

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Japan's Newest Technology Innovation: Priest Delivery

By JONATHAN SOBLE SEPT. 20, 2016

SAKAI, Japan — The stubble-haired Buddhist priest lit incense at a small, cupboardlike altar just as members of his order have done for centuries. As the priest chanted sutras, Yutaka Kai closed his eyes and prayed for his wife, who died last year of complications from a knee replacement.

Mr. Kai, 68, set aside his family's devout Buddhism when he left his rural hometown decades ago to work in a tire factory. That meant Mr. Kai did not have a local temple to turn to for the first anniversary of his wife's death, a milestone for Japanese Buddhists.

Cue the internet. In modern Japan, a Buddhist priest can now be found just a few mouse clicks away, on Amazon.com.

"It's affordable, and the price is clear," said Mr. Kai's eldest son, Shuichi, 40. "You don't have to worry about how much you're supposed to give."

The priest at Mrs. Kai's memorial, Junku Soko, is part of a controversial business that is disrupting traditional funeral arrangements in Japan. In a country where regulations and powerful interests have stymied much of the so-called gig economy — Uber, for instance, is barely a blip here — a network of freelancing priests is making gains in the unlikely sphere of religion.

Their venture is viewed by some as unseemly, and it has drawn condemnation from Buddhist leaders. An umbrella group representing Japan's many Buddhist sects complained publicly after Amazon began offering obosan-bin — priest delivery — on its Japanese site last year, in partnership with a local start-up.

But the priests and their backers say they are addressing real needs. They assert that obosan-bin is helping to preserve Buddhist traditions by making them accessible to the millions of people in Japan who have become estranged from the religion.

“Temples will sell you 10 yen candles for 100 yen,” said Mr. Soko, 39. “They’re protecting their own interests.”

Such arguments will be familiar to anyone who has watched e-commerce companies upend other parts of the economy, from book publishing to airlines, taxis and hotels.

In Japan, even in areas far less sensitive than religion, newcomers often receive a chilly reception, and start-ups are rarer than in other rich countries. Among the explanations are a scarcity of venture capital, the political clout wielded by established businesses and a culture that values stability over the creative destruction that drives growth in countries like the United States.

Yet religion may prove to be an exception. It is so opaque — and so removed from the day-to-day lives of many modern Japanese — that a little technological disruption may prove welcome.

The stakes are material as well as spiritual. As with religious institutions in many other countries, temples in Japan receive generous tax breaks.

“If it becomes a fee for services instead of a donation, and the government says, ‘O.K., we’re going to tax you like a regular business,’ how are we supposed to object?” said Hanyu Kakubo, a priest at the Japan Buddhist Federation, which opposes obosan-bin.

As with adherents of many religions, Buddhists typically give donations to priests for their services. Proponents of obosan-bin argue that conventional temples already operate like businesses — ones that put customers at a

disadvantage though murky pricing. The amount is left up to the donor, a custom that leads many to overpay, Mr. Soko said.

“They don’t want to make things clear,” he said.

Much of the reaction in Japan to obosan-bin has been positive, for equally familiar reasons: It offers convenience and low, predictable prices.

“There has been fierce criticism from the Buddhist world, but these days many people are abandoning religious funerals altogether,” said Noriyuki Ueda, an anthropologist who studies Buddhism at Tokyo Institute of Technology. “At least people using obosan-bin think having a priest is necessary.”

Mr. Kakubo of the Buddhist federation conceded that many temples had done a poor job of adapting.

“We need to reflect on the fact that we’ve created this situation where people feel that they have to turn to the internet,” he said, adding: “Are we protecting our vested interests? Yes, obviously.”

The process of booking a priest on Amazon can feel disconcertingly secular. Users click on one of several options and add it to a virtual shopping cart, the same way they would a juicer or a pair of shoes. Prices are fixed. A basic memorial ceremony at the home of the deceased costs ¥35,000, or about \$344.

The most expensive package, with a second service at a cemetery and the granting of a special posthumous Buddhist name, costs ¥65,000.

Obosan-bin was originally the brainchild of Minrevi, a for-profit internet start-up. Before signing on with Amazon last year, it built a network of 400 priests and took bookings on its own website, which it still maintains, as well as by phone. It said it keeps about 30 percent of the fees it collects; the rest goes to the priest.

The company has added another 100 priests to meet demand generated by its new partnership with Amazon, said Jumpei Masano, a spokesman. It expects bookings to increase by 20 percent this year, to around 12,000.

“A lot of people don’t have any connection with a temple, so they don’t know where to turn or what to do when they have to arrange a funeral,” Mr. Masano

said. "We saw there was a need."

Amazon declined to comment. In a written reply to the Buddhist association in April, reported by Japanese news media, it said its goal was "to provide as much information as possible" to its users so they "can make their own decisions."

When Mr. Kai's wife, Chieko, died, her funeral was held at a secular funeral parlor. But for the anniversary, Mr. Kai decided he wanted a priest.

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"We had a big altar in the house where I grew up, but not here," he said, gesturing around his small, tidy apartment in a public housing complex.

He said he rarely thought about religion until his wife's death. In the years after World War II, rural dwellers like Mr. Kai poured into places like Sakai, an industrial suburb of Osaka. Relatively few bothered to put down new religious roots in the city.

Today, 70 percent of Japanese identify themselves in surveys as nonreligious or atheist, though many said they still followed traditional religious customs such as going to a Shinto shrine at New Year or periodically visiting their ancestors' graves.

Mr. Kai's daughter-in-law found Minrevi's website. Her only request was that the priest should belong to the order to which the Kai family had belonged in his hometown, in Ehime Prefecture on the island of Shikoku.

Mr. Soko fit the bill. At the ceremony, which took place in Mr. Kai's apartment, Mr. Soko delivered a short homily about faith and remembering the dead.

The Kais seemed satisfied: They said they would request Mr. Soko for the next important death anniversary, in two years' time.

Mr. Soko said innovations like obosan-bin are vital to Buddhism's survival. Most temples' dues-paying congregations are shrinking as a result of social change and rural depopulation.

Incomes are shrinking, too. Revenue at temples and other religious institutions has fallen by a third in the last 20 years, mostly because of a drop in regular donations from long-term members, according to the government's Agency for Cultural Affairs.

"In the seminary, they teach you to chant sutras, but they don't tell you anything about how to manage a temple," Mr. Soko said. "We have to try new things."

Follow Jonathan Soble on Twitter @jonathan_soble.

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