

The Old in Old Japan: The Imagery of the Aged as Seen in Classical Literature

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates several patterns of how the Japanese have depicted their senior citizens in works of literature, especially during the Heian and Kamakura periods. By looking at the original variants of the *ubasute* legend as they appear in works such as *Kokin Wakashu* and *Yamato Monogatari*, we learn that the factor of abandoning one's parent due to extreme poverty was nonexistent in the beginning, but was added much later, for example in a short story *Narayamabushi-kō* by Fukazawa Shichirō. On the other hand, if we take a look at literary genres such as *rekishi monogatari* and *mugen-noh*, it becomes quite clear that the old was treated more commonly as omniscient, even mystical people, who possess rich experience and knowledge that younger people could only dream of. By understanding such cultural context concerning the treatment of the old, it could be hoped that Japanese policy makers and workers in the field of medicine and social welfare could come up with a more encouraging ways to treat the phenomenon of aging, so as to embrace the aging society in a more constructive manner.

Key words; aging society, imagery of the old, Japanese classical literature, *ubasute*, cultural context

Introduction

Japan is on its course in entering an unprecedented stage of aging society, where more than one third of the population is over 65 years old⁽¹⁾. Needless to say, appropriate public policies and vistas of sufficient social welfare is crucial to counter such situation. However, it also seems significant for us to know how the aged has been viewed in Japan, especially in its cultural context. Citizens will no doubt have increasing opportunities to communicate with the elderly in the near future, and moreover, they will become aged citizens themselves, probably sooner than they hope to be. Therefore, it never can be worthless to be familiarized with the concepts concerning the old in old Japan- during the Heian and Kamakura periods.

This paper will demonstrate examples of various images attributed to the elderly in Japan, especially within the works of literature produced up until the Kamakura period. Through those examples we should be able to have some idea on what Japanese have seen in, or expected from, the elderly. Since a work of literature not only reflects the ideas prevalent in the mind of the author but also in the collective minds of

the society the author lived in, we should be able to have a glimpse of the development in the relationship between the elderly and the society during the last ten centuries, and hopefully, we may be able to shed some light on questions concerning how the society should treat the elderly citizens in decades to come.

Before looking at actual examples, it should be made clear that such efforts have also been made in the past. Nishimura (2000) points out that although it was common in Japan throughout the premodern era to depict the elderly as demi-gods in stories and folklores, it was often old men who were said to possess divine characteristics, while old women made use of their profound knowledge in more domestic roles. Nagase (1985) takes examples from *rekishi monogatari*, or historical tales, to conclude that Japanese of the premodern era glorified the old, and this also mirrors their strong interest in medicine, especially with new knowledge and techniques introduced from the continent. However, it still remains true that attempts like above are scarce, and this is precisely why this paper could serve a purpose by looking at several examples in a more detailed fashion.

1. The old as a burden?

Wada (Featherstone and Wernick 2003) discusses that the Japanese maintain high sense of respect towards the elderly even today, and this tendency derives from the paternalistic structure of the society as well as the Confucian teachings of *kō*, which indoctrinates the importance of serving those who are older than oneself, especially one's parents.

Although the above can be true in many cases, it must be noted that such respect from the young towards the old is idealistic to some extent. Realistically speaking, poverty persisted throughout history, and for many needy families, especially farmers, their parents could very well become a burden once they become too weak to work in the fields. Perhaps it is such imagery of hardship that gave rise to the well-known folklore, in which the children, although hesitantly, take their aging parents to the mountains and abandon them there. This custom called *ubasute* (lit. dumping the old woman) typically implies a son taking her old mother to the mountains, and leave her there to die from dehydration, starvation, or hypothermia.

We can trace this mythical custom way back to the Heian period. It is in *Kokin Wakashu* (905), the first official anthology of *waka* poems in Japan, that we see the word *ubasute* for the first time:

わが心慰めかねつ更級や姨捨山に照る月を見て

My mind was never soothed
While I gazed the shining moon
Over the Ubasute mountain in Sarashina⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

In this poem by an unknown author, Ubasute is used as a proper noun, indicating a mountain. Sarashina is an area that spans over Nagano and Chikuma cities in Nagano prefecture in the present day. From the latter we can still approach the Ubasute Mountain, or Mount Kamuriki, as it is officially called. As we can

see, this poem focuses on the beauty of the moon and the lonely soul of a traveler; it has nothing to do with the abandoning of one's mother. In fact, thanks to *waka* like above, Sarashina and Ubasute Mountain became renowned as places of interest when the moon is concerned⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾.

It was in *monogatari*, or tales, rather than poems, that imagery of Ubasute took a tragic turn. All of *Yamato Monogatari*, *Konjaku Monogatari-shu*, and *Toshiyori Zuinō* have an entry on the incident, with minor differences in the detail^(iv):

Once upon a time, there lived a man in Sarashina, who was reared by his aunt, following the untimely death of his parents. He was now old enough to marry, and did so unaffectedly. Soon afterwards, however, the wife started to complain about living together with her aunt-in-law, who was by then old and ugly. The wife harassed the old woman whenever she had the chance, and eventually, asked her husband to dump her among the deep mountains. Overwhelmed, the man hesitantly carries his aunt on his back, and leaves her behind in the mountains, so deep that it is impossible for her to return alone. But once he gets home, he immediately notices the beautiful moon shining on top of that cursed mountain; he instantly remembers all the joyful years he has spent with his aunt. He tries to sleep his feelings off, but cannot sleep at all. Finally, he recites the poem above, and rushes back to pick her up.

This story, therefore, gives the aforementioned poem a possibility of alternative interpretation. The first line, "my mind was never soothed" no longer reflects the lonely state of mind caused by the journey, but it is now the result of his abandonment of his aunt. Naturally, it is the name of the mountain -Ubasute- that inspired the tale of a man dumping an old woman in the mountain. Why the mountain came to possess such a gruesome name is not known. And likewise, there is no concrete evidence whatsoever to prove that such custom actually existed.

It should also be noted that unlike the common belief today, the man in the story did not actually desert his aunt. The moon, a poetic device that often raised ontological questions in the minds of those who looked at it, compelled the man to recognize his wrongdoing. Besides, the reason for his actions was the hatred of his wife towards his aunt, and not financial difficulties. These facts suggest that today's version of *ubasute* legend has developed over a long course of history, and was not concocted in a single attempt.

All in all, it should be safe to state that the poem, originally, had no intention to inspire such legend. *Waka*, by all means, was pretty much reserved for aristocracy, and having no notion of severe poverty, it is unlikely that poets would have thought about leaving the elderly family member in the mountains to starve.

What, then, propelled the fame (or *ill* fame) of this legend? A thorough investigation of countless documents would be necessary to reach a passable conclusion, and that clearly surpasses the scope of this paper. At the moment, let us satisfy ourselves by taking a look at what seemingly made the modern version of the legend perpetual: it is *Narayamabushi-kō* (1956), a short story by Fukazawa Shichirō^(v).

The story takes place in a small agricultural village in Nagano (this coincides with the traditional location of Ubasute mountain). Orin, a woman who will soon turn seventy, is determined to go into the mountains, following the custom long established in the village. The reason for the self-sacrifice is simple: so the family would have one less mouth to feed. The winter comes, and many villagers are starved. One of Orin's neighbors could not resist the temptation to steal potatoes from his fellow villagers. His crime

was discovered, and within a few days, whole of his family was lynched to death. Soon later, Orin asks his son to carry him into the mountains. Knowing he has no other choice, the son obeys. After he leaves her on the mountaintop, he realizes that it has started to snow. It is considered fortunate to be abandoned on a snowy day, because one can die more comfortably from the cold than from starvation. The son runs back to his mother and tells her how lucky she is, although he would much rather carry her home. Orin, while knowing her son's feelings, quietly waves him away.

This sad, shocking, and somewhat melodramatic short story was received with utmost praise from contemporary writers and critiques; and because of this, it naturally became a bestseller. It was made into film twice, by famous directors Kinoshita Keisuke (1958) and Imamura Shōhei (1983), and these films even furthered the reputation of Fukazawa's story^(vi).

It must not be overlooked, however, that even in Fukazawa's story, the son is reluctant to "murder" his mother. And this raises a simple question concerning the whole legend of *ubasute*: would so many children leave their parents to die on the mountains, even in such hardships? It seems highly unlikely. Of course it is plausible to surmise that many starving farmers have *imagined* that they would be better off with less mouths to feed, but that does not mean they would actually take action. Moreover, from the traditional viewpoint of filial piety, the set of values accepted widely in Japan, such action would be deemed atrocious. The perpetrator of patricide or matricide would no doubt have been punished severely. While it is possible that an elderly family member would spontaneously leave the house or even commit suicide, killing of a parent by a child seems much less likely to take place in a real setting^(vii).

Having less strength for work but still hungry for food, the old could be considered a burden, especially in a small, impoverished community. It is understandable, therefore, that a legend like *ubasute* formulates at some point in the course of history. Nevertheless, through the examples we have taken into account, we should be able to state that such custom was mythical for the most part, and has no firm grounds in the cultural context of Japan. The bottom line is, if one had to choose, one would rather give up his children's lives than his parents'.

2. The old as historians

How, then, were the old treated in the mainstream of Japanese literature? A great example would be *Ōkagami* (after 1115), one of the early examples of the genre *rekishi monogatari*, or historical tales^(viii). Here, the two main characters of the story, Ōyake no Yotsugi and Natsuyama no Shigeki, serve as narrators of history covering from the reign of Emperor Montoku (mid 9th century) to the flourishing of Fujiwara no Michinaga (late 10th to early 11th century).

Perhaps the greatest characteristic of this text is that, unlike historians of today, the two elderly gentlemen do not recount what they have researched. In fact, they are only speaking from their memories: what they have really seen with their own two eyes. This could seem strange, since they talk about events scattered through two centuries, but still it is *possible*, because Yotsugi is 190 years old, and Shigeki is 180 years old. This somewhat outrageous setting allows the characters to share with the reader a convincing account of the olden years.

Without a doubt, the two men are aware of their extraordinary power. Right before he starts to tell the story, Yotsugi proudly declares thus:

昔物語して、このおはさふ人々に、「さは、いにしへは、世はかくこそはべりけれ」と、聞かせたてまつらむ。

Let us talk about the past, so people around us would listen and learn how the world was like back in the days.^(ix)

Ōkagami, as a work of literature, was an attempt to handle historical theme in the framework of fiction, which was considered a taboo before the 11th century. It was in circa 1028 that *Eiga Monogatari* was written, a revolutionary text that recounts historical details of successive emperors and high-ranking aristocrats using *hiragana*, a set of characters invented domestically, instead of Chinese characters that were designated for official purposes, including the imperial history. By introducing *hiragana* to the realm of history, it was now possible to *create* using history as a theme, rather than documenting it with (supposedly) accurate precision.

However, *Eiga Monogatari* could be deemed as a transitional work. Although historical theme was liberated by its use of *hiragana*, the style of the text still mirrors that of official record of history, and especially resembles that of so-called *rikkoku-shi*, a series of six official volumes that document the history of Japan from its creation by the gods, as depicted in *Nihon-Shoki*. It was *Ōkagami* that truly provided a breakthrough in expanding the possibilities of Japanese literature.

And to do this, a convincing narrator was absolutely necessary. Third-person portrayal of mere events was eschewed, and was taken over by a first-person narrative of experience, which is far more powerful and, as a matter of fact, *realistic*, regardless of the work's fictitious framework. Who, but a man of 190 years old, could carry out such a task?

We can state that the method of *Ōkagami* was accepted favorably by the reader, because the style of *Ōkagami* is to be handed down to its successors, namely *Ima-kagami*, *Mizu-kagami*, and *Masu-kagami*. Let us take a quick look at *Ima-kagami* to indicate its resemblance to *Ōkagami*.

The narrator of *Ima-kagami* (1170) is, this time, a woman who is at least 150 years old. She tells her audience (and the reader) that she used to be a lady-in-waiting who served Murasaki Shikibu, the author of *Genji Monogatari*, or *Tales of Genji*. This well-fabricated background gives her narrative strong grounds, because most, if not all, of the audience are well acquainted with her and her work. By claiming her connection to the renowned author, the audience would be strongly tempted to listen to whatever story she could offer. And to further reinforce her eligibility, the old lady also discloses that she is the granddaughter of Yotsugi, the narrator of *Ōkagami*. By her blood, she is entitled to recount history as she has witnessed it.

The word *kagami*, common in four of the famous *rekishi monogatari* texts, is also interesting. Meaning “mirror”, it is usually believed that these works function as a mirror to reflect the ages they portray. But it can also be interpreted that the narrators, the historians of great age, are considered to be mirrors

themselves. For example, in *Ōkagami*, Shigeki praises his friend Yotsugi that he is like a clear mirror that reflects not only the present, but the past and the future as well. Also, in *Ima-kagami*, the old lady claims that Murasaki Shikibu has nicknamed her *sho-kagami*, or “small mirror”. These episodes suggest that it was not only the texts, but also the narrators themselves, that were considered a mirror.

Old people are rich in experience, and therefore it is natural that they could tell more about the history, as long as they were part of it. This simple premise is exactly what is proven in *rekishi monogatari*. The narrators are, without a doubt, intelligent storytellers, but they are not historians *per se*, because rather than deducing what *caused* the events, they merely share what they have *seen*. From this we can surmise that the old was not only treated as savant of history, but something more than that –something more than mere human beings, as the imagery or the “mirror” suggests.

3. The old as demi-gods

Currently the Japanese have the longest life expectancy in the world, at 86.61 years for women, and 80.21 years for men, according to the recent data released by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare^(x). The oldest living man, as of June 2014, is a Japanese man Momoi Sakari, aged 111 years old^(xi). The oldest living woman, as of March 2014, is also a Japanese: Okawa Misao, at 116 years old^(xii).

It could be hypothesized that the Japanese have enjoyed a relatively long life even centuries ago. Of course the average life expectancy was much shorter due to various conditions such as war or famine, yet it was perhaps not at all miraculous to join the league of octogenarians. It was, however, quite bizarre to reach the point of being a double-centenarian, like Yotsugi and Shigeki of *Ōkagami*. And this sense of bizarreness is precisely the driving-force of their ability to function as omniscient narrators of history.

When Yotsugi and Shigeki are introduced to the reader, we learn that they have survived many of the people they have known and loved. They had to witness those who are close to them, like their wives, withering from diseases, and die. They are in fact suffering from their extreme longevity. Therefore, it must be noted that these men are unique even within the framework of the story; they are in fact considered abnormal in the sense that they seem to live on forever.

This somewhat uncanny imagery of Yotsugi and Shigeki is further strengthened when we notice that, although they seem to weep while talking about their lost family members, not a single drop of tear is present in their eyes:

あはれに言ひ語らひて泣くぬれど、涙落つとも見えず。

They cried and wept whilst their pitiful narration, but no drop of tear was visible.

Here readers become suddenly aware of the possibility that they could be *acting*. Maybe they are not sad about their loss, because they are not normal human beings with ordinary feelings. Although they really could have witnessed two-centuries worth of events, maybe that is because they are some spiritual entities, rather than mere men who just happened to live very long. Their witty and even satirical attitude

towards historical events could also be explained by such premises. To say the least, these Rabelaisian men are not to be defined with standard values.

And such is the imagery that is strongly connected with the old in the context of classical literature. They often serve as the medium between reality and paranormal, as we have seen in the cases of *Ōkagami* and *Ima-kagami*, its “sequel”. But their stage is not at all limited to *rekishi monogatari*.

For example, the main character of *Mumyo-zoshi* is a nun who is 83 years old. In this text, which could be deemed as a parody of *rekishi monogatari*, the old lady encounters a group of mysterious ladies-in-waiting, who inhabit an old mansion in a deserted area. There, they start to discuss great literary works and their authors of the Heian period all through the night. Interestingly, the text is abruptly discontinued, as if the ladies-in-waiting have suddenly disappeared with first light. Here again, the 83 year-old nun functions as a medium between the reader and spirits of the ladies.

It could be argued that works I have mentioned above also gave rise to a genre in *noh* theater, which is called the *mugen-noh* (the “fantastic *noh*”). *Mugen-noh* usually deals with supernatural entities, including spirits, ghosts, and phantasms. In a typical work, the main character will encounter an old person, who will recount a story that took place in that particular spot. This story often involves a spirit, or a divine entity, who is either holding a grudge against someone, or has a message to convey. Once the story is told, the main character will learn that it was in fact the spirit itself who was telling the story in the shape of an old person^(xiii).

Let us take a look at the *noh* entitled *Ari-doshi* to have a more concrete understanding. The main character of this play is Ki no Tsurayuki, one of the most prolific poets during the mid-Heian period. On his way to a visit to a shrine, heavy rain sets in, and his horse stops to move. There he encounters an old man with a torch in his hand. He explains to Tsurayuki that he is trespassing into the holy grounds of *Ari-doshi* shrine while mounting a horse, and such rudeness towards god has caused this problem. Now aware of his wrongdoing, Tsurayuki piously composes a *waka* poem. The old man praises his talent, and gives him a lecture on the ideals of *waka*. Then the horse gets back on its feet, and Tsurayuki is ready to move on. And finally, while they greet each other in farewell, the old man discloses to Tsurayuki that he is in fact the god of *Ari-doshi* himself.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated several patterns in which the men and women of old age have been depicted in the works of Japanese literature.

It is true that there are some negative aspects in the way old people are treated in works of fiction, especially in connection to the legend of *ubasute*. However, we have learned that the notorious custom of “dumping” the old was, to a large extent, a modern fabrication in the story by Fukazawa Shichirō and movies inspired by it. In original versions of the legend, the nephew of the old lady immediately regrets his cruel actions and fetches her from the mountains.

During the Heian and Kamakura periods, moreover, the old were portrayed with huge awe. The old were considered as ideal narrators of history because of their outstanding experience and knowledge, as

we have seen in the examples of *rekishi monogatari*. It was in fact common for the works of classical literature to treat the old as demi-gods, in the sense that they were even capable of living outside the framework of common sense, including their incredible longevity and their ability to function as a medium between people and supernatural entities.

In other words, the old people were no longer bound to reality. I have pointed out that the narrators in *Ōkagami*, in some parts of the text, seem to be cynical actors who merely play the role of old men. This factor of theatricality is amplified, of course, when it comes to *mugen-noh*. Old people, in classical Japanese literature, were free to move in and out of boundaries of reality.

As I have mentioned earlier, we should not overlook the fact that literature during this era was almost exclusively produced by, and circulated among, the aristocracy. Therefore it is entirely possible that imagery of the old as we have seen in works such as *Narayamabushi-kō* existed long before the production of modern versions of *ubasute*, but was suppressed because of the lack of creative channels. Nonetheless, it is also true that such works of fiction produced during the Heian and Kamakura periods came to represent values of the Japanese as a whole, because art of literature has diffused through wider social classes during the Edo period, and the aesthetic legacy of the previous periods served as foundations of later works. Therefore, it could be concluded that the old has been treated with respect much more than with nuisance, at least in the context of literary works.

It is within the social context, then, that we are sometimes urged to contemplate the negative aspects of aging. The realistic economic hardship may force a person to view their old parents as a burden, given that they have to spend a good portion of his/her income to support them, while supporting the next generation of family members simultaneously. The premonition of growing medical expenses for senior citizens cast a shadow towards one's future plans. It is widely believed that more and more money should be spent for the old as they age farther, and worse, should be spent in vain in many cases. However, as Pan et al. (2007) suggests, many of these fears could be deemed as myths; medical care for senior citizens is merely a single factor in the entire healthcare system, and medical needs of the elderly may very well be considered as an opportunity to further advance medical knowledge and techniques.

Historical and cultural contexts have contributed to the positive evaluation of aging in Japan. It is crucial for us to document such encouraging imagery in order to motivate ourselves to attain deeper understanding of the phenomenon of aging, and design necessary welfare policies accordingly. This will not only promote better harmony among citizens of all generations within Japanese society, but also relieve younger citizens from unnecessary pressure. It is natural for one to desire a long, prosperous life, and getting old is definitely a part of it.

Notes

- (i) In the 2014 edition of *White Paper on the Aging Society*, Japanese government estimates that by year 2060, 39.9% of the population will be over 65. http://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/whitepaper/w-2014/zenbun/pdf/1s1s_1.pdf (retrieved Sep. 15th, 2014)
- (ii) My translation. To convey its meaning clearly, the number and length of each verse are manipulated.
- (iii) In short, Sarashina and Ubasute became *utamakura*, or “place names”. In *waka*, such proper nouns are deftly manipulated to create profound system of semantic association.

- (iv) *Yamato Monogatari* (c. 950) is an example of *uta monogatari* that displays 175 short stories written in association with poems. *Konjaku Monogatari-shu* (12th century) is a collection of over 1000 *setsuwa* (a literary genre that includes myths, legends, folktales, and anecdotes) collected from Japan, China, and India. *Toshiyori Zuinō* (1113) is a book of poetic theory written by Minamoto no Toshiyori, which also includes many legends concerning *waka*.
- (v) Japanese names that appear in this paper are arranged in the traditional order: family name followed by the given name.
- (vi) The English title for both films is “The Ballad of Narayama”. The second version was awarded *Palme d’Or* in the Cannes International Film Festival. Notwithstanding such international popularity, however, the original story has never been translated.
- (vii) The year before the publication of *Narayamabushi-kō* (1955) marked the highest number of suicide cases in Japan. It is not difficult to see that such condensed atmosphere of death has inspired Fukazawa’s story in some indirect fashion. For data concerning suicides in Japan and the socio-economic context behind them, see Iga (1986).
- (viii) For further details of *Ōkagami* and formation of the genre *rekishi monogatari*, see Ono (2012).
- (ix) My translation. Yamagiwa (1967) and McCullough (1980) have both attempted a full translation of *Ōkagami*.
- (x) “Japanese men's life expectancy tops 80 for 1st time” *Mainichi Japan*, August 1st, 2014. <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20140801p2g00m0dm024000c.html> (retrieved Sep. 15th, 2014)
- (xi) “Japanese great-grandfather becomes world’s oldest man at 111 after death of American Alexander Imich - also aged 111” *Mail Online*, June 10th, 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2653832/Japanese-great-grandfather-worlds-oldest-man-111-death-American-Alexander-Imich-aged-111.html> (retrieved Sep. 15th, 2014)
- (xii) “World's oldest person celebrates 116th birthday in Japan” *The Guardian*, March 5th, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/05/worlds-oldest-person-116-birthday-japan> (retrieved Sep. 15th, 2014)
- (xiii) For a more detailed introduction to the *mugen-noh* and *noh* as a whole, consult Keene (1990).

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