



Japanese Local Communities: Role of Traditions in Postmodern Lifestyle

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Summary

Japan has a developed postmodern society, and the country is world leader in postmodern global culture. But despite of growing globalization and internationalization, many seemingly traditional elements have still continuing to play an important role as basis of local communities culture, identity and solidarity. Article is studying the Japanese local communities, their lifestyle post-modernization and the persistence of traditions in their structures, organizations, and activities. The empirical basis of the theoretical analysis are surveys carried out by the author in Japan. The conclusions are made concerning the significance of informal structures of the Japanese local communities, about the ways and means by which the identity of local people is built and the spirit of their solidarity is maintained, as well as about some of the changes in the local lifestyle at the end of the second decade of 21st century.

Keywords: local community, lifestyle post-modernization, tradition, local community informal structures, enterprising local actors.

Introduction: about empirical resources, goal and method

The empirical basis of the theoretical analysis contained in the article are sixteen empirical sociological surveys conducted by the author in Japanese local communities during a period of 26 years, from 1994 until now. Among all of them can be mentioned “Religious practices, rituals and festivals as basis of identity and solidarity of Japanese local communities”, „Local communities lifestyle in Kyoto: Traditions in postmodern society”, “Local communities in Kumano: Local initiatives, traditions and protection from natural disasters”, “Informal structures of Japanese local communities”, “Traditional forms of mutual help and cooperation in Japanese local communities”, carried out in different part of Japan as Shiga, Hyogo, Aichi, Mie, Gifu, Toyama and Kyoto prefectures. These surveys were dedicated to studying Japanese local communities’ lifestyle, their traditions, structures, initiatives, religious practices, rituals and festivals. In all, about 150 in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders of the informal structure of the communities, with enterprising local actors, NGO activists, local administrators,

leaders of agrarian cooperatives, farmers, and local residents, and more than 20 focus group discussions were held with representatives of these same categories of respondents. A variety of other sources of information were also used: statistical, economic, demographic, etc. Observations were made on a number of activities and initiatives of the surveyed communities: their traditional annual festivals – *matsuri*, and some of their volunteer activities and projects. The investigations were based on the case study method. The results are not representative and are by no means taken as such, but they do contain valuable information that may serve for drawing conclusions regarding the lifestyle of local communities.

Two thirds of all 18 investigated communities are located in villages, although some of them no longer conduct agricultural activity, or if they do, it represents an insignificant portion of their economies. Together with rural local communities six urban local communities were studied in the old Japanese capital – Kyoto city. Some of the surveyed rural local communities are situated far from the large economic and cultural centers, and this has an impact on their general socio-political, socio-economic, and cultural development. Among the basic problems of these communities are depopulation, migration of young people to large urban centres, and population aging.

The goal of the paper is to study the particularities of today's Japanese local communities and the continuing persistence of traditions in their organizations, structures, and activities.

The methodological approach applied to the lifestyle of local communities lies within the research field of social stratification. In this study I proceed from the traditions of the classical names in this problem field, such as Weber (1922/1978) and Veblen (1899/1994), as well as on the work of Bourdieu (1979/1984), Featherstone (1991), Jameson (1991) and others.

Local community lifestyle: a definition

The author argues that, despite the close proximity between the concepts of lifestyle and way of life, the two are not synonymous¹. Unlike 'way of life', 'lifestyle' emphasizes the activeness of the agent and the choices he/she makes among the various options at his/her disposal. Lifestyle is a characteristic and distinctive way of life. Since social-group formations are active in their lifestyle and can choose it, lifestyle is a significant indicator of their status. In modern societies it is a result of their activity; through it they delimit themselves from some social-structure formations and draw closer to others. The way of life, unlike lifestyle, is

determined by the social-group status of individuals and groups, and is a result of that status (Keliyan, 2010, pp. 22–23).

Some of the phenomena pertaining to lifestyle are: the complete set of typical and distinctive particularities and characteristics of activities other than paid labor, activities that can be freely chosen or done out of necessity but in ways specific to the individual or group, as well as all the subjective assessments, attitudes and feelings of satisfaction related to those activities. Lifestyle, although at first glance a product of individual choice, goes beyond individual distinctiveness; through it individuals can express themselves and their preferences, but it remains, nevertheless, something pertaining to the social-group and is a form of collective identity. Lifestyle creates social bonds between people and significantly delimits, distinguishes social-formations from one another. Lifestyle is defined as a synthesis, a unity stabilized through the social-group, a unity of specific, typical and distinguishable consumption patterns, leisure patterns of individuals, of various distinctive activities, apart from paid labor, as well as the evaluations, attitudes and satisfaction related to them. Lifestyle is structure-defining for social subjects and is among the key indicators of social-group status in postmodern society.

It is assumed that the lifestyle of the local community is an integral unity of specific, typical and distinctive activities carried out by the social actors (individual and collective) and structures of that community, activities carried out apart from paid labor (i.e. on a voluntary basis); some of these activities may be freely chosen (preferred), others may be pursued out of necessity (i.e. obligatory), still others may be initiated by its members and their organizations; it includes the evaluations, attitudes and satisfaction derived from all these activities. Lifestyle also plays a structure-determining role with respect to the local community: ever since the emergence of postmodern society, not only individuals but the organizations and communities formed by individuals have enjoyed much greater freedom and have a growing possibility to choose their lifestyle; in turn, that lifestyle defines their position in the social structure.

Lifestyle, although at first glance a product of individual choice, goes beyond individual distinctiveness; through it individuals can express themselves and their preferences, but it remains, nevertheless, something pertaining to the social-group and is a form of collective identity. Lifestyle creates social bonds between people and significantly delimits, distinguishes social-formations from one another. The lifestyle is directly related to identity and characterizes the class, status group or subculture (Zablocki & Kanter, 1976, p. 271). Group and community identity are

also shaped by lifestyle practices (Crompton, 1992, p. 128). In this sense, the lifestyle also has an “identification value” (Warde, 1992, pp. 25–26) because in a specific way connects people with their significant “others” and maintains the social ties between them. The lifestyle shared by the local community strengthens the links between its members, emphasizes the importance of belonging to them and plays the role of a factor uniting or even “consolidating” the community identity. It is a significant indicator of the ways in which social relations are formed and in which solidarity is manifested in the group and the community (Longhurst & Savage, 1992, pp. 228, 295).

Lifestyle acquires the characteristics described above at a definite stage of socio-historical development, more precisely, in postmodern society whose distinctive features are presented in the works of C. Wright Mills (1951), Baudrillard (1981), Lyotard (1979), Jameson (1991), Featherstone (1991) and others. Postmodern society essentially shows a change not only in values and cultural practices, but also in the mechanisms of social structuring. It is based on a new type of social structuring, in which lifestyle plays an important and decisive role, the middle strata are markers of the particularities and development of the society, and local communities have an increasingly important presence and role in public life in general. Owing to these characteristics, postmodern society is qualitatively different from modern society, and its emergence is brought about by important changes in the social organization of production and labor, by the development of science, education, information and communication technologies, mass production and mass consumption. The process of important socio-economic, structural, cultural, political and value changes through which society passes to its postmodern stage, is designated by the term “post-modernization”. The latter took place in the developed Western societies and Japan in the 1970s.

Post-modernization poses significant challenges for local communities, but does not bring them to loss of identity and provides them with new means and possibilities for dealing with their problems. For instance, the development of technologies, especially information and communication technologies, which are making our societies increasingly global, can simultaneously be used as means for preserving local specificities, consolidating and even popularizing the local lifestyle beyond the boundaries of the community, thus effectuating a sort of “globalization of the local”. But how and how much the local communities will inscribe themselves in the postmodern environment and cope with the challenges of that environment will depend on the social structures of the concrete society.

The Japanese lifestyle post-modernization

During the 1960s, Japan turned into a developed modern society and a world economic power. This led to significant changes in the social structuring and to a perceptible enlargement of the middle strata. Since the post-modernization of the country in the 1970s, a familiar phenomenon can be observed: consumption has been stimulated in order to preserve and increase economic growth. Leisure time has been increasing and gradually becoming more important², while lifestyle has definitely become an essential indicator of the social-group status possessed by the individual. Moving on from the “consumer society” stage, at which it was in the 1960s and 1970s, the country has reached a “welfare society” stage. The growing share of new middle strata during this period is a factor leading to the development of mass society and mass consumption, which firmly established the image of the country as a “middle mass society”. Since the end of the 1980s, the country gradually turned into a “divided middle mass society”, whose lifestyle is organized around post-materialistic values (as defined by Inglehart, 1977; 1997): a good family, satisfaction with personal life and leisure time, expression of personal qualities, ample social contacts, possibilities for leadership and self-fulfillment in informal relationships.

At the beginning of the 1990s, under the influence of the starting economic recession, Japanese society changed its direction from the lavish lifestyle of the 1980s to a “search for authenticity” and a rediscovery of the importance of local communities. From the mid 1990s there began a period of growing and all-embracing internationalization and globalization. While globalization processes were intensifying, they were refracted through the specific features of Japanese society. It is no coincidence that the term “glocalization”, used to designate the interaction between globalization and localization, was first used by Roland Robertson (1994) in connection with the specific Japanese business practices.

The environmentally oriented lifestyle has been popularized and established as a kind of counterpoint to the commercialization of values. Japanese society since the beginning of the 21st century is increasingly imbued with the spirit of “recycling”: people are attaching increasing importance to a lifestyle in harmony with nature and “green” values. Local communities are the natural environment where initiatives in this direction are implemented, where conditions are being created for production and consumption of bio-products and for leisure time activities in an environment meeting ecological requirements. Efforts are increasingly being made to lay out greenery in the megapolises, even on the roofs of the buildings, and this

trend relies once again on the enterprising behavior of local communities, their structures and actors.

Since the end of the 1990s, the issue of growing economic inequality is becoming a topic of intense discussion. During this period Japanese society, as part of the ever more globalized world economy, underwent recessions and crises followed by periods of revival. These cycles of financial and then economic recession, then revival, and once again recession, proved to be a trend that accompanies expanding globalization and is bringing modern societies to the task of working out a permanent strategy for dealing with these challenges. The first crisis of this kind was in 1997, and the earliest signs of recovery were seen in 1999. The second crisis came in 2008; the economy began to revive slowly from it in the middle of 2009, but the triple disasters of March 11, 2011 led to a collapse that can only be compared to the situation at the end of WWII. The society is quickly aging and the future seems increasingly insecure. Since the beginning of 2020, Japan, as well as other countries around the world, has been severely affected by the social, economic and health problems caused by the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on public life, public health and the health insurance system. All these troubles and difficulties are among the leading causes why at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century Japan perceived itself as an exhausted economic power that looks with pessimism to the future.

Local community in Japan

Local community is a form of coexistence, a form of co-affiliation of individuals living in a network of social relationships; it has a specific social structure; its members perform socially significant activities within a clearly defined territory that they inhabit. What is important here are not so much the physical and geographic characteristics of that territory, but the nature and quality of the social relationships that define the local community. The boundaries of the community, both real and symbolic, are especially important, for they serve to mark the membership and affiliation of the individuals included in it. The term ‘community’, as likewise “local community”, may be descriptive or it could refer to values and norms. The distinction that Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/1957, pp. 42–43, 64–65) made between “community” (*Gemeinschaft*) and “society” (*Gesellschaft*) as two different types of sociality was at the core of the romantic notion of the community as based on mutuality, cooperation, and mutual aid amongst its members. This is one of the views that contributed to the widespread, even mythical, representation regarding Japanese society and its unique difference from Western civilization,

regarding the specific feeling of community and community spirit that make up the essential quality of being Japanese.

The creation and spread of such highly ideological and mythologized representations is certainly connected to some real characteristics of Japanese society. This society has a developed community culture, which has been preserved over the centuries and continues to perform an important role and function even now, in postmodern society³. In Japan there are certainly strong social bonds between individuals within the framework of the group to which they belong, between the communities and society at large. Japan is a communitarian society (Etzioni, 1998 pp. 259–266), in which social responsibility and duty towards the group and the community are of paramount importance, despite the intense current of individualism that comes through Western influence. In fact, this trend is not only a result of foreign influence but also of the impact upon society and its structures of modernization, industrialization, urbanization, mass culture, post-modernization, and the social transformations all of these provoke.

The concept of “innovation of tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983, pp. 1–12) designates the newly created values and norms of conduct that correspond to the arising requirements in a period of considerable transformations of the community; it should be noted that communities not only inherit but also create their traditions (Matsuda, 1998, pp. 18–21). What is presented as a tradition may in fact often be a reaction against the modern and postmodern, a display of flexibility and creativity on the part of the local community; many of the now existing traditions are, in fact, innovations.

In recent years a different type of sociality has been established in the local community; the ‘community spirit’ of the past is giving way under the new conditions to the increasingly public character of relationships. This transformation is revitalizing the latter, not on the basis of *Gemeinschaft*, but through the pervasive public quality of their lifestyle.

The continuation of the traditions today: Structure, characteristics, and resources of the Japanese local community

The local community and its structures cannot be studied and comprehended without clarifying the particularities of the traditional Japanese family system – *ie* (家). *Ie* literally denotes not exactly the family or the household but rather the “home”, the “house”. *Ie* is the fundamental social and productive association in

traditional Japanese society. It is a perennial institution that continues beyond the lives of its members and includes the property, the family business, the family name and registered code, the ancestors who lived in the home, and the future generations. *Ie* is managed by its head, the *kachō* (家長), a position that is inherited by the first-born son. The relations between members of *ie* are subordinated to the Confucian principles of loyalty of those lower in rank to those higher and the benevolence of the latter to the former. In the traditional Japanese household, gender, age and order of birth are indicators that determine the status of each member. The position of the head of *ie* is not for life: when the father reaches a certain age, he retires from the position of *kachō* and his first-born son inherits it. Ever since the Meiji period, the *ie* institution has been assessed ambivalently: on the one hand it has been viewed as a basis of social solidarity, on the other, as an obstacle to the establishment of a modern lifestyle. The 1947 Constitution deprived *ie* of the functions it had before the war, but preserved its cultural and value contents. According to the census, conducted in 2015, in Japan are registered about 53.33 million *ie* (Statistical Handbook of Japan for 2019, 2019, p. 10).

Apart from the formal, institutionalized, and legally established structure, the local community also creates a functioning network of informal structures, which build up, maintain, and develop certain types of relationships between members. The informal structures express the ‘moral rules’ of the community, which the members are required to observe. These rules are an informal ‘institutionalization’ of its principles, its tradition, which, due to the symbiosis of the value aspect and the ‘semi-institutional’ aspect, are passed on through the centuries and, today, acquire a modern meaning.

The informal structure of the local community, established in Japanese tradition and functioning today, is called *chōnaikai* (町内会), which literally means ‘neighborhood association’. In some regions it is known as *jichikai* (自治会) or ‘residential association’, a designation that emphasizes autonomy, unlike the official administrative institutions established through law. In villages these structures are known as *shizenon* (自然村), i.e. a ‘natural’ village. In 2013 there were 300 000 such neighborhood associations in Japan (Pekkanen et al., 2014, p.1); in the last 30 years 90% of the people residing on their territories were taking part in their activities, and 14% of Japanese are engaged every day in activities in their local community (Statistical Handbook of Japan for 2008, 2009, p. 188).

The twofold social organization of the local communities is a unique mixture of traditions and democratic principles. From village to megapolis, such informal

structures have been built in each settlement. Membership in *chōnaikai* is not personal but through the *ie*, each of which sends its representative to the sessions. By tradition, this representative is the head of the household, the *kachō*, but in present-day Japan, due to the fact that men are much occupied with their professions, the wife performs these functions. If the local community is more numerous and has a large structure, five or ten households may elect a common representative to the *chōnaikai*. The members of the ‘general assembly’ elect an informal council of the local community, which manages all of its affairs for a period of four years. The chairman of this council is called *kuchō san* (区長さん) or ‘community leader’. The council also includes a deputy chairman (*fukuchō* – 副長), a sub chairman (*kumichō* - 組長), an accountant, and a controller, all of whom work on a voluntary basis, without pay.

The tradition in Japan is for several *ie* to be united in a group called *kumi* (組), which according to the size of the settlement may include at least 2 and no more than 11 *ie*. Each household contributes the local informal membership fee, called *chōnaikaihi* (町内会費). The sums are relatively modest by Japanese standards (5000 Japanese yen) and are spent on the needs of the local community. They are collected by cashiers who represent the separate *ie* and are changed every month.

Each household is obliged to keep clean the area around its home, and all *ie* have the duty, on a rotation basis, to maintain and take care of the local Buddhist and Shinto shrines.

A bulletin, called *kairanban* (回覧板), is published and circulated in the local community; this is an important means for exchange of information. It periodically announces news from the town hall, from the *kuchō san*, or from any household that wishes to share important family events with the neighbors.

The members of the local community are engaged in the numerous activities managed by the informal council of the *chōnaikai*, activities for which the *kuchō san* is generally responsible. In various fields of activity the following organizations are created and function:

1. **Groups for protection against natural disaster** built on a volunteer basis. Their members generally meet once a month to check the condition of the fire-fighting equipment and to carry out regular training. They train to react quickly in case of fires, earthquakes, floods, and other disaster, in order to restrict the damage until professionals from the civic protection organs appear on the scene. Training is regularly organized for the neighborhood residents. In most of the surveyed local

communities during the winter season, members of this structure walk around the neighborhood after 11 o'clock at night and remind their neighbors to turn off all heaters in order to prevent fires. This is a particularly important prevention for elderly people living alone. With the members of these groups in one of the surveyed local communities in Northern part of Kyoto city in 2018–2019, during the author's interviews with locals, the latter joked that “in the winter they are the night watch of the neighborhood”.

During the crisis and lockdown caused by coronavirus COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, young members of the above mentioned groups helped elderly people living alone by buying the products and providing any kind of help and support they needed (Kreitman, 2020).

2. Groups for maintenance and cleaning of roads and local infrastructure; part of the activities of these has now been transferred to the special community services, but they are still important in small settlements. Usually, part of the collected funds from *chōnaikaihi* goes for ordering the materials needed for the envisaged activities. Every *ie* must send one of its representatives on the appointed date and hour; if not, a certain fee is paid for the work to be done by professional workers. This is how grass fields, parks, rivers, streams, canals and shafts are cleaned. In most cases the work is completed within the day fixed for it, usually a non-working day.

3. Groups ensuring the security and safety of the residents of the local community; these groups generally include young men who perform the function of volunteer patrollers. Their aim is to help maintain peace and quiet for the neighbors and protect the neighborhood from crime.

4. Groups ensuring the socialization of the children of the local community. From the very first day of school the first-graders are organized in groups for going to school and back⁴.

5. PTA (Parents and Teachers Associations) groups are an important part of the structures and activity of the local community. They include the parents of schoolchildren from elementary, primary, and secondary schools, and their activities are related to the scholastic performance, socialization, and conduct of children. In many of the studied communities these two types of structures – groups ensuring the socialization of the children and PTA are closely connected and they have many common activities. In one of the surveyed local communities in Matsugasaki, Northern part of Kyoto city, investigated in 2012–2013, 2015–2016

and again in 2018–2019, retired teachers, engineers and university lecturers participated actively in such a structure. They helped in day-to-day activities such as safely moving students to school, patrolling busy streets and junctions in the area. They also regularly organized training courses for local elementary school students, introducing them to the local community's history, and held celebrations where the students presented the lessons learned to the residents of the neighborhood. These activities were valued by local people as crucial for the upbringing of young people as well as for building their identity with local community.

6. Groups of people sharing common interests such as housewives, pensioners, youths, mothers, classmates, different hobby groups, consumers associations, etc. Cultural centers are built in the local communities, in which programs for lifelong learning are implemented to train target groups of adults, according to their needs and interests, in subjects like foreign languages, sports, dancing, gardening, cooking, computer skills, etc.

Consumer groups play an important role in local community and they contribute to the growing popularity of the ecological lifestyle. During fieldwork in local communities in Shiga, Aichi, Hyogo, Mie and Kyoto prefectures, the activities of consumer groups were studied. In some cases spontaneous organizations of producers and consumers were created and maintained with the direct support of the informal village councils mentioned above. For instance in the village of Hyogo Prefecture, in the Tamba region, at the initiative of the *kuchō san*, the building of a closed-down factory was refurbished into a workshop for pickle production. The workers here were pensioners, who apply local recipes and use organic vegetables that they grow on their farms. They were in constant contact with consumer groups in a local community in Kobe, who were regular clients for their produce. In a local community in Kumano, Mie Prefecture, an enterprising local administrator used his personal contacts to organize consumer groups that buy up ecological production from pensioner farmers; he did this on a voluntary basis and entirely apart from his professional duties. The civic activeness of local producers, consumers, enterprising social actors, and informal structures of rural communities has proven a significant factor in the formation of an ecological lifestyle in Japan.

Local community structures are actively involved in consumer co-operatives customer groups. As a rule these groups are connected with local community infrastructures; they are an integral part of *chōnaikai* and usually they use *chōnaikaikan* (町内会館) or *jichikaikan* (自治会館) – the neighborhood

association club for their gatherings as a “logistic center” where they receive and distribute ordered purchases. Activities of such groups were studied by the author during 2012–2013 in the framework of the “*City farming in Kyoto: Case Studies in Ichijoji and Kamigamo*” empirical sociological research, as well as during 2015–2016 in a local community in Katsurakazaka, Kyoto.

7. Groups organizing and conducting local festivals - *matsuri* (祭), which are part of traditional Japanese culture and are held in every neighborhood, village, small or big city. They are emblematic for local identities; during these events the community displays its distinctive features to outsiders. The activities of these groups are important for constructing and maintaining the cultural foundation of local communities. Religious festivals solidify the relationships between individuals and their community, making the spirit of belonging stronger; they play the role of socio-cultural instruments and resources for constructing and re-constructing the community. Religious festivals belong to the structuring aspect of the cultural process. They express, perpetuate, and transmit elements of a culture’s values and aim to preserve such values; they intensify solidarity of the participants and shape their collective identity. Festivals are constructing and strengthening the social bonds between community members, making obvious that living in a neighborhood is not simply a residence, but a question of belonging to some very special social group, with which people identify themselves. Religious practices, rituals, and festivals are building the foundation of social networks in local community. Religious festivals are deeply incorporated within local traditions and culture. In a postmodern environment they become an important part of locality versus global forces, showing not only the continuity and connection with the past, but also the local culture creativity and potential for transformation. Religious traditions embedded in respective practices, rituals and festivals, consist both of elements deeply incorporated with the past, as well as new elements, invited from the local community during its own socio-cultural changes. Religious practices, rituals and festivals, inherited and transmitted through the generations underwent their own transformations. The latter are indicative for local community creativity, demonstrating not only its response to socio-historical and cultural changes but also its understanding of its own identity and the ways of expressing it. Local community not only transformed inherited cultural practices, but also invented new ones, in order to face contemporary world challenges. The above mentioned groups usually organize two types of festivals: traditional religious one and also so-called new, non-religious festivals, like *natsu matsuri* (夏祭), summer festival. Some new neighborhoods organize only *natsu matsuri* because they do not have history and

tradition of religious festivals; such a phenomenon was observed in studied *jichikai* during field work in the area of Katsurazaka in Western part of Kyoto city.

The leader of the local community, the *kuchō san*, is a very important figure for the community activities and organization. He is responsible for collecting *chōnaikaihi*, for conducting the above-mentioned activities of the *chōnaikai*, for the work and results of the neighborhood organizations; he arbitrates disputes between neighbors. The chairman of the informal council also plays a very important role as intermediary, as a contact and transmission agent between the inhabitants of the region and the local authorities at municipal level. He receives 100 000 Japanese yen per year from the municipality and uses these funds for the needs of the community, foremost for organizing *matsuri* and for the work of the various groups for civic protection, for cleaning canals, rivers, and irrigation appliances, for road maintenance in the neighborhood, etc.

The analysis of different kinds of informal structures and their groups in the local community shows that they are a basis of community identity, solidarity, and integrity. Social control in the framework of the community is informal but very important for the members. A refusal to take part in the activities and structures does not lead to administrative penalties but it does incur moral sanctions. Those who choose not to take part cannot rely on the support, friendship, aid and cooperation of their neighbors.

The typical characteristics of the local community – coexistence, and the harmonious combination of traditional institutions and values with a postmodern lifestyle and modern technology – are visible in the rural regions. The differences between local communities in large cities and those in small settlements consist above all in the way their residents take part in the community activities and in the meaning and functions for the life of the settlement that these activities have. Naturally, in villages, interaction between neighbors occurs far more often; people there are far more interconnected than in cities, especially large residential areas. Usually, the residents of villages and small towns directly contribute labor to the various activities of their community, while those in cities mostly contribute money for payment of specially hired workers to do the job. In rural communities, farmer groups are active, while in urban ones various form of consumer organizations are more important. The latter prove a cross-point of interaction between local urban and local rural communities. An essential difference between the activity of *kuchō san* and the informal council in big cities on the one hand and in small towns and villages on the other is that the latter are involved in activities aimed at ensuring

more jobs, at making the village more attractive for outside visitors, for keeping the local residents in their native settlements, and for attracting retired emigrants back to their birthplace.

What is impressive in the local communities is the spirit of enterprise, the numerous activities initiated by their informal leader, *kuchō san*. For centuries, the informal structures, councils, leaders, and their activities have served as a resource for the mobilization of local communities and of Japanese society in general. These structures are informal but they are also semi-official, because they are recognized by the central and local administration and have established relations with the latter. They fit in with the Japanese tradition of ‘duality’ and ‘multiplicity’, displayed in this case in the particularities of their status and nature. They fulfill the function of an intermediary between the local administration and the members of the local community and ensure regular communication by maintaining the dialogue between them. The informal structures of the local communities are based entirely on volunteer work; the developed community culture and communitarian spirit are among the factors favorable to intense volunteer activity, to the existence of numerous volunteer organizations and high participation of the Japanese in those organizations.

Intense civic activity and inclusion in the life of the local community serve as a basis for the creation and development of various civic organizations. The informal structures of the local community are such organizations, for they unite the members, express and protect their interests before the local authorities, perform the role of mediators between individuals and families on the one hand and the local authorities on the other. They are also a tool of public opinion in the community, for they set the principles and rules and check how these are being observed. They devote special attention to public spaces on their territory and, together with the collective efforts of the inhabitants, take care of the maintenance of those spaces.

The informal structures and their activities promote collaboration and solidarity in the community and serve as a basis for increasing and preserving social cohesion. The effectuation of their initiatives works as a sort of response to the depersonalizing and bureaucratic trends of postmodern society; community members acquire the conviction that these negative processes are not so strong and pervasive, that their own efforts are important and meaningful to themselves, to their communities, to the region and the country.

On the other hand, under certain social conditions and circumstances, some possible results of this community system might include:

- Social exclusion and moral penalties in the form of ostracism of those who refuse to participate in community life;
- Growing mutual social control and mutual dependence between community members, limiting their possibility for personal choice and violating their individual liberties.

The activities and organization of the local community are a symbiosis between tradition and the related system of duty to the community on the one hand and civil society on the other.

In March 1999 an administrative reform was begun (known as the great Heisei municipal merger – 平成の大合併 *heisei-no-daigappei* or cities, towns and villages merger – *shichōsangappei* – 市町村合併); it was the third one to date in Japanese history and was expected to resolve the problems facing local development like decrease of population, the financial difficulties and economic transformations at local level. It was conceived as a structural reform for reorganizing the local communities by “amalgamation”; this has a strong impact on local self-government. The purpose of the reform is to achieve greater centralization of resources by merging municipalities and decreasing their number by three times (from 3 232 to 1000). Consequently as of October 2018 the number of municipalities was reduced nearly by half till 1718 (Statistical Handbook of Japan for 2019, 2019, p. 194).

One interviewed local administrator tells how he sees the results of the reform:

"The previous merging in our [community] was 50 years ago, but the next one will probably be sooner, because the population of the community is constantly decreasing and aging. The elderly people, those above the age of 65, are 30% of our population, after about ten years it is expected their share will grow by another 5%, and then most likely a new reform will have to be made, because greater financial restrictions and limitations will be made by the central authorities. Additional staff reduction will also be made in the local administration."

In this situation, the informal structures of the local communities and their leaders as intermediaries between the administration and the local people are playing a more important role.

Enterprising social groups in local communities

The enterprising local social actors, whether these be individuals or groups, can successfully realize their initiatives because they have at their disposal the resources of their community and traditions. Of course, this does not at all diminish the importance of individual activeness, experience, enterprise, etc., but the potential of the community adds strength and carries with it energy needed for the success of personal initiatives.

An outstanding enterprising actor of the local community is its informal leader, *kuchō san*. It is on his initiatives that the lifestyle in the *chōnaikai* (or *jichikai*) greatly depends, and the organization and effectiveness of the different structures and groups. Another type of individual enterprising actors are volunteers, who could be members of the community but also outsiders. Volunteers are at the heart of a number of activities; they organize, or take part in, already existing groups and structures. The enterprising social-group subjects in the Japanese local communities can most generally be divided according to gender and age; each group, for its part, is devoted to and ‘specialized’ in certain types of activities. Generally, women are active members of consumer groups attached to the consumer cooperatives or to community supported agriculture. Mothers are those who mostly take an active part in groups engaged in the socialization of children and in PTA groups. In every local community there is a housewives’ organization, called *fujinkai* (婦人会), which has structures at the prefecture level and national level. Pensioners, because of their growing interest in ecological consumption and a healthy lifestyle, in addition to being occupied with farming in the local rural communities, are also active in these consumer groups and in hobby clubs, where they are taught how to lead a ‘meaningful lifestyle’. Generally they and housewives are more engaged with the matters of the *chōnaikai* than employed men and younger people.

Young people, in addition to taking part in study groups and hobby clubs, traditionally participate in activities requiring strength and endurance, such as civil defense, the organizing and holding of *matsuri* (both traditional ones and newly created) and in cleaning and maintaining the infrastructure, an activity suitable for their age.

The external volunteers included in the life of the local community generally take part in the activity of virtual communities functioning through the Internet, in consumer groups, in groups engaged in community supported agriculture, eco-tourism, organization and performance of *matsuri* in some depopulated rural areas,

etc. Such groups are extremely helpful in activities to restore the damage caused by natural disasters.

As a result of the quick economic development of the 1950s and 1960s, Japan underwent a rapid process of aging and the share of elderly people increased dramatically: over a period of 24 years, the country passed from a stage of an aging society to that of an aged society. The number of elderly households (private households with household members 65 years of age or over) in 2015 was 21.71 million. They accounted for 41% of the private households. There were 5.93 million one-person elderly households. Among these, there were approximately two times as many women as men (Statistical Handbook of Japan for 2019, 2019, p. 12).

In 2019, there were 35.53 million Japanese over 65 years in age, which amounted to 28,1% of the population of the country (Statistical Handbook of Japan for 2019, 2019, p. 10) Such a situation is hard on the pension, social assistance, and healthcare systems. The “channeling” and “organizing” of activities for these people is thought to be a kind of solution to the problems that might arise for their health and for their economic and social adaptation.

In general, the local community is the center for such activities; that is where their clubs are concentrated. IT products especially designed for pensioners have become increasingly popular recently, and pensioners prove to be active participants in electronic trading. They also use the wide possibilities of electronic education, and some of them get organized into cyber communities based on special interests. Retired people have proven to be increasingly active Internet users in recent years, which indicates the good level of their digital culture.

There are two specific groups of elderly people emerging in Japan:

- Ailing and lonely pensioners, who are in a vulnerable and disadvantaged social position due to the problems related to age and impaired health. They are users of various social services, and of the assistance and initiatives of the respective municipal and central authorities.
- Pensioners who are professionally and socially active, and who are among the enterprising local social actors.

These two social groups have completely different needs, interests, values, and require the application of different policies at central and local level; they are present and participate in different ways in the lifestyle of the local community.

In local communities in Kumano, Mie Prefecture were observed various initiatives of the municipal administration targeted at elderly people in need of assistance and certain social services. Local administration was working also on joint projects with enterprising pensioners aimed at reviving the traditional terraced rice fields, called *tanada* (棚田), at the initiative of an enterprising local pensioner. Among the purposed results of such projects, apart from animating the lifestyle of the local communities and attracting people from outside to the community's activities, is the feeling enterprising elderly people acquire that they can still be useful for the community and for themselves. In the words of one such pensioner:

"Indeed tanada is changing the landscape, and thereby the mood and self-esteem of people here, who previously felt abandoned and discouraged. Now they have hope that, although they are old, they can do something useful and beautiful for themselves and their birthplace, can bring back its beauty..."

Interviewed elderly people fully understand and share that aging is the biggest problem for the local communities they live in. How do they think they could solve this matter themselves? The most common responses are: Increasing their social activity and initiative by participating as much as possible in the life, activities and organizations of their community, leading an active lifestyle according to the possibilities of their age. According to them, this is their own contribution to solving the problem, but as they themselves say, *"it is important to be active, but not at all costs."*

To my question how this most serious issue of their local community will be solved, the former *kuchō san* of Mikisato, Kumano area in Mie Prefecture now chairman of Club XXI Century, sums up:

"The number of old people is increasing, children are decreasing. What can we do? By self-educating how to grow old with dignity, to stay healthy and active for a long time, to help with what we can. The most important thing is to preserve the harmony between the generations ... and not to forget ... to be healthy and active, without interfering with the young..."

Many local people, after retirement, turn back to their native place. They are following a U-turn type of migration which can improve population disparities in Japan, recruiting new residents in some areas (Sekiguchi et. al., 2019, p. 2). This type of returnees to their home places are still active and motivated to keep their local traditions alive; organizing and performing local festivals is one of the ways

to do that. Such cases were observed in Matsugasaki, Northern part of Kyoto city, and Hobo *chō*, Kumano city, Mie prefecture.

Matsugasaki is an urban residential area with very well established local community structures, groups and organizations. The place became a fashionable townscape because of nearby Universities, subway, Kyoto International Conference Hall, business establishments, shops, wedding halls, churches, and trendy restaurants. Its neighborhood association is *jichirengō-kai* (自治連合会) – a federation of residential associations, including 17 *jichikai* with functioning 24 different local organizations. Retirees who have returned to their homes are among the main organizers of many activities in the community and play an important role in preserving local festivals, customs and traditions.

In Hobo, a local community has elected only *kuchō san*, who is organizing all local community activities. This community, because of declining population, does not elect *chōnaikai* structures, organizations, and other *chōnaikai* leaders. Only 100 people are living there in 60 households. Most of them are pensioners and others are working outside their village. This is originally a fishermen's village, but now fishing in the area is in decline which is affecting their local community lifestyle. They don't collect *chōnaikaihi* and all their festivals are funded by donations to the local temples and shrines. But because of entrepreneurial spirit and activity of *kuchō san*, 8 local festivals are organized and continuously performed around the year.

Conclusion: the postmodern roles of traditional structures

In postmodern society local people have at their disposal much greater and more varied possibilities for choosing a lifestyle for themselves, their family, and for the neighborhood they live in. This is changing the importance of traditions in our times: traditions are no longer followed unswervingly but, instead, are used as a resource for development of the local community. In Japan there are good possibilities for expanding such a potential: the informal structures of the local community, their established and time-tested functions and activities.

The local community, thanks to its informal structures and active personalities, appears as a collective enterprising actor in contemporary Japanese society. The community relies on traditionally inherited organizational forms and structures, but these operate in today's postmodern environment. With its environmental initiatives, educational programs and activities typical for civil society, the community has asserted itself as an important locus, resource and center of a

postmodern lifestyle. Through this function and role it plays, it determines to a great degree the face of postmodern Japanese society.

Today Japan is certainly a leader of postmodern lifestyle: but the country is such not only due to its developed urban culture, high share of consumption of luxury goods and branded articles, its digitalization, robotization, ICT boom, etc. An important, distinctive trait of contemporary Japanese society is the enterprising lifestyle of its local communities, with their enterprising actors who use the resources of traditions for achieving socially significant postmodern goals.

Notes

1 Author's conclusion is based on analysis of works of Sobel, 1981, p. 28; Chaney, 1996, p. 99; Featherstone, 1991, p. 86 and others.

2 This process has taken place more slowly in Japan than in other developed societies (Keliyan, 1999, pp. 58–60). Also, while in some social groups and strata it has grown faster, in others the trends have been less evident, and in still others, for instance the well known *sarari man* (サラリーマン) of the large corporations, the “money rich but time poor” phenomenon is obvious (Keliyan, 2008, pp. 68, 346–351).

3 About local community importance and influence in Japan see also Petkova, 2017 and Kandilarov, 2015.

4 Activities of such groups were regularly observed during field work in Katsurazaka, Shugakuin, Ichijoji, Matsugasaki, Yase and Kamigamo in Kyoto city.

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