

# The Pursuit of Well-being by Elderly Japanese Women and the Symbolism of Bridal Noren Door Curtains

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## The Pursuit of Well-being by Elderly Japanese Women and the Symbolism of Bridal *Noren* Door Curtains

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This paper, based on fieldwork, firstly aims to explore the symbolic meanings of *Hanayome noren* which is a folk object of Nanao originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through explaining the features of Japanese kinship and family structure. It secondly aims to discuss how elderly women in Nanao City (Ishikawa Prefecture) have pursued a sense of well-being by performing exhibitions of *Hanayome Noren* (bridal colorful split door curtains—I will call them bridal *noren*).

Bridal *noren*, which is made using a traditional silk-dyeing technique known as *Kaga Yuzen*, is presented to the bride before her wedding ceremony by her mother, and its pattern and arrangement is decided by her. The *noren* plays an important role in the rite of passage of a woman's marriage into spouse's family, signifying that she is now an official member of the new family. It has no practical use after the wedding ceremony. Despite its sensuous beauty, it is normally just hidden away in the back of a dresser drawer. However, the women in their 60s—having retreated from their roles as housewives and/or shop proprietors—have recently rediscovered the value of their *noren*'s sensuous beauty, taking them out of storage in order to exhibit them as art objects. This paper examines how *noren* serves as a medium at an alliance between natal and conjugal families and how their feelings of well-being are expressed through serving as storytellers during exhibitions of *noren*.

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## 1. Introduction

In researching attempts to achieve well-being among elderly women in Nanao, I found that my informants used the Japanese term *Ikigai* to express a sense of social commitment to their family and community. *Ikigai* means in English “that which most makes life worth living” (Mathews 2010: 167). My informants in their 60s are from merchant households. As housewives they cared for their children until adulthood and for their parents-in-law until death. They have performed their domestic duties as housewives and proprietors and have now relinquished those duties. They think that they are still “young”, “active” and “healthy enough” to take on social roles and responsibilities, and they require *Ikigai*. One woman told me that she had found new *Ikigai* in her final stage of life.

One day I took my bridal *noren* out of the chest of drawers. That is the curtain I had brought with me on my wedding day. Since then it had been confined in there. Its beauty had not faded at all, even after 40–60 years. It was my mother who chose its colors and patterns especially for me. My mother-in-law also has her own curtain, which her mother made. The aesthetics of the curtain’s patterns and colors remind me of motherly love and bonds. I thought that there were probably lots of curtains still confined in the drawers of Nanao, so I asked my friends whether they still had theirs. Then I began to hold exhibitions in order to introduce them to many people and tell the story behind each curtain. That activity has become my new *Ikigai*.

Then I asked what her *Ikigai* had been in the past. She cited her household responsibilities, even though they had been hers by default as a housewife. She continued, “Now my son is married and his wife, my daughter-in-law, has taken over the role of housewife, which she performs very well. I step back now, but I have found my new *Ikigai* in the last years of my life. It is to let many people know about bridal *Noren*.”

After her interview I speculated on why she finds *Ikigai* in the activity of exhibiting *noren*. Tentatively, I concluded as follows. First, now that she has retreated somewhat from domestic life, she feels a sense of *Ikigai* in her deep involvement with social groups such as family and community. Second, she finds *Ikigai* in looking back over her own life before and after marriage.

When considering what English word corresponds to the Japanese word *Ikigai*, one must note Mathews’s use of the term “well-being.” He wrote, “the sense of well-being is difficult to specify in most languages, because there is no term for it; however, Japanese has exactly such a term: *Ikigai*, meaning ‘that which most makes one’s life worth living (Mathews 2010: 167).’” He also described the concept as “one’s deepest bond to one’s social world” and “one’s deepest sense of social commitment” (Mathews 2010: 173), pointing out meanwhile that today’s younger generations are likely to interpret it more as self-realization than as social commitment<sup>1)</sup>. If *Ikigai* is a socioculturally mediated experience as well as a subjective expression, this paper must carefully consider the sociocultural background of elderly women in Nanao and of their bridal *Noren*.

Well-being is for the most part considered either something individual and subjective or a matter of human’s universality from a Western perspective. This paper, however, treats the

phenomenon as a sociocultural mediated one. I will begin below by examining how the idea of “well-being” can be applied to this anthropological study of elderly women’s quality of life.

The term “well-being” is in English deeply related to ideas of health, wealth, and happiness. The latter are subjective and culturally bound concepts determined by Western cultural and linguistic contexts, however, and therefore cross-sociocultural comparisons are difficult. Still, Gordon Mathews and Carolina Izquierdo, anthropologists who are the editors and authors of *Pursuit of Happiness: Well-being in Anthropological Perspective* (2010), argue that comparative studies can be done using ethnographic accounts to conduct careful examinations of sociocultural contexts (Mathews & Izquierdo 2010: 6–10). They define well-being as follows:

Well-being is an optimal state for an individual, community, society, and the world as a whole. It is conceived of, expressed, and experienced in different ways by different individuals and within the cultural contexts of different societies: different societies may have distinctly different culturally shaped visions of well-being. Nonetheless, well-being bears a degree of commonality due to our common humanity and interrelatedness over space and time.

Well-being is experienced by individuals but it may be considered and compared interpersonally and interculturally, since all individuals live within particular worlds of others, and all societies live in a common world at large (Mathews & Izquierdo: 5).

They shed light on both aspects of well-being, which relates deeply both to cultural differences and to human commonalities such as bodily and genetic makeup. In brief they treat well-being as existing dialectically between individuals and society and between cultural relativism and universalism. The discussion above reminds us of the title of the well-known classic by Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man: A Survey of Human Behavior* (1944). Kluckhohn wrote, “Anthropology (which studies other cultures and societies) holds up a great mirror to man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety (Kluckhohn 1944: 19).” In other words, anthropology based on the ethnography of “others” can teach us much about “ourselves”. His discussion implies that the discipline of anthropology lies between others and ourselves and between sociocultural differences and human biological commonalities. Based on the argument above, I will use “well-being” as an anthropological concept for studying individual and sociocultural differences and examining human commonalities in terms of elderly Japanese women’s “well-being”.

This paper will: first, explore the ethnographic background of this study; second, discuss Japanese family and kinship structure in order to clarify the symbolism of bridal *noren* in Nanao; third, examine the activity of exhibiting bridal *noren* with a focus on the narratives given by the elderly women of Nanao and, finally, conclude.

## 2. Ethnographic Background: Nanao City in Japan’s Noto Region

Nanao is situated at the entrance to the Noto region of Ishikawa prefecture (See Figure 1),

which faces the Sea of Japan (or East Sea). Today the Sea of Japan side is called “Rear Japan” (Ura-Nihon), implying that the Noto region is comparatively rustic and under populated. The Pacific Ocean side of Japan, meanwhile, is known as “Front Japan” (Omote-Nihon). These terms were coined during the process of modernization, which established industrial areas and transportation systems along the Pacific Ocean. In the pre-modern period, however, the Sea of Japan side of the country was not “Rear” at all, for it enjoyed the cultural influence of Kyoto, the ancient capital city that had long been the cultural and political center of Japan.

Nanao is the largest city on the Noto Peninsula of Ishikawa prefecture in the Hokuriku region. The population is 57,714 as of 2011, but that number is decreasing due to emigration by the younger generation and to a low birth rate. Compared to Japan’s average of 23.1%<sup>2)</sup> (Ministry of International Affairs and Communications 2010), nearly 30% of the population here is 65 or older (Nanao City 2009). To deal with depopulation and rapid aging, the local government has emphasized the development of a community welfare network and created tourism resources to reinvigorate the local economy. Furthermore, Nanao was struck by a magnitude 6.9 earthquake in 2007. The local government now realizes that it is urgently necessary to construct a support network for the elderly who are living alone or with only a spouse, and thus it tries to prevent disaster as well as depopulation. Nanao, which is divided into 15 districts, used to be a mostly rural area whose residents depended on agriculture and fishing, and so in its districts social relationships are based firmly on reciprocal help. Incidentally, values and lifestyles have changed here in the last decades, with a number of wage earners commuting to offices in the center of the city and many people away from home



**Figure 1** A map of Nanao City of Ishikawa Prefecture

during the day, though relatively close ties still exist between neighbors. The government considers that the most efficient and appropriate method of disaster prevention is to strengthen existing relationships among residents while also forming new ones.

In addition to agriculture and fishing, tourism is now a major industry and important resource for the city. The old shopping street leading to the long-standing temple has become a popular tourist destination, and local goods such as marine products, hand-made candles and soy sauce are sold as souvenirs along with daily foods and goods. During the annual festival of *Seihaku-sai*,<sup>3)</sup> held from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, the total number of man-days in Nanao is estimated at 15 thousand, double the population. This is a good season for tourism, and various events are held at the same time as the festival. One of these is the exhibition of bridal *noren*.

In Nanao, the custom of bridal *noren* has been practiced mainly by merchant families residing along the shopping street mentioned above. Some of their homes, with stores at their fronts, were designated as important cultural properties of Japan in 2004. It was a source of pride to have one's daughter marry the son of a family on *Ipponsugi* Street. Today, bridal *noren* belonging to those families have taken on new significance as valuable tourist attractions both locally and elsewhere.

### 3. The Symbolic Meanings of Bridal *Noren*

This chapter explores the sociocultural and historical context of bridal *noren* in order to understand their symbolic meanings. I will examine: first, the history of bridal *noren*; second, the sociocultural background of the Japanese kinship system; and third, the ways in which bridal *noren* are used during and after marriage.

#### 3-1. Bridal *Noren* as Dowry and its History

The history of bridal *noren* goes back to the federal period around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the modern nation of Japan was inaugurated with the establishment of the Meiji Government. The custom of using the curtain as dowry was at its peak of popularity from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In pre-modern times, during the feudal military regime of Tokugawa that lasted over 200 years, the Noto region belonged to the Kaga feudal domain governed by the lord Maeda. It was one of the political and cultural centers of the Sea of Japan side of the country. Maeda had strong ties to the Tokugawa clan, holder of the hereditary military dictatorship, and Kaga was in any case a prosperous region involved in trade with the Kita-Kyushu area, the southern part of Japan, and, by sea, the Korean Peninsula. Overland trade utilized the road leading to Kyoto, and goods and ideas came to Kaga from there in abundance. Kaga even gained fame as "Little Kyoto". The yuzen process of dyeing, which is used to make high quality kimono and bridal *noren*, was one craft introduced to Kaga from Kyoto.

Lord Maeda occupied what is today Ishikawa Prefecture. The custom of using bridal *noren* as dowry originated among the merchant caste at the end of Tokugawa period. There was a hierarchy of castes, including warriors, peasants, artisans, and merchants. For warriors, especially very powerful ones such as lords who controlled whole regions, marriage could

change the political map by establishing ties with allies or challengers. Thus for warriors marriage was an alliance and a means to achieve property or status. In lords' marriages, the bride's dowry represented her birth family's economic and social status. The concept of the family in the feudal period described above is called *Ie*.

When the modern period, the Meiji era, began in 1868, former warriors and their descendants took control of the Meiji government and removed caste barriers. Their values and lifestyles began to be codified in new legal codes such as that of family law, in part through formal and informal instructional media and mass communication (Befu 1971: 32). Thus traditional values and practices regarding family and marriage survived even into the Meiji era<sup>4</sup>. For example, the system conferring rights of inheritance only to male householders remained in place.

Incidentally, the custom of bringing a dowry to marriage was introduced among the merchant castes during the late pre-modern period. Marriage for merchants was also an alliance, a way to achieve and ensure social status and business. Bridal *noren* thus became symbols of alliances between merchant *Ie*.

### 3-2. Bridal *Noren* as Symbols of Alliance between Families

Before further discussion of the symbolism of the curtain, Japanese family and kinship systems in the past and present should be explained.

The legal codes governing family law were revised again after the Reformation of the Second World War<sup>5</sup>. Socioeconomic and cultural conditions surrounding the family have changed greatly since the War and the economic growth of the 1970s. The shift in industrial structure brought about by economic growth resulted in a reduction in size of the Japanese family. The number of nuclear families increased and, especially among the young, marriage came to be seen as an alliance between individuals rather than one between families. The term *Ie* also evokes archaic images of feudal and patriarchal families for most Japanese<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, the concept of *Ie* is still essential to an understanding of Japanese family and kinship system today, particularly in discussions of rural Japan.

Traditionally the term *Ie* referred to the kinship group consisting of all those who resided together and shared socioeconomic lives, including their ancestors. *Ie* means the physical house as well, however. Anthropologist Harumi Befu, author of *Japan: An Anthropological Introduction* (1970), explains patterns of succession in *Ie* as follows. Although succession by the oldest son was most common, it also happened that the oldest child, regardless of gender, was expected to remain with the parents (Befu 1971: 41). In another variant, the youngest son or adopted child succeeded. In terms of residence there were matrilineal patterns, as well as patrilineal and neolocal ones. It seems that *Ie* was not a patrilineal descent group but rather a social institution with bilateral inclinations. Still, the head of an *Ie* was always male, and a man held authority over and responsibility for his wife, children, and parents. Women took on the role of housewife, looking after children, caring for in-laws, and often helping run the family business.

A bilateral kinship system is one in which the maternal and paternal lines are equally important in terms of descent and inheritance. The bilateral features of *Ie* can be explained using the notion of house proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi -Strauss 1982). He intro-

duced the concept to discuss the nonunilineal or bilateral features of the apparently unilineal, clan-like Kwakiutl *numayma*, but he pointed out striking resemblances between Kwakiutl *numayma*, the houses of European Medieval period, and those of Japan in the Heian and subsequent periods (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 174). Anthropologists Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, applying his concept of the house to an analysis of kinship throughout Southeast Asia, summarize Lévi-Strauss's discussion as follows.

European noble houses combined agnatic and uterine principles of succession as well as sometimes adopting in heirs, often through marriage. Their wealth consisted of both tangible property and less tangible names, titles and prerogatives, and their continuity was based on both kinship and marriage alliances (Carsten & Jones 1995: 7).

They focus on what Lévi-Strauss says about the house: that as a grouping it endures through time, its continuity assured not simply through succession and replacement of human resources but also through the fixed or movable property such as names, titles and prerogatives integral to its existence and identity (Carsten & Jones 1995: 7). Apparently the picture of the house painted by Lévi-Strauss is also applicable to the Japanese notion of *Ie*, which has roots in the pre-modern period.

The bilateral features of Japanese kinship can be observed in the civil code. Article 725 dictates who counts as a relative: this includes a relation by blood within the sixth degree, a spouse and a relative by affinity within the third degree. That means that Japanese relatives include both relations by both blood and marriage. These rules were not revised even during the postwar reformation. The system's bilateral nature is also evident from behavior among relatives. Japanese people associate with both maternal and paternal relatives in their everyday lives. The obligations of maternal relatives are emphasized at a child's rites of passage: the first birthday; *Omiyamairi*, the visit to a shrine on the 100<sup>th</sup> day after birth; the first Boys' Day on May 5<sup>th</sup> or Girls' Day on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, and so on. At these occasions the mother's relatives are obligated to prepare and present congratulatory gifts for the child. While a bridal *noren* is a dowry, it is also one such gift from maternal relatives to a child at a rite of passage.

The bilateral features of Japanese kinship are growing more conspicuous these days. For example, the preference for living with daughters has become marked among relatively young parents in their 50s and 60s in the context of low birth rates and an aging population. According to research conducted by the laboratory of the housing manufacturer Asahi Kasei Homes since 1980, the number of parents in their 50s and 60s who want to live with their married daughters is increasing (Asahi Kasei Homes Corporation, 2007). This research shows that 49% of parents in their 50s expect their married daughters to live with them. Furthermore, a new type of tomb called "*Ryouke baka* (tomb of the two families)" is gaining popularity. Customarily a tomb is succeeded by males, but today the number of elderly people without male successors is increasing. To deal with that situation, the names of both spouses' families are inscribed on a "tomb of the two families" that is then worshipped by the married couple. In short, maternal relations in Japan are emphasized more today than they once were<sup>7)</sup>.

Considering the social context outlined above, bridal *noren* in the Noto region can be considered symbols of the bilateral nature of Japanese kinship because they serve to represent



alliances between families joined in marriage.

### 3-3. Wedding Ritual Using Bridal *Noren* and What Follows

Bridal *noren* are used in wedding rituals. The wedding ritual is a significant rite of passage for the bride, who transfers her membership from her natal family, *Ie*, to the husband's family, *Ie*. The curtain symbolizes the bride during the ritual. When the wedding ritual is held at the groom's house, the bride brings the curtain with her there. At the beginning of the ceremony the bride and the groom stand in front of the house's entrance and drink a small cup of water, a mixture of water brought from both natal houses. Then they enter the groom's house and the curtain is hung from the lintel at the entrance to the room that holds the family's Buddhist altar, where where the groom's *Ie*'s ancestors are worshiped. The bride then passes under the curtain, enters the room, sits straight, puts her hands together in front of the altar, and says "Korekara Yoroshiku Onegaishimasu (Please recognize me as a new family member)". That speech act is considered the first stage in the process of being confirmed as a formal member of the groom's family. After that, the wedding ceremony begins. In addition to the curtain, the bride brings a lacquered multi-tiered food box full of fresh Japanese sweets with which to greet neighbors after the wedding. The box is wrapped in a *Furoshiki*, a wrapping cloth, decorated using the same colorful Kaga Yuzen dyeing process used for the curtain.

In the past few decades Japanese wedding styles have diversified, and ceremonies are now often held at ceremonial halls. Western Christian styles of wedding have gained popularity, as well as Shinto and Buddhist ones. However, the ritual of passing under the curtain has been recontextualized in the new ceremonies and is still practiced as an important rite for the new bride. The colors and patterns of the curtain are easily chosen from the catalog of a kimono shop, just like shopping by mail order. Nevertheless, the curtain is the private property of the bride. Even if it is very expensive or beautiful, it is never reused at anyone else's wedding. That means that every woman in Nanao has her own curtain, and that any given house has as many curtains as brides.

The bridal *noren* is still considered a significant object that cements an alliance between families and represents the affection, wishes and prayers of the bride's mother and natal family. Thus after the wedding it becomes an amulet to prevent misfortune, even confined as it usually is to a drawer.

When a new bride becomes a formal member of her husband's family, she takes on the role of housewife. This means she becomes a mother, cares for her child until it becomes independent, supports the family business, and finally takes care of her spouse's parents until they pass away. Considering the narrative of the woman in her 60s introduced in the second chapter, releasing the curtains from the drawers, spreading them in order, and discovering new value in the bridal *noren* might mean reaffirming the value of a woman's own life as a member of the *Ie* she married into and confirming the continuity of *Ie*.

## 4. Storytelling with Bridal *Noren* as a Means to Well-being for Elderly Women

This chapter focuses on how elderly women revitalized their local community by attaching new importance to bridal *noren*. Bridal *noren* are made using a Japanese cultural technology

called the *Kaga yuzen* process of dyeing, which is usually used to color silk kimono, Japan's traditional clothing. *Noren* are partition curtains made from fabric and now hung mostly at the entrances of traditional Japanese stores. Although *noren* in general are usually made of stout cotton and dyed with a simple indigo dye, special bridal *noren* are usually made of silk, though sometimes cotton or linen is used, and dyed with auspicious colorful hand-painted patterns such as court carriages, mandarin ducks, or flowers. The patterns are chosen by the bride's mother and hand-painted along with the family crest.

Since the curtain is of no practical use after the wedding, it is usually confined to a chest of drawers in the bride's new home. However, the beauty of bridal *noren* has recently been rediscovered by women in their 60s: the curtains have been recontextualized as art objects and tourist attractions in order to revitalize the local economy. Women organize bridal *noren* galleries and tell stories of the bond between mother and daughter embedded in each curtain's design. The curtains belong not only to these women but also to their mothers-in-law.

*Ipponsugi* Street in Nanao has existed since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It has 40 or more shops, including a Japanese-style candle store, a family Buddhist altar, a confectionary, a tea house, and more. As mentioned above, four of the shops with residences above them have been registered as important cultural properties, and the street has become one of the most well-known sightseeing spots in Nanao.

In 2004, when one building on *Ipponsugi* Street was designated as a cultural asset, the wives of merchants there had the idea of revitalizing the street and celebrating the town's history. Their attentions turned to the bridal *noren* that had been confined to the chests in their storehouses for so long. The curtains' aesthetic value were thus rediscovered by these women in their 60s, who had retired from their domestic duties as caretakers of their children and in-laws. They released their curtains from the confines of their storehouses and began to display them at exhibitions, thereby reaffirming their value as works of art. In 2004 they began turning rooms in their stores, the registered heritage sites, into galleries in which the curtains were displayed for visitors during the annual big festival, *Seihaku-sai*.

The bridal *noren* exhibitions begin with an opening ceremony in which the new bride and the groom walk down the street in front of the audience. The ceremony climaxes at the symbolic point when the bride passes under the curtain. After the ceremony, the bridal *noren* galleries are opened (See Photo 1 and 2).

The women who organize these displays tell stories of the bonds between mothers and daughters behind the curtains. There is a story about the curtain of a woman of 88 wedded a man who was heir to the Japanese-style candle store at 18 years old during the Second World War. Despite shortages of food and clothing, her mother saved in order to make a beautiful curtain for her daughter. She also gave her three sets of a chest of drawers full of kimono. A pair of family crests and a pair of court carriages were hand-painted on the curtain. For the daughter the curtain is a significant reminder of her mother's love.

After the big success exhibitions were held not only in Nanao during festivals but also in Tokyo and Osaka. The curtains came to mediate communication between the local community and the outside world. Brochures and official websites introduce bridal *noren* and the galleries on *Ipponsugi* Street.

One woman who had just come back from Osaka told me with excitement how she acted



**Photo 1** Poster for an exhibition held in *Ipponsugi* Street, April 29<sup>th</sup>–May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011



**Photo 2** Poster for an exhibition held in Osaka, February 3<sup>rd</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>, 2011

as a storyteller at the exhibition held in Osaka:

“It was my very first experience communicating so deeply with people outside of my hometown. Thanks to bridal *noren*, I could meet many people and pass on stories about the deep affection between mothers and daughters that is embedded in the curtains’ beauty. I want to continue this activity as long as possible, because this is my *Ikigai* indeed. Now my son is married. His wife, my daughter-in-law, has taken over household responsibilities, which she manages very well. I have retired from my role as housewife, but I in the last years of life I have found my new *Ikigai*.”

The woman told me that she sought and attained a sense of well-being by reaffirming the value of bridal *noren* and telling stories at the galleries. Her narrative interested me because it illustrated what bridal *noren* mean to her and other women of Nanao and illuminated the curtains’ sociocultural and historical background.

## 5. Conclusion

In the first chapter I discussed the concept of well-being in order to explain the subject of this paper. In the second chapter I explored the sociocultural and historical background of Nanao. In the third chapter I discussed the multiple meanings of bridal *noren*. First, it is both a dowry and an obligatory gift from maternal relatives to a child during a rite of passage. Second, it symbolizes an alliance between relatives on the father’s side and the mother’s side. Third, it acts as an amulet protecting the bride from trouble throughout her life. For the women of Nanao, discovering new value in bridal *noren* might be a powerful means of reaffirming the value of their pasts and attaining well-being in the present. In the fourth chapter I introduced

the activity through which the women of Nanao pursue well-being. The women pursue well-being by engaging in social activity that includes them in various relationships throughout the community. They remain a part of society even after retiring from their more active roles. Japanese elderly women are portrayed in the writings of Westerners as being extremely dependent on their families and any groups to which they belong<sup>8</sup>). But is it really so?

Japanese women are stereotypically described by Western-trained scholars as compliant, long-suffering, nurturing, and obedient to fathers, husbands, and grown sons (Smith 1982: xv). *The Women of Suye Mura* (1982), coauthored by anthropologist Robert J. Smith and literary scholar Ella Lury Wiswell, provided a new portrayal of the Japanese women. Incidentally, the book is based on Wiswell's journal, recorded while she accompanied her former husband, anthropologist John F. Embree, on a field survey of Suye Mura in rural Japan from 1935 to 1936. The book seems to have succeeded in revising a stereotyped image.

In Wiswell's writing, the women of Suye Mura are submerged in household roles: they are daughters, sisters, housewives, mothers, and grandmothers in the households of farmers, merchants, and artisans. Nevertheless, they also have active and lively social relationships in the village's public sphere. The women of Suye emerge as strongly opinionated, curious about certain aspects of life in the outside world, and eager to pass on gossip (Smith 1982: xvii–xviii). As Wiswell wrote, they enjoy participating in various community activities such as those of a women's formal association, "*fujinkai*", Buddhist religious activities, "*ko*" and so on (Smith & Wiswell 1982: 23–60). Remarkably, the book deals with the daily lives of older women, who were rarely made the subjects of ethnographies. The spheres of these older women may have been restricted due to illiteracy and limited knowledge of the world beyond Suye Mura and its surroundings. However, they had the knowledge and skills to cope with varied and colorful interpersonal relationships among villagers. In the Suye of the 1930s, while men dominated the public sphere, older women were quite capable of taking on men in public. Confrontation was rare, but the women of Suye were often seen placating men or trying to deal with them firmly but gently (Smith 1982: xviii).

Despite differences in sociocultural and historical contexts, I think the women of Suye whom Wiswell and Smith portray have much in common with those in Nanao whom I discussed in this paper. Wiswell and Smith do not introduce the term "well-being" to describe the lives of Suye's women, but the women of Suye, regardless of age, seem to have attained a sense of well-being by carrying out their obligations to the community.

Regardless of age, gender, or sociocultural and historical context, are different, humans are social beings and cannot live in total isolation. In American gerontology the inclusive concept of "productive aging" is used to analyze the wide range of activities in which elderly people engage. These vary widely, may be paid or not, and include housework, childcare, volunteer work, helping family and friends, capacity-building, and self-care (Butler, R. N. & Gleason, H. P. eds. 1985; Howell, N. M., J. Hinterlong, & M. W. Sherraden 2001). Doris Francis, author of the paper "The significance of work friends in late life", argues that in the 1970s a new view of adulthood as a time of growth and development emerged. That is, retirement after thirty-five years of work was no longer perceived as a negative transition, the end of life or a return to domestic duties; it was seen rather as an opportunity to reassess and renew commitments, explore untapped avenues of creativity, and reconstitute the self (Francis 2000:

183). American sociologist Robert C. Atchley discusses retirement as a social role, while it has been customary for sociologists to refer to it as a “roleless role”. He points out that socialization in retirement involves establishing prerequisites at least as much as it does developing specific knowledge and skills (Atchley 2000: 124). One specific prerequisite for retirement, he writes, is developing leisure skills and ties with organizations in the community (Atchley 2000: 119). The concept of “productivity”, however, which has deep roots in American socio-cultural contexts, helps explain how the elderly women of Nanao feel a sense of well-being when they are involved in social activities through bridal *noren* again in their late lives.

Although concepts of well-being vary with culture and society, I would like to conclude by pointing out that ideas of “social responsibility” and “deep involvement with society” are essential in any attempt to reconsider and understand the sense of well-being felt by these elderly women.

## Notes

- 1) Mathews added that living for one’s own fulfillment had become the dominant cultural meaning of *Ikigai* in Japan, but this is still not an accepted norm in Japanese institutions (Mathews 2010: 170). The word “well-being” is defined by Japanese anthropologist Nanami Suzuki as a state of happiness and/or prosperity that all people in various generations and/or physical states seek and feel, but not as an ultimate end in itself (Suzuki 2010: i–iv).
- 2) Japan has been facing a falling birth rate and aging population. People 65 or older accounted for 23.1% of the total population in 2010, already the highest such percentage in the world, and the Japan Health Ministry estimates that it will reach 30% in 20 years (Ministry of International Affairs and Communications 2010).
- 3) *Seihaku* was designated as an intangible cultural asset in 1983 has been well known for its large-scale productions since 10c. Three big floats, *Dashi*, are pulled around town. The *Dashi* are 12 meters high, 4.5 meters wide, and 20 tons. It is a festival that aims for world peace, national tranquility, and a bountiful grain harvest.
- 4) The Meiji Civil Code defined *Ie* as follows. (1) The institution of *Ie* is controlled by the householder “*Koshu*”. The householder has a wide range of rights called “householder rights”. (Meiji Civil Code Article 749, Article 750, Article 735, Article 737, Article 738, Article 743) (2) The eldest son alone succeeds the head of the household and receives the rights accompanying that position (Meiji Civil Code Article 970). In contrast, in post-war amendments to the Civil Code in 1946, the government had already stated, “The family system in which only the (male) householder has the right of inheritance should be abolished because it is feudal” (Yoda 1974: 308) and also that it should be abolished from the standpoints of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes (the new Civil Code Article 13, Article 14 and Article 24).
- 5) During World War II in June 1944, to prepare for the postwar occupation of Japan, anthropologist Ruth Benedict was commissioned to study the national character of the Japanese and explain what had driven them to war. The purpose of the study was to investigate people’s thoughts on the relationship between rulers and the people. She cited *Ie* as the place to learn about the hierarchy embedded in the Japanese social system. and “Japan was one large family where all Imperial members and subjects belonged”. SCAP viewed the Japanese family *Ie* as “the foundation of the nation,

a hotbed of fanatical militarism” (Yoda 1974: 273).

- 6) The feudal and patriarchal aspects of *Ie* might be emphasized through sociological studies conducted from the postwar period to the economic growth. Sociologist Tadashi Fukutake criticizes the existence of *Ie*, viewing it as a hotbed of feudalism in Japan and certain that Japan’s modernization and democratization would be accomplished only when the *Ie* system disappeared. He criticized patriarchal power and family systems that gave priority to the lineal inheritance of headship (Fukutake 1949: 25). However, that view was shared by American scholars who researched postwar Japan (Taniguchi 2011). In contrast, sociologist Kizaemon Aruga thought the real problem was that many Japanese believed what the SCAP said about the feudalism of *Ie* without rethinking what feudalism was actually about (Aruga 1965: 14).
- 7) The bilateral kinship system in Southeast Asia has much in common with Japan’s. As the preceding anthropological studies discussed, the kinship system in Southeast Asia is bilateral. Likewise, the kinship system of South Vietnam is considered bilateral, while that of North Vietnam is patrilineal due to the influence of the Chinese kinship system and Confucianism. In South Vietnam there is a kinship relation called “*ba con*”, which means kindred. In terms of descent and inheritance the mother’s family and the father’s are equally important. Important matrilineal marital patterns exist, in addition to patrilineal and neolocal arrangements.
- 8) Westerners often portray Japanese as the opposite of their ideal selves (Rosenberger 1994: 2). That is a sentence from the Introduction to *Japanese Sense of Self* (1994), edited by anthropologist Susan Rosenberger. According to her, the ideal individual in Western societies is conceptualized as acting according to abstract principles, eschewing decisions made based on emotion, intuition, or social influence (Rosenberger 1994: 2). In contrast, the Japanese are portrayed as having a strong sense of collectivity and control over people enmeshed in the immediacy of relationship and superstition (Rosenberger 1994: 2). Interestingly, Rosenberger points out that the perspective on the Japanese mentioned above arose from an imagined dichotomy of Western (“us”) versus non-Western (“them”), which in turn is embedded in a dichotomy of individual versus society, with the first term considered superior to the second in each case. Her discussion indicates that the West’s understanding of Japan is based on the dichotomy stemming from Western rationalism, and thus it is implicitly ethnocentric.

Studies of the Japanese character or personality gained wider ground in the United States during and after World War II. American anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) is the best known book on the Japanese character. She treated the Japanese as people understandable in the context of their culture and upbringing, but also considered them unique and somewhat odd, emphasizing the Japanese values of *on* (beneficence), *giri* (obligation) and *gimu* (duty). After her work gained popularity, young American anthropologists challenged her discussion based on intensive field surveys conducted in the early 1950s. Richard K. Beardsley, one of those who researched rural communities in postwar Japan, suggested that the Japanese were not odd by asserting that *giri* and *gimu* were feelings of obligation and duty natural to anyone with ordinary human feeling (Beardsley, 1951: 69-70). Nevertheless, Beardsley’s discussion also had a weakness in its emphasis on monolithic stereotyped images of the Japanese. He claimed that Japanese individuals were submerged within household status positions and the families into which they were born (Beardsley, 1951: 70).

The well-known *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1971) by the Japanese psychiatrist Takeo Doi

and *Japanese Society* (1970) by the Japanese anthropologist Chie Nakane became influential in Western understandings of the Japanese as soon as they were introduced. The term “dependent” provided by Doi and that of “group cohesion” from Nakane came into wide use among Western-trained scholars trying to understand the Japanese. This literature stressed distinctly stereotypical images of the Japanese.

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