

The Practice of Concern

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Pamela J. Stewart
and
Andrew Strathern
Series Editors

The Practice of Concern

Ritual, Well-Being, and Aging in Rural Japan

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For Mom, who will be greatly missed

Contents

Medical Anthropology Series Editors' Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
A Note on Conventions	xvii
Map of Japan	xviii
Chapter 1 Introduction: New Year's Day, 1996	3
Culture, Religion, and Aging	12
Health and Well-Being	21
Methods and Writing	22
The Program	25
Chapter 2 Aging and Anomie in Rural Japan	29
Social Networks: Family and Friends	36
Aging in the Tōhoku Region and Japan	43
Chapter 3 Aging, Well-Being, and <i>Ikigai</i>	57
Illness, Health, and Old Age in Japan	63
Collective and Individual Responses	
to the Potential of <i>Boke</i>	67
Power, Well-Being, and <i>Ikigai</i>	72
Chapter 4 <i>Omairi</i> : The Practice of Concern	79
Sectarian Affiliation	83
<i>Omairi</i> : Ritual Expression of Concern	91
The Private Context of <i>Omairi</i>	96
The Ancestors	105
The Public Context of <i>Omairi</i>	109
Enacting Concern	124

Chapter 5 Old Women, Ancestors, and Caregiving	127
Dreams and the Departed	130
Older Women and Concern	136
Chapter 6 <i>Matsuri</i> : Expressing Collective Concern	147
<i>Kabōsai</i> : The Fire Prevention Festival in Kanegasaki	148
Age and the Structure of <i>Kabōsai</i>	153
Concern and <i>Kabōsai</i>	161
Gender, Age, and Domains of Ritual Practice	164
Chapter 7 Old Age, Ritual, and Concern	167
Endnotes	183
Glossary of Key Terms	201
Bibliography	207
Index	223

Medical Anthropology Series *Editors' Preface*

Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

This is an extremely well-rounded, mature, and professionally written book, solidly based on extensive fieldwork and careful analysis of the relevant Japanese behavioral responses regarding aging processes. The author's overall approach is encapsulated neatly in the title: *The Practice of Concern: Ritual, Well-Being, and Aging in Rural Japan*. Old age and its associated transformations in health, general well-being, and family relationships, is an object of concern among people everywhere and has been throughout time. The Greek mythological tale of Tithonus (a mortal who fell in love with the goddess Dawn) dramatically depicts the fate of prolonged life and aging. In this classic story Tithonus, the son of a king of Troy, was granted the gift of living forever but he was not also provided with eternal youth. Thus, as time passed Tithonus grew older, weaker, and less mobile but did not pass onward to the next phase of the cycle of existence, i.e., death.

Many of the discussions in *The Practice of Concern* are ones that are also applicable to contexts outside of Japan, e.g., the U.S.A. Debates over health care, availability of medical supplies, and quality of life for "Seniors" are major political and social concerns. Traphagan's detailed study explores the way people in his study area deal with these concerns through particular ritual practices that both the aging

and their kin or community members undertake in order to cope with the particular circumstances of aging itself. The effect of this approach is that the author's text illuminates both Japanese ideas of religion, seen through the lens of ritual practices, and the specific concepts regarding aging and well being, such as "ikigai" (self-discipline) counterposed against "boke" (loss of self). Dealing with aging, and keeping well-being always in sight, leads to "omairi", the practice of concern.

One of the excellent features of this book is its general blending of different modes of analysis. Cultural meanings are explicated along with sociological and ethnographic descriptions of data, and the works of Japanese specialists are juxtaposed with those of theorists such as Paul Connerton on memory and Michel Foucault on discourse. This strategy of writing leads to an account that is well adapted to use both by researchers working in the field of gerontology and by students, graduate or undergraduate, seeking to gain a grasp of Japanese culture and society and in general to understand the intersection of religion and ritual in healing practices.

Traphagan's perspectives on themes in Japanese society show this same ability to project a balanced narrative. An example is his handling of the distinction between Shinto and Buddhism, where he writes that "the post-Meiji Restoration separation of institutional Shinto and Buddhism was something imposed by political authorities rather than inherent in the ways people historically have practiced the two religions." Or on kinship relations, where he considers the persistence of the stem-family as a family ideal and points out that nowadays this only "intensifies the distancing older people feel in rural areas," because of the shift from a three-generational to a two-generational nuclear family structure. Traphagan is also able to illuminate relations of a personal kind with ancestors, pointing out how "feelings of close relationships between the living and the dead appear to become stronger when one has experienced the death of a close relative." He also notes that for the elderly, "the tutelary power of the ancestors over their descendants continues to be important," while this is less the case for younger people. Very interesting here is Traphagan's treatment of dreams, and how these enter into people's

ideas of relations with ancestors and one another. If someone has an accident in the family, ancestors may appear in dreams to their kinsfolk as a sign of their care for their descendants. Similar ideas about kin appearing in dreams occur in many other societies (see Lohmann 2003 for a recent collection of essays on this topic).

As a contribution to the literature on both gerontology in particular and medical anthropology in general, this book is distinguished by its holistic approach. The author places old age into the overall practices of ritual and the exercise of concern for well-being. Following the insights of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney and Margaret Lock he also sets the issue of illness into the cosmic notions of balance, in which the aim of therapy is not to attain perfect health but to restore a balance that has been disturbed. He points out that women have a particular obligation as caretakers for the elderly. This raises the interesting question of what role is accorded to such women as ancestors when they themselves die. Senior women as care-givers occupy a kind of "healer" role. This is not unlike examples from other societies where women find themselves responsible for care-giving to elderly family members while also balancing their lives in terms of work, children and spouses. Not all processes have a harmonious outcome. Traphagan points out that as a result of demographic and economic changes in some areas older people may live in solitude and younger people may resent the role of taking care for the aged. The incidence of suicide points to strains of this sort in familial relations. In general, however, women themselves take on special care-giving roles in the family structure, and Traphagan strikingly suggests that they become like priestesses of the inner domestic world while men play major roles in "matsuri," public collective rituals. Such an analysis projects the idea of the complementarity of ritual functions as basic to gender relations (see Stewart and Strathern 1999, 2002 for examples of this process of complementarity in Papua New Guinean contexts).

Another strength of Traphagan's book is its dual focus on personal, intimate rituals and public expressions of collective concern. The author analyzes the roles of elders in collective rituals as personifications of concern for the community. By their ritual actions they purify

themselves and thus also strengthen the community as a whole. Thus, the rituals performed purify the whole community. This analysis has the intriguing outcome of suggesting that the whole schema of purity and pollution is a means of articulating concern for the community, not just in terms of its boundaries but as a means of ensuring its well-being. Individuals may also harness the purifying power for their own therapeutic purposes. While avoiding any stereotypical "groupist" characterization of Japanese social relations, Traphagan succeeds in showing how "the boundaries between individual, family, and community are not necessarily sharply drawn in the Japanese way of looking at the world."

This fine study is a significant contribution to gerontology, Japanese studies, religious studies, and medical anthropology, and it is a delight to read in terms of its careful modes of presentation and vigorous narrative as well as theoretical and analytical conclusions. The book clearly addresses the role of religion and ritual in healing practices and could profitably be used as a textbook in courses on religious studies, medical anthropology, and introductory cultural anthropology.

We are very pleased to present John Traphagan's book as the most recent contribution to the Ethnographic Studies in Medical Anthropology Series. The other titles in this Series include:

"Curing and Healing: Medical Anthropology in Global Perspective", 1999 (by Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart)

"Healing the Modern in a Central Javanese City", 2001 (by Steve Ferzacca)

"Physicians at Work, Patients in Pain: Biomedical Practice and Patient Response in Mexico", 2nd edition" 2001 (by Kaja Finkler)

"Elusive Fragments: Making Power, Propriety, and Health in Samoa", 2002 (by Douglass Drozdow-St. Christian)

"Endangered Species: Health, Illness, and Death among Madagascar's People of the Forest" 2002 (by Janice Harper)

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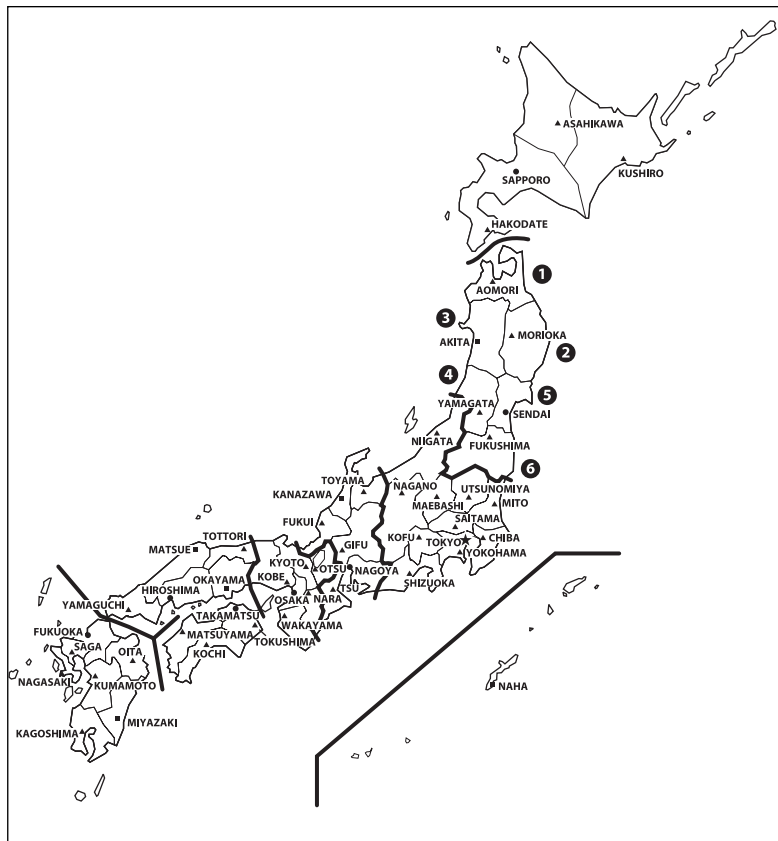
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A Note on Conventions

All names of Japanese individuals in this book are presented using the Japanese custom of writing the family name before the given name. As is common in ethnographic writing, the names of all individuals who participated in the research have been changed to protect their identities. In some cases, interview data from specific individuals appear in more than one of my published works; in these instances, names of individuals across publications are sometimes intentionally inconsistent in order to provide as much protection of the individual's identity as possible. Romanization throughout the book follows the Hepburn system.

Map of Japan



The Tōhoku region of Japan consists of Aomori (1), Iwate (2), Akita (3), Yamagata (4), Miyagi (5), and Fukushima (6) Prefectures.