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The Sense of Social Commitment and Well-being among Elderly Japanese Women: Focusing on the Reinterpretation and Exhibition of Bridal *Noren*

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Abstract

This article explores the ways in which elderly Japanese women's sense of well-being relates to their sense of "social responsibility" and "deep involvement with society." It is based on fieldwork conducted in Nanao City (Ishikawa Prefecture) in 2010-2011. The local government of Nanao recently emphasized the development of a community welfare network and tourism resources in order to deal with depopulation and an aging community, and to reinvigorate the local economy. I describe various activities in the social and political context of Nanao, meant to revitalize the local community. One of these activities is performed by women in their sixties, who retreated from their roles as housewives and/or shop proprietors. These women's activity reinterprets the given values of bridal *noren* (door curtain), a local object known for its beautiful sensuousness. When the women recently initiated activities to display bridal *noren* as objects of art, they become one of the main tourist attractions in the city. This paper concludes by demonstrating that elderly women expressed subjective well-being through involvement in their social world via social activities.

Keywords: well-being, social commitment, folk art, reinterpretation, exhibition

THE PROBLEM OF JAPAN'S AGING SOCIETY

Japan has faced with a falling birth rate and a growing aging population for several decades, especially in rural depopulated areas. People aged 65 and above accounted for 23.1% of the total population of Japan in 2010. This is already the highest ratio in the world, and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare estimates that it will reach 30% in 20 years. In that social context, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare issued its Annual Report, which indicated that life after retirement was "the second active life" and suggested that it was an important toward developing one's own *ikigai*. The Japanese word *ikigai* means "that which most makes one's life worth living" can be translated into the English expression of "the sense

of well-being" (Mathews 2010: 167). The report implied that development of one's own *ikigai* could be realized by increasing one's social connectedness through active commitment to neighborhood activities (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2003).

On the other hand, a white paper on Japan's aging society issued in 2009 showed that the number of elderly who expressed uneasiness due to living alone was increasing. In 2009, 22.5% of the elderly lived alone. If households comprised only of an older couple are added, the percentage goes up to 52.9% of the whole. The high ratio itself is not the problem. The problem is, again, the high ratio of elders who express uneasiness due to living alone:

63% in 2009 (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2009: 18-19). Moreover, over 30% of the elderly who expressed uneasiness remarked that they felt uneasiness when they thought that they had no close family or friends to be able to rely upon in their neighborhood (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2009: 18-19). These results indicate that creating or rebuilding close relationships with others in late life may have significant value for older Japanese adults' sense of well-being.¹

INTER-RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Quite a few reports and studies concern the inter-relationship between one's sense of well-being and social connectedness. In the 2001 report of OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) stressed that an economic aspect of well-being is only a part of human well-being and defined "human well-being" as a broader concept: "(it) is more than the sum of individual levels of well-being" (OECD 2001: 11-12), while the 1976 OECD report stated that "social well-being" was the aggregate of well-being of individuals that were affected by their relations with other human being and the physical environment (OECD 1976: 11-12). The important point to note about the 2001 report is that it stressed not only economic factors but also the complementarity between well-being and human and social capital that affects human well-being, employing American sociologist James Coleman's work on social capital in the 1980s (Coleman 1988, OECD 2001:13). Putnam's assertion that "social connectedness is one of the most powerful determinants of human's wellbeing" (Putnam 2000: 332) was also quoted in the report.

In his work, Putnam explained the way in which social isolation is profoundly linked to personal unhappiness and illness (Putnam 2000: 332). Various reports since the late 1980s have supported the strong relationship between personal well-being and social connectedness from the sociological and psychiatric viewpoints (Klinenberg 2010; 2012, Kiley 1989). Many sociological studies of Japan have discussed the inter-relationship between social connectedness and well-being, social isolation and self-neglect that often causes death (NHK "Unrelated Society Project" Press 2010, Tachibanaki 2011, Ishida 201, Inaba 2011). These studies showed that a sense of well-being, especially among Japanese elders, was affected by whether they had close social relationships with others.²

In this article I use Mathews and Carolina Izquierdo's definition of "well-being", which offers an anthropological concept involving a sense and experience that differs among individuals with different sociocultural contexts and a sense and experience that are common among

humans (Mathews and Izquierdo 2010: 1-22)(2).

Purpose and Contents

In this article I will present one of the Japanese elderly women's activities that increases social connectedness through community based activities to reinterpret and exhibit folk objects called *Hanayome Noren*³ ("bridal door curtain"—I will call it bridal noren) in Nanao city of Japan's Hokuriku region. Noren is a door curtain and is often hung at store entrances, however, bridal noren is a special luxury door curtain which is used only for wedding rituals. The women I will focus on are in their sixties and have retreated from their roles as housewives, caregivers of children and elderly parents, and co-managers of a family business. These roles were handed over to their daughters-in-laws. These older women express a sense of *ikigai* when participating in activities related to the broader social world. In their household roles, their social world was primarily in the domestic sphere, but now they are mediating between the domestic and public spheres by displaying and telling stories about the bridal noren in exhibitions. First, I will examine the social and cultural background of the city in which I conducted my research. Second, I will focus on the activity of exhibiting the bridal noren. Finally, I conclude by reconsidering the meaning of the concept of "productivity" in late life.

RESEARCH METHODS AND BACKGROUND

Method and Material

The main research method that I employed was participant observation, interview and an analysis of a brochure that was published by an executive committee of exhibitions. I conducted informal, "non-directed" interviews with two of the five women who took leadership in the activity of bridal noren exhibition. I asked a few questions to trigger off the story but the interviewee guided the course and the flow of the interviews.

Research Area: Nanao

As a researcher, I have been conducting fieldwork in a rural depopulated area for the last four years. Magnitude 9 earthquake, known as Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake, struck this area in 2004, and I have been, researching the way in which the elderly expressed a sense of uneasiness and well-being in the recovery process from disaster.⁴ For making a comparative study on this topic, I started fieldwork in Nanao city, which was struck by a magnitude 6.9 earthquake in 2007, known as the Noto Peninsula Earthquake. Fifty houses collapsed and 6,745 were damaged by the earthquake in which 127 people were injured but no one was killed.⁵ After the earthquake, the municipal government began to emphasize the idea that the most efficient measures for preventing a disaster are to

strengthen existing relationships and organization among neighbors and for people to reform close-knit relationships in the local community. The local government recognizes senior citizens who live alone or with only a spouse as “vulnerable people in emergency”, and thus it works hard to strengthen local community ties and the services provided to them. Promotion of welfare and well-being, especially of elderly, receives much attention today in Nanao.

Geographically, Nanao faces the Sea of Japan (or the East Sea), situated at the entrance to the Noto region of Ishikawa prefecture. It has a population of 57,714, as of 2011, but faces depopulation and a rapidly aging population. Thirty percent of the population is aged 65 or above (Nanao City 2009), however, Nanao is still the largest city in the Noto region.

Culturally, Nanao is influenced by Kaga where is now a capital of Ishikawa and has a nickname of “A little Kyoto”, the ancient Japanese capital city Kyoto, which was once the political and cultural center of Japan. For instance, the traditional techniques used to dye bridal noren were named after Kaga and it was originally imported from Kyoto. Nanao consists of 15 rural districts, and its economy depends on agriculture and fishing. Tourism recently became one of the city’s key industries. A popular annual festival, held from May 2–5, called Seihaku-sai attracts 15,000 tourists every year. The exhibition of bridal noren is one of the events at the festival. The bridal noren exhibition is launched by the bride and groom parade down the 400-meters-long old Ipponsugi shopping street, while fifty or more norens are hung from the front doors of the shops on both sides of the street. Along the street leading to the ancient temple are four old-style storefront residences. They received the cultural asset specification in 2004 and sell local products to tourists, such as marine products, handmade Japanese candles, and soy sauce. There are 37 shops in this street which has become one of the popular tourist attractions for those who are interested in the history and products of Nanao.

WHY BRIDAL NOREN?

Background of My Research

At the beginning of my research in 2010, I conducted participant observation in an activity of the community-based elderly group for the purpose of “prevention of long-term care” (*kaigo yobou*). That activity was based on a yearly grant from the local government. The group has been continuing the activity twice a week for 8 years since the frame of the grant was established. There are no other groups like this in this city. Five to ten members over 65

come together to have a chat, sing and play small games. The group activity is not limited to recreation. They voluntarily visit the hospital and some welfare facilities to entertain by singing, playing games or dancing a few times a year. Their social commitment was unique and I became interested in understanding these older adults’ feelings of well-being. Some members were just looking at other people talking or playing games from a distance, but they said “It is fun to come here.” The other member said, “It is fun to be involved with the local friends and to visit facilities.” From these comments, I became more convinced that the opportunities to meet people and work together would affect a sense of well-being for the elderly. Then one day during my fieldwork, I met a lively elderly woman who was delightedly working on an exhibition activity of bridal noren. I was very impressed with her story about her experience of social commitment and fulfillment and she became my first interviewee about bridal noren.

What is Bridal Noren?

The origin of the bridal noren dates back to the pre-modern period around the nineteenth century, and they had been used widely up to the beginning of the twentieth century. A bridal *noren* is made using techniques called Kaga yuzen, a dyeing process, commonly used for high-quality silk kimonos. Although, in general, the noren curtain is made of stout cotton dyed with a simple indigo dye, a bridal noren is made of silk (sometimes cotton and linen) and is designed with auspicious, colorful, hand-painted patterns such as court carriages, mandarin ducks, and flowers. The noren is a gift from the bride’s family to the groom’s family. It can be understood as a kind of dowry. The custom of using bridal noren as dowry was introduced by the upper warrior caste to the general public during the late pre-modern period, around 19th century and was a symbol of an alliance between the families.

The bride’s mother, who passed it on to her daughter, arranged the patterns and colors of noren. When wedding rituals were customarily held in the groom’s house, at least until the 1950s or 1960s, wedding rituals were held as follows. First, the bride and groom would stand in front of the entrance of the groom’s house and drink a small cup of water mixed from their respective natal houses. Second, they would step into the groom’s house, where the noren hung from the lintel at the entrance to the room near the family’s Buddhist altar. The room was the area where the groom’s family’s ancestors were worshiped. The bride would pass under the noren, enter the room, sit straight, put her hands together in front of the altar, and say, “Please recognize me as a new family member” (*korekara yorosiku onegaishimasu*). It was a rite of passage

for the bride to transfer her family membership to her spouse's family. In addition to the noren, the bride also brought a lacquered multi-tiered food box filled with fresh Japanese sweets for the neighbors. The box was wrapped in a colorful wrapping cloth (Furoshiki), which is also made using the Kaga Yuzen dyeing process. Although the location and style of weddings have varied in association with the change of lifestyles and values after the World War II, noren still play a significant role in the wedding ceremony. Now, the wedding ceremony venue has shifted from the groom's family home to a wedding hall, and weddings with Christian-style rituals have gained popularity. The rite of passage using noren is still performed in wedding ceremonies with Christian rituals in the wedding halls. The patterns and colors for the noren are listed in a catalog provided by kimono shops; thus, a new custom for the bridal noren has emerged, in which brides and their mothers can choose patterns and colors together.

THE EXHIBITION OF BRIDAL NOREN AND EXPRESSIONS OF THE SENSE OF WELL-BEING

Reinterpretation of the Values of Bridal Noren

After a wedding, a bridal noren becomes the property of the bride's and the family she married into and will not be reused as dowry. However, since it was of no practical use, it was usually put away in a storeroom drawer and was seldom released from there. The exhibition of bridal noren I started when four old-style houses in Nanao were registered as important cultural properties in 2004. Women in their early sixties, who co-managed stores along with merchants of Ipponsugi street, realized the significance of their own noren stored in their drawers and came up with the idea of renewing the face of the street and establishing a historical town. One day a woman asked her friends whether they still kept their noren in a drawer. They looked for her noren in their drawers and found not only their own noren but also their mothers-in-law's. Since most of the norens were kept without moth damage for years, the artistry of the noren was evident. They consulted with their husbands, who were shopkeepers, about the plan of exhibition of norens and with a neighborhood association as well. In this way, the executive committee for exhibition was organized including five women of Ipponsugi as main members. Then the exhibition of norens started in 2004 using rooms of the building registered as cultural properties to entertain tourists visiting on the days of Seihaku festival.

Exhibition

As mentioned above, exhibitions are held using spaces in the old-style houses during the festival. The women who plan and host the galleries also play the role of guides.

They tell the audience about the stories embedded in norens. The story of noren always comes with its owner's life history and family story. Here is an example of the narrative given by a woman in early 60s:

This is a noren of the woman born in 1919. She married a successor of the store of Ipponsugi during the Second World War when she was 18 years old. In spite of a shortage of food and clothes, her mother saved money to make a beautiful noren for her daughter's wedding. Three sets of a chest of drawers filled with kimonos were also given to the daughter. Please look at the patterns of a pair of family crests and a pair of court carriages painted on the noren. They are all hand painted and made using the Kaga Yuzen dyeing technique. The bride's mother decided all of the patterns of the noren and its arrangement. So, for her daughter, the noren has become a significant object that reminds her of her mother's love in her life after marriage.

Noren seemed indispensable for weddings, even during the war. It is bride's pride and more importantly, it is her natal and conjugal family's pride. Noren is sometimes considered to serve as an amulet to prevent women from misfortune and bring good luck to them after used for wedding, while it is confined to the storeroom drawer (Kitani 2008: 22).

By telling the story behind their norens, the women look back at their lives as daughters, new brides, and mothers. One of the women said that most of the audiences are women in the same age as them or younger; they are sometimes mothers and daughters and seem to display empathy listening to her story about her noren's history and the bond that had formed between mother and daughter. It is apparent that she feels a sense of joy when telling the story of her noren and sharing its beauty with people. She said that the activity made her feel "ikigai in the second life." She told me that she had pursued and felt a sense of ikigai by discovering a new artistic value for bridal noren and telling her story at the exhibitions.

The exhibition has since expanded outside the city. The women took their norens with them to Tokyo and Osaka for exhibitions, hoping to reach a wider range of people. In Osaka, they rented an old-style house for a show, and the exhibition went well. It takes approximately five hours by express train to get to the exhibition from Nanao. I interviewed an older woman, one of the storytellers of noren, who had just returned from an exhibition in Osaka. She expressed her excitement:

It was the very first experience for me to communicate with people outside my hometown as deeply as this. Thanks to my bridal noren, I was able to meet many people and pass on stories about affection between mothers and daughters that are embedded in the curtain's beauty. I want to continue this activity as long as possible because this is indeed my *ikigai*.

Where does her *ikigai* come from? How is it different from what she had before she retreated from her household role? What does her *ikigai* mean to her? I asked her these questions. She answered that she felt a sense of *ikigai* while fulfilling her household role of caring for her children and elderly parents and managing the family business with her husband. "That is my past *ikigai*," she said. Although the role of housewife was allocated to her automatically when she married, she got a feeling of satisfaction by fulfilling that role. She continued, "Now my son is married, and his wife, my daughter-in-law, has taken over the housewife role, and she is doing very well in it. I have retreated now, but I found my new *ikigai* during the last stage of my life. My new *ikigai* is to tell as many people as possible about noren." The noren has become an object that facilitates communication between the local community and the outside world. With noren as an art object, she seemed to have discovered the broader social world in which she can actively participate.

CONCLUSION

The elderly women of Ipponsugi reevaluated the sensuous beauty of bridal noren, reinterpreting it as art object and also discovering their exhibition activity as a place to realize *ikigai* in their later lives after retreating from earlier household roles. They worked together not only for their own sake but also for the common good of the local community, connecting different generations of the community. Sociologist Glenn Loury⁶ suggested that such social relationships can be understood as "local public goods." He used the concept to explain one aspect of social capital that indicated "public education, (...) peer influences that shape the development of personal character, contacts that generate information about the world of work, and friendship networks that evolve among persons situated in the same or closely related communities" (Loury 1988: 273). Social relationships in local as "local public goods" are intangible but reliable sources that increase opportunities of social commitment. The elderly women also used "local public goods" to extend their social relationships to outside the community. Later-life retirement may give one the image of "a phase of regression" or "withdrawal from an active phase" but it is neither. It means nothing other than entering a new phase of the life cycle. In American gerontology,

the concept of being "productive" was reconsidered as a concept that included the wide range of activities in which elderly people engage in of their own accord. The concept overarches any activity, whether paid or unpaid, such as housework, childcare, volunteer work, assistance to family and friends, as well as capacity building and self-care (Butler, R.N. & Gleason, H.P. eds., 1985; Howell, N. M., J. Hinterlong, & M.W. Sherraden 2001). Aging is not a negative transition at all, but is a positive and active phase that recreates individuals and their way of living. Robert C. Atchley argues against previous sociological works, referring to retirement as a "roleless role." He states that socialization during retirement involves establishing prerequisites at least as much as developing specific knowledge and skills (Atchley 2000: 124). One of the specific prerequisites for retirement is to develop leisure skills and ties with organizations in the community (ibid.: 119). Doris Francis discusses how retirement after 35 years of work is perceived as an opportunity to reassess and renew commitments, explore untapped avenues of creativity, and reconstitute the self (Francis 2000: 183). Reconsidering the meaning of the concept of "productivity" provides us with an idea for reexamining an inter-relationship between a sense of social commitment and well-being. Defining *ikigai* for oneself is important not only for the elderly after retirement but also for people at any stage of life.

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Notes

- 1 Japanese pedagogist Hiroaki Terasaki contends that "well-being" has gained currency as the translation for the Japanese word *fukushi*, which was often used as the translation for the English word "welfare." Referring to Michael Foucault, he explains that the term "welfare" came to take on a restricted and superficial meaning owing to the overwhelming torrent of the concept of "police" that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Terasaki 2010: 22-23). He summarizes Foucault's work, which described policing as a national institution that extended beyond the sphere of civic order, which deals with crime and criminals, to the comprehensive oversight and management of such spheres of life as poverty,

hospitals, hygiene, the nursing of children, and schools (ibid.). Therefore, the areas subject to policing were the marginal areas underpinning modern society. The concept was referred to as “biopower” by Foucault who contended that capitalist states exerted control over people’s birth, morbidity and longevity (Foucault 1976: 139-140). Foucault defined biopower: “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, (in other words) how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species” (Foucault 2007: 1) and “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1976: 140). The capitalist states promote people’s better life. This better life is so called welfare. Under “welfare,” the old, the sick, children, and other marginalized groups are to be protected and controlled. On the other hand, Terasaki stresses that “well-being” is a subjective sense of feeling good, such as when eating, and the resultant visceral sensation in human’s bodies of feeling comfortable, and it must be said to be meaningful life for all living human beings regardless of sociocultural differences (Terasaki 2010: 22-23).

- 2 From an anthropological point of view, Mathews and Izquierdo regarded it important to consider an inter-relationship between human commonality and sociocultural differences of sense of well-being. They define that “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” (Mathews and Izquierdo 2010: 5).
- 3 There is an official website on Hanayome Noren. The URL is as follows: <http://ipponsugi.sakura.ne.jp/noren/>
- 4 In the background of the growing interest in revaluation of social connectedness in Japan, it is pointed out that there were disasters that frequently struck Japan in the last decade.
- 5 The earthquake killed one person in another city.
- 6 He primarily discussed concerning the inequality of social capital and how it affected young people of the same community to form social cluster (Loury 1988: 273).

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