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Passage from Youth to Adulthood in Japan: Coming of Age Rituals and the Process of Change

Coming of age is one of the major transitions in the human life cycle. Marking the period which separates childhood from adulthood, the length of this period can vary from person to person, or from culture to culture. It is also closely connected to the legal age of adulthood, which varies between societies. Similarly, in different historical periods the specific age at which a given society associates the start of adulthood varies within that same society. The process of coming of age is a complex one that entails physical, psychological as well as social maturity of the person. There exist a range of instruments that societies use to culturally “treat” the passage to adulthood. One way of acknowledging this change is the coming of age ritual which belongs to the category of rites of passage, defined and labelled in the early years of the twentieth century by the French-Belgian anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep.¹ In Japanese society, a number of coming of age rites have existed during its history and whose forms varied on the basis of social class, gender, and local custom. All these historical forms belong today to a tradition that is still remembered but rarely observed in an unchanged forms. After WWII, a new form of coming of age rite was established by the Japanese state and it is this form that young Japanese people observe today throughout the country. The present article will discuss the major changes that affected the coming of age rite in Japan, starting with a description of the well-known traditional forms before addressing the present day situation in which the new modern form is facing challenges due to upcoming changes in the age of legal adulthood.

¹ In 1909, *The Rites of Passage* (van Gennep 1960).

Transition and rites of passage

As mentioned above, in his seminal work from 1909, van Gennep, basing his theory on the analyses of a number of disparate cultures, pointed out that there are rituals that are observed in most cultures and that these rituals often share a common structure.² These rites usually marked important turning points or thresholds in the lives of the community and/or of its individual members. Such critical junctures were, for example, pregnancy, birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. In van Gennep's understanding, 'rites of passage' – the name he adopted for these rituals – marked critical junctures and at the same time facilitated the transition that was perceived as a moment of crisis in the examined communities. Rituals had the function of helping to control the crisis and also to give social acknowledgement to a change that was taking place at a physical level.³ Furthermore, rites of passage also spoke to the difference that existed between social and physical puberty, or between social and physical parenthood.

Generally speaking, rituals work in a complex way and this makes it possible for rituals to have multiple effects and to work on multiple levels, symbolic as well as social. It is through rituals that the child becomes a 'complete' or 'full-fledged' member of the community. In brief, van Gennep explained rituals as instruments that assist in the task of elaborating and appropriating change and transformation in the society. In the decades following the publication of van Gennep's seminal work, generations of scholars have elaborated on various aspects of his theory. Among others, the anthropologists Victor Turner and Mary Douglas showed how rites of passage produce positive effects not only for the community, but also for individuals concerned.⁴ In this regard, James Bossard and E. Stoker Boll emphasized the psychological aspects of rites of passage that have the potential to restore equilibrium during periods that are perceived to be a transitional and distinguished by increased vulnerability. To this end, they argued that rites of passage are essential in the social development of the individual.⁵

² Van Gennep 1960.

³ Van Gennep 1960: 60–68.

⁴ Turner 1969 and Douglas 2003 (1970).

⁵ The authors exposed this theory in their *The Sociology of Child Development* 1960(1948). For elaboration of this theory see also their work *Ritual in Family Living* (1950).

Cultural specifics of coming of age in Japan

Coming of age rituals have a rich tradition in Japanese society as already mentioned above. Japanese culture has always been particularly rich in this type of ritual and there have been several theoretical attempts to explain this fact. Japanese folklore literature places rites of passage into the overall cosmology that is used to embrace everyday life and customs of individual members and their communities in the past. The theoretical frame known as a cyclical life view (*junkanteki seimeikan* 循環的生命観), in other words, ‘circular or cyclic life-view’ is based on Kunio Yanagida’s original interpretation of the progress of the human soul during the entire life and after death cycle.⁶ Another observation points to the heightened perceptivity of the Japanese people towards age. According to this observation, compared to the Westerners, the Japanese are distinguished by a higher sensitivity and in particular emphasize, *positive* sensitivity regarding age and ageing.⁷ Stronger age awareness can be noted, for example, in their attitudes towards belonging to a particular age group or towards ageing in general. Old age, indeed, is not associated as much with negative views as is more commonly the case in contemporary Western cultures. On the contrary, ageing is seen as the accumulation of experience, which is highly valued in Japanese society.⁸ The high number of elderly people in elevated positions, administrative and industrial, clearly demonstrate this reality. Moreover, belonging to an age group defines behaviour and finds expression in language, in dress style and consumer behaviour, too.⁹

The importance of acknowledging the process of coming of age in Japanese history is evident in many aspects of the culture and across wide segments of the population. Historical documents and collections of ancient laws (*Yōrō risuryō* 養老律令) include notions of age for the individuals and point out certain

⁶ Itabashi 2007: 288–291. For an English language account of this see Papp 2016, for Hungarian, Papp 2011.

⁷ In this regard, Augustin Berque makes an interesting observation, saying that Japanese cultural values change over ‘substance’ or ‘being’, therefore ‘becoming’, or ‘transformation’ gains more attention from the society (Berque 1995: 252–254).

⁸ Rohlen 1976: 141. There is a number of non-Japanese scholars of Japanese society who explored the subject of cultural interpretations of age and ageing in Japanese culture. See among them D. W. Plath (“The After Years” in D. Cowgill and L. Holmes (eds.) *Aging and Modernization*. New York, 1972, 133–150).

⁹ Divisions by age groups can be observed in many spheres of everyday life in Japan. In traditional agricultural communities age groups were active parts of community organization. In modern Japan, the system of career progress in companies is mainly based on the number of years spent in the same company. Another example of this is the media where there is a wide range of journals that address distinct age segments. Consumption is also majorly aligned along distinct age groups (Papp 2016).

ages as being important thresholds from a legal point of view.¹⁰ So for example, before the age of ten, children were not regarded – legally – as responsible for crimes.¹¹ Emphasis on rituals marking the passage of age altered with changes taking place in the society, in particular those regarding social structure. Ryō no shūge 令集解, a ninth century legal document, lists the ages of three and seven as limits for the jurisdiction of a number of regulations.¹² Descriptions of age rites emerge in several annals of upper social class families from the 15th century.¹³ These age rites included the rite of *hakama*¹⁴ (*hakamagi* 袴儀), which later became a popular rite of passage for samurai sons in samurai society.¹⁵ Rites of passage that highlighted affirmation, demonstration, and perpetuation of social standing acquired a central role, particularly in those social groups that attributed major significance to these aspects. Thus, when the warrior samurai class rose to political power and gained higher social status, age rites originally observed only by high ranking court noble families were imitated and appropriated by samurai families.¹⁶ The rite of *hakamagi* was adopted by samurai families for male children, as part of the series of coming of age rites guiding the male child towards adulthood and on the path to become a faithful vassal of his shogun. The ritual indicated that the samurai son was from this moment on allowed to put on his first formal crested garment.¹⁷ Between the age of 13-16, the completion of another rite of passage called *genpuku* 元服 was the condition that preceded the formal introduction of the samurai boy to his immediate lord.

***Genpuku* and age groups in traditional Japan**

Generational groups, also called “age groups”, were common in pre-Meiji Japan, in particular in rural communities. During the modernization of Japan these groups gradually lost their function in the community, some of their roles being taken over by the state and the newly established educational institutions.

¹⁰ Sakurai 1938: 121.

¹¹ See also Yamaji 2005.

¹² In the ninth volume of Ryō no shūge (Sakurai 1938: 121).

¹³ Sugawara 2007: 229 and Sugawara 2000: 47–51.

¹⁴ *Hakama* is a pants-like garment in the traditional Japanese dress, originally worn by court nobles of both sexes. Later it became part of the ceremonial male clothing of the samurai class. See also Papp 2016.

¹⁵ For a list of historical documents mentioning age related rituals observed among noble and samurai families, see Tsuboi 1976.

¹⁶ Tsuboi 1976: 166–170.

¹⁷ The crested formal garment worn for the ritual had a central role in the samurai society in which heritage and the continuation of the family line were viewed as of particular import. See more on this Papp 2016.

In the past, age groups had diverse functions and roles in the community, ranging from the preparation of the village festivities to fire protection. The activities were organized according to the group and participation in its activities was considered important for the individual's social education. The youngest cohort was made up of children between 7 and 14 years of age (called *kodomogumi* 子供組) after which boys between the age of 14 and 16 entered the youth group called *wakamonogumi* 若者組, girls into *musumegumi* 娘組. In the case of girls, eligibility to enter the *musumegumi* was on the condition of their first menstruation (*shochō* 初潮), while in the case of boys it was their physical strength that made them eligible.¹⁸ The transition from one group to another was marked by a rite of passage, whose form varied from region to region and by social class. In rural places one type of ritual for celebrating a girl's maturity was the *heko iwai* 兵児祝い (or *fundoshi iwai* 褌祝い). This ritual indicated that the girl received her first piece of loincloth worn by adult women. This was seen as part of the sexual education of girls and as a sign of the beginning of their sexual maturity. The custom of teeth blackening (*kanetsuke* 鉄漿) was also observed as a female coming of age rite but sometimes it was performed only upon marriage. A change in clothing and in physical appearance (hair, blackening) was a frequent element of these coming of age rites, and of rites of passage, in general. The changed physical appearance, brought about by a new piece of cloth or an adult hairstyle, was seen as a visible acknowledgment of the new social status acquired by the young adult.

Another widely observed coming of age rite for boys was the *genpuku* which was known throughout history by many different names, such as *kakan* 加冠, *eboshi iwai* 烏帽子, *uikōburi* 初冠, names that described the head wear (*eboshi*, *kanmuri*) placed ceremonially on the head of the boy. The rules that defined which head cover is associated to which age varied by social class and changed over the course of history but, in general, it marked the period from when the young person was allowed to wear adult head wear. The hair style was adjusted in order to make it suitable to carry the head cover (by shaving or by tying it, depending on the custom). Boys also received a new name and abandoned their childhood name. All these changes were aimed at reinforcing the awareness of a symbolic rebirth, in other words the emergence of a new identity coupled with new social responsibilities and social status.¹⁹

¹⁸ Iwata 1999. For an English language account of age groups and their place in the social structure of Japanese rural communities see Fukutake 1972: 96–116 and Papp 2016: 229.

¹⁹ Akata 1979.

The birth of the modern coming of age rite, the *seijinshiki*

The traditional coming of age rites in Japan have gradually faded away during the period following the Meiji Restoration (1868). With the social and economic transformation of traditional village communities, age groups lost their function. Similarly, the social structure of Japanese society underwent major transformation. After the end of the WWII, the country found itself in need of rebuilding its structures and communities which had been heavily affected by the war and prior militarization. In 1946, the youth organization (*seinendan* 青年団) of Warabi town 蕨市 (Saitama prefecture) decided to hold a ceremony for its local group of young adults with the aim to raise the spirit of the future generations after the societal depression caused by the war.

The young population was expected to carry the weight of rebuilding the nation, which had been devastated by the war, and boost the country's economy. The public ceremony organized by the youth organization of the town of Warabi was to represent the hopes that the town's adult population held towards its young adults. The news of this ceremony soon spread to the national media and the Japanese government decided to make the ceremony a model for a public coming-of-age event to be integrated into the national holiday calendar. In 1948 the law regarding national holidays was issued and January 15th, traditionally the end of the New Year's celebrations (*koshōgatsu* 小正月), was selected for Adults' National Day (*seijin no hi* 成人の日). In 1949, the government ordered town and cities to establish ceremonies on this day and by the 1960s over 90% of municipalities were already organizing *seijinshiki* ceremonies for their young population. In present times, this figure has risen to 99% of municipalities holding *seijinshiki*. Even private companies organize their own *seijinshiki* ceremonies for their young employees reaching adulthood in the preceding year. In 2001, the date of the *seijin no hi* was moved to the second Monday of January.

Until the 1990s, when the baby boom generation (born in the 1970s) reached 20 years of age, *seijinshiki* celebrations were held in public halls, organized by town councils. Afterwards, due to the growing influence of the falling birth rate, the number of young people started to decrease and big town halls began to seem too big for these ceremonies. As a consequence, nowadays, *seijinshiki* ceremonies in many towns are held in schools, though their organization continues to be led by municipalities. Since 2000, another change which impacts the ceremony has occurred. During the ceremony the behaviour of young people started to visibly deteriorate. Instances increased of young attendees of the ceremony showing undesirable conduct, such as shouting, causing public offense by rude manners, throwing objects on the stage, gathering outside the hall, consuming

alcohol, using cell phones during the ceremony, and street disorders.²⁰ All the more worrying were some cases in which misbehaviour resulted in arrests. These incidents soon aroused media attention and stirred public debate about social problems concerning the younger generation. Public discourse centered on issues of whether the tradition of *seijinshiki* should be discontinued or whether there needed to be reform of the content of *seijinshiki* ceremonies. Some critics questioned the authentic meaning of the ceremony, saying that it was only an empty shell and without a genuine purpose in a society where a sense of community has been lost. Others pointed to the fact that youth at the age of 20 could not be seen as independent – either financially and emotionally – and therefore the meaning of the coming of age ritual was lost. Indeed, several opinion polls show that the majority of young adults do not consider themselves as adults and are still financially dependent on their parents.²¹ Moreover, young people nowadays feel too much the pressure of responsibility of adulthood, and on the other hand general optimism for the future stagnates at low levels. Regardless of these issues, print and electronic media continue to closely follow *seijinshiki* ceremonies throughout the country every year. Irresponsible behaviour is monitored and promptly exposed in the media directing public attention to the allegedly deteriorating moral qualities of the younger generations (*moraru teika* モラル低下). Critics often underline that *seijinshiki* should be the place where young persons show their maturity and preparedness to behave like adults, instead of being an occasion to show up and misbehave. The intensity of criticism surrounding these incidents is worthy of examination. Public misbehaviour has been always seen as something socially unacceptable in the Japanese society. To know and follow the socially approved rules of formal behaviour is considered as sign of maturity and consequently, the formal occasion of *seijinshiki* is seen manifestly as a symbol of maturity. The meaning of the *seijinshiki* ritual is, after all, the acknowledgment of adulthood. Offending the rules on this occasion is perceived as a very sensitive issue by the majority of adult society. This can explain the heightened attention with which the Japanese public follows year after year the celebration of the *seijinshiki* and the incidents that accompany some of these events. However, it is important to keep in mind that young people causing trouble represent only a small percentage of all attendees.

²⁰ In Okinawa young people, called *yankii* ヤンキー, often parade in town center driving extravagant rented cars. Occasionally fights with police, too arise.

²¹ Every year a relatively big number of surveys on the opinion of new adults about becoming adult and their attendance in *seijinshiki* are undertaken and published. They are carried out by several organizations and companies. See for example: <https://www.linebiz.com/jp/column/research/20200110/> https://www.macromill.com/r_data/20140108shinseijin/, <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000527.000000624.html>.

In order to understand the phenomenon, it is also necessary to hear from the other side. When asked about the incidents, young people say that *seijinshiki* is seen as a rare occasion where they can allow themselves to relax and feel free from the pressure that the society otherwise places on them. The occasion is also seen by many young people as place to meet their old classmates, especially as the celebration gathers together persons who attended the same middle school.²² It is also thought to be the last occasion when classmates and old friends can meet before becoming committed to family and regular work. The event of *seijinshiki* has been seen as an occasion for meeting old classmates since long before these problems started. This trend has also been strengthened by the decision of many town councils to move the place of *seijinshiki* to the gym of middle and high schools, a tendency which has grown since the 1990s. Another trend sees the *seijinshiki* organized during the summer months, in particular in August, not by municipalities in this case, but by ex-classmates. This is typical for those students who attended a secondary school not in their hometown. These young adults prefer to see their classmates instead of attending official *seijinshiki* events in their hometown.²³

Regarding the age of majority, for a number of years the change of the legal age of adulthood has been under serious consideration in Japan. Recently, it has been decided to change it from 20 to 18 years of age and the government has enacted a bill which will take effect in 2022, April. This is the first time in Japan's modern history since 1876 that the age of adulthood has changed. A step preparing for this was the lowering of the voting age from 20 to 18 in 2015, probably with the aim to counterbalance the shrinking number of young people in this ageing country. This decision also caused questions about the timing of *seijinshiki* emerge, dividing the public opinion in two groups, one of which says that the celebration of *seijinshiki* should follow the legal adulthood age, the second saying that there is no sense in celebrating a coming of age rituals for young persons who are yet to finish their secondary education.

Conclusion

Seijinshiki is a coming of age ritual and it is not merely a symbolic action, but a social one as well. Not only can rituals reflect changes in society, but also they can integrate and embed change. In this sense, rituals are active agents in society and serve as a mirror of and to the society. At the same time, they play an active role in the elaboration of societal changes. The concept of change is not easily

²² Town councils send invitation to all young persons registered with their home address within their administrative unit.

²³ Personal communication from professor Ishii Kenji, Kokugakuin Daigaku, 2015.

interpreted within the ritual's interpretative framework. Rituals are often judged and appreciated because of adherence to traditions; people expect rituals to convey traditional values, norms and rules.²⁴ When change takes place in a ritual, it is always difficult to interpret, both for the scholar, ritual expert, and lay public. The contemporary practice of *seijinshiki* is an excellent example how change is integrated as well as reflected throughout the practice of ritual. On one hand, *seijinshiki*, despite being a modern invention, is nourished by a century-long tradition of ritual culture that placed at its centre the passage in human life course, the major examples of which have been listed above. On the other hand, changes over the last two decades show that *seijinshiki*, while continuing to be regarded by the public as an important event marking a threshold in the human life cycle, now also mirrors a number of problems that Japanese society has been facing in recent times. However, critical voices targeting the misbehaviour of young people during the ceremony disregard a basic function of rituals expressed by Victor Turner in his seminal work from 1969, *The Ritual Process*.²⁵ Turner described ritual process as a movement from structure to *communitas* and again back to structure. Accordingly, in rites of passage individuals or groups become liberated from the structure in order to enter the *communitas*, and subsequently, once revitalized from the experience of *communitas*, they return to the structure. Through the rite of passage, individuals become integrated into the structure, in other words, into the society, in a more complete way. As we hear from young Japanese, life in the structure, i.e., in the adult society, represents many difficulties and hardships. It demands decision making, responsibility, sacrifice, and hence, it can become hard and tedious. The ritual of *seijinshiki* offers an occasion – even if for a limited period of time – where within controlled circumstances members of the society can experience the regenerating power of *communitas* and all that comes with it, freedom and liberation. Moreover, ritual is also an occasion when the society's values and norms are re-examined.²⁶

In brief, today, the passage from youth to adulthood occurs in a very different manner compared to the pre-modern past in Japan. It is no longer concentrated in one short period of time but rather spread over a longer period during which symbolic events of transition such as school entrance ceremonies, graduation exams all represent single stations in this lengthy process. In Japanese society, rituals like *seijinshiki* still comprise part of this process, a fact which on one hand indicates that Japanese culture continues to give importance to the ritual treatment of passage. On the other hand, problems emerging within *seijinshiki* reflect social processes and problems taking place in present day Japan.

²⁴ Grimes 1982: 541.

²⁵ Turner 1969: 129.

²⁶ Turner 1969: 129.

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