*. *Shi* is also the word for 'death', however, so the number four is often avoided in numbering rooms of buildings, or houses in a block. Similarly, the number 'nine' can be pronounced as *ku*, with connotations of words such as *kurushimi*, suffering, or *kutsū*, pain, and may be avoided for similar reasons as those governing the use of four, though avoidance of the number four seems to be commoner or stronger.

Therefore the *yakudoshi* at the age of 42 is sometimes explained by saying that 42 can be pronounced *shi ni*, meaning 'to death', and is therefore to be feared, whereas 33 could be pronounced *sanzan*, a homonym for a word meaning 'hard', 'difficult' or 'troublesome'. It may also mean 'birth difficulty' (Bownas 1963: 152). While these two 'folk explanations' (to quote Norbeck's use of the term, 1955: 118) are those most commonly cited, the same reasoning could also account for the *yakudoshi*s at the age of 4 and 49 (and perhaps some of the others containing the elements 4 or 9).

Norbeck (ibid.) considers this 'folk etymology' to be unlikely because it would depend upon a widespread knowledge of the alternative readings of numbers which in turn would depend on a high degree of literacy among the ordinary people in the Edo period or earlier. However, his reasoning can be challenged by the following considerations which would argue in favour of the 'folk etymology':

a) Literacy was in fact fairly widespread by the end of the Edo period (mid-nineteenth century) among commoners as well as gentry, about 40% of the male population and 15% of the women being literate—a figure higher than that of England and other countries at that time (Dore 1965: 100–1).

b) 'Literacy' in Japan is not strictly a concept amenable to comparison with countries having a 'simple' alphabet system: two types of syllabaries (*kana*), each consisting of 52 'letters', form the level of literacy used in books for children of infant-school age. Gradually during primary school some of the most common or simpler Chinese characters (*kanji*) are introduced, among the first being the *kanji* for numbers. Therefore a knowledge of the variant readings of numbers does not require a high level of literacy to produce connotations and word plays for the numbers 42 and 33.

c) Even if the majority of the population were illiterate, a knowledge of such puns can be diffused from the literati into the general consciousness, perhaps forgetting the 'original' source of the idea in this process of diffusion, especially

10. Depending on the context, the Japanese reading can also be *yotsu*, in which case the character is read *yo*, plus a suffix for *-tsu*.

11. The Japanese readings lack the Chinese intonation markers and are usually derived from ancient rather than modern Chinese forms. The lack of intonation also produces homonyms in Japanese among words that are distinguished by intonation in Chinese.

once the idea of *yakudoshi*s became widespread and practice took precedence over questions of origin.[12]

d) If the numbers chosen as *yakudoshi*s are arranged in numerical order, omitting the 'medium' *yakudoshi*s (which are dependent upon their proximity to the 'major' *yakudoshi*s), then almost all the *yakudoshi*s fall at intervals of three years, with the marked exceptions of 33 and 42 which are separated from their 'nearest' *yakudoshi*s by intervals of 5 and 4, and 2 and 4 years respectively.[13] This produces a pattern of 19 sets of (normally) three-year intervals between the ages of 1 and 61, which is distorted in order to incorporate the years 33 and 42, this pattern indicating that the choice of these years comes from a different source—most likely from the puns in the 'folk etymology'.

3) A third suggested origin of the *yakudoshi* complex is that these years mark times of critical change in the life-cycle. Norbeck (1953: 381; 1955: 114–17) has shown how some *yakudoshi* years marked the boundaries of formal age-sets in traditional Japanese villages, and it may be that such considerations influenced the attribution of sex distinctions to the 'major' *yakudoshi* years. Either these differences of sex at the boundaries of major stages of life (such as retirement for men at the age of 61) were imposed upon the regular pattern of three-year stages outlined above, or else the major segments of the life-cycle according to age-groups were then further subdivided into regular sub-sets of three years. Since detailed information on former age-grading practices in rural areas is rather fragmentary (cf. Norbeck 1953: 373), it is impossible to decide which pattern preceded the other.[14] According to this theory, the word *yakudoshi* is derived from another word for *yaku*, meaning 'responsibility', thus rendering *yakudoshi*s as 'years of responsibility' (cf. also Bownas 1963: 173), but, as Norbeck (1955: 117) notes, the question arises why the years of responsibility afterwards were not also feared, when some duties continued. Similarly, data on former demographic patterns is relatively scarce and will need further examination in relation to *yakudoshi*s, but what evidence there is shows that the age of marriage in Japan was relatively late (often well into the twenties for many women) during the Edo period (Hanley and Yamamura 1977: 246–8). Therefore it is unlikely that the age of 19 was associated with a woman taking on the responsibilities of marriage, but there is evidence from the Edo period that the normal age for the cessation of child-bearing was between the ages of 33 and 37 (ibid.: 216, 236, 241).

12. Compare the similar taboos on the number 13 in the West, which is said to have been derived from the fact that thirteen persons were seated around the table at the Last Supper; this 'origin' in a literate tradition (in this case read and taught in churches and heard by those who were illiterate) is unknown at popular level, although the practice of avoiding the number 13 has continued.

13. The numbers so arranged are 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 33, 37, 40, 42, 46, 49, 52, 55, 58 and 61.

14. On a priori grounds we might assume that the more complex *yakudoshi* structure was built upon the simpler structure of age-grades, but I have my doubts about this too, because the 'simpler' can also be a 'degenerate' form of the more complex.

4) The most common reason for observing *yakudoshi*s reported by informants in Ueno is that one's body changes at these critical points—in a way which, they claim, has been 'scientifically' demonstrated but which appears rather to be a pseudo-scientific gloss to validate a traditional belief.[15] Often informants would say they had 'heard' that it is 'scientific' that the body 'changes', 'deteriorates' or 'becomes tired' at the age of 42 for men and 33 for women, so that they are more susceptible to disease at these times—but these informants could not cite a scientific source for their ideas. Some were a little more precise in their affirmations, for example that 'the hormone secretion levels of the body change' or that 'the incidence of cancer rises after these ages'. The most detailed exposition of such ideas came from a 49-year-old man, who said: 'Past data shows that it is not a superstition but scientific: at these ages parents receive a mental shock as they reach a crossroads in life when their children marry or leave home etc.' He, like the others, was however unable to cite any specific 'past data' or 'scientific evidence' as such.

These informants who assert that it is 'scientific' are mainly those without a high degree of specialization in medical or scientific fields of study, whereas two men with such a background—one a dentist and the other a professor of pharmacology and biochemistry at a leading research institution—both dismissed such explanations about *yakudoshi*s and denied having any 'belief' in *yakudoshi*s, because they are 'not scientifically provable'. However, this pseudo-scientific theory about *yakudoshi*s provides a justification or validation of the belief in the minds of most informants. It is almost as if 'science' has taken the place once occupied by religious literati—technical scientific language being here like the use of Latin by medieval monks—so that the mystification of science in relation to ordinary people allows the possibility of 'science' being used to validate or provide a veneer of acceptability to folk concepts.[16]

Statistics on the degree to which people pay attention to *yakudoshi*s are ambivalent because those who in early life say they do not pay attention may do so when they encounter their own principal *yakudoshi*. However, the consciousness of *yakudoshi*s varies, so that some women may pay attention to their major *yakudoshi* at the age of 19 whereas the majority do not do anything about *yakudoshi*s until they are 32 or 33 years old. This ambivalence on account of whether or not a person has already experienced a major or principal *yakudoshi* partially accounts for those who are uncommitted in a questionnaire response

15. On a general level it is obvious that one's health does tend to decline as one reaches middle age, but it is not 'scientific' to assert that this process accelerates or begins at a fixed age, such as 42 for men and another age for women. Rather, the fixing of such an age is a socially decided demarcation of boundaries in a continuous process of ageing, occurring at varying rates of intensity for different individuals.

16. An extension of the idea that one's body changes and is more susceptible to illness during a *yakudoshi* may be the emphasis put upon the idea of 'biorhythms' in some Japanese factories, as mentioned by Kamata (1982: 121, 124). I withhold judgement about the 'scientific' or 'pseudo-scientific' status of such ideas.

and say they 'neither do nor do not' pay attention to *yakudoshi*s. Out of 664 people who answered this question, 17.3% were uncommitted in this way, but 48.5% replied that they did pay attention to *yakudoshi*s and 34.2% that they did not. Similar percentages were found in a nationwide survey in which 51% replied 'Yes' and 48% 'No'.[17] This certainly indicates a high proportion of the population who do express some concern about their reaching a major or principal *yakudoshi* age. A change in replies from 'No' to 'Yes' is discernable among a few men in their early forties interviewed in 1984 who had bought special charms or visited particular shrines because of their entering a *yakudoshi* year, but who in 1981 had replied on the questionnaire that they did not pay attention to *yakudoshi*s. This same change in attitudes probably accounts for the higher percentage of women who say they pay attention to them (55.5%, versus 44.1% of the male respondents), because women reach their principal *yakudoshi* earlier.

However, these overall statistics are not amenable to finer correlations by age and sex because some people pay attention to 'non-principal' *yakudoshi*s (such as the major *yakudoshi*s at the ages of 19, 25, or 61), and a few are aware of the minor *yakudoshi*s, whether or not they observe any ritual actions at such times. More informative findings come from reported behaviour as derived from the interviews. Forty-five people who said that they 'paid attention to' *yakudoshi*s were questioned about their behaviour, including three men who had indicated a 'non-attention' to *yakudoshi*s in their questionnaires but who had participated in *yakudoshi* rituals by the time they were interviewed in 1984. Ten others who did not claim to believe were also questioned about their attitudes. It transpired that these divisions were not fully consistent with practice, largely owing to the ambiguity of the term 'to pay attention to' *yakudoshi*s used in the questionnaire. Most interpreted this as intended, replying 'Yes' if they had bought a special charm or visited a special shrine because of their *yakudoshi*, but two people had not done either of these and yet said that they 'took care' during their *yakudoshi*s (going to their doctors when they felt unwell sooner than they otherwise would have done), owing to their subscribing to the idea that the body deteriorates at that time.

Among the ten denying any concern with *yakudoshi*s were three men already past their principal *yakudoshi* who remained sceptical on scientific grounds, and three other men not yet at that age who claimed to be sceptical—but obviously their scepticism could not be checked with their practice. Two of these, however, seemed to have a 'passive' rather than 'active' scepticism—in that one of them, aged 40, mentioned how many of his colleagues attribute illnesses to their *yakudoshi* and say that he ought to visit a shrine in his coming *yakudoshi*; so he thinks he may go 'to be on the safe side'. The other is in his mid-thirties, but at New Year went with his brother-in-law to a shrine for a 'purification' or 'exorcism' (*yakubarai*) against the latter's *yakudoshi*; he did not realise at the time

17. The other 1% are recorded as 'others'. Details of this survey were published in the *Asahi Shinbun*, morning edition, 5 May 1981.

that his wife was entering her *yakudoshi* that year—otherwise, he says, he would have bought a charm for her at the same time, thereby indicating that in a few years he is likely to buy one for himself despite his present denial of any concern with *yakudoshi*s.

All four women who denied any concern with *yakudoshi*s had already experienced their main one (that of 33 years of age) by the time they were interviewed. The practice of only one of these was consistent with her 'disbelief', but she had also kept quiet to her husband about her approaching *yakudoshi* so that she would not feel pressurized into going to a shrine or buying a charm. Another denied a belief in *yakudoshi* on the grounds that 'it is just from a word play on *shi ni* and *sanzan* so it is all nonsense', but she nevertheless accompanied her older brother and his wife to Tachiki shrine for the sister-in-law's *yakudoshi* and bought a charm herself because the sister-in-law said she should, both of them being the same age. This informant described her purchase as 'a problem of human relations and obligations' (*giri-ninjō no mondai*) which forced her into purchasing the charm in spite of her scepticism.

Both the other two women who said they 'did not pay attention to' *yakudoshi*s were pregnant at the time; both gave birth to girls that year. There is an idea prevalent among many Japanese women (though not all had heard of it) that if one bears a child in one's *yakudoshi* the effects of the *yakudoshi* are nullified: the joy or happiness of motherhood cancels out the 'calamity' expected in a *yakudoshi*. Those mothers who had given birth to a male child in their *yakudoshi* said that the calamity is averted only if the child is male, whereas those with a female child said that a child of either sex would cancel the *yakudoshi*, though one of them did admit that a male child 'would have been better'—this lady having three daughters and no son. Since the sex of the unborn child is not normally known when the mother enters her *yakudoshi* at New Year, it is significant that all four women interviewed with male children born in their *yakudoshi*—one of them having been born in the 'medium' strength *maeyaku*—did go to pray for safety and protection in their *yakudoshi* and buy protective *mamori* or *fuda*.[18] They could not guarantee the sex of their child to mitigate the *yakudoshi*, so it was a 'reassurance' (*anshin*) when the boy was born as an 'added bonus'. On the other hand, two women with daughters born in their *yakudoshi*s had not conducted special rites, partly because they were sceptical about *yakudoshi*s and partly because they had a convenient 'justification' (pregnancy) for not going. Even so, one of these admitted to doubts when she had worse morning sickness than had been the case for her two previous children and sometimes wondered if it were on account of her *yakudoshi*.

One other woman, Mrs Yamamoto, had a daughter born in her 37th-year major *yakudoshi*. She claimed that a child of either sex eliminates the evil and that the birth of their daughter did (retrospectively) take away the 'calamity' of the *yakudoshi*. Nevertheless, she and her husband went in the previous year (*maeyaku*,

18. One of them did not buy a *mamori* or *fuda* but instead went to Iwadani shrine, prayed and bought a towel—as the cheapest available 'dedication gift' (*hōnō*)—on which she wrote her date of birth and name, leaving the towel as a kind of votive offering at the shrine.

before the child was conceived), main year (*honyaku*) and following year (*atoyaku*) to Ueno *jingū*, where they received a special 'exorcism' or 'purification' (*yakubarai*); every year they bought charms which they each wore around their necks for the whole year. This behaviour was rather extreme or unusual but is understandable in the light of a confluence of influences:

1) both had *yakudoshi*s at the same time, when Mr Yamamoto was aged 42 and his wife 37;

2) Mrs Yamamoto had already had one miscarriage and so they wanted to take special care this time; and

3) both parents were relatively old at the time of their first (and, as it turned out, only) child's birth, so 'it would have been a shame (*kawaisō*) if anything were to happen to us while the baby was so young'.

Therefore pregnancy during a *yakudoshi* does not in itself prevent a mother from taking special precautions against her *yakudoshi*, and in cases like that of the Yamamotos may increase anxiety to some extent. Whether or not a mother thinks that only a male child or a child of either sex removes the 'calamity' can exert an influence, but in cases like that of one woman whose boy was born in her *maeyaku* (and theoretically took away the 'calamity' of the *honyaku* and *atoyaku* too) shrine visits may be continued in these subsequent *yakudoshi* years, 'to be on the safe side'.

During a *yakudoshi* year any ailments or injuries are easily attributed to the influence of *yakudoshi*s by people who in other years would regard such events as part of the normal circumstances of life, a psychological process recognized by one of those interviewed and given as a reason for his scepticism. Others with some openness to the idea of *yakudoshi*s would say about such illnesses, when talking with friends, 'I wonder whether it could be anything to do with my *yakudoshi*?'—but in a tentative and unsure manner. Such was the case with Mrs Kimura, who after a major row with her husband was very tense for a few days, one symptom of which was a stomach-ache, during which she speculated about her *yakudoshi*—but after the ache had gone she abandoned the idea of a *yakudoshi* connection. Those with a more 'active' belief more readily attribute such illnesses to the influence of *yakudoshi*s. An example of such a woman is Mrs Ikeda, aged 26 at the time of interview, and therefore in a 'minor' *yakudoshi*:

> You're always told about people getting illness to an unbelievable extent in their *yakudoshi*s and it's been just like that for me this year. I've had nothing but illnesses: my eyes have been aching recently and my child went down with chicken-pox. It's been like that all the time this year.[19]

Despite the fact that several informants mentioned hearsay cases of misfortunes happening in a *yakudoshi*, few could provide specific examples of such misfortunes happening to themselves. The few instances are as follows:

> I lost a tooth this year, my main *yakudoshi*, which is the first sign that one's getting old: the second is loss of eyesight, and the third is loss of sexual appetite!
>
> Man, aged 41

19. Mrs Ikeda is from a rural background in a village outside Ueno, whereas the other informants mentioned in this paper are from urban backgrounds.

> In my *maeyaku* things did not go smoothly at work for several months.
>
> Man, aged 43

> Though I agree with my husband that *yakudoshis* are not scientifically provable, nevertheless when I was 19 I was ill in hospital for three months and when I was 32 I broke a leg and had to use crutches while it was in plaster.
>
> Woman, aged 33

All these examples involve people who were very close to the time of their own *yakudoshis* and could remember the instances well, with the exception of the woman whose misfortunes occurred at the ages of both 19 and 32. By contrast, three men in their forties who had previously experienced a more serious illness specified that it was before their principal *yakudoshis* (occurring in their later thirties, these illnesses being meningitis, a heart operation and a stomach illness). They were confident that these had 'no connection' with their *yakudoshis*, whereas more minor instances detailed above which did occur in a *yakudoshi* are emphasised as having a connection with the 'calamitous year'. Such observations further indicate a subjective element of interpretation in the management of illness, some using *yakudoshis* as convenient scapegoats for any ailments occurring that year.

Such personal illnesses are the type which would be expected from the widespread interpretation of *yakudoshis* as times when the body deteriorates and degenerative diseases become more prevalent. However, breaking a leg or uneasy relationships at work do not fall into this category, and neither do the majority of other misfortunes attributed to *yakudoshis*, all of which involved a third party. Six such cases were reported, as follows:

> *Female Informants:*
>
> My husband's mother died young, when my husband was 41 and in his *maeyaku*.
> My father died when I was 33.
> My younger sister died when my husband was aged 42.
> My older sister's child became ill and died when my sister was 33 years old.
> My mother died when I was 32.
>
> *Male Informant:*
>
> My wife had an accident when she was 19 and one of the children also had an accident when my wife was 33.[20]

While all of these involve 'calamities' (*yaku*), they do not conform to the common pseudo-scientific rationalization for *yakudoshis*. However, these kinds of 'dramatic' events involving a death are often those which circulate by hearsay and become distorted in the re-telling, so that a popular image is built up according to which such events commonly occur in a *yakudoshi*. Many who expressed a 'belief' in *yakudoshis* and were unable to supply any definite instances

20. The first part of this statement does involve an accident to the person in a *yakudoshi*, but it was not included in the few cited earlier because this unspecified accident was reported at second hand.

of misfortune in their own experience said that they had heard of such tales from 'acquaintances', 'my grandmother' or 'other people', some simply calling it 'ancient wisdom', 'said from of old'. These tales are then amalgamated with the pseudo-scientific concept of degenerative diseases increasing from the time of a *yakudoshi* onwards, so as to form a folk mythology of verbal traditions related to the *yakudoshi* cycle.

However, an element of circularity is introduced into people's thinking by their use of prayer and charms. Such circularity is particularly apparent in 'negative' prayers for protection or safety, as compared with 'positive' prayers for a definite, specific goal.[21] It is the former type which characterizes most Japanese prayer, of which *yakudoshis* are a clear example. If one expects misfortune to occur and it does occur, then it can be attributed to one's *yakudoshi* and the 'belief' is reinforced, whereas if one prays or buys a charm in order to counteract the *yakudoshi* and then no misfortune occurs the 'belief' in the need for such prayers or charms is reinforced. Such 'belief' may still be mingled with scepticism, as in the common attitude to charms that 'because nothing disastrous happened I suppose it may have had some effect', though sometimes the qualification is added that one cannot be sure whether it was the effect of the charm or of the person's care about health or safety. Others take a more cautious view and say that the charm's 'effect' is more psychological than technical—giving 'reassurance' (*anshin*) or a 'sense of security' (*anshinkan*)—and it is noticeable that all three who attributed some personal misfortune to the influence of a *yakudoshi* hold attitudes of this type, since all of them had taken the proper ritual precautions.[22] It seems that when experience conflicts with doctrine there is a shift in the interpretation of doctrine from it being held as factually true to one of symbolic truth (cf. Southwold 1979: 635–6). However, in cases such as *yakudoshis* the doctrine is not tested by experience until a certain age in one's life, before which the ideas are not very relevant to a person and therefore the truth value is not yet categorized into factual or symbolic truth, some remaining sceptical of its truth value altogether. Such scepticism may remain even if the person feels obliged to engage in the practices owing to social pressures, but in other cases the conformity to expected practices induces in itself a certain suspension of disbelief and perhaps a willingness to hold the beliefs as 'true' in some sense during these critical years of one's life. Experiences during that time can be interpreted in ways which either

21. There can be an element of circularity in both types of prayer if one allows for escape clauses such as 'if God wills'. Such escape clauses are very common in most religions throughout the world, though a recent trend in some Christian circles has been to emphasise that one can expect very specific answers to prayer (such as healings or material provision) provided a few basic conditions are fulfilled. Statistical probability can be used to test whether such 'answers to prayer' are the result of chance or are more likely to be the result of a significant relationship between prayer and the outcome, thereby removing the element of circularity from such 'positive' prayers.

22. For example, the man who lost a tooth in his *yakudoshi* says the *mamori* charm which he wears next to his skin each day has some 'effect' in a 'mysterious' rather than 'visible' way. He says, 'If it gives relief of heart, it is efficacious' (*anshin dekireba, goriyaku ga aru*), so that 'to believe is to be saved/reassured' (*shinjiru koto wa sukuwareru/anshin sareru*).

confirm the idea that misfortunes occur in *yakudoshi*s or else provide reassurance (*anshin*) that one took the proper precautions. When these precautions were taken and some misfortune still occurred, attitudes towards charms may undergo a shift in interpretation, but no cases are found in this sample of *yakudoshi* charms being rejected on account of contradictory experiences.[23]

A few individuals mentioned certain restrictions on movement which they observed during *yakudoshi*s (in addition to the more usual practices of shrine visits and special attention to diet and exercise). These restrictions are:

1) 'One should not change one's position at work';[24]
2) 'One should take special care of one's body in a *yakudoshi* year if one is in a different environment, such as on a business trip';
3) 'One should not build or repair a house or change its structure too much' (mentioned by two people).

All of these involve a change in location—becoming 'out of place' while one adjusts to the new and altered conditions. As such it may be useful to apply to *yakudoshi* concepts the framework of analysis developed by Douglas (1966) for purity and pollution concepts in which she argued that 'dirt' can be defined as 'matter out of place'. Both Douglas and Leach (1976: 33–6) further argue that what does not fit into a clear category but is marginal or ambiguous is often regarded as 'dangerous' in some way. Ambiguous marginal states are seen in most cultures as sources of danger and taboo, according to this framework of analysis, and in Japan this applies not only to the changes of location listed above but also to the *yakudoshi*s themselves. We might graft this framework of analysis onto the common Japanese metaphor which describes *yakudoshi* years as like the nodes (*fushi*) of a bamboo tree: this indigenous metaphor also focuses attention on the boundaries between compartments and relates them to critical or 'dangerous' transitional periods between one stage of life and the next. The bamboo tree symbolizes the human life-cycle in which critical junctures occur at regular intervals (about every three years for 'minor' *yakudoshi*s) and form crucial boundary markers in the life-cycle. At such important junctures one should take special ritual precautions to avert possible misfortunes and some also pay attention to the physical or social dimensions of location by avoiding, if possible, moving house or changing one's job in a *yakudoshi*. However, as many company employees have relatively little control over such aspects of their lives, it appears as if this particular element of the *yakudoshi* complex is less widely emphasised than perhaps it might have been at one time.

On the other hand, a possible decline in one element might be matched by a rise in another while the *yakudoshi* beliefs and practices as a whole remain relatively strong in an industrial, urban context. While specific rules about changes in location might be de-emphasised, it seems that paying attention to

23. One case related in a different context concerned a man who threw away a charm for traffic safety when his car crashed and overturned on the way back from the shrine where he had bought the charm.

24. This was mentioned by the man who reported having problems at work in his *maeyaku*.

one's health at these ages is becoming increasingly emphasised. To some extent this is actually a by-product of modernization in so far as an increasing suspicion of Western, cosmopolitan medicine—which is alleged to produce many more side-effects than herbal medicine as well as to be responsible for some serious iatrogenic illnesses—has been partly responsible for a popular resurgence of interest in East Asian medicine (Lock 1980: 152). This is particularly concentrated among those over the age of 40 (ibid.: 99–100), which for men at least might be partially triggered off by their principal *yakudoshi*, which falls at the age of 41 by the Western reckoning, its *maeyaku* at the age of 40. It is true that chronic illnesses of the kind less amenable to treatment by cosmopolitan synthetic drugs are likely to be more widespread once one reaches middle age, but the social awareness of one's state of health triggered off by a *yakudoshi*—in which one's family and friends often admonish one to 'take care'— is probably another major influence in Japanese attitudes to medicine. Lock (ibid.: 141) mentions the idea of bodily deterioration in the context of East Asian medical therapy rather than that of *yakudoshi*s, but a close link between the two is seen in the case of Mrs Kimura, mentioned earlier, who, the year after her principal *yakudoshi*, began to attend a class to learn *shiatsu*, a traditional type of 'pressure massage'—'because', she said, 'my illness last year made me more aware of my health so I joined a keep-fit class and chose this one as it was the least expensive of those available.' A number of other informants were questioned about their use of East Asian medicine, and it appears that particularly for men some connection with passing their principal *yakudoshi* is discernible, as indicated by Figure 2.

Younger generations have been affected in general by the popular interest in *kanpō*, but the greater use of East Asian medicine among women is attributable partly to their being responsible generally for the family's health and partly to some of them using it during pregnancy or (in two cases cited) on behalf of a child.

A further consistency between attitudes towards *yakudoshi*s and East Asian medicine is their common emphasis on prevention rather than cure. Traditional medical systems emphasise preventive medicine through the regular use of herbal remedies, massage or other treatments (ibid.: 204, 245–6), just as Japanese businesses often encourage their workers to do group exercises before work. In the same way a Japanese emphasis on being 'forewarned and forearmed' (cf. Benedict 1946: 22–4) leads to *yakudoshi* charms being bought and prayers said at shrine visits in January in order to prevent imagined misfortunes from occurring in those years. Similarly, prayers at both Buddhist and Shinto household altars (*butsudan* and *kamidana*) are often prophylactic prayers (asking for a safe and healthy day etc.), while a common attitude towards keeping *mamori* safety charms is 'if I didn't have one, something might go wrong or I might have an accident'.

Finally, returning to the secularization hypothesis, it can be pointed out that *yakudoshi*s display structural links not only with purity and pollution concepts but also with the Japanese cultural emphasis on age (Norbeck 1955: 106–7). Since these are both cultural emphases which are widely recognized as ones which pervade many aspects of Japanese life both in rural and urban areas (as

Figure 2: Use of East Asian Medicine Before and After a Principal Yakudoshi

		Men	*Women*
ACUPUNCTURE			
After *yakudoshi*:	Used:	4	4
	Never used:	8	3
Before *yakudoshi*:	Used:	0	3
	Never used:	8	6
SHIATSU (PRESSURE MASSAGE)			
After *yakudoshi*:	Used:	2	4
	Never used:	10	3
Before *yakudoshi*:	Used:	0	1
	Never used:	8	8
KANPŌ (HERBAL MEDICINE)			
After *yakudoshi*:	Used:	10	2
	Never used:	2	5
Before *yakudoshi*:	Used:	4	5
	Never used:	4	4

described, for example, by Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 21–31, 34–5, 47–9; Norbeck 1953 and Nakane 1970: 26–30, 128), it is not unlikely that the persistence of *yakudoshi* observances in industrial cities is partly attributable to their links with these two other cultural value-orientations, which appear to have been relatively little affected by the transition to an industrialized capitalist economy.

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PART III

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEISURE