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Jason A. Danely

* Center on Age and Community, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

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Art, Aging, and Abandonment in Japan

JASON A. DANELY
Center on Age and Community, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Representations of aging in Japanese art not only influence how older adults construct their identity in late life, but the ethical implications of this identification. This article concentrates on one representation of aging in Japanese art, the crone of Obasuteyama, as she has appeared in various forms throughout centuries of Japanese folklore, literature, theater, and film. This article argues that although the Obasuteyama story addresses the moral questions surrounding the fear of abandonment in old age, its multiple artistic interpretations also provide older adults with different, and sometimes contradictory cultural models to understand and cope with this fear. Ethnographic observations and interview material concerning aging and abandonment in the lives of present-day Japanese adults are used to show how seemingly different attitudes toward aging can be linked to a shared narrative of abandonment.

KEYWORDS Japanese literature, abandonment, identity, psychosocial factors, obasute

SAMUEL BECKETT IN KYOTO

In the summer of 2006, as my first extended period of ethnographic fieldwork on aging in Japan was coming to an end, I was invited by friends to a theater performance in central Kyoto. The performance consisted of several
short plays by Japanese as well as non-Japanese actors billed as “contemporary Kyôgen,” an updated version of a centuries old traditional style of Japanese comic theater (Salz, 2001). The performances skillfully employed the play between cultures, languages and traditions to heighten the comedic effect of each piece, giving the audience the thrill of not knowing what to expect next. But as the curtain rose after the intermission, we were shown a scene that was anything but comical. A single rocking chair had been placed in the center of the stage, and a disembodied woman’s voice began to slowly recite the words of Samuel Beckett’s *Rockaby* (Beckett, 1981) in a strange and solemn cadence of rising and falling pitches:

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till in the end
the day came
in the end came
close of a long day
when she said
to herself
whom else
time she stopped
time she stopped
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A woman slowly made her way onto the stage and sank down into the rocker. As the recorded voice continued to speak the repetitive, mantra-like script, a performer in a Noh mask glided slowly onto the stage, mirroring the rocking woman’s feelings through the subtle gestures of ancient Japanese theater. Meanwhile, the recitation continued, washing over the largely Japanese audience in gentle waves:

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all eyes all sides
high and low
for another
another like herself
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The whole sensory experience was almost trance inducing, and it took several repetitions before the meaning of the words themselves could penetrate the aura that they cast over the audience, myself included. The words of the old woman, shadowed by the masked Japanese figure, reveal her desire to be “seen” by “another like herself,” to hold onto both memory and personhood even as she knows that it is “time she stopped.” The repetition of this last line suggests a double meaning—that in old age she stopped time, moving only back in forth but never forward. Still she goes on rocking, repeating her search and finding no other “living soul,” only memories of those in her past. Though physically still save for the rocking, the woman’s memories and fantasies seem to roam over the stage like a ghost searching for something lost long ago. In the end, the only clue we
The performance of Rockaby by a troupe of Kyōgen performers in downtown Kyoto made a strong impression on me as well. Its depiction of the dull isolation and the meaninglessness of time as the old woman waits through her last days seemed to resonate not only with the bittersweet aesthetic of Japanese fatalism (Tomita, 1994, pp. 44–45), but also with contemporary concerns about “solitary deaths” (kodokusshi) (Tokyo Shimbun, 2009), late-life depression (utsuyō), and older adult suicides (Becker, 1999, pp. 62–64) in a country where more than 22% of the population is over the age of 65. By recasting Rockaby as contemporary Kyōgen, the director could portray old age in a manner that transcended the boundaries of national or cultural discourse, even as it made use of iconic Japanese symbolism. This was more than dressing up Beckett in kimono—it was a visual representation of how a Japanese person might re-imagine the experience of aging through the medium of an artistic performance.

In this article, I look at “the art of aging” as both a product and act of production, as aesthetic and ethic, as a cultural resource for imagining oneself and practical skill for creating meaning in late life. Representations of old age in Japanese art not only tell us about the cultural models that older adults draw on to form their identities, but also how they enact resistance to the dominant discourse of a successful “Japanese social welfare society” (Garon, 1997, p. 216) and create a space for alternate or emergent forms of identity. Using ethnographic data, I will illustrate how older Japanese adults find themselves within the myriad and sometimes contradictory cultural representations of old age and in the process make decisions and develop practices that affect their adaptation to late life.

I do not mean to imply that artistic representations of aging are always packaged for nor consumed directly by older adults themselves. Rather, they are part of the Japanese cultural ethos—repeated and persistent schema formed over the life course that nonetheless take on new significance when viewed from the perspective of old age. Just as I do not have to be familiar with the films of Clint Eastwood to know something about the persona of the American cowboy, a Japanese person need not have seen the late works of Akira Kurosawa, for example, to appreciate his portrayal of the natural cycle of life and death, or the strange and sometimes heartbreaking nature of old age represented in his films (Cohen-Shalev, 2009, pp. 88–103). My aim is to show how artistic representations offer insights into aging in Japan that cannot be found when we assume that older adults are living in a world that can be understood by relying on the government white paper on aging or mass media alone.

The wealth of scholarly work addressing aging and Japanese folklore, literature and film attest that I am far from alone in noticing the importance
of art when considering aging (Plath, 1980, 1982; Woodward, 1986; Skord, 1989; Donow, 1990; Yamaori, 1997a, 1997b; Tsuji, 1997; McDonald, 2008). Unfortunately, with the exception of David Plath’s (1980, 1982) work on late middle-age transitions of identity, the voices of the older adults themselves have largely remained silent. By reintroducing some of these voices alongside the artistic texts, I will try to emphasize the role older adults have in actively shaping the “art of aging” as they narrate the stories of their lives.

AGING AND ABANDONMENT IN JAPANESE ART

Although Japanese literature has no lack of sweet or saintly old persons (Skord, 1989, pp. 140–141; Yamaori, 1997b; Kawai, 1997, p. 22), after watching the Kyōgen adaptation of Rockaby I was reminded of another image—one of the most prevalent images of old age in Japanese art—the old crone (rōjo, oba) (Yamaori, 1997a). I thought that perhaps this was one reason that the director found Beckett’s piece to be a natural fit for the audience; after all, one of the most famous Noh plays about the old crone features a similar despairing monologue about the loneliness of age. This play, entitled Obasuteyama, can be translated as the “mountain of the deserted crone” (Keene, 1970, p. 127), and is part of an entire genre of stories based on folk tales of abandoning the elderly in the mountains to die.

These stories can be found throughout Japan, with the earliest known written instance appearing in the 10th century Tales of Yamato (Tahara, 1980). Variations on the obasuteyama legend have since appeared for centuries in Japanese literature and more recently film, each one focusing on a different aspect of the basic ethical problems posed by old age in a society where adult dependence is considered shameful and where succession by younger generations is both valued and yet emotionally difficult.

One of my first encounters with Obasuteyama was a translation of the 15th century Noh drama written by the playwright Zeami (1363–1443 CE). In this version it is explained that a man had taken his “aunt” to the mountain at the urging of his wife (Keene, 1970, p. 119).2 Wearing the mask of a ghostly old woman, the actor laments:

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, p. 121)
As the play continues, the ghost of the old woman tells of her yearning for the joys of her younger years, singing that her “heart is bound by memories” and “unshakable delusions” (Keene, 2002, p. 126). Like the woman in Rockaby, the old crone of Obasuteyama finds herself alone and lost in memory, ashamed in front of the eyes of the world and yet longing to be seen by one who can offer hope. In Zeami’s play, this hope is symbolized by the moon, itself a symbol for the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amida).

Unlike the woman in Rockaby, however, the crone of Obasuteyama is not merely alone or disengaged from the world in her old age, but abandoned (suteru). Indeed, the person doing the abandoning is at least mentioned in every version of this story that I have come across, and in no case does it seem that the old woman ascended the mountain alone or simply found herself abandoned there one day as if by chance. This notion that old age intensifies the threat of abandonment might seem counterintuitive to those familiar with the scholarly literature regarding the social support and integration of older adults in Japanese society (Silverman, 1987, pp. 228–233; Palmore & Maeda, 1985). Certainly it is tempting to think of Obasuteyama as an artifact of the past with little relevance to the realities of older people who today benefit from a variety of health care options not available in the distant past in which the story is set (Campbell, 2008). Nevertheless, the Obasuteyama story and its themes are still widely circulated through popular media as well as informal conversations. What then accounts for the persistence of the obasute story and how is it interpreted in contemporary Japan?

In the obasute myth abandonment is the result of dependence, and this association is as strong today as it seems to have been in Zeami’s time. The old woman is consuming limited resources without making a contribution herself; dependence, even for an aging parent, can become repulsive. In the remainder of this article I will look at three variations on old age dependence as depicted in different versions of the obasute legend: (1) abandonment by family, (2) abandonment by society, and (3) self-managed abandonment. In each of these versions, the reaction of the old person (or the abandoner) to their abandonment and resulting outcome are different, and yet traces of each version are internalized by older adults in Japan as they construct their identity in late life.

**ABANDONMENT BY FAMILY**

In Zeami’s play excerpted above it is the immediate family who decide that the old woman’s dependence is no longer acceptable and that she should therefore be abandoned. In a society where parent and adult child co-residence remains high and where a third of reported cases of elder
abuse or neglect are perpetrated by a son (Asahi Shimbun, 2004), the notion that \textit{obasute} is a family decision is prevalent, despite Japan’s status as a modern industrialized society (Glascock, 1997, p. 69). In some versions of the \textit{obasute} story, old age dependence has made the old woman ugly, and even demon-like (Kurahashi, 2003, pp. 27–40), a characterization echoed in other descriptions of old age decrepitude in Japanese literature (Skord, 1989; Sorgenfrei, 1994, p. 78). Such images might describe the shame of the older person towards their own aging (as in the excerpt from Zeami above), or the disdain and fear of younger generations toward the old. In Japan, the latter is intensified by the conflict between the social values of succession and filial piety, which together demand that caretakers (often women) attend to children and elders with an equal degree of self-sacrifice and perseverance (Jenike, 1997, 2004).

This conflict is highlighted in Niwa Fumio’s \textit{The Hateful Age} ([1947]1962), a story about a family struggling to care for their senile and infirm mother that recalls the \textit{obasute} legend (Donow, 1990, p. 487). At one point in the story, the old woman’s (Ume) son (Minobe) contemplates the physical and emotional burden of conforming to the principles of filial piety in the household:

\begin{quote}
Staring at Ume, Minobe suddenly remembered the Confucian teachings on filial piety and respect for one’s elders. Was it possible that the Master had had sly wicked old women like this in mind when he expounded his noble precepts? To respect an insensitive old woman like Ume, conscious as she was of only the physical aspects of life was like worshiping a stone idol. Ume had become just a body, in which it was impossible to detect the slightest trace of a soul, spirit, conscience, or anything that makes human beings worthy of respect. . . . There was hardly a family in Japan that did not suffer from the system in which old people had to be either cared for by their children or committed to primitive and sinister institutions. People had been complaining for years, but the traditional family system still lingered on, with all its inefficiency, hypocrisy, sentimentality, and injustice. It was high time for something to be done—not by sociologists, but by people all over Japan who were themselves suffering from these anachronistic traditions. (Niwa, 1962, p. 340)
\end{quote}

By setting his story in postwar Japan, Niwa takes the \textit{obasute} trope out of the “once-upon-a-time” realm of a mythical premodern Japanese wilderness and situates it directly in that of the modern day family. Minobe is a sympathetic character whose efforts to care for his mother himself rather than have her institutionalized gives evidence that he still holds to some basic moral principles. When nursing homes began to spread throughout Japan, they quickly became known as the modern day version of
obasuteyama (Bethel, 1992). Indeed, the conditions in most nursing homes in Japan were far inferior to American and European facilities, and routinely restrained clients in their beds at least through the late 1980s (Okuma, 1996, pp. 186–188). Minobe’s choice, however, comes at the cost of emotional attachment or affection for his old mother as well as his respect for “traditions.” Minobe even refers to his mother as something like a “stone idol,” recalling a part of the obasute tale in which the abandoned woman physically transforms into a stone (Inoue, 1965, p. 95; Keene, 1970, p. 122).

Concerns arising from family and residence situations were common subjects of conversation at the adult day service centers where I regularly volunteered. In one instance a blind woman at the center mentioned that she lives with one of her four sons and that they all eat meals together. At this, a 99-year-old woman at the table said that she had lived alone since her husband and daughter had died. Rather than depend on family, this woman said that she mainly counted on her relationships with 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 lives alone then told a story that everyone agreed represented the worst case.

This woman said that she knew another woman who lived with her only son and his family, but that they lived a completely separate existence (see Brown, 2003). The old woman took her meals in her own room and her son and his family even locked 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.

The part of the story that frightened these women 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 character Ume in Niwa’s story. Because this abandonment came at the hands of family, she had been excluded from what had constituted her “in-group” (uchi). This meant that her legacy as an ancestor of the household would be forgotten. 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 reinforced the consequences for those who could not.
ABANDONMENT BY SOCIETY

If the first category of obasute tales help people think about the ambivalence towards caregiving and dependence in the family, the second version deals with fears of being abandoned by society. In this version, a feudal lord decrees that all people over 70 are to be abandoned (Inoue, 1965, pp. 74–75; Traphagan, 2000, p. 151). Although filial guilt for the fantasy of gerontocide is deferred, the threat of abandonment as a result of old age dependence remains central. According to the story, a man defies the decree and hides his mother from authorities. Later, the old woman earns her freedom in a display of wisdom that changes the ruler’s heart.

I initially read this version of the tale with some skepticism, preferring the darker, and psychologically rich family version of the tale. However, the idea that abandonment in old age could be managed through resistance and wisdom did seem to describe the experience of some older adults I spoke with. They would probably have made few distinctions between the feudal lord of the story and the words of conservative Japanese politicians who have referred to giving more money to the elderly as “Giving water to a dead tree.”

The first time I heard this quotation, it was from a friend of mine, Mr. Hasegawa, a 75-year-old retired civil servant. Mr. Hasegawa lived with his wife, whose arthritis and other infirmities required her to visit a doctor at least once a week for therapy. Regular national census reports usually track the number of households like Mr. Hasegawa’s, comprised only of an older married couple, comparing these numbers to the once dominant three-generation co-residence arrangement (sansedai katei). The one implicit assumption in these demographic reports is that in the latter case, older adults receive supplemental care (and are therefore less eligible for state assistance benefits) (Jenike, 1997, p. 220). Mr. Hasegawa told me on many occasions that even though he received a pension, there was usually very little left over at the end of the month after paying medical and other basic expenses, a fact that he blamed on popular compliance with a flawed health insurance and senior welfare system (see Hideaki, 2008).

Mr. Hasegawa had taken to writing his grievances out in Japanese haiku poetry, sometimes late at night when his anxiety made it difficult to sleep. The following poem was published in a local newsletter of a pensioners union:

A lonely old man
The pitiless bureaucrat
Tells me “go to hell”

Although the architects of the “Japanese style welfare society” envisioned traditional values of collectivism and filial piety as cultural assets to offset
state assistance (Garon, 1997, pp. 215–225), this has obviously been a failure from Hasegawa-san’s perspective. One doesn’t need to be confined to a nursing home to feel abandoned by society. The haiku is Mr. Hasegawa’s little resistance, not to aging, but to the authority of those who impose the consequences of old age. When viewed in light of the *obasute* story, the themes of loneliness, abandonment and death in Mr. Hasegawa’s brief poem take become even more powerful, pointing beyond the individual and towards a larger social critique.

SELF-MANAGED ABANDONMENT

Nearly every adult I spoke with was familiar with similar tales of modern-day *Obasuteyama*, of the dark threat of growing old in a changed society where the value of the elders no longer insures their care, and where the greatest fear is not death, but living “too long.” When I spoke to people about this, most expressed a desire to live however long they were destined to (*tenju wo mattou suru*). While such statements may appear passive or fatalistic, they are held simultaneously by people who believe that one can and should take efforts to manage one’s last years actively (Rohlen, 1978; Traphagan, 2006). In this third version of the *obasute* story, the older adults are able to shape the nature and consequences of their own abandonment.

In the two film versions of *Obasuteyama* (Kinoshita, 1958; Kusakabe, Tomoda & Imamura, 1983), both based on the story *Narayama Bushikō* (Fukuzawa, 1956/1964), it is the old woman herself who makes the decision to go to the mountain, taking control of her own abandonment and approaching her sacrifice with brave determination. The reason she is able to do this is because she has taken measures to insure the continuity of her social interdependence in the household. She has shrewdly arranged her son’s remarriage and left the house before becoming a burden on her family. As her son reluctantly brings her to the mountain, she sternly encourages him. In doing so, she leaves a personal legacy as a pious ancestor and model of moral aging.

For many older adults in Japan today, maintaining interdependence like the heroine of the films means living out one’s last years free from *boke*, or being “out of it” (Traphagan, 2000, p. 135). Although *boke* has similarities with other kinds of age-related cognitive decline such as memory loss and confusion, it is primarily characterized as a condition that renders one unable to respond adequately and appropriately in social situations (Traphagan, 2000, p. 138). This sort of “lack of common sense” associated with old age been called the “Japanese cultural nightmare,” since it excludes one from the social world and makes one dependent on others (Plath, 1980, p. 217; Traphagan, 2000, p. 182).
For Mr. Sato, a 71-year-old man who lived in a separated living quarters of his son’s house, visiting a nearby senior welfare center to participate in clubs and activities in one way he tried to avoid becoming boke.

Most people that come [to the center], come here to avoid boke. There are a lot of motivations, but really, in the end, it’s so that they won’t become boke. Because when people become boke, they’re a burden on other people, and particularly to strangers. People that don’t know them. My son’s wife is a “stranger” to me! (laughs)

But really, sometimes people die around here. These folks, some of them don’t have a lot longer to live. Sometimes you have folks that don’t come around for a while and then people ask “where’s so-and-so?” and it turns out they’re dead.

But that’s a good thing! If you die like that, without being a burden on someone, that’s good! That’s what I want! Some people wish that I was dead too, like my son’s wife! (laughs)

For Mr. Sato, the threat of abandonment (“some people wish that I was dead”) as the result of dependence (becoming “a burden on other people”) and preparing for death are realities of aging. His jokes about his daughter-in-law showed some overlap with the first category of obasute stories, but the ethical implications that he drew from this relationship also bore a resemblance to the heroine of Narayama Bushikō.

Mr. Sato’s motivation to use the center to stay mentally, physically, and socially active indicated more than a desire to delay or avoid the discomfort of an aging body. Consciously or not, Mr. Sato was framing his identity in the same cultural terms that underlie Narayama Bushikō. He used representations of aging found in art to formulate his own notions of “successful aging” (Rowe & Kahn, 1998) and the “good death” (Hattori, McCubbin, & Ishida, 2006) in ways that were both personally meaningful and culturally appropriate.

CONCLUSION

“In my mind, thought I, I had arbitrarily envisioned my own obasuteyama and had pictured myself wandering around there carrying Mama on my back. But Mama—being Mama and being completely different from me—might very well have imagined her obasuteyama as a big steep mountain like Mount Kamuriki.” (Inoue, 1965, p. 95)

Were Obasuteyama simply a historical fact to be tabulated by the bureau of statistics alongside numbers on co-residence and suicide rates, its ethical dimensions would be framed in terms of the aims of social welfare policy, its meaning prescribed and inflexible. As a work of art, however, the cultural “text” of Obasuteyama is open to subjective interpretation and manipulation, not only on the part of the artists, but also on the part of its
viewers. In coping with the everyday losses and worries of aging in Japan, older Japanese adults are imagining their own mountain and writing it into their own *obasute* myth.

By creating a theatrical context using Japanese symbolic motifs, Beckett’s image of the solitary figure, slumped in a rocking chair, losing count of the days and searching for another soul becomes the dance of the deserted crone of *Obasuteyama*. In this artistic twist, the picture of age is timeless, borderless, and boundless. In a similar process, older Japanese adults interpret the events of their everyday lives through a cultural worldview condensed in stories and myths. There is an art in this act of interpretation, a creative act that has the potential for bringing about a new sense of identity as an older adult, whether passive, resistant or engaged.

NOTES

1. *Rockaby* was premiered on April 8, 1981 at State University of New York, Buffalo. All quotations from *Rockaby* are from field notes taken at the performance unless otherwise noted. The notes were confirmed using Beckett (1981, pp. 8–23). Quoted passages appear on pages 9–10.

2. Although the old woman of the story is referred to as an “aunt,” Yamaori (1997a) notes that the man “took care of his aged aunt as though she were his own mother” (1997a, p. 34). The term “oba” or “uba” (老婆) does not necessarily indicate “aunt” or mother, but rather an “old woman” (老婆). In many versions of the story and in comments about it made by informants, the old woman is understood to be the mother of her abandoner.

3. The moon is a common symbol of Japanese poetry and literature and has taken on several symbolic meanings in the context of the Obasute story. Mt. Obasute has been a famous site for moon viewing since the Heian Period (793–1191 CE), and numerous stone tablets on the mountain have been inscribed with poems inspired by this moon (Yaba, 1983). The moon is a symbol of change, but also of “hope,” a word which shares a Chinese character with “moon” (水月). The moon adds an atmosphere of melancholy to the story, as in Inoue’s (1965) description of the frontispiece of a children’s book about Obasuteyama: “The rays of the full moon tinted the entire scene blue everywhere—the trees and grass and earth—and the shadows of the two people were imprinted in bold relief in black over the ground like spilled ink” (p. 75), and later “When I envisioned these stones illuminated by moonbeams, for some reason they gave an uncanny feeling completely irrelevant to their elegance and taste” (p. 95). Finally, in Zeami’s play, the moon’s light shining in the night is a symbol of Amida, whose grace offers salvation to all beings in the “Pure Land,” decorated with, among other things, “the Bright Moon Jewel” (Gomez, 1996, p. 181). Most Noh dramas have a Buddhist message at their core, and Zeami’s is no exception.

4. *Toku no Shinseki yori, chikaku no tannin* 遠くの彼岸より近くの他人

5. Haiku is a popular form of Japanese poetry that follows a 5-7-5 syllable structure difficult to capture in English. It is meant to capture the essence of the moment in the fewest words possible.

6. *Oi hitori yakusbo no oni ga shine to iu* 老い一人校の鬼が死ねと云う

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