

MASTERY WITH AGE: THE APPEAL OF THE TRADITIONAL ARTS TO SENIOR CITIZENS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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Abstract: This article examines the involvement of senior citizens in the traditional arts in Japan. In these arts, elderly practitioners command respect from their audiences and students for their long years of training and experience. They are venerated as the repositories of embodied knowledge and skill. In contrast, youthful and middle-aged practitioners are considered “works in progress” who must continue to perfect their skills to approximate their elderly counterparts. Drawing on case studies of senior citizens who join classes in the traditional arts of Noh chanting and dance and calligraphy, we explore the ways in which the traditional arts give senior citizens a new horizon for growing and striving into later life. We theorize that the promise of mastery in very old age has special appeal to retirees in Japan. Through various certification processes, many are able to work their way up to attain leadership roles in old age. This growth possibility serves as a counter force against the loss of social role that many retirees experience after they leave the workforce. These arts also provide a unique framework for transforming the risks associated with old age into opportunities for realizing human maturity.

Keywords: human maturity, traditional arts, aging, Japanese elders, human cultivation, life-long learning

1 INTRODUCTION

Tu Wei-Ming (1976) asserts that old age itself is not a condition for maturity, nor is prior knowledge of established norms of being a “good elder” a guarantee that one will fulfill the mandate of maturity. To become a mature person, the elderly must foster within themselves an inner drive to manifest the Way by undergoing a dynamic process of self-transformation. This Confucian vision of old age as a time of ongoing cultivation of self has influenced the Japanese approach to the adult life course as well. As Thomas Rohlen (1976: 128) points out, the Japanese think of adulthood not as one long, static period of being, but as “a time of becoming. Time,

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rather than hindering or limiting this process of growth is seen as contributing to it through the tempering agencies of experience and aging.”

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), the famous Japanese artist of the Edo period, delineated his own artistic growth, his vision extending even beyond his life span.

From the age of six, I delighted in drawing the shape of things. At 50 I had published a vast number of drawings. In the end, however, nothing I produced prior to the age of 70 is worth mentioning. Only at 73 was I finally able to recognize the rough structure of nature, the true shape of animals, birds, fish and insects. Thus, at the age of 80 I will have made further progress, at 90 I will gain insight into the fundamental enigma of things and then at the age of 100 I will certainly attain a most blissful state of mind. Once I am 110 years old, everything I draw will be filled with life, whether it is a simple dot or a mere line. (Rinharuto 1986: 267 in Formanek 2008: 324)

Many senior citizens in Japan today consider old age an intrinsically valuable chapter in a person's life journey. They view the life stage of their sixties and seventies as a time of new beginnings. It is a life stage where transformation and continuing growth are possible and within reach. Our article explores case studies of several senior citizens in Tokyo who pursue growth through the traditional arts. They are women and men who are actively involved in the arts as either teachers or students. Some had adopted the arts early in life and gained certification in middle adulthood with the intent of teaching in retirement. Others adopted the arts after turning 60, believing that cultivating the posture of a novice would set the stage for a new phase of exertion in their lives. The two intertwined themes that we trace in the article are, first, that the journey into late life is a time of continuing growth and, second, that it is also a time when the elderly have to remain vigilant against negative changes that may occur. Of interest to us is that many senior citizens participate in the production of ageist notions in order to spur themselves on to live to a good old age. They invoke stereotypes of the elderly as people who are prone to selfishness, arrogance, or inflexibility. Old age is, in their eyes, a stage in the life course where they must make a conscious effort to remain open to new learning. We theorize that the traditional arts provide a unique framework for Japanese senior citizens to mitigate the risks of old age and turn them into opportunities for realizing human maturity.

In the first part of the article, we provide background on the broader field of leisure activities in which the elderly are involved in Japan. This is followed by an overview of the traditional arts, and a discussion of Noh and calligraphy. In the second part of the article, we present five case stud-

ies of senior citizens who practice Noh chanting and dance and calligraphy. We argue that these arts are particularly meaningful to senior citizens given the precarious state of elders in Japanese society. The scholarship on old age shows that in spite of gerontocratic tendencies in Japan and other Asian cultures influenced by Confucianism, old age in itself commands little admiration. Respect for the elderly has historically been contingent on the elder providing resources to the young or manifesting a wisdom that the young do not possess. Elders who did neither and who were simply dependent on their kin and communities were regarded as burdens. Less is known about how the elderly sought to cultivate themselves into venerable elders so that they could win the respect of people in society. The goal of our article is to provide a window into the subjectivities of the elderly themselves and, through case studies, provide insight into how they practice the traditional arts to proceed on a path of venerable old age. Taking inspiration from David Plath's observation that "people continue to grow [...] but only to the extent that their culture provides forms in which to realize that growth" (1980: 7), we contend that the traditional arts are one such support structure for the realization of human maturity.

2 METHODS

We draw on a large body of observational and interview data with senior citizens who were practicing Noh and calligraphy in Tokyo, Japan. Katrina Moore became a student in a privately-run school of Noh dance and chanting called the Sumire Kai.² She spent 18 months in the school from 2004 to 2005, and made follow-up research visits in the summers of 2007 and 2008. At the school, she trained regularly with the teacher and students, spending hundreds of hours learning how to chant Noh songs, play the shoulder drum, and master dance steps for a performance at the Hōshō Noh Theater. In addition, Moore conducted over fifty in-depth life history interviews with the students. Ruth Campbell draws on interviews with older adults engaged in traditional arts in the community and in nursing homes. In 2007 and 2008 she attended calligraphy sessions in Tokyo taught by an experienced calligraphy teacher who adapted her methods to work with the frail and elderly. She also observed and interviewed participants in the Japanese tea ceremony and *cha-kaiseki* [i. e., the formal meal associated with the tea ceremony] and observed *haiku* groups in which students and teachers were in their seventies and eighties.

² The name of the Noh school has been changed.

3 JAPANESE LEISURE

Robert Stebbins (2007) develops the idea of “serious leisure” to describe leisure activities that require perseverance, significant personal effort, a control of the body, and a quest for self-actualization. His conception of leisure appropriately captures the seriousness attached to the practice of the traditional arts that makes it a pathway of dedicated effort rather than simply a form of relaxation to be undertaken in one’s free time. Stebbins places three types of activities within this framework of serious leisure: amateur pursuits, hobbyist activities, and volunteering. The traditional arts can be understood as an amateur pursuit.

Older people are the main attendees at *sumo*, and also of traditional performing arts such as Noh, *kabuki*, *bunraku* puppet theater, and *rakugo* comedy. They are the main participants at contests of *Hyakunin isshu* poetry, which requires an extensive knowledge of traditional poetry. They also form the majority of members of *haiku* groups and contribute frequently to publications featuring traditional forms of poetry. In many of these cases, the elderly appear not only as participants, but also often as teachers, as custodians and transmitters of cultural heritage (Clammer 2008).

Based on a survey of 34 different leisure activities conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, participation by peo-

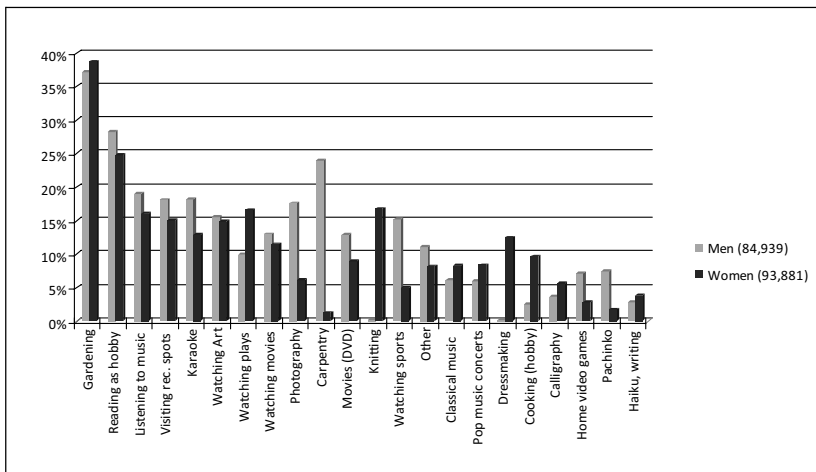


Table 1: Participation in various leisure activities by gender (findings from the 2006 Social Life Survey)

Source: Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku (2006).

ple over age 65 in the traditional arts is rather low (see Table 1). According to the survey, about 5 percent of people aged 65 and over practiced calligraphy, 3 percent composed *haiku* and other forms of writing, 3 percent did Japanese flower arrangement, 3 percent did Japanese dancing, 2 percent traditional Japanese music and 2 percent practiced the tea ceremony. However, viewing these traditional arts over the life course, from age ten through age 75 and over, interesting patterns emerge. Japanese calligraphy, writing *haiku*, chorus or vocal music, painting or carving, Japanese dancing, and the game of *go* (not an art but a traditional game that has been popular for centuries) all have higher participation in the 10–19 age group, decrease through the adult years, and then increase to higher levels after age 60. This is especially true of calligraphy where the survey reports 21 percent of ten- to fourteen-year-olds practice it, under 2 percent in the young adult and middle-aged groups, increasing up to 5 percent at age 60 to 70. (Japanese flower arrangement shows some increased participation with age, while the tea ceremony is fairly steady in participation levels.) This indicates that older people who study and perform these traditional arts are also engaged in preserving them and transmitting them to younger generations who view their work and performances.

Other leisure activities popular among people age 65 and over include: gardening (38 %, the leisure activity with the highest participation), *kara-oke* (15 %), photography and carpentry (11 % each), playing musical instruments (3 %), and Western dancing (2 %). There are gender differences in rates of participation in leisure activities, with women more prominent in knitting and sewing, attending musical concerts and the theater, cooking, dancing, flower arrangement, writing *haiku*, chorus and tea ceremony. Men are more likely to do board games such as *shōgi* and *go*, play home video games, watch sports, or engage in photography, carpentry and *kara-oke*. However, in some traditional arts – such as calligraphy (males 4 %, females 6 %), *haiku* writing (males 3 %, females 4 %), and traditional Japanese music and pottery (2 % each) – males and females participate at fairly equal levels.

A possible deterrent to more participation in the arts may be the cost needed to practice them. Although going to concerts and the theater is more expensive, from 3,000 yen to 5,000 yen (US\$ 32 to US\$ 52) per visit, the expense per time for practicing Japanese dance and tea ceremony is about 2,500 yen (US\$ 26) and with special equipment and performances can go even higher (NSKSH 2008: 17).

4 TRADITIONAL ARTS

The traditional arts can be divided into four categories: performing arts such as Noh and *kyōgen*; graphic arts such as calligraphy and painting; literary arts such as *haiku* and *waka* poetry; and applied arts such as swordsmithing, ceramics, lacquerware, the tea ceremony and Japanese flower arrangement (Smith 1998: 27). What these arts share in common is the claim to genealogical continuity. Each has an *iemoto* system based on the idea that a single lineage is the one true authority on the artistic technique; the grand master (*iemoto*) is believed to have access to secret knowledge pertinent to the tradition. To ensure consistency in the education of adherents, lineages certify teachers and students at various levels of experience.

Various qualities of teaching in the traditional arts also bear mention. First, emphasis is placed on experiential learning. Training by doing, rather than by explanation, remains the core of the practitioner's experience. Teachers tend to rely on nonverbal communication to impart skills. By imitating again and again the teacher's movements, intonations, and gestures, students gradually internalize the movements and make them their own (DeCoker 1998).

Second, discipline is a key feature of the master-disciple relationship. A clearly defined relationship between master and student, in which strictness of teaching coupled with the humility and willingness of the student to endure physical and psychological hardship are considered essential elements of a student's acquisition of this art form. This relationship between master and disciple can last for decades and is generally exclusive. It is rare for a student to simultaneously take lessons in the same art from multiple teachers.

Third, the traditional arts are often described as having the quality of "limitless depth" (*oku bukai*). Learning is often considered without end (*owari ga nai*). As one practitioner says, "In Noh, there is never a point of completion or perfection. Now that I've reached this level of performance, [the teacher] will push me to the next." These words illuminate one of the key aspects of the learning process: that perfection is considered unattainable.

Fourth, the ultimate goal of learning this art is the development of the spirit (*seishin*). Artistic training is considered a gateway to a higher spiritual plane. This process occurs when an individual's personality is put in touch with a larger principle outside the self. Actions must spring from motives that are unsullied by attachments to self or to social position, or by calculations of pain or gain. The virtue of developing a "natural alignment of the individual and his 'untrained' nature toward a set of higher

ideals" (Rimer 1998: 36) is one of the key principles of traditional East Asian ethics of self-cultivation.³

Old age in these arts is considered in a positive light. It is often seen as a symbol of mastery and long years of striving in these arts. Elderly teachers are venerated as the repositories of embodied knowledge and skill. Accolades such as the "Intangible Cultural Property" awards are generally given to senior practitioners who range in age from their late fifties through to their nineties. This designation was made official through the 1950 Protection of Cultural Assets law (*Bunkazai hogo-hō*) which added the category "Intangible Cultural Assets", popularly known as "Living National Treasures" (*ningen kokuhō*), to the protection of works of art and architecture. The law defines this designation in the following way: "Under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, 'Intangible Cultural Properties' are defined as 'drama, music, craft techniques and other cultural products, which possess a high historical or artistic value for Japan'. [...] In other words, the fundamental difference between intangible and tangible Cultural Properties is that Intangible Cultural Properties are not the products of the techniques practiced by individuals or groups, but are skills, behaviors, and actions of people" (ACAJ 2008b: 9). Reacting in the early post-war years to the Westernization of Japan, the government hoped that by honoring these individuals, these arts would be preserved and transmitted and would not disappear. The honorees, as contrasted with elderly performers honored in the U. S. annual Lincoln Center awards, are not so much honored as individuals but as holders of knowledge that would otherwise vanish. As one writer put it, "the Living National Treasure system is but a law designating some endangered thing for preservation, something akin to preserving forests or saving whales – only in this case, we are saving something that is intangible, of cultural importance, and is held within the hands of certain individuals" (Aoyama 2004). As of April, 2008, 38 individuals and 11 groups were honored in the category of performing arts, including *kabuki*, Noh, Japanese dance, music and *bunraku* puppet theater, while 81 individuals and 25 groups were honored in the category of craft techniques such as ceramics, textiles, lacquerware, and papermaking (ACAJ 2008a: 38).

Finally, there are health benefits associated with the traditional arts that are worth noting. These arts increase physical stability and powers of concentration. Many of the senior citizens whom we interviewed acknowledged that the extensive memorization of dance steps, chanting

³ See also David Plath's (1980: 47–50) discussion of sincerity (*makoto*), which is another idiom of human maturity in Japanese vocabularies of personal growth.

sequences, or calligraphy strokes, was useful for arresting age-related memory loss. Specific aspects of these arts' body-based training, and emphasis on vocal and physical fitness, are important for helping seniors sustain health in later life, facilitating a sense of continuity between development of the self and the body. Thus they help prevent the situation that Diana Athill (2009: 10) describes as "falling away", or Hepworth and Featherstone (1982) describe as "bodily betrayals" where a disjunction between a self that matures and a body that declines leads to frustration among aging persons. These arts also complement recent initiatives by the Japanese government to promote health in late life. An example is Healthy Japan 21 (Morioka 2007) which encourages older adults to improve their diet, exercise regularly, take part in leisure activities, reduce consumption of alcohol and nicotine, watch their dental health, and guard against lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

5 ELDERLY PRACTITIONERS OF NOH

There are, broadly speaking, two categories of Noh practitioners. One is the *kurōto*, or professional actors who have attained the highest level of certification (*shokubun*) and who stage plays at the various Noh Theaters around Japan. The other category is the *shirōto*, or amateurs, who practice Noh as a leisure activity. *Shirōto* occupy a distinct and important place in the world of Noh practitioners in contemporary Japan. Their patronage of this art takes the form not simply of spectatorship, which is a subsidiary part of their training, but becoming apprentices (*deshi*) to certified teachers of Noh. They attend lessons, purchase costumes and instruments for training, and pay fees to the Noh Theater and to actors to participate in stage recitals. Their chanting, dancing, and drumming are not a stepping stone to a professional acting career on the Noh stage. Yet, many go on to gain licenses such as the *shokutaku* license which certifies them to teach their own students. The licenses are given by the *iemoto* of the school of Noh in which the practitioner is a member.

Many amateur practitioners share the concerns of the Japanese government to sustain artistic traditions, especially those that have a long history such as Noh. As noted earlier, the Japanese government has sought to protect the traditional arts by designating highly gifted practitioners as Important Intangible Cultural Properties. This designation affords a degree of state protection to Noh as well as to its actors. As of 2008, 37 individuals were designated as Intangible Cultural Properties under the Noh category. The average age of the designees at the time

they were honored is 72⁴; the youngest was 56 and the oldest 90. In 2001, UNESCO proclaimed Noh as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage.”⁵ Noh is also sponsored by the Japan Arts Council (Nihon Geijutsu Bunka Shinkokai) which nurtures successors of this theatrical style. With this level of sponsorship, it may seem that Noh is in good hands, but in fact it has been losing enthusiasts, particularly among the younger generations of Japanese. Many of the senior citizens who are featured in this article do so with the fervent desire to preserve this art form. They believe that the only way to keep Noh alive is for teachers to transmit it from generation to generation and for new performers to practice it.

6 EMBODIED TRAINING

Apprentices learn Noh at the homes of Noh actors, and in culture centers and local neighborhood associations. They usually learn in small groups of approximately 12 students where they enjoy the close guidance of the teacher. When learning to chant a new song, students mimic the teacher. This mode of mimicking the teacher is colloquially called “parrot return” (*ōmu gaeshi*). The students literally return or repeat the words stated by the teacher like a parrot.

Noh dance consists of extremely slow motions with the body tipped slightly forward, sliding the feet in an alternating sequence across the stage. As students practice their dance, they seek to maintain a perfectly straight alignment of their nose, navel, and groin, so that their torsos appear to be perfectly still, even as they are moving steadily across the stage. While this movement is not demanding for the cardiovascular system, Noh dance requires a high level of mastery over the body and practitioners often undertake years of concerted training to achieve mastery.

⁴ See the on-line encyclopedia Nihon Daihyakka Zensho, published in 2007, e.g. through <https://gateway.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/body/display/,DanaInfo=www.jkn21.com> (or through the Japan Knowledge database); as well as http://www.bunka.go.jp/oshirase_other/2008/pdf/hodo_shiryō_20080718_mukei.pdf (accessed 14 January 2009).

⁵ UNESCO defines an “Intangible Cultural Heritage” as something that is transmitted from generation to generation; is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history; and provides communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity. The depository of this heritage is the human mind, the human body being the main instrument for its enactment, or – literally – embodiment. See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002> (accessed 30 June 2009).



Fig. 1: Students at Noh class, repeating after teacher

Photo: Katrina Moore.

Dorinne Kondo, describing the ways artisans acquire technical skill, refers to the physical idioms invoked by Japanese artisans to show that learning takes place on a bodily rather than on a purely cognitive level. Artisans use expressions such as “learn with the body” (*karada de oboeru*), “attach the technique to the body” (*gijutsu o mi ni tsukeru*) and “polish one’s arm” (*ude o migaku*) in order to express the fact that techniques, once committed to muscle memory, become a palpable part of the self (Kondo 1990: 238). In Noh practice, learning with the body takes precedence over the study of dance texts. Dancers acquire skill through bodily implementation by watching and modeling the teacher. Through endless repetition of the same movements of the Noh glide (*suriashi*), maneuver of the fan, and chanting, apprentices eventually learn to feel the working of different muscles within their thighs, hips, and abdomen. They expand the body’s powers of smooth motion, so that a movement that initially feels like a robotic and wooden walk increasingly becomes a fluid motion of the body moving effortlessly across the stage.

The pinnacle of the training is an hour-long performance in elaborate costumes and centuries-old masks at the Noh Theater. This is the occasion

when students' long months, or even years, of perfecting their chanting and dance sequences come together on the stage. The students who stage these plays do so only after the teacher deems they are ready to execute this feat. Each performer who stages a Noh play must also procure a large sum of money.⁶ The thrill of the performance lies in showcasing their mastery to the audience, and also in performing on the same stage with professional actors who provide accompaniment for amateur performers. When the performance is skillful, the students win acclaim from their fellow dancers and the professional actors who have served as accompanists. Families and friends also come to these performances, and they are a way for performers to gain new respect and admiration from them as well.

7 ELDERLY PRACTITIONERS OF CALLIGRAPHY

Shodō [the way of writing] has been an art form in Japan since the seventh century, originating from China and produced in Buddhist writings. In the eighth century the *kana* syllabary developed, first appearing in the *Man'yōshū*, a collection of 4,500 poems, which is the oldest existing and most highly revered contribution to Japanese literature (Earnshaw 1988). The practice of calligraphy was greatly influenced by Zen. The calligraphy practiced today by many older people in community centers, nursing homes, day care centers, and their own homes encompasses a wide range of possibilities. In an interview, Kurokawa Yukiko, a psychologist who has created many opportunities for groups of people to practice calligraphy, says, "You can use all sorts of paper, draw lines, even a dot. Singing a song may be considered childish but this is adult work and can be enjoyed even with a disability."

Participants in Kurokawa's groups do not evaluate the individual's work or point out what is good and what is bad. They use ink, which is available in plastic pourable bottles, in black and red, and may even use coffee in place of the ink. Without much effort people can be creative, making combinations of dots, lines, curved lines, and straight lines. The feel of the brush is important, and using it does not require a lot of strength although the teacher demonstrates by pressing her hand down on the student's hand, ensuring one long continuous stroke. At first they are asked to write a certain character and then they can choose whatever they want to do next. They are using procedural memory, Kurokawa notes, memory from the body, not the mind. In the group they are often

⁶ Practitioners can spend anywhere from one to three million yen to stage a full Noh play (US\$ 10,500 to US\$ 31,500).

stimulated by others. For example, they have all written their names many times. In one group, for instance, a woman named Kazuko starts by writing the first character of her name. This stimulates others in the group to express their own ideas with characters that have meaning to them. The advantage of calligraphy is that most elderly Japanese have learned at least some rudimentary skills as part of their elementary school curriculum. Calligraphy is also seen on a daily basis in signs and store fronts, exhibits in museums, and local community centers. Calligraphy can express many meanings at different levels; those using it are part of the very long tradition of making art with characters and words, whether they are studying in a traditional style with a teacher making comments and corrections or whether their work is more free form.

8 CASE STUDIES

In the following section, we present case studies that call attention to the ways many senior citizens in Japan approach later life as a new frontier of growth and learning. The case studies reveal the desire of the elderly to continually polish themselves in order to approximate a certain ideal in old age. Many found a source of strength and continuity in the traditional arts. The first three case studies are of Noh practitioners who practice in the Hōshō School of Noh: they include a retired salaryman, age 72, who became a teacher of Noh after retiring from his career in a bank; a female Noh instructor, age 80, who began Noh at age 16 and teaches Noh classes in multiple cities across Japan; and a former school principal, age 60, who began learning Noh for the first time after she retired from her career. These studies are followed by two calligraphy case studies that feature senior citizens who are more frail but who nonetheless discover a talent for writing characters, through the sustained encouragement of their teacher. These latter cases call attention to the importance of senior citizens using their bodies to express their creativity, and of sharing work within a community.

9 TEACHING IN RETIREMENT

Okazaki Shigeru, age 72, worked for the Bank of Japan for 40 years, and has been retired for 12 years.⁷ He has been practicing Noh since his twenties and for almost 50 years trained under the guidance of the esteemed

⁷ All names used in this article except for the calligraphy teacher, Takahashi Riko, are pseudonyms.

Noh actor, Matsumoto Shigeo (1915–2003), who in 1991, at age 76, was designated an Intangible Cultural Property.

Shigeru's eyes light up as he recalls the excitement he felt when the actor, Matsumoto Shigeo, began to visit the bank's head office each Monday night from 6 to 8 p. m. to teach Noh chanting to employees. The bank offered lessons through its system of "workplace recreation" (*shokuba rekuriēshon*). Workplace recreation, which may sound like an oxymoron was an activity promoted by large Japanese corporations in the 1950s and 1960s, and was available in most large firms until the recession of the 1990s. Companies made many activities available, including classes in Noh, flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and *shigin* poetry reciting; sports teams of baseball, table tennis, and volleyball; and company retreats at scenic sites. These activities were subsidized through the "employee benefits" (*fukuri kōsei*) scheme (Rōmu Kenkyūjo 1964; KKRC 1980). In no other context would Shigeru have had the opportunity to regularly brush shoulders with a Noh actor. As an art form enjoyed by the Japanese elite up to the end of the Second World War, Noh lessons would have been out of the pay range of junior employees like Shigeru. It was only because the bank subsidized the cost of these lessons that Shigeru was able to learn Noh. His fascination for chanting continued to grow, and he eventually began attending private classes offered by Matsumoto Shigeo to the most promising students at the bank.

Shigeru describes the master-disciple relationship as one requiring total obedience (*zettai fukujū*). Total faith in the teacher's ability to guide the way is a requisite feature of this learning. No matter how tired or frustrated a student may be during a lesson, it is not his place to contest the teacher's orders, to offer a different opinion, or to negotiate with the teacher about how he will undergo the lesson. Quoting Zeami, Rimer (1998: 43) describes a similar phenomenon: "in order to 'revere' the art of *nō* properly [...] an actor must deeply believe what his teacher conveys to him and take those instructions to heart." A disciple of Noh must apply himself wholeheartedly to learning what the teacher has taught him.

Shigeru steadily built up his mastery of Noh plays by performing in annual recitals that his teacher sponsored for students. There are over 250 plays and they derive their plots from Japan's classical literature, such as the *Man'yōshū*, *Genji monogatari*, and the *Heike monogatari*. At age 55, after over thirty years of learning with his teacher, Shigeru gained his *shokutaku* license, the first-tier license that enables a practitioner to take on students.

Noh clearly occupies an important part of Shigeru's life in retirement. He smiles and explains that Noh is much more than a hobby, that it has become his lifework (*raifuwāku*). Most of his days are dedicated to Noh-related activities. He teaches chanting to two groups of senior citizens in

his local neighborhood in Yokohama. One of these groups meets twice a month at the Senior Citizens' Welfare Center (Rōjin Fukushi Sentā) and is comprised of ten women and men, mainly in their seventies. The other group is affiliated with the local neighborhood association (*chōnaikai*) and is similarly comprised of women and men in their seventies. Many of his students are completely new to Noh. They joined the classes because of the health benefits of deep breathing required to chant songs and the muscular fitness required to do Noh dance. Given the current preoccupation with avoiding dementia, it is interesting to note the results of a five-year study by Verghese *et al.* (2003): in a group of people 75 and older who did not have dementia at base line, dancing was the only physical activity tested that was associated with a lower risk of dementia. Although we do not seek to establish whether the specific forms of training in Noh dance, chanting, or drumming influence the aging process, there may in fact be cognitive benefits associated with Noh training.

Shigeru convinced his wife to join an Asahi Culture Center to learn Noh when she was in her fifties so that they would find a mutual pursuit when he had retired and was spending more time at home. Together they resolved to sing a song together each day. This shared pursuit helped to expand the topics of conversation between his wife and him. The couple are currently members of two Noh singing groups, go to the Noh theater together, and sometimes watch television programs on Noh and discuss the songs. Shigeru is also taking lessons in the shoulder drum (*kotsuzumi*) twice a month and drum (*taiko*) three times a month. Learning the drums is useful for "preventing senility" because the practice "requires concentration, precision, and use of the hands."

A hobby he took up in his twentieth year in the workplace has become a major source of Shigeru's identity in late life. The social ties he had created at earlier stages of his life continue to enrich his current life. For example, he participates in an annual chanting jamboree with fellow retirees from the Bank of Japan. He feels a mission to transmit the teachings of his late teacher and is especially happy to be able to reach people who have not been able to see many Noh plays during their lifetime, and had even fewer opportunities to learn to chant and dance. Furthermore, unlike many retired men, he has a role with status as a teacher and a cohort of like-minded people to associate with for sociability as well as a sense of belonging. Shigeru's case study illustrates the importance of having an identity, a role outside the usual work life. It is an identity he has been building over the years, in something of a parallel identity to his working career.

10 PERPETUAL STRIVING

Tsurumi Reiko, age 80, is the head teacher or *sensei* of a Noh school in central Tokyo. She is a high-ranking Noh instructor (*shihan*) who has been certified by the Hōshō School of Noh. The two Noh actors with whom she trained had been designated Intangible Cultural Properties by the Japanese government. Her first teacher was Nomura Ransaku, with whom she trained from age 17 to 22 and from age 33 to 57. He was designated an Intangible Cultural Property as part of a group of actors (*sōgō mukei bunkazai*). Her second teacher was the actor Matsumoto Shigeo – who also taught Shigeru – with whom she trained from age 57 until age 74.

“I still have a lot to do to polish my *gei* [art]. I need to mature further,” she says in response to the observation that at age 80 and with over 60 years of training in the art of Noh, she must feel she had reached a state of perfection (*kansei*). Pondering some more, she adds: “If there ever comes a day when I feel I’ve perfected my art, then clearly, that would be the day when it is *all over*.” She speaks the last two words (i. e., *zenbu oshimai*) emphatically and slowly. Tsurumi-*sensei* feels it is not enough for her to occupy the position of an esteemed teacher who transmits to her students all she has learned over nearly sixty years of practice. She too has to keep learning and remain humble. She believes that when a Noh practitioner feels she can stop striving to perfect their art, that moment is tantamount to instantiating death. This is not a biological death, of course, but as she refers to it, it might as well be the end of her meaningful existence as a teacher.

She teaches Noh in an apartment which she renovated into a training center and installed a Noh practice stage. Her classes last on average for seven hours a day. Periods of rigorous practice are interspersed with conversation and with a sumptuous lunch that Tsurumi-*sensei* herself prepares for her students. Tsurumi-*sensei* is a firm believer in students absorbing other people’s lessons while they wait for their own. When a woman is dancing on the stage, fellow students watch from the side of the stage and serve as the chorus. Along the way, Tsurumi-*sensei* gives her students suggestions, powerful admonitions, and occasional praise.

Permeating Tsurumi-*sensei*’s philosophy of teaching and learning is one of the master motifs of Noh: the notion of “beginning each step with the beginner’s mind” (*shoshin no kokoro*). This concept emphasizes the attitude of approaching each stage of training, even when one has attained great heights, as if one were a total beginner. She uses this idea to push herself and her students to continue to engage in assiduous training, master new plays, and perform in her school’s recitals at the Noh Theater.



Fig. 2: Tsurumi-sensei with student

Photo: Katrina Moore.

Tsurumi-sensei reprimands her students whenever she perceives a lack of practice. Although many of her students are themselves senior citizens, mostly women in their sixties and seventies, she scolds them unabashedly, yelling at some in front of others. “I’ve taught you so many times and you still don’t get it,” she thunders from the tatami area as she watches students perform on the stage. “You haven’t been rehearsing your moves.” Or even when students have diligently memorized the dance moves, if their performance is mechanical and lacks vibrancy, she laments, “What have I been teaching you all this time! Put your soul (*tamashii*) into your performance.” These admonitions typically inspire embarrassment, especially in the more senior students who have been practicing Noh for some time. But they also catalyze an overpowering yearning for improvement. This desire to improve and to become immersed in the thrill of progress is built into the structure of Tsurumi-sensei’s teaching. Students experience a desire for mastery, constant pursuit of improvement, and a wish to excel as they move toward the day of the recital. The ultimate pinnacle of this training is the attainment of a state of no-mind (*mu*), where the dancer is on the stage transported by the music and is simply caught up in the intensity of the performance.

Tsurumi-sensei teaches with the utmost seriousness and conveys the expectation that all students will reach new heights through continuing practice. Not one to be condescending or to treat students as mere amateurs who are doing Noh as a hobby, she insists that all students are capable of becoming skilled at Noh, no matter their age when they began it. Her hope is to cultivate disciples among the middle-aged women in her class so that one day, some of them will take on her role and teach students of their own, ensuring that the heritage of Noh and the teachings of her teachers are kept alive.

Her philosophy of perpetual striving extends beyond the domain of artistic work to that of being a good elder. The training she offers at her school is a form of *shugyō* [discipline], especially for people as they became older. "As one ages, our emotions become blunted. We make less of an effort to get along with others. I know from my own experience that we are not willing to extend ourselves for others in the ways we might have when we were younger and more energetic." In her view, coming to the Noh school helps her students remain "young" because so much of the training involves being mindful and considerate of other people. She teaches them *reigi* [etiquette, rules] on how to comment on the performance of other students, offer praise, and provide feedback in constructive rather than hurtful ways. She reminds her students that the health benefits of Noh extend beyond the building of physical strength. "The practices of learning together, getting along with others, and conversing with different people in the class are very important for sustaining a social self in later life." Without such opportunities to practice social interaction, older people were likely to decline more rapidly.

Still, the physical benefits associated with this form of embodied practice, such as strengthening of the hips and thighs and improved posture, are evident in Tsurumi-sensei's physique. She has a spring in her step and carries her 80-year-old body with certainty. Onstage, her body has the bearing of one who knows something of great depth, and it is a living testament to her having cultivated the art of Noh dance for almost six decades.

11 HUMBLING TO MITIGATE ARROGANCE OF OLD AGE

The risks associated with old age come through in a different vein in the following case study of a retired elementary school principal, Ozawa Hiromi, age 62, who took up Noh practice in her fifties as she was transitioning from her career as a school principal into her new job as an adjunct professor at a teacher's college. Hiromi is one of many retirees in Japan who is taking up new posts at around age 60 after they leave their primary

professions. There is a growing trend in Japan for retired civil servants, school principals, and even company executives to serve as adjunct professors at colleges upon retirement.

Hiromi shares her perspective on the risks of aging in the following way: “With age, I have come to occupy a hierarchically high position. I have gained more authority. But I need to be very vigilant. Seniority carries risks of hubris and arrogance. Older people can become bossy and dogmatic, especially when guiding younger generations.” And about the Noh training she says that it helps her temper these tendencies:

Once we step inside the doorway of the Noh training room (*keikoba*), we shed whatever public identity we come in with. The fact that I’m a school principal and have public responsibility means little at the school. Sure, most people know that that was my profession. But within the class I completely let go of a sense of self I gain from my public identity. This practice of letting go is really precious. It feeds back into my current job as a college teacher. When I stand at the podium on the college campus and lecture to the students, I ask myself, ‘What is my foundation for engaging with my students? Is it based on my position in the hierarchy and the fact I’ve had a forty-year career? Or is it based on my capacity to relate to my students in a meaningful way?’

Hiromi believes that to have any credibility with her own students, she needs to be continually open to learning herself. “How do I do that? I go to the Sumire Kai. Learning things from scratch imposes humility, and the class creates an environment where I’m able to reflect on myself. I see a different self. This is really valuable to me.”

Noh training also creates a lot of tension (*kinchō*) in Hiromi, especially when her teacher, Tsurumi-sensei, scolds her in front of the other students. Hiromi smiles sheepishly. “It’s kind of refreshing actually. There aren’t many occasions at my age where people scold me anymore.”

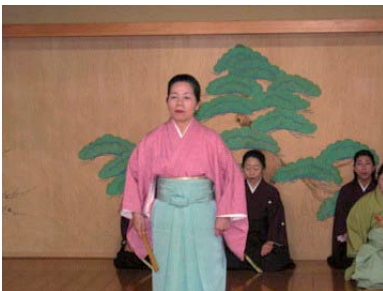


Fig. 3: **Ozawa Hiromi, a student of Tsurumi-sensei**

Photo: Katrina Moore.

Hiromi's case draws attention to a recurring theme in these case studies: that later life is a time of becoming and renewal. It is also a time of having to be vigilant about the risk of arrogance that comes when people rely on their public career and status to gain a sense of self.

12 BLOSSOMING OF LATE-LIFE CREATIVITY

The blossoming of late-life creativity is often linked with illness or loss of role as in retirement. Hinohara Shigeaki, a nonagenarian Japanese physician and author of several advice books on aging well, tells the story of an old friend who suffered from cancer in his sixties and was forced to retire from the business world. Dr. Hinohara encouraged him to begin painting in an effort to restore his love of life and found that once this friend began painting seriously he discovered new strength in himself (Hinohara 2001). Day service programs which have expanded quickly under *kaigo hoken*, the public long-term care insurance program begun in 2000, are introducing or reintroducing frail elderly members to painting, *haiku*, and calligraphy. In these settings, the traditional arts represent culturally legitimate and familiar leisure activities, distinguished from some activities done in day programs which are seen as "childish." A 75-year-old man, Tanaka Shōhei, partially paralyzed from a stroke, proudly pointed to the calligraphy hanging on the wall of his home. "Once a month, a *sensei* comes to day care, and teaches us." His wife added that he got very high marks. He said they use a brush when the calligraphy teacher comes, but on other days he uses the *fudepen* [pen-brush] which is an easier way to practice calligraphy and to do other kinds of drawing. He had practiced calligraphy during his working years, taking lessons and becoming proficient but he had not done it for a number of years until he went to the day care program. Fortunately, his right hand was not paralyzed so he was able to write and looked forward each month to the teacher's comments and encouragement.

Displays of residents' calligraphy are a common feature of Japanese nursing homes. Whether done in groups or at the bedside, brush-and-ink calligraphy is widely regarded as an art that benefits from the experiences and wisdom of age. Often when a particularly experienced calligrapher lives in a nursing home, he becomes a kind of nursing home star. Guests are brought to admire his work and it is hung in his room and in the halls. For the less expert, it does not seem to matter whether or not the handwriting is shaky. Most people can maintain the pressure on the brush. Unlike someone beginning to paint for the first time in late life, most Japanese elderly have learned calligraphy in school and used it in their lives. The motions are part of their physical memory just as an older person with dementia still remem-

bers how to drive even though he many not remember how to get to where he is going. People will write the same characters over and over, practicing and improving their efforts. In one day care program for people with early stage dementia, the volunteer teacher, a man in his mid-seventies, assisted by two middle-aged and adoring women, continued the tradition of correcting the strokes people wrote, instructing the elderly students on the correct form to use. The students were copying a traditional New Year's greeting and seemed to appreciate the teacher's attention to detail. They may have felt thrust back into their student days when the practice of correcting and redoing characters was part of their education.

13 SYMBOLIZING LIFE AS A FLOW OF WATER

A different approach is taken by an accomplished professional calligrapher, Takahashi Riko. Working with a heterogeneous group of elderly in a community reminiscence group, she says, "In *shodō* we strive to express freely our own inner selves. We project our way of living into the characters we draw." In one session, she asks the group to draw only two characters, *yama* [mountain] and *kawa* [river], not because these are relatively simple characters to draw but because they symbolize life, as water flows continuously from the mountains into the rivers.



Fig. 4: Takahashi-sensei, a professional calligrapher

Photo: Ruth Campbell.

Takahashi-*sensei* encourages the older students to have fun with drawing, to be loose, not “correct,” and to infuse their own life experiences into the characters they choose to draw. However, she emphasizes that they have to know how to move the brush, how to apply the right pressure and go slowly. Placing her hand over the hand of a student, she moves the brush slowly in a long stroke, applying pressure as she does this, carrying on the bodily tradition described in the Noh examples. Working with an expressionless, depressed woman, paralyzed from a stroke, she uses the woman’s “good hand,” guiding it through the *yama* character. “Keep trying, you can do it,” she repeats, and by the middle of the hour-long session, the woman is drawing the character on her own, her expression changing little. Still, the determination in her movements gives the impression of an inner change in her feelings.



Fig. 5: Calligraphy circle in a day care group

Photo: Matsuzawa Hirokazu.

Another woman in her eighties, frequently laughing in embarrassment, says at the beginning that she just cannot do it. Again, with the teacher’s hand firmly on hers, she draws the long lines of the *kaawa* character. At the end of the session she reveals that she worked from an early age in a *soba* [buckwheat] noodle shop, leaving school before she learned to write characters. All her life she relied on younger people to write for her. In tears at

the end of the session, she spoke of what it meant to write a character for the first time in her life. While it is true, as mentioned above, that most Japanese study calligraphy in their elementary school days, it is important to remember that many Japanese now in their eighties grew up in economically difficult times and did not have the privilege of completing an elementary school education.

Takahashi-*sensei*, in her early sixties, is an established artist, comfortable in her own skills and her ability to transmit them. She revels in unorthodox methods, traveling to Poland and China to teach disparate groups her approach to calligraphy. She fearlessly takes on groups of fifty to sixty people at a time, spreading them out in a large room in a Tokyo temple, to draw characters on pieces of wood cut to various shapes and sizes. Again, using her hands to guide others' hands, she presses people to disregard what they may have learned and put their own life experiences and feelings into their drawing. In both small and large groups, people of various ages not only create their characters but discuss and confer with each other on how they are doing. In an intergenerational group with university students working alongside the elderly, the older students advise the young as they uncertainly begin drawing. One older woman remarks, "Look at me, now I'm a teacher." This reversal of roles seems to have special significance for her.

14 COUNTER-FORCE AGAINST AGEISM

Interestingly, in order to realize their ideal vision of old age as a time of maturity, senior citizens simultaneously engage in the production of ageist notions. Ageism, first coined by Robert Butler in his (1969) article, is stereotyping and discrimination directed at or experienced by a person on the basis of that person's age. It refers to prejudicial attitudes directed toward old persons, old age, and the aging process – views that are frequently adopted by older people themselves.⁸ The senior citizens we interviewed invoke stereotypes of the elderly as people who are prone to selfishness, inflexibility, and arrogance or whose emotions become blunt with time. They use these stereotypes of old age as negative figures or *hanmen kyōshi* to motivate themselves to learn new things and work against becoming stereotypical older persons.

⁸ Butler (1989) later expanded this concept to include attitudes of older adults toward the young. Ageism may also refer to negative *images* about aging, especially in relation to changes to the body. Signs of old age in the body become a starting point for discrimination and oppression.

Historically, the elderly have been viewed in an ambivalent light. They have been considered, on the one hand, to become dependent and burdensome as they lose physical and cognitive function. On the other hand, they are seen to possess wisdom and maturity that people who have lived lesser years do not possess. Susanne Formanek (1992), in reviewing literary sources of the Nara and Heian periods, observes that old age was frequently associated with physical characteristics of decay, loss of vitality, mental deterioration, and the diminishing of skills. She cites a famous poem in the *Manyōshū* (5/804) in which Yamanoe no Okura complains of the impermanence of human life, ending his description of the elderly with: “they totter along the road, laughed at here and hated there” (*Manyōshū* 5/804 cited in Formanek 1992).

Early twentieth-century literary sources show that the social value of an older person was often contingent on their ability to offer resources to younger generations. For example, in Nagai Kafū’s short story *Ōkubodayori* (Engl.: *Tidings from Okubo*), serialized in the magazine *Mita Bungaku* from 1913 to 1914, Nagai says: “The day when a child could be relied upon to console a parent in his old age is past [sic] in any case. Today a parent is respected only if he has money” (Nagai 1972: 67). A similar theme emerges in the well-known folk tale of Ubasuteyama.⁹ The tale has come down through the centuries in many different versions, portrayed in stories, plays and movies. Kitayama Jun (2008) demonstrates in a map of Japan the robust diffusion of the Ubasuteyama legend, with many prefectures containing more than twenty versions of the tale. The notion that the frail older person is at risk of being cast aside by society once she is seen as having no productive value appears again. Only by displaying special wisdom and knowledge that others in the community do not have, and also by attracting the pity of her child, is the older person saved from being abandoned on a mountain where she will meet her death (see Appendix for one version of the tale in its entirety).

The book on morals *Chikubashō* (1383, “Writings on Hobby-horse Childhood Days”) by Shiba Yoshimasa (1350–1410) states: “[I]n order to avoid a despicable fate in old age, when one is commonly disliked by people, it is imperative that one exercise oneself in some art such as poetry, which might provide some consolation in old age and cause people to seek one’s company, at least from time to time.” The writer urges people to do this in their middle years because they might lack the motivation to begin it later in life (Formanek 2008: 332–333).

Today, as well, senior citizens motivate themselves to learn the traditional arts to work against becoming stereotypical older persons. These

⁹ Ubasuteyama is also written as Obasuteyama.

arts are one of the few avenues where age is esteemed. They provide an important framework for mitigating the risks of old age and turning them into opportunities for realizing human maturity.

15 CONCLUSION

Referring to elders who immerse themselves in leisure activities such as gardening and Western dance, Fujiwara Tomomi (2008) states that these activities are self-indulgent and do not contribute to local community life; in fact, he says, they exacerbate the isolation of many Japanese senior citizens. Our perspective on the world of leisure is quite different. We argue that communities such as these Noh and calligraphy groups are highly structured and structuring spaces where senior citizens engage in the construction of new identities and selves. In a time of life when losses and change are common, practicing a traditional art brings a special kind of reward. These communities offer a place where senior citizens can find a role and meet others who share similar life experiences.

The traditional arts can also be surprisingly adaptable. People with strokes, as noted above, can still manage to do calligraphy when the instructor departs from more rigid ways of teaching and pays attention to individual needs. Nursing home residents attend *haiku* classes in their wheelchairs and do calligraphy on their bed tables. The more structured forms illustrated in the Noh case studies are modified so that the sense of participating in an honored tradition are conveyed, but the way in which people participate is adapted to fit their physical and mental abilities.¹⁰

Two themes continually intertwine in the narratives of the people featured in this article: the journey into later life is not only a time of continuing growth, it is also a time of having to remain vigilant against the changes that occur as people grow older. This was explained by Noh teacher Tsurumi-*sensei* in terms of decreasing concern for others, and de-

¹⁰ This process of adaptation is illustrated in another traditional arts setting which Campbell researched for this article. This was a group of 80-year-olds in Gunma Prefecture who are studying *cha-kaiseki* with a 70-year-old teacher. During a four-hour *hatsugama* [the first tea ceremony of the new year], five of the members sat *seiza* style, legs tucked under them, while four others preferred to sit on chairs. Several wore kimonos, while others were in Western dress. The teacher, who has been studying the tea ceremony for twenty years, patiently repeats instructions, explains each dish individually to participants, and encourages participants mid-way through the ceremony to use a back rest or move up to a chair. The elements of the *cha-kaiseki* are there, but they are modified so that all can participate and learn, regardless of declines due to the aging process.

clining ability to be mindful of others. Hiromi, one of Tsurumi's students, explained it in terms of the risk of arrogance that comes when people rely on their public career and status to gain a sense of self. Such beliefs about the arrogance of old age, or about old age blunting emotions, reflect how older people use stereotypes of old age to motivate themselves to learn new things in late life. Immersion in the traditional arts helps these women and men explore and negotiate the changes that accompany old age by providing a space to recreate the self.

Drawing on case studies of men and women who participate in Noh chanting and dance and in calligraphy, this article has explored the ways in which the traditional arts present opportunities for senior citizens to attain maturity. The attainment of maturity has multiple manifestations in late life: as a creative adaptation to the inevitable process of aging, as a proven ability to mature further, and as wisdom and strength to serve as a role model for others. With their highly codified rituals, demanding social relationships between master and disciple, and the emphasis on embodied training, these arts provide an important structure for continued discipline in late life. They also offer milestones for practitioners to showcase their striving as members of venerated artistic traditions. Although other leisure activities such as swimming, exercising, and learning a language all benefit the participant, there is a special benefit from learning an art that places self-cultivation as a fundamental part of the learning process. Not only are the Japanese traditional arts one of the rare spaces where age is venerated, but these arts provide senior citizens with a new frontier of achievement that can offset rupture and the losses – i. e., losses of meaning, social status, and social ties – that occur with old age.

APPENDIX

The following is one version of the Ubasuteyama story (Kitayama 2008) in its entirety:

Long ago when people had reached old age and were unable to do anything, the ruler decreed they should be thrown out onto a mountain. A son carried his elderly mother on his back to abandon her on the mountain. As they went along, the old woman broke off the tips of tree branches in order to mark the trail. "What are you doing that for?" asked the son. "It would be too bad if you were unable to find your way home," replied the mother. When the son heard this he realized how kind-hearted she was, so he returned home with her. They hid the mother so that the lord would know nothing about it.

Now the lord of the country sometimes commanded his subjects to do very difficult things. One day the lord said, "You must each bring me a rope woven from ashes."

All the subjects were very troubled. The young farmer asked his mother. "You must weave a rope very tightly, then carefully burn it until it turns to ashes" said the old woman.

He did just as she said. None of the other farmers were able to do it. For this the lord praised him highly.

Next the lord commanded, "Everyone must bring a conch shell with a thread passed through it." The young farmer went to his mother again and asked her what he should do. "Take a conch shell and point the tip toward the light; then take a thread and stick a piece of rice on it. Give the rice to an ant and make it crawl into the mouth of the shell; in this way you can get the thread through." He did as he was told, and so got the thread through the conch shell.

He took the shell to the lord, who was very impressed. "How were you able to do such a difficult thing?" he asked. The farmer replied: "Actually I was supposed to throw my mother away on the mountain, but I felt so sorry for her I brought her back home and hid her. Your commands were so difficult that I had to ask my mother how to do them. I have done them as she told me, and brought them to you."

When the lord heard this he was very impressed and realized that old people are very wise and that they should be well taken care of. After that he decreed an end to the tradition of taking older people to Ubasute Yama to be abandoned.

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