Aging and Abandonment: Obasute Narratives in Contemporary Japan

Jason Danely, Ph.D.
Department of Anthropology, Rhode Island College

Abstract:

Japan's older adult population has climbed from less than 5% of the total population in 1950 to almost 22% today. While older adults themselves are aware that this large-scale demographic shift has impacted both intergenerational ties and age-cohort identity and solidarity, they also struggle to comprehend what it means to grow old in a society where the institutionalized ethical guideposts of filial values, honorable elders and ancestor veneration have become so dramatically transformed. This paper combines anthropological, psychodynamic and literary analysis to examine the phenomenology of loss and recovery in an aging Japan. Obasuteyama, the centuries old Japanese legend of abandoning the old, is the most widely shared and fundamental narrative of aging and loss in Japan, serving as a common cultural reference point for nearly all other work on the subject. The frequent retelling and remixing of obasute reveals the polysemic nature of not only old age, but also of dependence, care, and grief. In the context of contemporary Japan, obasute indexes many of the anxieties of a growing number of older adults uncertain about their place in Japanese society and seeking alternatives to the shame of becoming a burden. In news headlines and gossip circles, stories of elder neglect, abuse and abandonment circulate daily, adding to the insecurity that ripples through the waiting, whether it is waiting for frailty, for dementia, for institutionalization, or for death. When understood from the perspective of obasute, these become a medium for 'storying' loss into later life, for imagining abandonment in the context of a cultural psychology of stoicism, impermanence and the return of the spirit.

Introduction:

This paper explores the themes of loss and recovery, or abandonment and hope, in an aging Japan. Wandering into such thick forests of meaning requires an interdisciplinary, multi-perspective approach that utilizes not only the field guides of ethnography, but also the myths and legends of literature and folklore. At times these two epistemes intersect, signaling the phenomenological insufficiency of one or the other; neither the catalog of loss in aging nor the cultural meanings given to it can, if taken separately, fully encompass the lived experience.

Anthropologists have often looked to literature, myth and popular folklore to illuminate the cultural meanings underlying the often paradoxical values and behaviors observed in the ethnographic encounter (cf. Benedict 1974 [1946]; Plath 1980). In this paper I use a similar approach to focus on the significance of “obasute,” or tales of abandoning the old. These stories constitute arguably the oldest and most widespread discourse on aging in Japan that still appears in popular reiterations and the everyday vernacular. What emerges this analysis are intermingled narratives of ambivalence, grief, dependence, care and hope. How do the stories Japanese elders tell themselves about aging and the
cultural representations that circulate through tales like obsute co-construct what it means to be old in Japan today? How do individual experiences and cultural myths mutually impose modes of recognition on each other? What does this mutual recognition reveal about the possibilities of loss and recovery?

A Modern Tale of Losses (Un)recognized

In July, 2010, city officials came knocking on Sogen Kato’s door. The officials were visiting Mr. Kato to congratulate the 111 year old for his achievement of being Tokyo’s oldest resident. However, as the New York Times reported,

his daughter gave conflicting excuses, saying at first that he did not want to meet them, and then that he was elsewhere in Japan giving Buddhist sermons. The police moved in after a granddaughter, who also shared the house, admitted that Mr. Kato had not emerged from his bedroom since about 1978.

In a more typical case that took place just blocks from the Mr. Kato’s house, relatives of a man listed as 103 years old said he had left home 38 years ago and never returned. The man’s son, now 73, told officials that he continued to collect his father’s pension “in case he returned one day.” (Fackler 2010)

Another article describing the case of Mr. Kato reported that rather than giving Buddhist sermons somewhere in Japan, he had literally become a “living buddha” (ikibotoke), a label usually applied to radical ascetic practitioners who enter deep meditative states to the point of eventual starvation and death. Such a description, though embellished, was perhaps closer to reality.

As officials and communities across Tokyo and eventually all of Japan scrambled to confirm the whereabouts of other centenarians, more stories began to emerge. Aiko Watanabe, for example, turned herself in to police after skeletal remains of her mother, who had died in 1996, were found. Aiko claimed that she had used her mother’s pension money to cover living expenses (Asahi Shinbun 2010). Eventually it was estimated that at least 234,354 of Japan’s oldest citizens on record were missing (Fukue 2010). In 2009, census records indicated that there were 40,399 centenarians in all of Japan (MHLW); the number of “missing centenarians” was almost six times the actual number.

Whether the missing centenarian predicament was precipitated by death hastening behaviors, widespread selective neglect of the old, everyday fraud, or bad record-keeping (in thousands of cases records were open for people that would have been over 150 years old), it was the older people, lost, dead or disappeared that have been silent as these stories whirled around the national and even international media.
How could this kind of elder abandonment have happened on such a massive scale throughout Japan?

Many Japanese commentators leapt at the chance to characterize this incident as a symptom of larger social disintegration, the nuclearization of the family, and the weakening of neighborhood ties. “This is a type of abandonment through disinterest,” said Hiroshi Takahashi, a Professor at the International University of Health and Welfare in Tokyo. “Now we see the reality of aging in a more urbanized society where communal bonds are deteriorating.” (Fackler 2010).

Others see the combination of unreasonable expectations of family care and the cultural emphasis on shame as inhibiting families from reporting the death or disappearance of an elder family member:

Some have pointed out that the expectation that family will care for old and dependent family members has resulted in a situation where not only is it shameful to admit to poor or abusive conditions in the home, but reporting the death of a parent who is under one’s care may be just as shameful. Silence might be a means to preserve face, just as it is a way to collect benefits from the dead. (Fukue and Aoki, 2010)

Interestingly, the case of these “abandoned” elders brought new attention to the centuries old Japanese tale of “obasuteyama”. In a revealing comment, the Governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintaro, told the press, “If we don’t know their whereabouts … maybe we ought to go looking for them on Obasuteyama! If there are flocks of crows and a bunch of bones, it would be a modern-day ghost story!” (Nikkan Sports 2010)

I could hardly believe my eyes after I read this statement (even if Ishihara is well-known for making provocative comments). The tale of the missing centenarians is not only a modern-day ghost story, but also a story of modernity’s ghosts—the lingering abandoned elders fell into the widening chasm of a modern bureaucratic system unable or unwilling to account for them, relegating their existence to the uneasy realm of the living dead. Now that the ghosts of obasuteyama were revealed what can we learn from them about aging in Japan?

Abandonment of the elders seems to imply a state of liminality (the abandoned are neither living nor dead, the elders are neither wholly engaged in the world nor separate from it), and yet liminality, that period of transformation between two socially recognized statuses, also implies that
there is an over-arching structure in which the abandonment makes sense either by the inversion of normative values or the repetition of them (Turner 1969). The loss or leveling of self-identity experienced in the liminal phase is meaningful precisely because it is understood to be a precursor to a particular kind of transformation. The stories of Mr. Kato as “giving Buddhist sermons” or becoming a “living buddha” while seeming to indicate a need to ‘story’ the act of abandonment in terms of positive cultural values, does little to change his status in the larger social context. In contrast, traditional Buddhist post-death rites such as the memorials conducted every week for the first 49 days after death, do attend to the specific liminal state of the spirit (and the family) and the need to transform ritually transform and elevate it to the status of hotoke (buddha) (Smith 1974).

Abandonment of the old cannot be explained in terms of liminality. There is simply no “there” there that can constitute an end to the ambiguity of the lost. This characteristic provides perhaps the strongest link between the feelings of loss expressed by older people in Japan and the tales of obasuteyama: the unresolvable ambivalence toward aging and the aged. The case of the missing centenarians could happen in Japan for the same reason that characters in the obasute myth turn away from the elders abandoned on the mountain: the only way to recognize the unrecognizable (the abandoned) is to render them invisible.

In the following sections, I will examine a small sample of notable versions of the obasute story as retold in Noh (Obasuteyama Zeami, 15th c.), in film (Narayama Bushikō, Imamura 1983), and in manga (Abandon the Old in Tokyo, Tatsumi 1970). In each case I will then reflect on the ways similar tales of aging, loss and recovery arose in observations and conversations during my fieldwork in Kyoto, Japan from 2005-2007.

In drawing parallels between the obasute myth and ethnographic accounts I argue that for Japanese older adults loss propels the enduring work of knitting together meaningful identities and relationships in the last years of life. This process is what anthropologists have called “the work of culture,” as much as it is the “work of self” and of grief (cf. Leavitt 1995; Obeyesekre 1990; Parish 2008: xii). In this sense, the men and women I came to know through my research showed how loss is not to be denied in the human experience, nor is it something to be overly romanticized as a pure state of being in itself. Rather, they show how losses seek their own transformation, producing works of life that open new imaginations of “the possible” (Han 2011: 8) and of “possible selves” (Parish 2008: x)
that quietly contest the boundaries of the age-based norms constituted within families, communities, and nations in which they are embedded. If we are to believe that loss haunts the experience of growing old, what might be gained from viewing this loss through the eyes of those who believe that it also contains the faces of the cherished ancestors, and the hope of continuity that ultimately transcends age, and even death?

“Obasuteyama” as a tale of impermanence and continuity

Tales of the social abandonment of the elders in Japan can be seen as early as the mid-10th century Japanese historical chronicles “The Tales of Yamato” (Yamato Monogatari) and early 12th century “Tales of Times Now Past” (Konjakumonogatarishu ca. 1120) both of which contain narratives of old women “bent with age,” or “deformed by age,” each hated by their son’s wife, whose responsibility it was to care for them (Tahara 1980: 109; Tyler 1987: 315). It is therefore decided that the son will take his mother deep into the mountains and abandon her there.

Obasute stories have numerous variations, but all blend lessons on ethical obligations to family, folk understandings of a spirit filled natural landscape, and understandings of aging and dependence. Some have located the origins of these tales in sources from India and China (Huang 2011), but these were subsequently blended with folkloric accounts of the “mountain hag” (Yamauba) and Japanese aesthetics of impermanence and fatalism prominent in Buddhism, and lost many of the moralistic Confucian elements of filial piety.

The setting of the prototypical obasute tales is a remote mountain village, where the scarcity of land and food means that everyone must contribute (Keene 1961 xii-xiii). Older people in this context are seen as a burden on the family and by extension the village as a whole, since they consume resources and contribute little. The ugliness of the old woman of obasute and the spite of younger generations adds to the decision to abandon the old as well as some degree of implicit or explicit social sanction of the abandonment as a possible solution to the problem.

Gerontocide or other forms of selective neglect of dependents in societies of scarcity have been well documented in anthropology (Glascock and Feinman 1981), and while it may be comforting to see a kind of universal logic at work, this does not fully explain the nature of the retelling of obasute over the centuries and across Japan. Although most Japanese folklorists agree that this kind of “gerontocide”
was not actually practiced in early Japan (Yoshikawa 1998), the legend of obasuteyama has nonetheless remained a popular story, acted out in numerous stage dramas and films. The fact that it is not a mere depiction of a real occurrence, however, further supports the argument that the obasute story is best viewed as an allegory, expressing the suppressed desires of the audience.

Several academic studies have examined at the obasute genre, most notably Nishizawa Shigejirō’s *Obasuteyama Shinkō* (1936), and folklorist Yanagita Kunio’s “Obasuteyama” (1970 [1936]). Huang (2011) reviews many of these works, concluding that although there is evidence of strong influences from outside of Japan, the more local forms tend to conclude not with the old woman’s rescue and the unambiguous upholding of filial piety, but rather with an unresolved state of ambivalence towards old age, placing it in the uncomfortable gray area between “abandonment and care.” Anthropologist Yohko Tsuji (1997: 207-8) sums up the explanation for this aesthetic when she writes,

> Though tales generally depict the aged as wise and benevolent, some elderly are represented as wicked. Profound ambivalence toward old age also underlies the legend of obasute or abandoning the granny. Why was this story so wide-spread despite the absence of the actual practice of gerontocide? Why is the term obasute still used in Japan even though its sense is metaphorical? “The reason is that while gerontocide may not have existed in people’s behavior, it did [and does] exist in their hearts and minds” (Cornell 1991:87)

When I first read a translation of Zeami’s *Obasute* (Jones 1970), I was also struck not so much by the morbid notion of a son abandoning his mother to the wild inhospitable mountains (indeed, he is usually the most sympathetic character in these tales), but by the manner in which age and ancestry come to occupy central elements of the story. Indeed, were the story about abandoning an infant or a stranger, the consequences for the abandoner would likely be quite different. Furthermore, the old woman is abandoned rather than killed outright. Similar tales involving matricidal sons and resentful daughters-in-law do not always result in the seeming of exemption from social sanction seen in the obasute tales (Huang 2011). Obasuteyama therefore reveals the challenge of loss and the social abandonment in a society unable or unwilling to provide care.

In the opening sequence of Zeami’s *Obasute*, two curious travelers encounter an old woman who explains her abandonment as the result of her own personal struggles with attachment and loss. The chorus, speaking for the old woman, sings:
CHORUS: How shameful!
Long ago I was abandoned here.
Alone on this mountainside
I dwell, and every year
In the bright full mid-autumn moon
I try to clear away
The dark confusion of my heart's attachment
(Keene 1970:121)

Immediately afterward, the woman vanishes. The travelers soon meet a local villager who explains that a man, at the urging of his cunning wife, left his elderly “aunt” in the mountains to die. The villager also explains that after the old woman died, her attachment to the world turned her into a stone marker on the mountain (Jones 1970:122-123). No longer human, she is cold and exposed as a stone; what remains of her, like a gravestone, marks her absence even as it guides the path traveled by others. The travelers, understandably shocked at this revelation, tell the man that they had met this old woman earlier, and her identity as the deserted crone is confirmed. The villager finally urges the two travelers to make a memorial offering for the spirit of the woman and sends them on their way.

Obasute does not conclude with the travelers’ revelation of the true identity of the mountain woman. The remainder of Zeami’s drama is a powerfully emotional portrayal of a life in a Gray Zone, as the audience is drawn into the tension between the sadness of abandonment and the ecstasy of the old woman as she dances in the full moon’s light singing of the salvation of the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amida). She sings too of nostalgic memories that keep her attached to past selves, and the pain of their impermanence. The old woman is changed, and her mask is now that of a ghostly spirit, singing,

GHOST: Trying to forget that long ago
I was cast aside, abandoned,
I have come again to Mount Obasute.
How it shames me now to show my face

1 The description or translation of the old woman as “aunt,” rather than “mother” is interesting here, since many of the retellings of the story explicitly identify the old woman as the mother of the son who abandons her. Folklorist Yamaori Tetsuo (1997) supports Yanagita’s (1970) assertion that the actual identity of the woman is the mother rather than the aunt, noting that in Zeami’s play, the man “took care of his aged aunt as though she were his own mother” (1997:34).
2 The stories of aging presented in this book all touch on obasuteyama as a cultural idiom of what Bourgois and Schonberg drawing on Primo Levi (2009:19-21) call an ethnographic “Gray Zone,” where structural forces create “a morally ambiguous space that blurs the lines between victims and perpetrators” (2009:20). In their study of homeless heroin injectors Bourgois and Schonberg consider Gray Zones as places where moral agency operates within a circumstances that are subject to intense institutional scrutiny and violence embodied in the habitus (2009:20-21, 319). In a similar way, the old woman on the mountain has lost her agency through a process of social and bodily change, her physical aging, and her loss of social status and authority in the family.
In Sarashina’s moonlight, where all can see!
(Jones 1970: 125)

The moon, like memories, however, is inconstant, and as the ghost continues to dance, her song alternates between her own voice and the chorus:

CHORUS: Over and return, over and . . .
GHOST: . . . Return, return
Autumn of long ago.
CHORUS. My heart is bound by memories,
Unshakable delusions.

I shall vanish,
The traveler will return.

[the traveler leaves]
Abandoned again as long ago
And once again all that remains—
Desolate forsaken crag,
Mountain of the Deserted Crone.
(Jones 1970: 126-127)

At the finale of Zeami’s drama, the ghost of the old woman raises her arms and freezes, quiet as a stone. Her loss (again) is represented in the empty, or negative space of this frozen moment. In the Japanese composition of a life, we might say that loss represents the “negative space,” which, with a slight alteration of perspective can become the foreground of meaning. In Japanese art, this space is referred to as “ma,” the aesthetic quality of “interstice” meant to evoke the atmosphere of interdependence of form and emptiness (Barthes1982:26, Crapanzano 2004:51-52). “Ma” is one of the defining elements of Noh aesthetics, and Zeami was undoubtedly the master of its use. It is what anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano calls “the stillness that anticipates” (Crapanzano 2002:52). In this space, we are asked to reflect: Is there hope in the rhythm of “over and return?” Does the ghost remain bound to this world by her longing for the return of her youth? Does she find salvation through the travelers’ memorial offerings and the grace of the Buddha?

“The dark confusion of my heart’s attachment”

The reconceptualization of loss that I see distinctly in Zeami’s Obasute and in the notion of “ma,” considers loss as both a motivating force and a creative act in itself. This requires us to suspend many assumptions based in biomedical or psychotherapeutic frameworks, which equate loss in old age with the diminishment of personhood unto death. Old age too has its own “negative spaces,” but it also
brings new vantage points from which to evaluate these spaces and the worlds they bring into form. Memories and narratives design and redesign the architecture of selves with often dazzling creativity, but the materials found in social and cultural quarries can wear with age. The anguish of sometimes unbearable loss, of bereavement and the pain of abandonment are also part of the Japanese story of old age in the twenty-first century. In illustrating vitality that springs from loss in the lives of Japanese adults, I do not wish to deny them the dignity of this suffering. I wish instead to focus, as anthropologist Steven Parish does, on “how we make ourselves appear, open ourselves up to, close ourselves off from, a world that offers suffering” (2008: xi).

For one woman I met in Japan, and whom I will refer to as Mori-san, the fear of abandonment and loss in old age was expressed in her feelings of nostalgia and attachments to the belongings that she accumulated over her life, and which her daughter whom she lived with frequently urged her to throw away. As Mori-san and I sat at her dining table months prior to the move, she turned to me saying,

I still have things left to do. Even when I look around here, there’s the organizing, putting things in order. [My daughter is] starting to say “Mom, what are you going to do with so much stuff?” She asks me to simply throw it out—throw it out like regular trash. That’s why things right now are so terrible… My own daughter would just throw out her own parents’ things, her parents- simply throw them out... Well I don’t know what to say about all that. I’m in trouble! (laughs) Well it’s not like any of this stuff is really worth anything, is just that, well, they hold memories [for me]…

Mori-san, who was 79 years old when we met, was in a constant state of reminiscence and mourning over the loss of her sentimental objects, and the fact that this sentiment found no sympathy from her children only added salt to her wounds. For Mori-san, there is little difference in her mind between throwing away someone’s possessions and throwing away that person. Like the old woman in Zeami’s Obasute, Mori-san’s attachments and her age led to a rapid degradation of both the mother-child relationship (there were frequent fights) as well as Mori-san’s own mental and physical health.

During the long, painful process of discarding her mountain of belongings, Mori-san came upon several objects that she considered too precious or meaningful to discard. Most of these were important symbols of her ancestors, and although their exact origins were often unknown, Mori-san nonetheless felt that they deserved a proper disposal. In one instance, I went with Mori-san to her parish temple for a ceremony to put this object to rest. After the ceremony, which in most respects resembled a standard memorial service, Mori-san turned to me with a sigh of relief, saying, “It’s a mysterious thing, isn’t it?
It’s just not a good thing to keep leftover things in your heart (kokoro). It’s different than when you’re young! Life gets shorter… This is how you feel when you get old (toshiyori no kokoro).”

For Mori-san, the ceremony was a way of transforming loss into recovery, agency and hope. The nature of the recovery was not the denial of loss as much as it was the affirmation of a life beyond the losses of old age, towards a continued recognition and care as an ancestor. Although the ultimate fate of the woman’s spirit in Zeami’s Obasute is unclear, there is reason to hope. Even if the moon changes, it too returns; and like the moonlight, the Buddha’s power could enlighten even a stone.

The Ballad of Narayama: Loss as lightness

Obasuteyama can be interpreted not only as a story about abusing or neglecting the old, but also as a story about moving through time. It is about how a self continues despite the inexorable fact that life brings departures and returns, losses and recoveries, weightness and light. These uneven and unstable movements create the kind of tensions that, when taken to their extremes, might culminate even in the unspeakable fantasy of gerontocidal abandonment.

Generational distance, succession and inheritance all contribute to these intimate tensions, as do broader social changes which occur far beyond the control of individuals. Social abandonment brings one kind of order to the process of aging, but in order to bring this created negative space or absence to the level of “ma,” one must look at its cultural elaboration, and especially its relationship to the experiences of older people. Do the lives of descendants depend on the passing of the elders? Are all descendants, and particularly heirs and successors, implicitly guilty of some kind of elder abandonment, if only in feeling and fantasy? Is the ethical choice for older people to defer to younger generations or attempt to resist the inevitable abandonment for as long as possible?

While we clearly see the ambivalence of the old deserted woman towards her aging and loss, the ambivalent feelings of the son who abandons her are more difficult to assess in the text of Zeami’s drama (the son does not appear or speak himself). Discerning the underlying feelings between mother and son is less of a problem, however, for audiences of the film adaptations of Fukuzawa Shichiro’s obasuteyama novel Ballad of Narayama (1956). In this version of obasute, the son vies with his mother for the title of protagonist, even though it is still clearly focused on aging and loss.

The first film version of Ballad of Narayama was released in 1958 (Kinoshita 1958), after Fukuzawa’s novel had won the first-time author the prestigious Chuo Koron Prize for fiction. The second adaptation was made 25 years later, in 1983 (Imamura 1983). Like the novel, both films were
popularly and critically acclaimed at the time of their releases, a notable achievement for modest films based on the small hardships of village life in a remote area of rural Japan. As films, they were able to speak to a wider audience as well, and both were shown internationally.\(^3\)

In 1961, A.H. Weiler of *The New York Times* wrote “Viewing ‘Ballad of Narayama,’ like tasting shark’s fin soup for the first time, can be an exotic, if not a sobering, experience,” as it deals with “the custom, harshly implacable to Occidental eyes, of transporting the aged and infirm rustic villagers to the barren heights of Mount Narayama” (Weiler 1961). While Weiler is not terribly impressed with the performances of many of the actors, he does comment that “as the matriarch Orin, Kinuyo Tanaka makes a strong and resolute individual, whose like is easily recognizable…her performance is as modern as the twentieth century” (Weiler 1961).

As can be surmised from this review, the old woman of Mount Narayama (Orin) is quite different from the pitiful “deserted crone” of *Obasute*. In this retelling, the plight of the old deserted woman of the mountain is turned on its head, suggesting that social abandonment by one’s children is not only an inevitable consequence of old age, but that the emotional and ethical meanings of abandonment can be shaped by older persons themselves. While Zeami’s *Obasute* focused on the helplessness of the old, Fukuzawa’s *Ballad of Narayama*, as Weiler points out, presents a complex picture of agency and interdependence, tradition and modernity.

Of the two films, Imamura’s 1983 version of *The Ballad of Narayama* is the most vivid telling of the story of Orin, who, on the eve of her 70th birthday is preparing to follow her village’s tradition of abandonment on the eponymous mountain. Rather than resist this fate, Orin sets about preparing her family for a life without her, mostly by manipulating and matchmaking for her moping, widowed son (Tatsuhei) and her young, cocky grandson (Kesa). Orin does not simply accept her abandonment stoically, she demands it. There is no cruel daughter-in-law that we can hold responsible for the abandonment. In fact, Tatsuhei has little interest in remarrying and longs to keep his mother close, allowing his own prolonged period of mourning for his wife. Orin will have none of this. In one especially uncomfortable scene, Orin knocks out her own teeth on a grindstone in order to appear older and feebler even as she encourages her new daughter-in-law to eat heartily. After the proper match for her son has been secured, Orin chooses to follow the village laws and be taken to Mount Narayama and abandoned there. The film ends with Tatsuhei’s return to his house, where the rest of the family has already divided up the old woman’s belongings.

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\(^3\) The 1983 film won the prestigious Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival of that year, and has remained a well-known and popular film since.
Orin is not the only old villager living in the shadow of Mount Narayama. Another old man residing with his son in a neighboring house is shown bound to a post in back room, pitifully crying and protesting his time for the mountain. While Orin is finally taken to the mountain on Tatsuhei’s back, assertively driving him on toward their destination, the old man must be forced up the mountain, bound in a net which his son eventually throws off a cliff, angered and ashamed. Such a contrast makes Orin’s determination that much nobler, a fact which the audience can be certain will be remembered in her distraught son’s memorial rituals. Who knows, this memory may even give him the courage to face the mountain in his own last years.

Another interesting detail is that Tatsuhei is haunted throughout the film by the memory of his father, Rihei, who, in the wake of his own grief for his aging mother and for a young daughter that had been sold away, became too depressed to take his mother to the mountain and eventually abandoned the family in mysterious circumstances. Rihei literally disappeared in the mountains, but at several points in the film he returns, either as a gust of wind in the trees or a ghostly figure in the mountains. He abandoned his own family because he could not bear to abandon his mother.

Orin, again, shows little sympathy for her husband: “The law is the law,” she sternly rebukes,

Orin: Pity gets you nowhere. He acted like he was the only one suffering, and he ran away. He shamed us in front of the entire village. (turning to Tatsuhei) You’ll probably…

Tatsuhei: (forcefully interrupting) I’m different! I’m not like my dad!

Orin: I wonder…

Orin fears that Tatsuhei, grieving for his wife and unwilling to take his mother to the mountains, will follow a similar shameful fate. Just as she would knock out her own teeth to avoid the shame of burdening the village, she is willing to sacrifice her own life to uphold tradition, as if to rebalance the fates and make up for her husband’s abandonment. It is more than coincidence that Orin destroys her teeth during the summer festival for the ancestors, and her transformed visage is shown soon after illuminated by the light of an offering fire as she sings of her family to comfort the spirits of the dead. If anyone can understand her, it is the ancestors, whom she will soon join on the mountain.

Imamura’s film combines at least two of Fukuzawa’s stories of the hardships of poor villages, creating a metaphoric scene that might be interpreted as an intensified microcosm of Japan. At Narayama, survival is precarious and the authority of tradition exists side-by-side with manipulations and betrayals. Orin too is capable of violence. It is Orin who tricks her grandson’s selfish and thieving wife, into returning to her natal family’s hut just before a lynch mob of angry villagers arrives to
enforce justice by burying the thieving family alive. In this case, Orin’s actions have more to do with her respect for village custom (killing families that rob from the village) than it does with protecting her own family (the grandson’s wife was five months pregnant). In such a brutal world we can see how relationships operate in the gray zone of obasuteyama, where obligations to the family or the community are weighed against personal moral beliefs, sometimes setting neighbor against neighbor or family members against one of their own. Under this logic of survival, however, the old are little better than the thieves, and the person facing Narayama must contend with question of not only how will I face death, but what will I leave behind? Who will remember me, and how? How can my loss also become the potential for life?

The unmistakable climax of the film, and the most iconic image of the obasute tale is the journey up Mt. Narayama with the mother on her son’s back. The village traditions of the abandonment (passed down orally by the elders) are clear that no words should be exchanged between the two of them once they start up the mountain, and that once the son begins to descend, he is not to turn back, even for one last glance. This variation on the prohibition of “Don’t look” echoes of the many “debt repayment” folktales (on kaeshi setsuwa) that usually revolve around married couples (Kitayama 2009). Like these tales, taboos of seeing or speaking protect one from the revelation of the other’s private, shameful self (Kitayama 2009: 96-97). In Narayama, the prohibition creates the possibility of abandonment through invisibility, just as Orin is kept behind Tatsuhei as they climb (a perspective which in itself might be associated with shame), and though the son attempts many times to talk to her, Orin remains a stone quiet burden he must carry. His attempts to look at old age are turned away. The intimate and emotional bond of mother and son is deferred for the sake of tradition and for the greater survival and dignity of the household.

It would be hard for anyone close to an older parent to watch Ballad of Narayama, and not feel moved by the sight of Orin, pale and still in the bone littered rocky crag, silently chastising her son to leave quickly. When it begins to snow on the mountain, the son runs back to his mother one last time, shouting like a small child “mother! It is snowing!” Tatsuhei knows that the snow is a sign of mercy from the god of the mountain, bringing a quick death to Orin. Orin reproaches him with a last glance, sitting stoic and still amid human remains. Finally it is his time to turn away and to descend the mountain.

If the village is a microcosm of society, the mountain of Narayama is both the wild of nature and the gateway to the world of the spirits. In a grander sense, we might interpret the mother-child climb as a meditation on aging on the most basic level of the intergenerational dyad. Orin is at once passive
(silent, on her son’s back), literally removing herself from the family (ascending) to make way for her
descendants, and yet it is her will that is the force propelling herself and her son forward up the
mountain path. The debt of son for his mother’s care is repaid by caring for descendants, but the debt of
the mother for her care in old age is repaid through her willingness to be abandoned. This generational
life-cycle of debt and care is mirrored in the seasonal cycle of the film, which begins and concludes
with the snows of winter. It is only natural that people and families should age this way, brutal as it
may appear.

For the viewer of the Ballad of Narayama, old age is condensed into a single year preceding the
mountain. For Orin, old age is the last chance to prepare her family for life after her departure, and she
never seems to rest or feel lonely or depressed as she goes about this venture. This is perhaps a
reflection of the way death gives meaning to life, just as many older Japanese people I met remarked on
how secure they felt about life in general after they had purchased a grave plot or made similar end-of-
life plans.

One of the most touching scenes in Imamura’s film is a conversation between Orin and an old and
ailing friend, Okane. As Orin gently massages her back, the two old friends discuss not only their fears
of death and abandonment, but of hope and return:

Okane: I envy you Orin
Orin: Why?
Okane: I wish that I could live longer
Orin: But being as healthy as I am is embarrassing. I eat a full portion
Okane: I want to go to the mountain… I don’t want to die of sickness. They’ll just bury me here.
Orin: It’s all the same. Either way, our spirits go to the mountain. We will all meet again on the
mountain.
Okane: Will we all meet again?
Orin: We will all meet again. Your husband is waiting for you… I don’t know about my husband
though…

We are all abandoned by our children, the story seems to say, but only those of us who accept this
fate, who can mourn the loss of the past and look towards the future with the hope of remembrance and
reunion, can return from the mountain, just as the ancestors return during the summer holiday. To
return is to change; these two words are homonyms in Japanese (kaeru).

**Lightening the Burden**
Nishida-san, like Orin, lives with her son and his family, and since the deaths of her husband and his parents, has taken on the role of the family matriarch. Also like Orin, part of fulfilling her role and lightening the burden of her old age on the household has meant preparing for death. On her retirement, she used her savings to purchase a new domestic altar (butsudan) for the family dead and even received a posthumous name in a special ceremony at a Buddhist temple. Part of her motivation for arranging these things comes from her experience as a member of the local neighborhood social welfare association (fukushikai) which sometimes entailed making funeral arrangements for older people who had died alone (kodokushi).

As a result of her community service, Nishida-san is a seasoned professional at post-death arrangements, often instructing bereaved families on what to do when relatives die, from cleaning to getting the death certificate to the finer points of funeral arrangements:

Nishida: After an individual dies, we have to clean up. If they live in a rented house. (Jason: Rented house?) A rented house. If they die there. When one old man died, that’s up to the social workers. Even if it is my region, others will come out to help and we’ll have a number of people cleaning. So we take all the unnecessary things, put out all the trash—one old man politely wrote it all out—the Buddhist priest, for example, who should come, and from the neighborhood association (chōnai), who should come, he wrote it all out, so we followed as best we could, but, if we didn’t have something written out like that, and it if was someone without any money, in the end, we’d go around and ask for money, and everyone would put in a little, and we could dispose of all the garbage… for people who don’t have any family. The civic group would have to take care of all of it… We’d have to give a simple funeral for the person too.

Well, I feel bad, but someone in this neighborhood (chōnai), an old man died—do you understand “otsūya” (Buddhist wake)? (Jason: Otsūya?) When we look after the deceased for one night, right next to the body. It’s supposed to be the family that looks after the deceased, but if you’re alone, there’s no one to do that for you, right? So the civic group said we’ll have to do this, but I felt like, I’m scared to do this by myself! (laughs) It’s a little creepy! (laughs more and pushes me jokingly) to be with a dead stranger! I can’t do it!

Then the head of the house next door asked me, “Nishida-san, what will you be doing tonight?” and when I said “I’m doing otsūya,” he said, well, I’ll come and keep you company. So he came with about four people and we stayed up drinking tea and chatting! (laughs).

In another story from her days as a community social welfare leader, Nishida-san told me a story of a funeral with only three people attending:

One time this old man died and his wife was all running around and not really getting anything done saying over the phone, (strained and mocking voice) “Oh, my husband has gotten sick and died!” So I went right away, and after all the funeral arrangements were made, there came another call- “How much should I pay for this?” she said! At the time it was about 140 thousand yen (about $14,000 US), so I negotiated with the funeral director and we were able to agree on 140
thousand yen for everything. In exchange, I had to do hold the 丟々 and watch over the funeral. That was on December 31st. (Jason: New Year’s Eve?) Right. He died on the 30th, and so until he was cremated at Four o’clock on the 31st, I was there. They depended on me. That’s the first time I’d been to a funeral with only the 仏-san and two other people! I’ve had a lot of experiences…

As with the first story, Nishida-san takes on a leadership role in making arrangements for the bereaved, reinforcing her reputation as someone you can “depend” on. The general theme of all of her stories seems to be that if you keep up connections with others, and if you plan ahead of time, you will not face a death that burdens other people. Like Orin, a good old age means preparing for a good death. In her own life, Nishida-san seems to be a model of successful aging, still working at the age of 89, her son has taken on the family silk-weaving business and the two enjoy a close and loving relationship. When Nishida-san takes her regular strolls to visit neighbors, her son will accompany her, keeping her steady as she takes careful steps with her severely stooped posture.

Nonetheless, there are constant reminders of death as friends and family die, and with every memorial visit to the butsudan or the family grave plot. Again, like Orin, whose ancestors had gone to the mountain for generations, the sense of continuity in the midst of loss has become a guiding principle for Nishida-san’s life:

We’re all allowed to live now because of the grace of the ancestors. Or you could say we have been brought to life, whatever. But you mustn’t make light of the ancestors. [You should] do your best not to worry the ancestors. Saying that, even if you have something you’re worrying about, [the ancestors] will protect you! (laughs)

Nishida-san’s story shows that abandonment and loss are not limited to older people living alone or with abusive family. Tales like Narayama, however, helps us recognize that loss can be transformed through the practice of integrating oneself within webs of social dependence, be it with the living or with the dead. For Nishida-san, the hope she finds in the ancestors is mirrored by the hope that her son and her descendants will not be burdened by her old age, nor by her death and will carry on the traditions and values of the family after she has left them.

“Desolate, forsaken crag”: obasute and the shame of age

Zeami’s Obasute emphasizes the pain of old age, no doubt to impress on its audience the need to prepare for one’s last years by turning to the Buddha rather than expecting to be cared for by family. Ballad of Narayama seems to absolve the guilt of the family by introducing the idea of aging and death as a time of noble self-sacrifice, of incurring a debt that is repaid through the continuity of the family.
line and the promise of memorialization. Perhaps one reason for the continued popularity of the Obasuteyama tale in Japan today is that there is so much flexibility to the story. In some versions, for example, the old woman is not even completely abandoned, and is praised for her wisdom (Traphagen 2000: 150; Yamaori 1997a: 35); in others, she is freakishly demented and demon-like (Kurahashi 2003:27-40; Sorgenfrei 1994). Because of the tale’s plasticity, different authors are able to play with the few essential elements of the story (elderly woman, son, and the threat of abandonment) and the moral consequences of their articulation.

Knight and Traphagan (2003) write that “Many anthropologists and folklorists who have worked in remote areas of Japan will be familiar with tales of local spots in the mountains— often referred to as “Hell Valley” or Jigokudani— where in earlier times the old (and the sick) are said to have been discarded and which today are considered inauspicious, haunted places to be avoided” (2003:14). In modern urban Japan, there is another kind of “living hell” (kono yo no Jigoku) (Okuma 1996) that many older people face, a kind of abandonment that involves the state as well as the family, and produces an ever more urgent need for rethinking the meaning of care and its impact on the work of the self. Tatsumi Yoshihiro’s “Abandon the Old in Tokyo,” is a graphic novel set in gritty, modern-day Osaka, Japan. The obasute story here is unmistakably modern, urban and full of despair.

Tatsumi Yoshihiro was born in 1935, and began drawing Japanese serial comic books (manga) during the 1950’s, when artists like Osamu Tezuka, the creator of Tetsuo Atom (Astroboy), were reshaping the aesthetic and intellectual boundaries of the genre. Tatsumi was a pioneer of the gritty, dark, black and white style that he dubbed “Gekiga,” (“dramatic pictures”) and became a cult figure in the manga world (Garner 2009).

Tatsumi’s stories blend the angst and ennui of everyday life in a Japan adrift in the post-war era (Tatsumi’s autobiography is titled “A Drifting Life”) with surreal depictions with often bizarre, violent, and disgusting fantasy imagery. There is little heroism in such a world, and little hope for more than brief, desperate episodes of animal pleasure. Tatsumi’s work boldly confronts the existential anguish of life in the gray zone, and his anti-heroes working in sewers and other dirty jobs, can hardly stake a moral position from which to criticize the emotional numbness of society (Gill 2011). It may come as little surprise then, that his 1970 collection “Abandon the Old in Tokyo” directly incorporated the themes and subjects from obasute, setting it within the historical context of the two generations spanning the war years.
The story revolves around a troubled garbage collector, Kenichi Nakamura, and his mother, who live together in a small Tokyo apartment. Kenichi’s mother is bedridden, and when the reader first sees her, she has just soiled herself again. Kenichi dutifully cleans up the mess while his mother laments on how hard it was to raise him, how lonely she is when he goes off to work, and how miserable it is to be old. Kenichi bears his burden stoically. In fact, throughout the short story, the reader does not see him speak a word to his mother, who never seems to stop talking.

Unable to sleep due to his mother’s loud snoring, Kenichi opens up a newspaper and reads one of the headlines:

“Old person (rojin) discovered two weeks after death in a downtown apartment”

The following frames show Kenichi thinking back to something said by his coworkers on the garbage truck: “People get rid of anything old. That’s modern life for ya.” (Tatsumi 2006)

He thinks of his fiancé, whom he had dinner with before returning home to his mother, saying, “I can’t wait to leave home. I can’t wait to live with you” (Tatsumi 2006). The upper half of Kenichi’s head can be seen in this frame, panicked and sweating.

Kenichi doesn’t waste time, and soon finds a small, secluded apartment to move his mother into. His mother is heartbroken at the news, crying, “I can’t believe how ungrateful you are, after all I’ve done.” Kenichi leaves to wander the city alone, passing by an underpass marked with a sign that reads “Please don’t throw away your car here” (Tatsumi 2006).

When the day has come to move his mother, Kenichi must life her onto his back to climb a long staircase up to the apartment. Though dressed in kimono, the posture is anything but flattering: her legs straddle him, sticking out to the sides; her body hunches over his, draped limply like a flesh cape. Kenichi hears the crows overhead, and when he looks up, an entire page shows him paused, sweating and grimacing at the skies, while the streets and buildings have become a dark silhouette of the forest. While there have been several frames that lend themselves to a feeling of “ma,” this one is clearly the most striking, as we are suddenly transported from the city to the forest of Kenichi’s imagination.

The story could just as well end here, as it more or less does in Zeami’s *Obasute* and in Fukuzawa’s *Ballad of Narayama*. The old woman has been abandoned by her son, giving him the chance at recreating himself with another woman who is young, pretty and modern. Kenichi knows what he has done. He has even arranged to go on a vacation with his fiancé far away from Tokyo and the sounds and smells of his mother. Just before the train departs, as his fiancé smothers him with affection, he becomes panicked again. When she tells him slyly, “I’m never going to let you go” he
finally makes an excuse and leaves the train, ashamed, but also determined, and runs back to his mother. When he opens the door, he finds the body, rigid next to an open bottle of sedative.

Kenichi is crushed by the discovery but manages to put the body on his back again and walks out into the streets, where he runs into the middle of a large crowd of people who seem to hardly notice the burden he is carrying. A news reporter approaches Kenichi, asking “Pedestrians are her today to take back the streets. As a dutiful son, would you care to comment on this?” (Tatsumi 2006) As the frame pans back cinematically, we see Kenichi and his mother in the classic obasute pose, in the center of a crowded street, and banner that reads “Pedestrian Paradise” (Hokousha Tengoku).

Well-side Conversations about Abandonment and Care

Concerns arising from family and residence situations were common subjects of conversation at the adult day service centers in Japan where I regularly volunteered. In one instance a blind woman at the center started a conversation by mentioning that she lives with one of her four sons and that they all ate meals together. At this, a 99 year old woman at the table chimed in that she has lived by herself since her husband and daughter passed away. Rather than depend on family, however, this woman told the group that she mainly counts on her neighbors for help, using the phrase “Outsiders close by are better than family far away.” “Living alone isn’t so hard,” she added, turning to me, “But maybe it would be for a man!” The others at the table voiced their support of both of these models of dependence, neither of which suggested the fear of abandonment in old age. However, the woman who lived alone then told a story that everyone agreed represented the worst case.

This woman said that she knows another woman who lives with her only son and his family, but that they live completely separate. The old woman takes her meals in her own room and her son and his family even lock her out of their part of the house at times. “They even go on vacations without telling her!” she continued, “And once when they went on a vacation in Okinawa, she died.” The women at the table talked about this case of modern-day obasute for some time, repeating the details for some of the more forgetful listeners at the table.

What was most frightening to these women about this story was not necessarily physical separation from children, but emotional separation; they feared becoming merely a body, easily forgotten or discarded like the old crone or the mother in Tatsumi’s manga. Just as caretakers are ambivalent about their role, older adults express both a desire to be cared for as well as shame for being a burden on others. The women at the center seemed to be able to achieve a balance between these two.
and their stories and gossip reinforce the consequences for those who cannot.

**Conclusion**

The United Nations categorizes a population as an “aging society” when 7% of the population is over 65 years old. Japan already met this criterion by 1970, (the same year *Abandon the Old in Tokyo* was published). What is more remarkable is that by 1994, the percentage of the population over 65 doubled to 14%—the fastest increase of any county in history. According to the national census of 2010, it is estimated that 23.1% of Japanese are over 65, and by 2055 this number is expected to reach 40%, with more than a quarter of the population over 75 (MHLW).

In a country where nearly one of every five people are over the age of 75, and the average period of dependence is seven years (ages 76-83 based on average life expectancy statistics), aging and its discontents have become a national project. Loss is abundant.

The question of what to do with so many dependent older people is not particularly new in Japan. After all, Japanese culture has long placed a strong moral emphasis on generous reciprocity, interdependence and group identity, and older adults who cannot participate in this system, and who, through their own dependence too sharply announce the strain of maintaining it, find themselves subject to an ever constrained and ambiguous social status. For these reasons, social abandonment of the old is not uncommon in Japan, but it is also not inevitable. The stories of losses and insecurities in the last half of life, like those faced by Mori-san during her move, by Nishida-san and her pre-death arrangements, or by the women at the day center are both real and anticipated, but all present moments of adaptations in the self. As the self opens up to loss, aging may bring a king of “mourning-liberation” (Pollock 1989), but a liberation of the self should not be mistaken as merely a change in one’s inner state, a kind of “being at peace with oneself”; mourning liberation is relational, inter-subjective, and in the world, and thus, must contend with the interests of others, and the social and institutional regulation of dependence and care.

As the ambiguity and ambivalence about what it means to grow old in Japan persists, so too will the stories of obasute. As population aging becomes an unavoidable aspect of political, economic and family life for everyone in Japan, the prevalence of official discourses on aging amplify rather than solve the tensions that produce obasute. As tales of elder abuse and suicide circulate alongside those of health, wisdom, and care, the social reality of will grow even more complex, varied and creative.
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