

Live and Die in Solitude Away from the Family: Issues Relating to Unattended Death *Kodokushi* in Japan

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1 Introduction¹

“Tokyo’s ‘the oldest man’ had been dead for 30 years” – read the headline in July 2010.² When local government officials were going to congratulate a 111-year-old Tokyo resident on his long life the celebratory occasion turned out to be quite unexpected. They found the man’s “mummified skeletal remains lying in his bed”³. This man had been born in 1899 which meant that he could have been a contemporary of the novelists Yasunari Kawabata and Earnest Hemmingway who were both born the same year. What is curious is that he was not living alone but with his family members (their ages in brackets): his daughter

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² Nihon Keizai (Nikkei) Newspaper, 29 July 2010. See BBC News Asia-Pacific 29 July 2010 for the article in English; “Tokyo’s ‘oldest man’ had been dead for 30 years”, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10809128> for the article in English.

³ Ibid. More stories in detail are described in various online newspaper columns and magazine articles at the time, particularly at MSN Sankei News <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/affairs/news/110127/crm11012701310017-n1.htm>, <http://sankei.jp.msn.com/affairs/print/110124/crm11012413580223-c.htm> (now both deleted), which tells that the deceased person’s use of an electric heating blanket on the bed would have led to him becoming “mummified” rather than decomposed.

(81) and her husband (83), granddaughter (53) and younger grandson (49).

The family explained that his death was the result of “attainment of Buddhahood during life, a self-made mummy” at his own will since 1978⁴. The family told police that he had absolute power over members of the family being the Head of the Household “*Kacho*”⁵ so that none of them could do anything given that none of them were allowed to enter his room.

They were not accused of illegally disposing of the body⁶, however, the 81-year-old daughter and the 53-year-old granddaughter were charged with fraud of receiving his widower’s pension benefit to the sum of 9.5 million yen through his bank account they concealed his death in that they deliberately did not report it. The granddaughter was found guilty of assisting her mother in the fraud and was given a prison sentence of 2 years and 6 months suspended for four years on 22nd November 2010 by the Tokyo District Court. The daughter’s trial was scheduled on 2nd February 2011 but the prosecution dismissed the case as a result of her death.

2 Attended but ignored death cases

⁴ The police found a couple of newspapers dated 5th and 9th November 1978, faded, beside his bed.

⁵ In the *ie* system established in pre-modern Japanese society during Meiji era *Kacho* meant the head of the patriarchal household. The Household Head (called *Kosh*’, *Kacho*, or *Kafucho*) had exclusive centralised power over and duty towards his entire family members. Despite the fact that the *ie* system was abolished by the revision of the Meiji Civil Code in 1947, until quite recently it is not uncommon to see or hear people using the term *Kacho* as to describe an absolute leader of a family unit.

⁶ Criminal Code (*Keiho*), Act No. 45 of 1907 (The current version of the Act includes amendment No. 54 of 2007) regulates at Article 190 that “A person who damages, abandons or unlawfully possesses a corpse, the ashes or hair of a dead person, or an object placed in a coffin shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than 3 years.”

(1) About the cases and legal issues

The above case subsequently led to the discovery of more missing centenarians ‘who were supposed to be living’ according to their Family Registration Book (record)⁷. Each local government carried out further investigations, as did the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. As a result over 230 thousand people throughout Japan were not identified according to the Ministry of Justice’s investigation⁸. It included many ‘super old’ people born in Edo era such as a 200-year-old man born 1810 in Nagasaki⁹, the same year as Chopin, a 189-year-old man born 1821 in Ehime¹⁰, the same year as Dostoevsky. It is presumed that these people are still alive as there is notification of their death in the registration record; their names had not been deleted the register.

Like the 111-year-old mummified man’s case, it is suspected that 3% of the claimants over 85 years of age were either dead or missing¹¹. The Ministry of Labour, Health and Welfare have therefore established its countermeasures team

⁷ The Family Registration Book (*Koseki*), hereinafter FRB, records a Japanese person’s identification from birth, and is the source from which all the other identification documents originate. It is unique in its style in that it is created primarily for each family as a unit, and in this way differs from other types of identification records for individuals, such as the birth certificate in Western countries. Since it is a requirement to notify a person’s death within 7 days in the Act of FRB, the deceased person’s record would otherwise not be deleted without the notification. Article 86 (1) of the Act of FRB provides “A notification of death shall be submitted by the person whose duty it is to submit said notification within seven days from the day on which he/she became aware of the fact of death (when the death took place abroad, within three months from the day on which the person became aware of that fact).”

⁸ There were 234,354 persons who were over 100 years old whose identification record (FRB) did not have a tag of residential information, of these 77,118 were aged over 120 years, 884 were over 150 years old. See Press Release Document dated 10 September 2010 of the Ministry of Justice, http://www.moj.go.jp/MINJI/minji04_00008.html

⁹ Mainichi Shimbun newspaper 28 August 2010.

¹⁰ Ehime Shimbun newspaper 28 August 2010.

¹¹ Press release of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of 27 August 2010, see <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/2r9852000000nks5-img/2r9852000000nkud.pdf>

since August 2010¹².

Regardless of their age, so not necessarily ‘super old’, these unreported cases of elderly people’s death has revealed that they were living with their children who continued receiving the parents pension and other benefits. The followings are more examples of news reported in 2011 including one of a nephew hiding the skeletal remains of his aunt in a wooden box.

* a 57-year-old son was sentenced 2 years imprisonment for neglecting 80-year-old mother needing care, left the body, and received pension benefit afterwards (13 January 2011)

* a 58-year-old man who appeared to be suicidal received the pension benefit of his aunt (91) whose skeletal remains were found in a wooden box (19 May 2011)

* a 45 school teacher was arrested for neglecting his bedridden 82-year-old mother who died of dehydration and heat illness (10 June 2011)

Similar cases are being constantly reported in Japan. For instance ongoing reports of cases in April 2012 where sons/daughters left his/her parent’s body within the home as follows:¹³

* a 63-year-old man left the dead body - reduced to a skeleton- of his mother (98) yet for 12 years he continued to receive her pension benefit (Okinawa, 3 April 2012)

* a 54-year-old man left the body of his mother (83) (Osaka, 19 April 2012)

* a 61-year-old son left a mummified mother (98) (Kobe, 19 April 2012)

* Two sisters aged 58 and 60 insisted that “he is still alive” and were giving

¹² The first meeting was held on 5th August 2010 (<http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/2r985200000kh0m-img/2r985200000kh23.pdf>) and the second meeting was held a week later (<http://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/houdou/2r985200000kqp7-img/2r9852000000kgqo.pdf>). However it would appear no further meeting was held after the second meeting.

¹³ Regions and the dates when reported in newspapers are shown in brackets.

him a drip “cure” despite the mummified remains of their father (88) in the house (Tokyo, 20 April 2012)

* a man in his 50s who sought welfare benefit was found collapsed outside his house and his dead father (78) was found at home accordingly (Osaka, 27 April 2012)

More recently¹⁴ the first case of a 52-year-old man being arrested for abandoning the corpse of his father (78) was reported in Niigata, the region where the author lives¹⁵. The son, who was living with his father, had no regular job for about a decade and both water and gas supplies had been stopped for eight years. He was sentenced to a suspended prison term of two and a half years for the illegal disposal of his father’s body and fraud in that he received his father’s pension benefit to the sum of 174,000. However, he was arrested again only a week after release for shoplifting food priced at 670 yen (less than U\$7)¹⁶. It was presumed that the son had no money and no idea how to pull his life back together given that he had not worked or contacted with other people for over ten years.

(2) Moral and Social issue

Similar to many other societies it has doubtless been regarded and probably still is that kin are primarily the people who take care of their family members, they

¹⁴ The most recent case in March 2014 was in Yamagata when a man his 30s was found not guilty of abandoning the body of his 66-year-old father. He was also charged with fraud by receiving the father’s pension in Yamagata, a neighbouring prefecture of Niigata. The judge at Yamagata District Court described their familial relationship as extremely peculiar in that they did not pay any attention to each other despite living in the same house. It was reported that it was in fact his father who had stayed in his room. The prosecution demanded a sentence of two years and six months in prison but the son was found not guilty. Yamagata Shimbun newspaper, 13 March 2014.

¹⁵ Niigata Nippo newspaper, 6 June 2013. The news revealed the fact the son was living with his father, see Jiji Press of 12 June 2013.

¹⁶ Sankei Shimbun newspaper, 9 September 2013. He was released on 3 September as a consequence of the above decree of Niigata District Court.

pay respect to their elders particularly at the point of death. The above cases may illustrate gaps in the family's 'physical' distance and their spiritual, emotional distance in that on the one hand they live together and share the same household whilst on the other hand they somehow ignore the deceased.

Being economically dependent on parents, in or after middle age, can be a crucial factor in defining familial relationships it may not necessarily be as straight forward as living together for the sake of the parent's money. Some have ended up murdering a father or mother in extreme cases¹⁷ whilst other adult children might have lived with their parents in this way as a matter of course.

(3) Reasons why they left it?

So the question arises why families left things the way that they did it. It is assumed that one of the relevant reasons is absolute poverty¹⁸. The families made similar comments indicating that they didn't have the money to see a doctor or to hold a funeral¹⁹.

¹⁷ A 56-year-old man arrested on 28 February 2012 for murder of his father who was killed 12 years previously. The father's body was wrapped up and kept in a self-storage unit that the son rented from the day he killed the father. The son had used up all the father's savings and borrowed money in the name of his father all of was spent on gambling. See the news articles with details of Sankei Shimbun Newspaper "*Shogeki Jiken no Kakushin (the point of shocking news)*" dated 20 March 2012.

¹⁸ The number of recipients (both individual and household) of welfare benefit is increasing every year over the last decade. The most recent figures of recipients are of December 2013 (the figures of December 2012 in bracket for comparison), 2,167,220 (2,151,165) person and 1,598,072 (1,570,823). See each data classified monthly at <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/74-16b.html#link02>

¹⁹ According to the statistics on Public Health Administration for the financial year 2012 (released on 24 October 2013) by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 99.9% of corpses were cremated (1,291,444 of the total 1,291,681, excludes dead fetus, and the remaining 237 are burial), see table 6 of Chapter 4 *Seikatsu Eisei (Environmental Health)* at <http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/List.do?lid=000001114932>. Each municipal government provides the service of cremation at city crematoria at an average price of 10,000 yen per person over 10 years old. However it may be more common to see cases where the deceased person's family uses a funeral company to make arrangements for both cremation and funerals although they may be more

Many of the cases also show a common factor that the adult child was financially dependent on the parent despite being in their 40s and 50s. These adult children were described as “a parasite in expectation of pension” by Japanese Sociologist Professor Yamada²⁰.

The other factor that has been identified is the consequence of long and difficult nursing care for aged parents. It is a continuous burden for the adult children who look after their senior parents by themselves at home, particularly for middle-aged sons. It reveals a common pattern of inevitable elder abuse when the son cannot ask for other’s help.

3 Unattended death cases

(1) About the cases

A serious social problem has emerged in the number of cases of *Kodokushi*, which means unattended death in Japanese²¹. *Kodokushi* is when a person dies alone and remains unnoticed for sometime. This was once understood to be the result of an aging society in that elderly people living on their own were the main

“expensive”.

²⁰ See Yamada, M., *Wa-kingupua Jidai (An Era of Working Poor)* Bungeishunju Ltd., 2009.

²¹ The major trigger was a TV programme entitled “*Muen Shakai (A Society with No Bond)*” broadcasted by NHK at the end of January 2010. Prior to this, in December 2008, a popular female TV personality/entertainer Ai Iijima age 36 was found dead in her house a week after she had died. The news was a great shock to not only her fans but also those who are single and in the same age group given that it highlighted the particular issue. Moreover, NHK had broadcast a documentary programme on the very theme of younger people’s *Kodokushi* in 2005 (NHK Special “*Hitori Danchi no Isshitsu de (Alone in a room of housing complex)*”, 24 September 2005) It is said that the programme illustrated that there were a number of cases of younger people’s *Kodokushi*, which was previously perceived as only relevant to the elderly. NHK Special Shuzai-han and Sasaki, T., *Hitori Darenimo Mitorarezu (Alone, no one attended on deathbed)*, Hankyu Communications Ltd., 2007, at 14.

cause of these unattended death cases. However the reality is that of those who are found dead alone many are relatively young, in the prime of life. The common feature is that these people were not found for some months after the death or were found following reports by neighbours of a foul odor to the landlords.

One of such cases was that of a 39-year-old man who died from starvation and was not found for 3 months²². No one knew of his situation, he had left the word “help” on a piece of paper in an unposted envelope addressed to his uncle who lived in the same region and who had once supported him and his mother. The uncle could not understand that a young person under 40 ended up dying at home from starvation; it was his view that the nephew was responsible given that he could work for a living.

There have been similar cases reported of *Kodokushi* which are more frequent in working age males. Nevertheless it is not confined to men that a 31-year-old woman was found dead alone from starvation in Osaka city in November 2013²³. She was unemployed and originally had been living with her mother (65) who had been ill. They had lived on savings from life insurance money following the father’s death. Four years previously the daughter had asked city hall for advice

²² The story is included in the first chapter of NHK Close-up Gendai Syuzai-han *Tasukete To Ienai (Cannot Say “Help”)*, Bungeishunju Ltd., 2010, pp.13-51. Further details were reported with the comment of his uncle in the Asahi Shimbun newspaper article series of “*Kozoku no Kuni (A Land of Isolated Folk)*” dated 29th December 2010. The series of “*Kozoku no Kuni*” was published in a book, Asahi Shimbun *Kozoku no Kuni Shuzai-han, Kozoku no Kuni – Hitorihitori ga Tsunagaru Jidai e (A Land of Isolated Folk – Toward an Era Where Each Individual Connected with Others)*, Asahi Shimbun Publications Inc. 2012.

²³ It is reported that she had consulted with her brother-in-law about their financial distress in July about 4 months before her death and received cash of 20,000 yen accordingly. Once the news was broadcast both the police and municipal government were criticised for their careless administration. Police could have looked for the daughter in the same house when rescuing the mother because they had been informed that the household was that of mother and daughter.

See Sankei News West dated 20 November 2013, http://sankei.jp.msn.com/west/west_affairs/news/131120/waf13112011350013-n1.htm

about applying for welfare benefit. However she was told that she could return once they had used up all their savings. The Management Company responsible for their residence became suspicious when their rent was not paid in October and supplies of gas, electricity and water had been stopped. The mother was found to be infirm and rescued by the police and the Management Company people; the daughter remained undiscovered and was left alone resulting *Kodokushi*.

(2) Moral and Social issue: Unclaimed bodies

It has been noticed in the never ending reports of unattended death that there are a number of cases where the body was unclaimed as no one wants to accept the responsibility of holding a funeral or being responsible for the burial of cremated ashes. Another category of unclaimed bodies, *Koryo Shibo-nin* which in legal terms means ‘falling dead on the street’, this is where the individual is ‘unknown to all’. In these cases, despite information about the ‘unidentified’ individual being published in the official gazette, no one comes forward and so it is the responsibility of each local government to arrange cremation of the body. There were no nationwide official statistics and so an NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) news crew investigated a number of *Koryo Shibo-nin*, they learnt that whilst some of them may be identified there were up to 32,000 per year²⁴.

It was also reported that there were cases where the deceased person was identified but not looked after following their death, like the following cases: born ashes were kept in a pickle jar (instead of an urn) which was left outside a funeral company in Tokyo with a note saying “please keep and look after it for sometime, will come back to collect it in the future”²⁵. Another case was that where a

²⁴ See Chapter 1 of NHK “Muen Shakai Project” Shuzai-han, *Muen Shakai (A Society with No Bond)*, Bungeishunju Ltd., 2010, at 18-69.

²⁵ The story told by a funeral company *Fuji No Hana* in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, in Sankei Shimbun newspaper article series “*Cho-ju Shakai no Kyojitsu (Truth and False of the Longevity Society)*” Vol. 3 *Kanashimi no Nai Shi (A Death with No Sorrow)*, dated 17

daughter left bone ashes of her mother at a temple and said “I don’t want to get involved”²⁶.

Those who die alone may not necessarily be identified after death in some cases they may have lived under an assumed name, hiding their background. Their true story only being revealed following their death or in some cases it remains concealed.

(3) Reasons: why they were left alone

So the question then arises why they were left alone in that way? A common feature of the unattended death cases is that the deceased has difficulties with his/her family, some of them being divorcees, unemployed or day workers resulting in financial difficulties. It has also been noted that more men than women are subject to the unattended cases. This trend is explained in that men tend to ‘pretend’ that they are doing well, that they are working and living a ‘normal’ life as they cannot “ask for help” to ease their living²⁷. It would appear that it is not only men but also women who are under pressure to bridge the gap between the ideal and the reality by acting as though they are achieving thereby meeting the expectations set by the family and themselves. The result of no contact with the family could mean that they could not ask for help and may have led to them passing away unattended.

The emergency of *Kodokushi* may also be explained as a result of an increase in

October 2010.

²⁶ Op. cit., n.25, “*Cho-ju Shakai no Kyojitsu (Truth and False of the Longevity Society)*”, dated 18 October 2010.

²⁷ Ishida analyses gender differences in that men are likely to be more isolated compared to women who may be more able to access a variety of support. See “Chapter 5: Naze dansei ga koritsushiyasuinoka (Why men tend to be more isolated)?” in Ishida, M., *Koritsu no Shakaigaku: Muenshakai no Shoho-sen (Sociology of Isolation: A Prescription for Society with No-bond)*, Keisoshobo, 2011, at 128-148.

single-person households. It is apparent that there has been a clear shift in down-sizing of households over the 45 years²⁸ (see Figure 1).

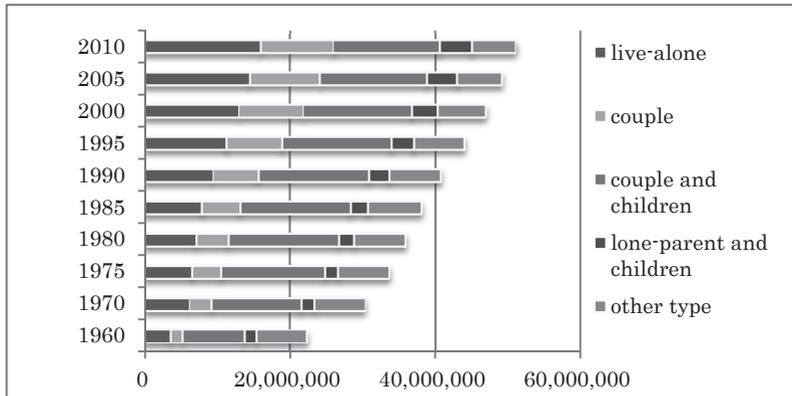


Figure 1 Down-sizing shift of household 1960-2010 (based on the result of National Census which is carried out every five years²⁹)

There is no official national statistics for the number of *Kodukushi*. However the graph shown here, the *Kodukushi* cases in rented accommodation governed by the Urban Renaissance Agency (hereafter UR)³⁰ indicates its increasing trend (see Figure 2).

²⁸ It should be noted that there is a significant portion of “other type” households which includes those of three generations and with non-family members.

²⁹ See the latest data in English at website of the Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/kokusei/index.htm>

³⁰ UR is an independent administration agency under supervision of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism which holds 760 thousand rented accommodations throughout Japan.

For its profile booklet, see http://www.ur-net.go.jp/profile/english/pdf/profile_en_all.pdf

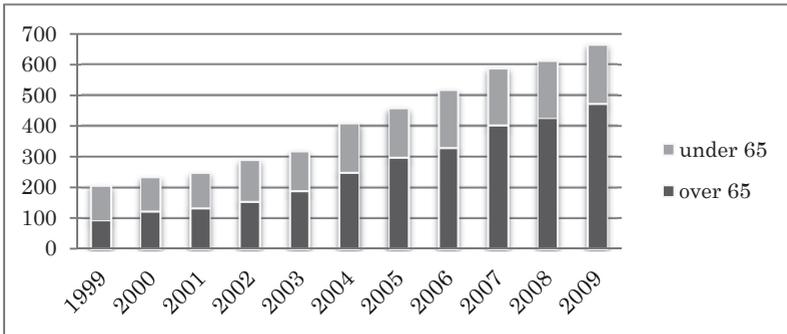


Figure 2 *Kodokushi* cases³¹ of rented accommodation governed by UR (Press Release of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of 13 January 2012)

4 Preventing deaths in isolation

(1) Unattended death of plural family members

What has become more prominent in recent days is that *Kodokushi* can be the unattended death of not just a single person but two or more members of a family found dead together. These cases are called *Koritsushi*, which also means to die in isolated circumstances³².

A common pattern of these cases is that one of the family members has been the carer for the other, irrespective of the age, it includes the cases of younger people such as handicapped member of the family: 1) In January 2012 in Hokkaido a

³¹ In October 2011, UR announced that they do not count a case as *Kodokushi* anymore if the body was discovered within a week following the person's death. Therefore the series of statistics are disconnected to the updated ones thereafter. This new definition of *Kodokushi* by UR has been controversial in that some argue it is still *Kodokushi* irrespective of any length of time before the body was found because the term means unattended death.

³² See an article by Doteuchi, A. "*Hitorigrashi dake dewa nai 'Koritsushi'* ('Die in isolation' is not just of those who lives alone)", Niissei Kiso Kenkyujo, http://www.nli-research.co.jp/report/researchers_eye/2012/eye120409.html

42-year-old woman died through illness and her mentally impaired sister aged 40 who had been dependent on her older sister died from cold³³. Despite the fact that the older sister had sought welfare benefit at the Sapporo City Hall, the Municipal Government, the sisters did not receive any support in the end. 2) A 45-year-old woman died suddenly and her 4-year-old disabled son starved to death in Tokyo in February 2012³⁴. 3) Similarly in Yokohama in December 2011, a 77-year-old woman was found dead with her 44-year-old son who it was presumed died after his mother because he was seriously disabled and could not manage without her care³⁵.

Furthermore three members of one family, a couple in their 60s and their 39 year-old son were all found dead in Saitama near Tokyo³⁶. It was presumed that they died a couple months before their bodies were found in February 2012. The mother had once asked a neighbour to lend her some money and been advised to contact the local governmental office but she did not do so. None of the three had been registered as a local citizen which may have explained they're being reluctant to seek official 'help'. It was also found that gas and electricity supplies had been stopped.

(2) Possible countermeasures and difficulty

Since these *Kodokushi* and *Koritsushi* cases have become more frequent the State and Municipal governments have begun to undertake countermeasures. In order to prevent these cases they have been sending officials to visit households that fall within certain categories, for example those inhabited by single or elderly

³³ Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper, 21th, 23rd and 24th January 2012.

³⁴ Mainichi Shimbun newspaper, 22 February 2012.

³⁵ Sankei Shimbun newspaper and Mainichi Shimbun newspaper dated 17 March 2012.

³⁶ See Sankei Shimbun newspaper, 5 April 2012. It was reported that the family had moved from Akita, a prefecture in the Northern part of Japan thereby in order to escape from multiple debts in 2001.

couples³⁷. The Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare released a report in March 2008 entitled “‘*Koritsushi*’ *Zero o Mezashite (Toward No ‘Koritsushi’)*” which was prepared by a Promotion Council who had discussed how to create a society where any elderly adults can live in peace and security and to prevent *Koritsushi* cases³⁸.

Many municipal governments have a policy of collaboration with companies such as suppliers of gas and electricity whereby if any household stops using these utilities it will be reported as ‘suspicious’ and may be at risk of *Koritsushi*. Such a strategy of “neighbourhood watch” has been reported as working successfully shortly after the above *Koritsushi* incident in Saitama. In late March 2012 in Sayama city in Saitama, a local woman who makes doorstep deliveries of nutritious drinks, much like a milkman or a newspaper boy, noticed the unusual sign that one of the households had left the bottles unopened outside. She called the police who found a 75-year-old mother who had been dead for sometime but they were fortunately able to save her 45-year-old disabled son from starvation³⁹.

However, it has been pointed out that one of the reasons why governmental activities and countermeasures, by both state, municipal, other organizations and individuals have been unsuccessful in preventing *Kodokushi* and *Koritsushi* cases is the difficulty of balancing the protection of privacy with that of intervention. This is a common issue which is also discussed in other cases relating to family matters such as domestic violence and the abuse of children and the elderly. Thus

³⁷ See Chapter 4 of op. cit. NHK Special Shuzai-han and Sasaki, T. at 139-230, for various approaches and countermeasures by different bodies and institutions tackling the problem of *Kodokushi*. It is well known that a residents group of the Tokiwadaira Housing Complex in Chiba have carried out pioneering activities for prevention of *Kodokushi* since the first such *Kodokushi* case of a 69-year-old man who had been dead for 3 years before his body was found in October 2000, *ibid.* at 21-67.

³⁸ It describes *Koritsushi* as “a death which impairs one’s dignity”. Press Release of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare dated 28 March 2008, <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2008/03/h0328-8.html>

³⁹ Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper, 23 March 2012.

it is not easy to enter someone's household, a private sphere, nonetheless there might be good reason to do so when the 'victims' are in life-threatening situations within the home.

5 Conclusion

What is the real picture of family bonds and ties behind the phenomena of cases of so-called attended but ignored death and unattended death? There are several common factors which may explain the causes of these phenomena as mentioned above; it may be due to poverty and the impact of disparities, lack of feelings of respect for the deceased, hesitation in asking for help, and being isolated within society. It has also been pointed out that the family, which may be widely regarded as the primary, natural and fundamental group unit of society, may not be functioning as a 'group' in these cases.

It would be difficult and is probably not possible to derive the right reasons why the family decided not to announce the death and why the deceased of unattended death cases were left in that way. It has been pointed out that it may be indicative of a tendency towards the dilution of family relationship. However it is not as simple, there may multiple factors and it is not certain that family relationships in the past were 'thick' or 'thicker' with more relevant bonds and ties in Japanese society⁴⁰.

Nonetheless there is no immediate answer to explain the phenomena, so what can be done for this. Besides the governmental support in helping people

⁴⁰ The theme of *Kodokushi*, *Koritsuthi* was exposed through the TV programme of NHK as mentioned above and the term "*Muen Shakai (A Society with No Bond)*" has been broadly accepted accordingly. However question remains whether Japanese society in the past was in fact "*Yuen Shakai (A Society with Bonds and Ties)*" and if so, to what extent and in what way we had enjoyed the bonds and ties.

overcome poverty by a number of means, it would be necessary to reconsider the meaning of the family, particularly in terms of its boundary and distance, both physical and spiritual. It is presumed that living together or blood-related family members cannot be expected to look after each other anymore. There is no guarantee of receiving care and support from ‘original’ family members.

The prospect of territorial/neighbourly ties and not familial ones has led to the emergency of an alternative style of ‘home’ created by group members living together under the same roof. This trend of sharing a house with friends or even non-acquaintances has featured in the media as well as in accommodation advertisement. They share common living space such as dining room and kitchen. Some of the comments of the residents explain the reason behind sharing a house with others in that they fear that they will end in *Kodokushi*. They have chosen to live a life within a man-made familial relationship in order to prevent dying in solitary circumstances.

If the original members were not available regardless of the reason, it may be possible to develop your ‘familial’ relationship by altering ‘family’ members with no blood ties. Having the option of alternative ‘family’ does not give answers to the questions “what is family?” and “who is my family?” which we still need to explore: it cannot be as simple as to predicate that family is whom you have chosen. However it is nevertheless important to assure each individual has the freedom to call anyone ‘family’ whomever s/he wants to, irrespective of blood or affinal ties and even non-human being such as one’s dog⁴¹.

⁴¹ Professor S. Minamikata gave a paper entitled “Is a dog a member of my family?” at *International Symposium on the Jurisprudence of Extended Families, Extending Families and Intergenerational Solidarity* in Doha, in May 2012. He pointed out that a family’s dog can be regarded as a ‘family’ member by illustrating trends of people’s behaviour in that they treat their dogs in the same way as human members of the family in current Japanese society.