

## The Role of Active Aging in the Well-being of Elderly Japanese in Brazil

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## **The Role of Active Aging in the Well-being of Elderly Japanese in Brazil**

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The pressures of globalization and migration make aging an increasingly intercultural process. Those who cross social and cultural borders eventually grow old and experience a series of losses in physical strength, social utility or family relationships. The role of migration in issues of aging is too often ignored, however. How have Japanese immigrants been aging actively in a multicultural society? How has the ethnic community contributed to the well-being of the elderly? This paper will answer these questions by illustrating various forms of well-being among aging Japanese immigrants in Brazil. This ethnographic research is based on fieldwork conducted intermittently from 1998 to 2009<sup>1)</sup>.

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### **1. Introduction**

Elderly populations have increased steadily and dramatically in recent years, and in the past few decades aging—especially in highly developed countries—has become one of the world's most serious issues. Planning for an active and fulfilling retirement has become vital for those immediately involved in the aging process: the elderly, caregivers (families and care workers) and policy makers (Suzuki 2010).

The pressures of globalization and migration make aging an increasingly intercultural

process. Those who cross societal and cultural borders eventually grow old and experience a series of losses in physical strength, social utility or family relationships. Aging is more than a sequence of changes in an individual; it is also a group experience that varies from culture to culture. In multicultural societies like Brazil, the aging process differs from one ethnic group to another. Elderly people of color—not all but many of them—find themselves in “double jeopardy,” suffering from both racial discrimination and ageism. Their aging experience is essentially dissimilar to that of the so-called “Brazilian” elderly.

After the U.S. government restricted Japanese immigration with the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907, the Japanese government encouraged its citizens to emigrate to Brazil using the slogan “Down to South America with Family!” Though pre-war Japanese immigrants in Brazil were once perceived by themselves and others as *kimin* (abandoned people)<sup>2</sup>, they later became one of the most successful ethnic groups there. It has been a long time since they were called “*japonês garantido* (guaranteed Japanese).” There are now between 1,400,000 and 1,500,000 *Nikkei* (people of Japanese descent) living in Brazil. Ironically, however, the model minority stereotype<sup>3</sup> (Iino 1989) has prevented elderly Japanese in Brazil from being seen as a discrete group in need of social support or special health care. They have been invisible, and problems arising from their aging process have been neglected (Kanamoto 2010).

How have Japanese immigrants been aging actively in a multicultural society? How has the ethnic community contributed to the well-being of the elderly? This paper will answer these questions by illustrating various forms of well-being among aging Japanese immigrants in Brazil. This ethnographic research is based on fieldwork conducted intermittently from 1998 to 2009.

## 2. Fieldwork Setting

Japanese communities in six urban areas in Brazil (São Paulo, Londrina, Maringá, Rio de Janeiro, Vitória, and Belém), most of which have large Japanese populations, were selected as field sites. Three fazendas once controlled directly by the Japanese government (Tomé-açu, Guatapará, and Funchal) and five welfare facilities for elderly Japanese in São Paulo (Jardim de Repouso São Francisco, Casa de Reabilitação Social em Santos “Kosei Home”, Recanto de Repouso “Sakura Home”, Casa de Repouso Suzano “Ipelândia Home”, and Casa de Repouso “Akebono Home”) were investigated. For purposes of comparison, French, Jewish, German, and Swiss facilities were also researched (see Map 1).

When the elderly start to number their remaining days or years, not only in everyday life but also in narrative, some resources for activating their later lives and grooming themselves for death are often observed (Myerhoff 1992). In addition to participant observation at field sites, and oral life histories of 72 elderly Japanese were collected. *Rōjin-kai* (elderly associations), *Kenjin-kai* (prefectural associations), and *Fujin-kai* (women’s associations) were the ethnic networks utilized for this research. Consequently, most of the subjects were *Issei* (the first generation of Japanese who immigrated to Brazil) or *Jun-Nisei* (quasi-*Nisei*<sup>4</sup>) who are the *Issei*’s children, born and socialized in Japan; but brought to Brazil when very young) and their family members. The oral life histories were transcribed verbatim and computerized. Highlights have been selected and edited for the sake of brevity.



Map 1 Fieldwork Setting

### 3. The Graying Japanese Community in Brazil

#### 3.1. Defining the Aged in Brazilian Society

Defining a precise age group as ‘elderly’ in Brazilian society is no simple task: not all Brazilians retire at the same age. To receive a pension in Brazil, people must have been members of the National Pension Program (either Regime Geral de Previdência Social [hereafter RGPS] for non-government workers or Regime Próprio de Previdência Social [hereafter RPPS] for public officials) for 35 years (if men) or 30 years (if women). Male recipients in the RGPS must be 65 years old in urban areas and 60 in rural areas, while women must be 60 in urban areas and 55 in rural areas. In the RPPS, men must be 60 and women 55 (Konda 2009) (see Table 1).

In fact the average retirement age, between 60 and 65 in other developed countries, is in Brazil ‘a tender 53’ (Margolis 2010: 7). In comparison with Japan’s life expectancy (79.4 years for men and 86.4 for women as of 2010), Brazil’s lower numbers (69.4 for men and 77.0 for women as of 2009) is assumed to be one reason Brazilians retire about five years earlier (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2011). For the sake of convenience, ‘the elderly’ are here defined broadly as people who are 60 years of age or older<sup>5)</sup> (Kanamoto 2010).

According to Brazil’s census, its population was only 4.5% elderly in 1991, but that number had jumped to 8.6% by 2000 (I.B.G.E. 1991, 2000). Though it once had one of the world’s youngest populations, Brazil is now aging faster than other western countries ever

**Table 1** Pension Schemes in Brazil

	Regime Geral de Previdência Social (RGPS)	Regime Próprio de Previdência Social (RPPS)
Qualification	Non-government Workers	Public Officials
Term of Contribution	Men: 35 years Women: 30 years	
Age of Entitlement	Men: Urban Areas: 65 Rural Areas: 60 Women: Urban Areas: 60 Rural Areas: 55	Men: 60 Women: 55

did. The latest survey conducted by the Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros (1988) estimated the aging ratio of Brazilian *Nikkei* (people of Japanese descent) at 9.7%, and it is now assumed to be over 10%<sup>6</sup>). The aging ratio of rural *Nikkei* communities (e.g., Guatapar and Funchal) had already exceeded 40% in 2000<sup>7</sup>). Since the 1980s, the phenomenon of *dekasegi* (Brazilians of Japanese descent working in Japan)<sup>8</sup>), has further accelerated the aging of *Nikkei* communities throughout the country. Every *Nikkei* community has thus established itself as being ‘aged’ in Brazil’s ‘youthful’ society.

### 3.2. Living Conditions of Elderly Japanese in Brazil

Two quantitative surveys, conducted in 1995 (Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros 1995) and in 2003<sup>9</sup>) (Beneficncia Nipo-Brasileira de So Paulo & Kanamoto 2003), describe the lifestyles of elderly Japanese in Brazil as follows:

- (1) They are homeowners.
- (2) They live with a son’s or daughter’s family.
- (3) They receive a pension of about 200 to 600 reais (US\$120 to 360) from the Brazilian government.
- (4) They are financially dependent on their children.
- (5) Some of them have difficulty enrolling in a health insurance program.
- (6) They belong to one or two Japanese associations (*Rjin-kai*, *Kenjin-kai*, or *Fujin-kai*), religious groups, or other activity groups (e.g., radio gymnastic exercises, Japanese croquet clubs, and so on).
- (7) They enjoy watching Japanese TV or videos, reading newspapers, and listening to the radio.
- (8) They expect they will receive nursing care if necessary (there is no nursing care insurance in Brazil).
- (9) They anticipate being cared for by their son or daughter.
- (10) They hope to spend their remaining days at home rather than in facilities for the elderly or day-care centers.
- (11) They don’t want to live in a retirement home.

According to research, the *Nikkei* elderly in Brazil seem very active and comfortably well-off.

In reality, however, well-being is more elusive. Japan's traditional values as a system of mutual assistance—*e.g.*, children should take care of their aging parents—are vanishing. Due to *dekasegi*, as mentioned above, the *Nikkei* community as a whole has been losing caretakers for its elderly. The lifestyles of elderly *Nikkei* in Brazil reveal the fragility of their retirement planning.

## 4. Pioneers of Aging in Brazil

### 4.1. Final Home for Elderly Japanese

The first Japanese immigrants, with dreams of making a fortune at one stroke and going home loaded with honors, came to Brazil on the *Kasato Maru* in 1908 from the Japanese port of Kobe. Japanese immigration into the Amazon area began in 1928. These immigrants were pioneers of Japanese global migration.

The population structure of Japanese immigrants in those days was 'youthful,' and most became laborers on plantations cultivating coffee, cotton, or sugar cane. Later, some achieved financial success with businesses that could be launched with little capital. After the births of their second generation—the *Nisei*—most transformed themselves into long-term residents of Brazil. Ultimately, they became one of the most successful ethnic groups in Brazilian society. They were called '*japonês garantido*.'

Their assimilation process was by no means easy. After the Pacific War broke out in 1941, the *Nikkei* community was strongly marked by restrictive measures. When Brazil declared war on Japan in 1942, the Japanese became enemy aliens. They could neither travel the country without a safe-conduct pass nor speak Japanese in public. Since many were subject to arrest on suspicion of being enemy spies, a Japanese Catholic organization was established in order to support prisoners and their family members. This organization enjoyed support from Brazilian society, taking advantage of religious conformity to combat unreasonable racial prejudice. It also began to help Japanese people in poverty or sickness, as well as those who were unmarried and living alone, providing food and shelter to those in need (Assistência Social Dom José Gaspar 1968).

In the 1950s, the Japanese community in São Paulo, which still has a large *Nikkei* population today, had already identified a great need for the care of their elderly. Jardim de Repouso São Francisco, the first Japanese facility for the aged, was established in 1958. Beneficência Nipo-Brasileira de São Paulo was organized in 1959 to support the destitute and the elderly, and it later built cultural homes for elderly Japanese as well. Residents at the time were mostly unmarried elderly people, and were perceived as being given relief. People in the Japanese community, therefore, have perceived the facilities as a so-called *obasute-yama*<sup>10)</sup> (a secluded place in the mountains where old men and women were abandoned by their families). In fact, compared to Japanese facilities in Los Angeles in the United States (Kanamoto 2000), these facilities in Brazil are lacking in health care services, food arrangements, and cultural activities. The residents are required to work to support themselves—for example, serving tea, cooking, or planting (Kanamoto 1998). However, they and their families, like

elderly people and their families in other ethnic groups, still retain an implicit trust in these homes centered on ethnic heritage.

Mr. and Mrs. A live in Jardim de Repouso São Francisco. Their ages are 92 and 82 years respectively. They need caregivers in their everyday lives. Their son and his wife, however, chose to work in Japan as *dekadegi*, leaving their parents in Brazil.

‘... Our children went to Japan for *dekasegi*. Although our grandson lives nearby, we can’t ask him to help us every day. He is still a university student and needs to study .... To tell the truth, we have difficulty shopping, cooking, and cleaning up our house. Before my son left for Japan, he made arrangements for us to live in this facility. He said “If you live in this facility, I don’t have to worry about you.” My wife didn’t want to come here. This is a place for those who don’t have a family and money. But you know, my son asked us to do so .... Well, we just didn’t want to give him our trouble. I find that this is not so bad because we can find Japanese friends to talk here....’ (emphasis added)

Mrs. B, an 84-year-old *Nisei* living in a Japanese facility in Suzano, was forced to come here. She cannot disguise her mixed feelings about the establishment.

‘... After my husband died, I have lived alone. You know, I am a serious diabetic. One day my oldest daughter told me, “Mother, if you live alone, you will die in complete solitude.” I wanted to live with the second son, but his wife’s mother is bedridden so they need to take care of her. So he wanted to put me in this facility. I got angry at what he had done to me. You know, I have had a hard time through my life. Nevertheless I was put in a home for the aged.... I don’t know how long I need to stay here. I may spend the rest of my life here.... I don’t know. But you know, the Japanese government funds this facility. Don’t you think this is a good place to live? Rooms are new, food is good, and people are nice....’ (emphasis added)

#### 4.2. Home Caregivers within the Family

In the 1970s, Japanese longevity led to a rise in the number of the bedridden elderly. Wandering was also a major problem. If circumstances required, families employed in-home caregivers, or a daughter-in-law or a daughter bore the burden of elder care. Thus *Nikkei* families feel heavy pressure to care well for their elderly.

Mrs. C, who farms in Londrina, looked after her mother-in-law. Her husband showed little interest in nursing care for his mother. When her mother-in-law started wandering, she spread nets over the house to prevent her from leaving.

‘... One day Mother-in-law went missing. My husband and I went out to the fields to work. When we came home in the evening, we found that she wasn’t at home. We searched all over the house. We looked everywhere we thought she might be .... It was not till night that we could find her. She stayed somewhere in the field for hours and hours .... After that we used to tied her up to a bed while we were out. (Tears spilled from her eyes.) But I felt sorry for her. Accordingly we decided to cover our house to defend her freedom ....’ (emphasis added)

Mrs. D had also trouble caring for her bedridden mother-in-law. Whenever her mother-in-law wanted to go out, she needed to carry her on her back and walk for hours.

‘... Once my husband and I lived in the country and engaged in farming .... My bedridden mother-in-law was strong-willed, and whatever I did for her, she was always dissatisfied. She never said “Thank you” to me .... One day a Japanese movie came to Londrina. My mother-in-law wanted to see it because watching Japanese movies was the only pleasure of her life .... We didn’t have a car at that time. So I carried her on my back for hours, all the way to the theater. I remember that when we arrived at the theater, everybody said “How good of you to come with your mother!” and she said “Thank you” to me. That was the first and last time I heard “Thank you” from her. I still remember her words ....’

Even when Japanese elders live with their families, a generational language barrier isolates them. Generally speaking, *Issei* can speak and understand Japanese, and can neither speak Portuguese nor understand well what *Nisei* and *Sansei* say in Portuguese. On the other hand, *Nisei* and *Sansei* can usually understand what the elderly say in Japanese to some extent, but can speak no Japanese—only Portuguese. Such one-sided and insufficient communication within the family naturally creates a generation gap and social detachment.

In addition, intermarriage has been increasing among younger *Nikkei* (e.g., *Sansei* and *Yonsei*). The *Issei* and *Nisei* elderly sometimes complain that they cannot communicate with ‘*gaijin*’ (this Japanese word literally means “foreigners” but here refers to Brazilians) daughters-in-law or sons-in-law.

Due to economic conditions in Brazil, not only *Issei* but also *Nisei* and *Sansei*, who are supposed to take care of their elderly, are away from home for *dekasegi* (working in Japan). Some have settled down and built permanent homes in Japan. Others have become naturalized Japanese citizens. The elders they leave behind in Brazil consequently struggle to find caregivers. Some, without family ties, are forced to live in the Japanese facilities.

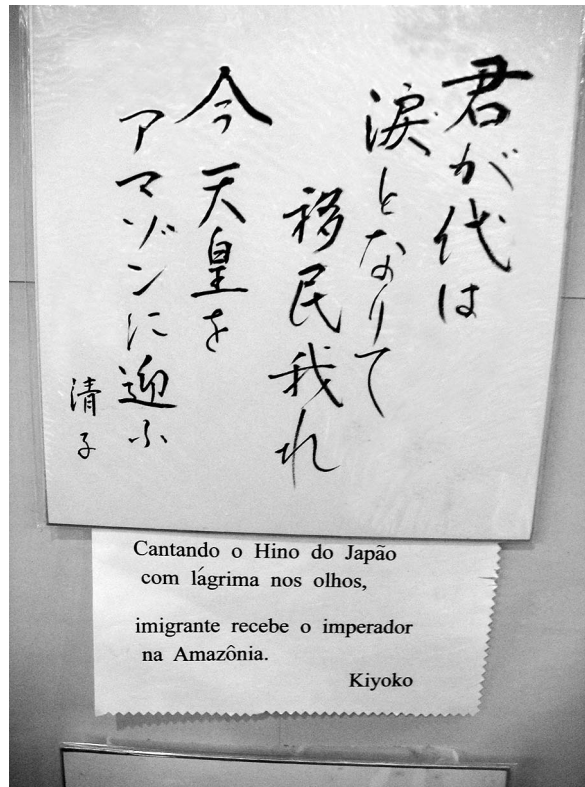
Mr. F of Rio de Janeiro is a post-war immigrant. He worked as a policeman for years and now receives a pension from Japan. Ironically his son went to Japan and has already become naturalized there. Mr. F chooses Brazil as his final resting place, as most in his position do. Many seem to put down their roots firmly in Brazil, and Mr. F knows he just cannot return to Japan and live with his son any more.

‘... I’ve been to Japan several times. You know Japan is a good place to visit, but not to live. People are very nice to meet first, but gradually perceive me as a heavy burden. People there are very severe with others. Japan is a hard place for us returners to live. This is the best place for us. This is our place ....’

### 4.3. Pioneers of Active Aging

Since the 1970s the Japanese community has voluntarily facilitated networking among its elderly in order to prevent them from being bedridden and wandering. The Japanese government—not the Brazilian government at the time—ensured the success of this project. In 1973, a Japanese gerontologist came to Brazil and introduced the idea of *Rōjin* clubs (clubs





**Photo 1** A Haiku by Kiyoko Sueta for the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Japanese Immigration to Amazon (“Singing the national anthem of Japan brought with tears of joy, when we immigrants received His Imperial Majesty to Amazon”) (Photo by the author)

for the elderly), like those originally designed for mutual assistance after the Second World War in Japan. There are now over 100 such clubs throughout Brazil, and their total number of membership rose from 8,000 in 1979 to 13,000 in 2010 (Associação dos Clubes de Anciões do Brazil 2009).

The clubs organize activities such as gateball (Japanese croquet), Japanese radio gymnastic exercises, singing Japanese songs, haiku (Japanese poems having a 5-7-5 syllabic form and containing a reference to the season), calligraphy, and classic Japanese dance (see Photos 1 and 2). In one popular singing class, members loudly sing from memory—old songs by the wartime Ministry of Education such as ‘Furusato’ (Hometown), and ‘Hirose-chūsa’ (Commander Hirose), for example, and other war songs. Sometimes they hold social dances to the accompaniment of these songs. Apparently the Japanese songs are inharmonious with western-style social dances. Club members share their life experiences and memories freely, and they are an active presence in their societies. They are no longer just recipients of relief.

‘I find a meaning for life when I came here,’ many comment. The clubs are no longer simply places to get together: they are what makes life worth living. Mr. E is an *Issei* who is



**Photo 2** Japanese folk dance at *Rōjin* club (Photo by the author)

anxious about living alone, and he commutes to the *Rōjin* club in Liberdade every day.

‘... Since my wife passed away, I spontaneously come to Liberdade every day because I feel lonely while I stay at home. I can meet my friends and enjoy talking with them. I have four sons, but I can’t communicate with them because of the language barrier. Even though we are a family, I don’t share a sense of family with them .... I can maintain my health so far. But I become uneasy about how long I can live a free and easy life. Because I have absolutely nothing for dealing with my old age, I am wondering if there is a facility that can accept me. I feel extremely uneasy about the rest of my life ....’ (emphasis added)

#### **4.4. Overseas Pensioners**

The pension that Japanese elders receive from the Brazilian government is not nearly enough to support an independent life. Most *Issei* and *Nisei* were plantation workers. Many had run away or moved from one fazenda to another at some point due to harsh conditions and are therefore ineligible for a full certificate of employment. As mentioned above, most receive a Brazilian pension of about 200 to 600 reais. Needless to say, those who receive a full pension from the Japanese government are few. Thus financial situations in retirement are difficult.

Fazenda Funchal, which is located east of Rio de Janeiro and used to be under the direct control of the Japanese government, is standing on the edge of a disappearing precipice. *Issei* immigrants have eked out a living by planting orchards. Their children (*Nisei*) and grandchildren (*Sansei*), without exception, have left for the big cities to obtain better educations and prestigious careers as medical doctors, dentists, or pharmacists. Recently many have left Brazil for *dekasegi*. No one is expected to return home and take over the fruit ranch from *Issei* parents. As a result, most residents of this community are now elderly *Issei* and aging

*Nisei*, who say, ‘This Japanese community will disappear in ten years, and they will find this whole place a wasteland ....’

Mr. F used to work for a coalmine on Hokkaido, lost his job when the mine was closed in 1962, and decided to come to Brazil. After moving to Funchal, he began to cultivate fruit trees, but everything he and his wife tried ended in failure. They were busy making ends meet. Now one of their sons has already left for São Paulo to work and the other for Japan to work as *dekasegi*. After F’s retirement, he found that he could receive a pension from Japan because he had worked as a coalminer for fifteen years—long enough to be eligible.

‘... We had a hard time after coming to Brazil. We couldn’t send our oldest son to university. We asked him to support us. Our farm didn’t make enough money to support ourselves. As we were getting older, we sometimes talked about our later life. Now we receive our own pension from Japan. The total is roughly 1,300,000 yen per year. You know, the Japanese yen is worth almost three or four times as much as the Brazilian real. It is enough to support us. We built this house. We appreciate this money .... We usually say to my son, “We are going to live in a home for the Japanese elderly, so you don’t have to worry about us.” We have enough money to do so ....’

Interestingly, many links between the elders’ everyday lives and their homeland of Japan have become far stronger since they left for Brazil. Half the population of community are former coalminers from Hokkaido. Before leaving Japan, most didn’t know the country’s pension requirements, even if they had already fulfilled them. Most pre-war emigrants left home before the Japanese pension scheme existed, while post-war emigrants had already withdrawn from it when they left.

After retirement, fortunately, many found that they could still receive their pensions. Some new houses here have been built using pension money from Japan, and the community is now well known as a wealthy Japanese population in Brazil. The amount of money is small. However, the connection between overseas pensioners and their homeland is strengthened even though decades have passed since they left Japan for Brazil.

## 5. Conclusion

Aging brings immense, irreversible changes to an individual’s later life. As the process advances, a series of losses leads to dwindling social and cultural involvement. The elderly, therefore, are forced to transform their social and cultural involvement in order to re-adjust themselves by finding fulfillment in what they retain or reinforcing memories of past experiences.

For the past few decades the Japanese community in Brazil has aged drastically in a young country that has only recently become aware of its own aging. Without the support of Brazil’s government, the Japanese community in Brazil needed to find a means of coping with aging. Cultural facilities and activities were successfully introduced, and ethnic networks are mobilized to manage crises and maintain well-being even as the elderly lose family ties to intermarriage and *dekasegi* among the young.

Aging is a dynamic process. The elderly search for social security, cultural conformity, and emotional serenity. A sense of well-being is shaped and furnished not only by elders themselves but also by their caregivers and communities.

## Notes

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- 2) In *Somin*, a famous Japanese novel written by Tatsuzo Ishikawa, Japanese immigrants to South America are described as *kimin* (abandoned people) by the Japanese government at the time.
- 3) ‘Model minority’ refers to an ethnic group whose members have achieved a high degree of success in income, education, or family stability in a multicultural society. In the United States, however, it sometimes refers to Asian Americans.
- 4) *Nisei* are different from quasi-*Nisei*. *Nisei* are *Issei*’s children born in Brazil.
- 5) The Japanese people used to have a rite of passage to functionally designate those who had reached 60 years old as ‘the aged.’ Called *kanreki* (return of calendar), this rite marked the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday as a symbolic rebirth or the beginning of the second childhood. After this celebration, people were expected to retire from their work; they were allowed to depend on others, primarily their first son, and entered a privileged period (Maeda, 1980). The Japanese people in Brazil also have retained this custom.
- 6) This estimate was reported by Beneficência Nipo-Brasileira de São Paulo in 2010.
- 7) This figure was calculated by the list of Japanese households published in 2000. The list was offered by one of the residents in Guatapara.
- 8) In 1990 the ‘Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law’ was revised and the Japanese government authorized the legal entry of second- and third-generation Japanese descendants and their families into Japan.
- 9) The subjects of this research are elderly *Issei* and *Nisei* who live in Sao Paulo. They number about 4,700: about 3,300 are *Issei* and quasi-*Nisei*, and about 1,400 are *Nisei*. The author participates in this project as an academic supervisor. This research is funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).
- 10) According to Yolen (1999), *obasute-yama* is described in ‘Mountain of Abandoned Old People,’ an eleventh-century Japanese tale.

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