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Aging, Reciprocal Dependency and Changing Social Support  
Systems in a Rural Okinawan Village

沖縄の農村地域における高齢化、相互依存、社会的支援  
システムの変化について

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# Aging, Reciprocal Dependency and Changing Social Support Systems in a Rural Okinawan Village

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the changing nature of social support for older people in a rural Okinawan village. Until recent years, the predominant role of family members in the social support system of the elderly was taken for granted. In particular, the parent-child relationship has reflected the cultural norm of filial piety. However, older people in depopulated rural villages can no longer count on such intensive support from their children. How do elders maintain their social support networks in the face of intensive social changes brought on through the combined influence and pressures of modernization, urbanization, depopulation and other socio-demographic imperatives? This research question was explored through the qualitative methodologies of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with older village residents, their children, relatives, friends and neighbors, as well as public officials from the Township involved with elderly welfare. In addition to formal support from the Township (which will not be explored in this analysis) it was found that elderly villagers seek to maintain their autonomy in the face of aging and weakened intergenerational support systems through an enhanced interdependence among intimate age peers and by relying upon mutually supportive practices such as informal visiting behavior and fictive kin-keeping; sharing of work tasks; exchanges of gifts, information and other items; and other mutually beneficial social relationships. Two forms of institutionalized social relationships, based upon a norm of reciprocity, were found to be particularly important-- friendship and associations. The study concludes with an analysis of efforts of the villagers to create fictive community organizations and other associations that help to maintain ties and supportive relationships between villagers and fictive villagers (ex-villagers).

Key Words: social support, reciprocity, aging, community, Okinawa, Japan

## INTRODUCTION

The degree to which a person is interconnected and integrated within a community, or web of social relationships, is vitally important to both individual and population health. Social integration, social networks and social support have all been shown to impact health in diverse ways and within the past few decades, a vast research literature has developed in this area (for review see Berkman and Glass 2000). Within this research framework, social relationships consist of two major components: social networks and social support. *Social networks* are usually conceptualized as the structural aspect and defined as the existence or quantity of social relationships while *social support* is commonly utilized to refer to the quality or functional aspects of the relationships (Cohen et al. 1985). The functional aspects can be further defined as interpersonal transactions involving key elements such as aid (including resource and/or informational support); affect (including emotional, esteem or expressive support); affiliation (social companionship or belonging); or other important benefits that come from close social ties (Cohen et al. 1985).

In Japan, until recent years, the predominant role of family members in the social support system of the elderly has been taken for granted. In particular, the parent-child relationship has reflected the cultural norm of filial piety and daughters-in-law who marry a first born son and live together with his parents have traditionally been expected to become the main providers of support for the husband's parents when they become frail, particularly with regards to caregiving. However, older people in many depopulated rural villages can no longer count on such intensive support from their children and they have had to adapt their social support systems to new socio-demographic realities over the past few decades.

Although some research has confirmed the continuing importance of family ties within the social support system of the Japanese elderly (see Koyano 1994 for review) most of this research has not focused on the social support systems of elders in depopulated rural areas and it has been quantitative in methodological approach. There are far fewer qualitative analyses to be found within the research literature. In particular, there exists a dearth of studies that have employed ethnographic methods such as participant observation to get detailed, "thick descriptions" of these newly emerging social support systems and the unique forms they are taking, depending upon local, socio-cultural contexts. It was with the foregoing gaps in the research literature in mind that the current study was undertaken in a rural, Okinawan village, where socio-cultural forms of support are, arguably, the most unique within Japan.

### *Changing boundaries, social support networks and the yaa*

The *yaa* and its Japanese counterpart, the *ie*, both originate in the extended stem family system found commonly throughout East Asia where primary bonds of affection, interdependence and support along filial lines have been seen as the ideal. This can be contrasted to a pattern that emphasizes the conjugal relationship, as can be seen in mainstream American society for example. This emphasis on filial rather than conjugal relations has had distinct implications for relationships of reciprocity, obligation and dependency. Hashimoto (1996:65) refers to the Japanese social support network pattern as promoting "structured security" because the filial orientation found in Japan is conducive to forming a *concentrated* network focused on co-resident children inside the household unit. She contrasts this with a mainstream American pattern of "diffused security" that does not depend as heavily on children but also taps extensive networks outside the household among relatives, neighbors and friends.

In Japan, although custom dictates that the elderly live with their children, co-residence rates have been falling at a steady pace for decades. In 1980, seventy percent of people aged sixty-five and older were living with children but by the end of the century this rate had hit fifty percent (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2000), and although still high compared to most Western societies, co-residence rates are expected to fall further still. As co-residence has great implications for how older people access family members for support, this leads us to the question of what Japanese elderly without co-resident children do for support.

Koyano (1994) reports that for Japanese elderly living alone, neighbors are a more dependable source for less-burdensome instrumental support, such as grocery shopping, than for care-related support. Further, "collateral relatives" and "non-kin others" seem to be able to function as a source of emotional support but to a lesser degree than co-residing family members or children living apart.

Differential roles played by co-resident children, children living apart, relatives, and non-kin others in the social support system of Japanese elderly have also been frequently observed in studies in western societies. Koyano (1994) theorizes the presence of a boundary in the case of long-term caregiving. That is, persons within the boundary seem to be restricted to co-residing family members and children living apart, but non-kin others seem to be left outside the boundary. Thus, social networks outside the household represent potential support resources that are contingent upon the availability of resources inside the household. Shanas (1979) calls this the *principle of substitution*. The social support network outside the household usually consists of children living apart, relatives, neighbors, and friends. Are there differences between

western and Japanese social networks that have implications for support practices outside the household?

Sociologist Akiko Hashimoto seems to think so and says they can be located in the stronger role that peer groups play in most western societies. Hashimoto (1996:59) explains:

Although the Japanese are more noted for their age grading practices than the Americans they paradoxically maintain weaker peer group ties among their age sets. These peer group ties are limited partly because filial attachments are strong...

Other researchers who have commented on the hierarchical (or vertical) structure found in Japanese society suggest that "vertical alliance" in relationships takes precedence over "horizontal alliance" as can be seen for example in *sempai-kouhai*, (senior-junior) *oyabun-kobun*, (parent organization-branch organization) *sensei-deshi* (teacher-student) relationships (Nakane 1972; Lebra 1976).

The significance of friendship patterns in American society seems to make sense as an extension of the close conjugal ties that are part and parcel of the "couple culture". Studies of confidantes of older persons also reveal differences in Japanese patterns when compared to American patterns in that Japanese elderly tend to mention a "child" more often while Americans mention a "friend" when asked to whom one feels closest (Hashimoto 1996).

Interestingly, comparative surveys of older people in six countries by the Japan Management and Coordination Agency (1992) report that for Japanese elderly who live alone, friends are favored over children, and those who lived with their spouse only tend to confide more in their spouse than they do in their children or friends.

These data and other data on depopulated rural areas of Japan (Traphagan 1997; Ogawa et al. 1996) where children have moved away from the village and where community ties have both depth and continuity, suggest that support exchanges with neighbors/friends and extended relatives tend to be called upon to substitute for weakened filial support.

### ***Adapting to Change***

It might be argued that the dependency of elderly villagers upon their children is part of a reciprocal chain. Indeed, they may feel entitled to dependency upon the filial bond as the final stage for restoring a balanced reciprocity for the care that they

have provided to children. What characterizes this reciprocity is the long time span encompassing the older person's life course tied together with that of their children. As Lebra (1976) suggests, unlike the shorter cycled, on-going exchange which is more likely to occur between age or generation peers, long cycled reciprocity operates only where the memory of debits and credits is well retained and it may be that intrapersonal or interpersonal memory needs to be supported by a cultural memory in the form of either a collectively shared ideology (such as filial piety or ancestor worship), or of a social structure such as the Japanese stem family or the Okinawan *munchu* system. Thus, under the patrilineal and patrilocal system where the aged parents are to be taken care of by their daughter-in-law, who is not personally indebted to them but only indirectly through their son (her husband), cultural indoctrination of the moral obligation of long-cycled reciprocity would seem to be all the more necessary. However, there have been cultural, structural, economic, and demographic changes that have directly affected the socio-cultural norms, lifestyle and expectations of aging villagers and their children, women in particular.

First of all, the post-war change in the structure of the household (both legally and demographically) has undermined the structural mechanism of support. Second, changes in post-war education have undermined the ideological support for Confucian values of filial piety, emphasizing instead individual choice and equality. The filial obligation to reciprocate has thus, in recent years, become more based on affection and the nuances of the personal relationship and to a comparatively lesser extent on obligation (Lebra 1976; Robb-Jenike 1997). This fact helps explain the gradual shift from daughters-in-law as caregivers to daughters, and in the village where this research took place, to daughters and unmarried, middle-aged sons. Third, socio-economic changes whereby economic opportunities lie outside the village have drawn away younger people into the cities and diminished chances of filial succession to family farms and occupations as well as chances for co-residence. The result, as we shall later explore, has been a dramatic increase in the number of elderly single occupant households and elderly married couple households. Geographical mobility has also weakened neighborhood and village solidarity which may have functioned as a pressure to fulfill filial obligations. And finally, increasing life expectancy itself has compounded the problem by extending the period of aging and disability. The dilemma is particularly cogent for older village women who, by outliving their husbands, are left to deal with these challenges bereft of traditional family support structures. In Okinawa, where the life expectancy difference between men and women is the largest within Japan, this problem is keenly felt.

## METHODS

### *Study Area*

Research took place in a township of about 3,500 persons that consists of seventeen smaller traditional village hamlets (hereafter referred to as "the Township") Intensive fieldwork was focused in one village (hereafter referred to as "the Village"), which has a population of approximately 450 persons and is the third largest of the 17 hamlets (small villages) making up the administrative Township unit.

### *Research Methodology*

Fieldwork took place over a five year period from 1997 to 2002, during numerous visits ranging from a few days to a few weeks. Participant observation of a wide range of activities that older people took part in, including (but not limited to): the activities of the *Rojinkai*; sports activities such as gateball; traditional dance; cooking and eating; and numerous other facets of daily life, was the primary method of data gathering. In addition, a census was taken of the village to gather demographic information and documents were collected from the local Village and Township offices to supplement the census. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with older and younger villagers; children, relatives, friends and neighbors of elderly villagers; and public officials involved in the provision of elderly welfare. From this data set is presented the following: the current population by age and sex of the Village inhabitants; the historical population trends of the Township that reflect the depopulation pressures the Township has been facing in the post-war period; and vignettes of interviews with elderly villagers, their friends and neighbors, their children and extended kin; and welfare officials from the Village and Township. These data help to reveal, both on a macro and a micro-level, the elderly villagers' experience of a changing socio-demographic reality, shifting social support resources, and the strategies villagers have been employing in order to cope with these intensive social upheavals.

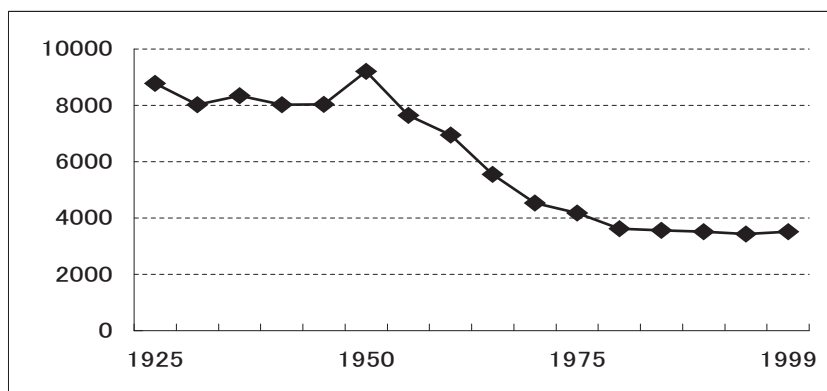
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Population dynamics of the Township*

In contrast to the upward trend of Okinawa's population growth in the post-war period, the population of the Township (Figure 1 below) declined sharply, primarily due to excessive out-migration. These two divergent trends of population dynamics

suggest that while the population of the entire prefecture keeps growing as a result of its high fertility rate (highest in Japan) and in-migration, the rural population declined drastically in tandem with an urbanization process that began in the 1950's, peaked in the 1960's and leveled off in the 1970's (Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Population of the Township 1925-2000



Source: Township Office, Population Registration Section 2000

The depopulation of rural communities is not restricted to Okinawa's rural villages but can be witnessed throughout Japan as a whole, with lower fertility rates throughout mainland Japan compounding the problem. However, in Okinawa, since 4/5 of the population can be found in the central and southern regions of the island, which makes up only 1/6 of the prefecture's land area, the decline of the rural population has been more drastic, with profound implications for social life in the villages.

One of the concomitants of the depopulation process is the declining size of households in rural areas. As shown in Table 1 (below) the average household size of the Township in 1960 was four persons per household, but from 1960 to 1985 household size declined 30% to 2.96 persons per household. By the mid-1990's the decline had stabilized but had reached the lowest average household size for any city, town or village within the prefecture at 2.72 persons per household.



**Table 1 Population, Household Size and Density in the Township 1960-1995**

Year	Population				Persons per Household
	Total	Male	Female	Households	
1960	6,497	3,047	3,450	1,612	4.03
1965	5,552	2,502	3,050	1,459	3.80
1970	4,535	1,979	2,556	1,372	3.31
1975	4,178	1,908	2,270	1,314	3.18
1980	3,626	1,695	1,931	1,223	2.96
1985	3,567	1,734	1,833	1,333	2.68
1990	3,513	1,682	1,831	1,296	2.71
1995	3,437	1,675	1,762	1,223	2.72

Source: National Census 1960-1995, Japan Management and Coordination Agency

Interestingly, the average household size for Okinawa prefecture as a whole has also declined steadily despite the large population increase. However, due to the severe population drain, household size in the Township was already well below the prefecture average by 1960. The inevitable outcome of the exodus of younger persons from the villages is a high concentration of elderly people. Predictably, the age composition of the Township (Table 2 below) reveals an extremely high proportion of

**Table 2 Household Structure and Aging Index of the Township**

Percentages (%)	Prefecture	Rural	Nakagami	Shimajiri	Kunigami	Township
			Central	Southern	Northern	All Hamlets
Single Households	21.9	18.1	17.5	25.4	24.2	29.9
Two person Households	20.0	20.0	17.8	18.6	23.4	27.0
Persons per Households	3.1	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.0	2.7
Nuclear Family	65.5	66.7	67.2	70.0	61.3	55.8
"Working Age"	61.3	58.8	61.3	60.2	53.5	46.6
Under 14yr/15yr-64yr	33.4	34.9	33.5	36.2	34.7	35.5
Over 65yr/16yr-64yr	18.1	22.2	17.9	18.9	34.9	53.1
Over 65yr/under 14yr	52.8	62.0	52.0	50.9	97.7	145.4
Over 65yr	11.7	13.8	11.5	11.9	20.1	27.6
Dependency Ratio	63.1	70.0	63.1	66.1	86.8	114.4

Source: Calculated from National Census 1995, Japan Management and Coordination Agency

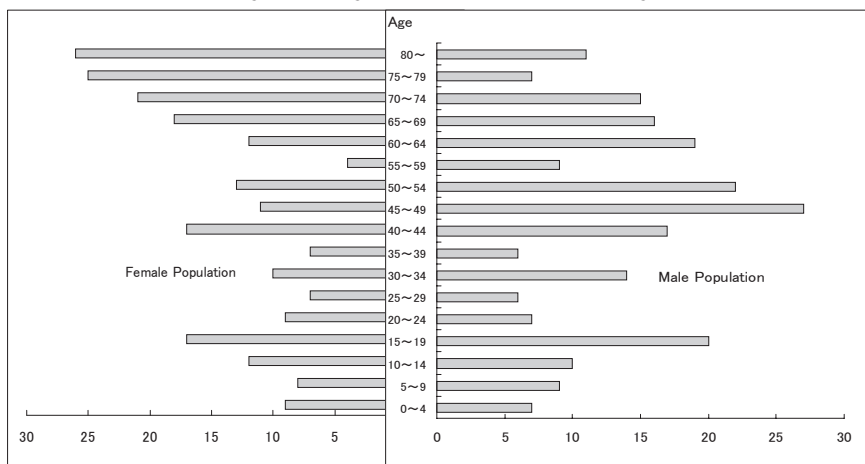
elderly people, particularly those aged 80 years and older. Combined with the low numbers of those of "working age," the Township also has the highest dependency ratio in Okinawa, and one of the highest in the nation.

It is clear that Okinawa's demographic characteristics are unique within Japan for despite the highest birth rate in the nation, population levels in the rural areas remain low. However, the problem of population decline in rural areas was not merely because of the interaction of declining fertility and urbanization, which has defined the dominant characteristics of depopulated rural areas in mainland Japan. Rather, the birth rate remains relatively high and yet the bulk of the younger population is leaving the villages. This unusual combination of high fertility, longevity and high out-migration has profound implications for understanding social relationships in the Village.

### *The Village household*

In many ways, the Village is characteristic of depopulated rural villages found throughout Japan. Ogawa et al (1995:2) refer to such villages as *rural de-facto senior citizen communities* in order to emphasize the high proportion of elderly residents.

Figure 2 Age Structure of the Village

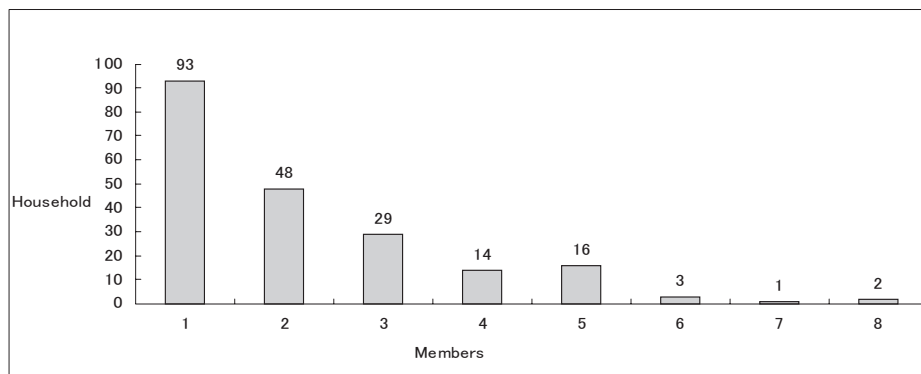


Source: Township Office, Population Registration Section 2000

It is a well known demographic phenomenon that as society ages, women make up a relatively higher proportion of the population in developed nations, where male-female differences in life expectancy stand out. This is particularly true for Okinawa where the gap in life expectancy between men and women is the highest in

Japan. Figure 2 (above) reveals very high numbers of older women in the 80+ age group, more than double that of men.

Figure 3 Household Size in the Village



Source: Township Office, Population Registration Section 2000

As revealed in Figure 3 (above), the village residents make up two hundred and six households, almost half of whom live in single person households. The next most common household type is the two-person household which accounts for about one fourth of all households, followed by the three-person household, which makes up close to fifteen percent.

The great number of single and two person households can be explained to a large extent by the aging of the Village. Many are widowed women or older couples. For example, among single person households, if we subtract the temporary residents (non-native villagers), then the percentage of single person households that are elderly (aged 65 and over) is over 60% and among these single elderly occupant households, over three-quarters of them consist of a single older woman (data not shown). Of these single elderly occupant households, the oldest old (defined here as 80 years old and older) make up about half of the households (data not shown) with 87% of these occupants being women (see Table 3 below).

Table 3 Single Households-Oldest Old\*

Male	(13%)
Female	(87%)
Total	(100%)

(\*Defined as 80 years and over)

Source: Township Office, Population Registration Section 2000

## Daily rhythms, informal visiting behavior and gathering places

Every morning in the Village the first light of day is welcomed by the whooshing sound of doors, windows and oiled-paper walls sliding away. As the Village awakens from its slumber, morning walks are punctuated by visits to neighbors and friends for tea and greens are gathered from gardens to add to *miso* soup—a breakfast staple. At 7:00 AM, the intercom that is set up on every street corner plays a traditional folksong to let the children know it is time to go to school. The daily rhythms of the Village have begun. Village rhythms are regulated by flowing tunes at timely intervals that serve to punctuate the villagers' lives...at 7:00 AM... at 12:00 noon... at 5:30 PM... the music plays...the songs are traditional Village folksongs that evoke a feeling of nostalgia and a sense of a way of life far removed from the hectic pace of the city where time flows more slowly. For older villagers time does indeed flow more slowly, there is less of a need to hurry, and daily rhythms have become routines or patterns of regular activity. A leisurely stroll through the village at the right time allows one to catch a glimpse of these daily routines. Every morning, after a short walk and before breakfast (at around 6:30 AM) four women gather at the house of 89 year old T.S. She lives alone, as does K.M., 79 years old, and K.S. 82 years old. The fourth member of the group, T.K. is T.S.'s younger sister. She is 84 years old and lives with her 92 year old husband, J.T. All were born and raised in the village. Although K.S. officially lives with her daughter's family in the City, she spends most of her time in her home village with her friends:

I don't like living in the City. There's nothing to do there. All my friends are here. We used to gather at K.M.'s house and that is where we still do some afternoons, but ever since T.S. fell and broke her hip, she can't walk so well anymore, so we gather at her place.

T.K. is the quieter of the two T sisters and says little but she smiles constantly. T.S. is popular in the village and her place is *yoriyasui* (meaning it is easy to drop over anytime there). K.S. chips in:

When we wake up in the morning, the first thing we do is throw open the doors. If we look down the block and see that T.S.'s door is not open, we go over anyway. If the gate is locked then I usually go around to the back and let myself in and open it for the others. You see, often T.S.'s oldest son (who lives next door with his wife) sleeps later than we do so we have to open the

gate ourselves. He's young, you know (62 years old) and older people like to get up earlier than younger people.

In the Village, about the worst thing you can say about a villager is that people don't drop over at their house. *Yori-yasui* houses act as gathering places for the enormous amount of visiting behavior that goes on in within the Village. The following experience of the researcher taken from fieldnotes, will help to elucidate the function of the *yori-yasui* house:

One day I (researcher) stopped in at T.S.'s house and to my surprise found only K.S., K.M. and S.A. there. Surprised, I inquired about the whereabouts of T.S. only to be told that today was her day to visit day service. Despite the fact that everyone knew that T.S. was going to be out that day everyone had gathered at her place and were having their *ocha* (green tea), eating brown sugar and chatting away amicably. They invited me in and offered me sweets and tea and I joined the conversation. They did not seem in the least concerned that the host (T.S.) was not among them. This was, after all, the gathering place and it was, after all, tea-time.

Tea-time usually takes place early in the morning and mid-afternoon and is an activity engaged in by older women. However, visiting is not limited to these times alone. Anytime is potentially visiting time. Day or night. Traditional Okinawan homes (common in the Village) are built in such a way that one can (and usually does) enter right into the living room through the sliding doors that are usually left open during the day. Even if one steps out for a bit the living room doors are often left wide open and doors remain unlocked. When guests call they often walk right into the living room calling out the person's name. At night doors are closed but if one's light remains on then one is considered fair game for a potential visit. There are usually two or three houses in each neighborhood that act as gathering places for older women and most participants engaged in these daily visiting behaviors are widowed. Discussion at such meetings often centers on family matters with participants sharing experiences, emotions and exchanging detailed information on the state of their health and that of mutual acquaintances. The conversation may just be an exchange of the latest gossip or news, or it may take on more lively or even sexually explicit themes as advanced age serves to break down social taboos regarding this topic. Visiting behavior often takes place between neighbors and friends who have

grown up in the same or neighboring *han* but is certainly not limited by this factor. T.S. and most other village women who have formed these groups are constantly visiting each other on a daily basis and it seemed that every time I was interviewing one of these elderly women someone else would drop by to chat often bearing an informal gift of vegetables or food of some sort. When a woman fails to show up, another might visit her asking why she hasn't shown up or if she was having any problems.

### ***The "Baiten Snack": Lubricating social relationships***

In addition to informal gathering places such as *yori-yasui* houses which are mainly gathering places for older women, older men have more centralized gathering places. The most popular of these places is what is called the *baiten snack*. In the Village, the *baiten* is actually the community store and the "snack" or drinking establishment, consists of a long table and chairs plopped in front of the community store. Being located outside it is covered with a tarpaulin roof to protect the men who gather there every night from the rain in winter and sun in the summer. Needless to say, there are no hostesses at this "snack bar". Here older men gather to drink, smoke, chat and exchange information. The Village head explains:

The *baiten snack* is a place where men drop by after work for a drink with their friends. It is a place for information exchange (*johou koukan*) to catch up on the news and relax after work.

In fact, the Village head encouraged me to hang out there when I began fieldwork in the village in order to get acquainted with other villagers. The *baiten*, as it is called for short, was indeed an excellent source of information and I spent many nights there engaged in conversation on matters of all sorts. Even though the *baiten* is both commercial and public, male villagers share the liquor and food they buy there and exchange information and opinions on village matters, politics or just plain gossip. The *baiten* is community owned and managed as a cooperative store (*kyoudouten*) and therefore part of the money that is spent there goes back into the Village. Often a phone call will come to the store from the wife of one of the men drinking there, the window of the store will open and a villager will be handed the telephone or relayed a message. The *baiten* closes by nine in the evening whereupon those gathered will wander off home or in small groups back to one of the villager's homes to continue drinking and chatting late into the night.

### ***Informal visiting behavior, reciprocity and social ties***

As the preceding examples of visiting behavior have shown it is evident that there are gender and age-related patterns of visiting behavior. Strong friendships are most often formed on the basis of similar ages and same-sex relationships. Friendships are based on reciprocity in terms of behavior. Objects of exchange include information, emotional support, foodstuff and minor instrumental support for those that are less mobile. Drinking (and eating) behavior may also be seen as an intermediary for a specific kind of exchange. Alcohol for men and green tea for women act as objects of exchange. One does not usually pour one's own drinks at social gatherings. One drinks tea or alcohol until a cup is half empty then it should be filled by one's drinking partners. Not to do this is considered poor manners and even disrespectful. If there is a hierarchical order in terms of age and/or prestige (ie. *sempai/kohai*) at the gathering place then sometimes drinking behavior follows a pattern with younger persons or *kohai* making sure that the glasses of older persons or *sempai* are always full. These hierarchical serving patterns between older and younger, teacher/student, boss/worker are common in mainland Japan, as well as other Asian cultures such as Korea (Chun 1984). In the Village, however, hierarchical relationships are discouraged and when a *sempai* is served, he or she usually quickly reciprocates by filling the glass of the junior. Drinking behavior has been observed to be related to the process by which the everyday social world is made and re-made (Collman 1979; Chun 1984). This also holds true in the Village.

### ***Gift-giving, reciprocity and consolidation of social relationships***

One of the most important ways older villagers maintain reciprocal relationships is through the giving of gifts. Gift giving is a daily occurrence in the Village. It is so ubiquitous that it is rare for a villager to drop by a fellow villager's place without bringing some sort of gift or conversely, to leave without being given something. If one were to add up the monetary amount of gifts given on a regular basis the amount would be of significant economical value. Gifts are constantly circulating and most gifts, particularly items of food, are often given to a third party without it being considered bad manners. The social context is one of redistribution or sharing of one's abundance with others. One usually sees a pile of packages on the *butsudan* (ancestral altar) as one enters the home of a villager as the ancestors are the first to be notified of the receipt of something and are considered to partake of the "spirit" of the gift when placed on the altar.

Gift giving takes different forms depending upon the context. One form of gift

giving takes place within the context of formal, ritual occasions such as a wedding or funeral. On these occasions money is placed in a special envelope, one for festive occasions and one for mourning. The envelope is then given to the host upon arrival. In the case of a wedding it is given to the person in charge of collecting the envelopes (*kakari*) usually at a table outside the wedding hall. In the case of a funeral one places the envelope on the *butsudan* (alter) of the house of the deceased. The guest will then receive a gift in return when they leave. On these ritualized gift giving occasions amounts received are accurately recorded. The size of future gift exchanges are adjusted according to what has been received in the past. Monetary gifts vary in value according to the intimacy of the relationship between the giver and the receiver, with more intimate relationships requiring higher value. *Koden* is the monetary gift given on the occasion of a funeral and usually amounts to one to two thousand yen for persons other than very close relatives. *Koden* are not only given on the occasion of a funeral but on the days that commemorate the death of the person who has passed away. Depending upon how close a relationship one has to the deceased one may be required to attend a half a dozen times or more during the first year and set occasions thereafter (such as third year, seventh year, etc.) following the death. On these occasions there is no return gift given but one receives a small meal instead. The amount of money received on these occasions is significant and might also be viewed as a form of mutual aid to the household of the deceased similar to the function of the *kye* in Korea, which will be discussed later. Older people, of course, attend significantly more of these occasions than younger people because they both have more time and they have more friends and acquaintances who are older and more likely to pass away.

Gift giving also takes place during the New Year, the Mid Year, *Obon*, *Shimi-sai* (grave-visiting) and other festive or holiday periods. On these occasions packages of food such as cartons of juice, flats of beer, canned goods, mushrooms (*shiitake*), pork roasts, bags of rice, or other gifts are given often along with a visit to the main house where the ancestral alter is kept. These gifts are exchanged. Goods that will not spoil quickly are often the most popular gifts and indeed people seem to consume many of these foodstuffs for weeks or months after the occasions. These more formal occasions for gift giving help to cement reciprocal relationships between villagers but the most significant gifts for older people in the Village in terms of maintaining reciprocal relationships are not given formally but informally. In the farming villages such as this one, where every household has at least a small garden the most common gift is vegetables (sometimes fruits). Most older villagers grow their own vegetables



for home consumption and give away surplus to neighbors, friends and relatives in the city. Vegetables act as the most significant item of exchange that helps to integrate older villagers and are in constant circulation.

To reiterate, gifts are given at important ritual occasions such as *Obon* or New Year's. Gifts are also given at times of special financial need such as weddings and funerals. These gift-giving occasions are formal and ritualized and reciprocated according to precise rules of exchange. Perhaps, even more important than these formal ritual occasions, however, are the informal, everyday exchanges of gifts (such as vegetables) that take place between neighbors and friends for it is gifts given in these informal social contexts that best serve to consolidate ties between villagers.

### ***Fictive "kin-keeping" and social support***

Gift exchanges, as important as they are for consolidating on-going daily relationships are relatively short-cycled. Where the memory of debits and credits is well retained long-cycled reciprocity may be seen to operate. Older people in the Village experience aging within a context of interwoven reciprocal dependencies and obligations that have existed between various households for years. Relationships are steeped in history. Most older villagers are interacting with the descendents of ancestors who also interacted with, and in many cases intermarried with, their own ancestors. At the level of the community these relationships can be counted on as a source of social support. This support is particularly important for older people living alone and in the Village, often takes the form of what I term "fictive kin-keeping".

*Kin-keeping*, as it has been used in the gerontological literature, usually refers to a care-taker role that a family member will take upon themselves (or is designated) to provide care for an older dependent member of one's kindred. This care usually includes care-giving in the form of help with activities of daily living such as help going to the toilet, getting out of bed, or bathing, although I do not use it in this sense. Most often, when a villager reaches this stage of dependency they will either move in with their children in the city or move into a nursing home. Or, as is frequently the case in recent years, they will apply for home help services available under the long-term care insurance system.

Kin-keeping, in the sense I use it, refers more to a role that the kin-keeper has taken on through a sense of obligation to "keep watch" over the elderly person and help with less burdensome instrumental support such as weeding a garden, shopping, providing a ride, cooking and delivering meals. I use the word "fictive" to emphasize the fact that the kin-keeper often has no direct kinship ties with the elderly person

they keep watch over. Often, however, a kind of quasi-kin relationship has developed modeled on the parent-child relationship. The relationship most often involves that of an older woman and a younger woman. Sometimes the women are in fact kindred (or *weeka* as kindred are known in Okinawa) related through blood or affinal ties. Often they are merely related through ties of long-term co-residence and past social obligations. In the case of Y.N., for example, a long-cycled reciprocity going back over seventy years seems to form the base of the fictive kin-keeping relationship. The following three examples from fieldnotes are fairly typical of fictive kin-keeping relationships in the village.

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*Re-paying a Seventy Year Debt (On)*

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Y.N. is 89 years old. She has been living alone since her husband passed away last year. She appears healthy and strong although just a wisp of a woman at about five feet tall. She was born in the Village as was her husband and they, like many others from their village, spent many years living abroad before returning to the village of their birth. Y.N. lived for a few years in the South Sea Islands (*Nanyo*) when the islands were a new Japanese colony. Like many Okinawans they worked as laborers for the Japanese forces in the new colonies. Following the war they moved to the southern Ryukyu Islands of Yaeyama where they lived for forty years until they came back to the Village three years ago. Y.N.'s oldest son lives in mainland Japan and is married to a mainlander. She has five other children but all are living away in the city. Her house is a *yoriyasui* house and visitors come every day. In fact, Y.N. informed me that if she didn't see her friends every day, the next time they meet they greet each other by saying *Mii-du-saa* (long time, no see). I was interviewing her at around eleven in the morning and sure enough there were two visitors in the hour that I was there. One was her friend, N.M., who lives close by. The other person present was O.S., who is Y.N.'s kin-keeper, and readily admitted that fact when she stopped by when she said: "I look after Grandmother." (*Obaa no mendo wo miteiru*). They are not related by blood or marriage but instead their link is through O.S.'s husband's father, who was the school principal (*ko-cho sensei*) during the 1930's and thus an important man in the village.

Y.N. had worked as a maid in the O.S. household and looked after the O.S.'s children as well acting as a kind of nanny. O.I., 79 years old, was a child then. Now, over seventy years later he is a hale and hearty senior and will soon be an octogenarian himself. He feels an obligation to look after Y.N. and O.S. (his wife), has taken on the role of kin-keeper for Y.N.. She stops by every day to check on her, sometimes bringing vegetables from the garden but mostly just to chat Y.N. will turn ninety this year and is healthy and strong but not young. She also keeps her own garden and takes care of her own home and this keeps her busy and content. She resists the idea of a home-helper saying that she prefers to do things herself. O.S. offers to help but is mostly politely declined although her company is readily accepted. In this way the O.S. household is repaying the kindness they received from the Y.N. household over seventy years ago.

In contrast to the above kin-keeping relationship, where there was no blood or affinal tie between the Y.N. and the O.S. households, in the next example the kin-keeper happens to be the niece of the woman she looks after.

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*Looking After Auntie*

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K.N. is 90 years old. She lives alone and has been a widow for over twenty years. Like Y.N., she too is a tiny but affable woman with an engaging smile and a ready laugh. Upon first meeting she greeted me with a grin but also a warning : "Our ancestors take care of us around here." By then I was quite used to being mistaken as a Christian missionary and therefore quickly assured her that I was not visiting to convert her but was instead a guest researcher in the Village. She agreed to my interview. It turned out that K.N.'s kin-keeper was T.T., According to K.N., she was her aunt on her Mother's side. K.N. had no children of her own and T.T. was a favorite niece of hers. T.T.'s mother was K.N.'s older sister. T.T, who turns eighty this year now looks after K.N auntie, stopping by every evening after work and often on weekends. K.N. is now quite frail and walks with a hesitant, shuffling gait. She was sporting a black eye when I first met and her which was the result of a fall while gardening a few days before. No doubt her measured

steps were calculated to prevent further falls, the nemesis of the frail elderly. A home-helper stops by daily to help prepare meals and K.N attends day service once a week. T.T. was weeding K.N`s garden when I made my next visit and looked amazingly strong and healthy for someone about to turn eighty and greeted me with a nod of her head.

In the Village, people in their seventies and early eighties often seem like mere youths and it isn't until one nears ninety that people really appear to slow down. Kin-keepers therefore are often in their seventies or older as seen in the above two examples. The following example is an exception to this rule as the kin-keeper is a relatively young woman in her fifties.

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*Fulfilling Obligations (Giri)*

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K.T is eighty-four years old. Unlike many others of her age cohort, older contemporaries in the village who are healthy into their late eighties and nineties and beyond, she is doing poorly in comparison. Her knees are bad and she can barely walk a few paces even with the help of a cane. Worse, she suffers from dementia that has left her prone to verbal aggression and suspicion of the home-helpers and visiting nurses with whose help she relies upon to remain living "independently" in her own home. Yet she fiercely holds onto her slipping autonomy and steadfastly refuses to enter a nursing home despite the urgings of her son and daughter who live away in the city. In a way, K.T.`s situation is unusual for unlike most of other villagers who seem to have a constant stream of visitors few people seem to drop by K.T.`s place. I too had been advised by more than one villager to avoid her place as well. Although hesitant to visit her I was lucky to find her standing at her gate propped up with her cane one day. I took the opportunity to ask her a few questions and soon found that her answers to basic questions that are used in common cognitive impairment screens were not appropriate and concluded that she was likely suffering from mild to moderate levels of cognitive impairment. However, what really struck me in the strongest sense from our conversation was her attempts to make it appear that she was not idle but always busy with something. How someone barely able to walk and suffering

from cognitive impairment remained busy I was curious to find out. When I asked her how she remained busy she replied that she was constantly busy with reading the newspaper (*shinbun wo yomu de isogashii*). I interpreted her strong self-presentation as an attempt to impress upon me that she was indeed engaged in productive activity. That she was not idle. And that indeed she was still building social capital. In a way, this was in concert with what other villagers had been telling me about her. That she and her husband had once been very critical of other villagers for their lack of ambition and idleness. That they had once had money and that their household had lent money to other villagers. The house was known as one that held itself above the other villagers. They had broken a cardinal rule of the village that "we are all equal" and were highly resented for it. Although surrounded by affinal relatives, even they have largely abandoned her. Although not completely. Her kinkeeper is her husband's younger brother's second son's wife. Although the younger of the K brothers remains alive and well at eighty-two years of age K.T.'s husband (oldest K brother) passed away quite a few years ago. Despite the ill will between the brothers he feels obligated to watch over her and has delegated that responsibility to the household of his second son.

From the above examples we can see that kin-keeping relationships are based on numerous overlapping principles. In the first example, obligation to repay past kindness, seems to be the main operating principle between the O and Y households. In the second example there is a direct blood tie between the kin-keeper and recipient of support as well as an affective bond between the older and younger women. In the third example, the two households are bound by common lineage ties. They are members of the same *munchu* and T-san is the wife of the head (now deceased) of the main house. Although ill will stands between the households the obligation to the main house must be fulfilled even if only for the sake of the ancestors.

### ***Children living apart: An important social support resource***

The foregoing discussion may have given the impression that because children do not live in the village, they cannot be counted upon as a source of support. Nothing could be further from the truth. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, children living apart from older villagers are still counted upon for support. Frequent phone calls, visits on weekends and festive occasions as well as emergency visits when parents fall ill were frequently observed during the course of fieldwork. As mentioned

earlier, children living apart have different functions within the social support network of elderly villagers. Indeed, they are the most *likely* sources of support when it comes to informal caregiving (formal caregiving or *kaigo* is available, and usually called upon through the long term care insurance system if an elder remains in the Village).

This informal caregiving support can be witnessed when older parents become ill. Caregiving, once the sole or main responsibility of the wife of oldest son (*yome*), has now become a diffused responsibility mainly carried out (or coordinated) between spouses, children (and their spouses) and grandchildren (and their spouses), in the case of informal support. The common word uttered by members of this diffused social support network is *kotai-gotai* (taking turns) such as the next case taken from fieldnotes.

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*Being Filial (Oyakoko)*

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When playing gateball today I noticed that T.J. was not there to participate. At 92, T.J. was a senior member of the team and still one of the best players. I asked Z-san where T.J. was today and he told me that T.J. was at home taking care of his wife who happened to be down with a cold. After gateball, I went over to check on the older couple and found that that their *chonan* (oldest son) and his wife were there visiting. As it was a Sunday I figured that they had heard that their Mother was sick and had taken the time out to come over to take care of her. They told me that she had been hospitalized with a cough and high fever but now she was recovering at home. I gave them some vitamin and mineral drinks to give to Mother and went home. Later in the week (a weekday), I stopped by again to check on her and found that the daughter-in-law (*yome*) of the second son (*jinan*) was visiting from (about 1.5 hours away). I saw that the mother was sitting in the living room and appeared to have recovered. Their *yome* said that it was the first day that her Mother-in-law was out of bed and that her fever was down. I told her that I saw the *chonan* and his wife here a few days ago and while grinning she said: "Yes, we're taking turns (*kotai*) looking after Mother".

Children (and spouses), grandchildren (and spouses) also visit older parents and

often stay overnight before heading back the next day. These trips are often combined with recreational pursuits like golf or even business activities such as picking up vegetables to sell in the city. Typical are the following two examples from fieldnotes.

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*An Attentive Son-in-Law*

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Today, I had dinner at T.S.'s house and the prepared meal was a very tasty traditional treat of boiled pig's feet, vegetables and rice. It was Saturday night and T.J. and his wife T.K., and friends T.M. and K.S. all dropped by. As did T-san (head of the *Rojinkai* or Older Persons' Club). We chatted and what struck me as most interesting was the fact that T.S.'s son-in-law was the one who had prepared the meal. He was a great cook. Later I found out that he makes the trip to the Village from the City (2 hours away) every Saturday. He buys vegetables from the villagers and takes them back to the City where he re-sells them along with other goods. He runs a convenience store in the City along with his wife (T.S.'s daughter). He says he enjoys coming to the country, growing and buying vegetables (he has a garden here too) and visiting with his mother-in-law. T.S., who certainly seems to enjoy his company as well. T.S. remarked that the weekly visits of her son-in-law were not only looked forward to as a source of positive emotional encounter but they also served as source of instrumental support for T.S. as she received a nice dinner, a cleaner house, groceries and other daily necessities of life, which are hard for her to pick up on her own. The visits also helped as a source of informational support where T.S. remarked that welcome news of her daughter and grandchildren was received via T.S.'s son-in-law. The gathering of other elders in the community at T.S.'s home for this weekly ritual also seemed to be an added bonus to the whole affair as it helped keep these relationships strong as well.

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*A Dutiful Son*

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K.C. is ninety years old. K.C. is the neighbor of K.N (also 90 years) but despite same last name are not related. K.C is in good health for someone of her advanced age. She prefers not to receive the home-helper visits or day service that many other villagers her age are receiving even though she lives alone. She says that she prefers to do things herself. She's rare for older people in the Village because she was actually born in a neighboring village and therefore not a native villager. Her husband was killed in the war and she raised her children with the help of her husband's parents whom she in turn looked after until they passed away. All had lived in the same house that she has been living in since she came to the Village over sixty years ago. She has six children but none of them live in the Village. Her oldest son lives in the City and makes the two-hour drive to the Village every week. He visits his mother and then takes in a game of golf in a nearby golf course and then spends the night at K.C.'s place before heading back to the City the next day.

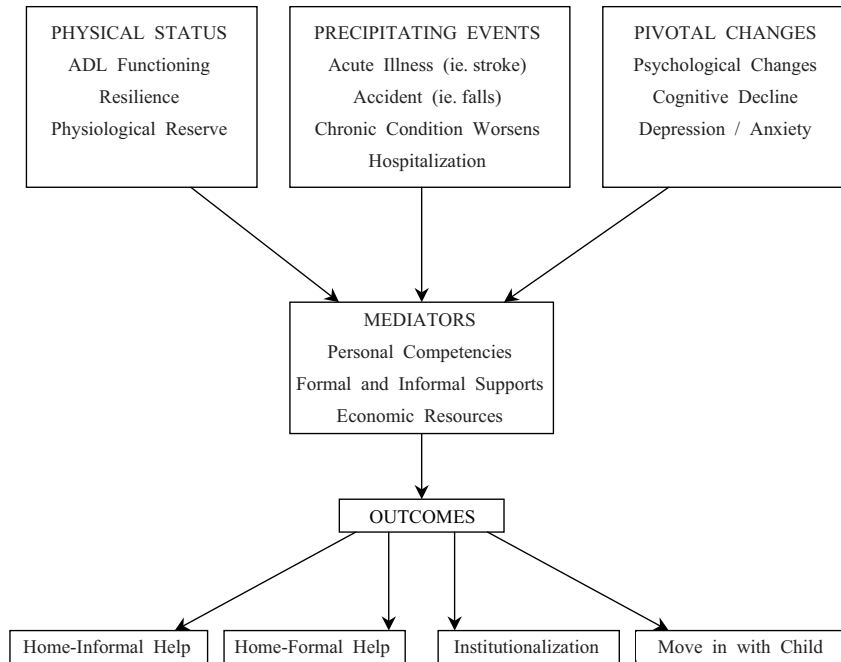
***Transitions into Dependency are mediated by social support resources***

As pointed out throughout this paper, when older villagers become frail, despite the weakening of the *yaa*, they are still left with a number of support options. A model of transitions into dependency originally developed by Johnson and Barer (1997) was, with certain adaptations, found useful to represent the experience of villagers and is shown below in Figure 4. As can be seen from the model, functional changes are mediated by support resources that can lead to a number of differential outcomes. Which trajectory a frail and increasingly disabled elderly villager will ultimately follow thus depends upon many possible factors.

To visualize the trajectory of change, Figure 4 below depicts a model of a potential chain of events that can occur among the increasingly frail elderly. To dramatize the model an example is helpful. First, a precipitating event such as an acute illness episode (i.e., pneumonia, stroke), an accident (i.e., fall), or a surgical procedure may end up in hospitalization. At this point it is quite possible that a cascade effect may occur, with pivotal changes in psychological status happening in tandem with physical changes in ability to carry out activities of daily living as described by the model below.



Figure 4 Model of Functional Changes Occurring Over Time Among Frail Elderly



The mediating factors in this model refer to a villager's support resources, such as an adequate social support network, financial resources and personal competencies such as attitudes, skills or coping abilities needed to deal with declines in health. The potential outcomes include morbidity, mortality, institutionalization, returning to one's own home with the help of informal and/or formal support, or moving in with one's children. The following vignettes (from fieldnotes) of actual experiences of older persons from the community further help to illustrate possible trajectories that may be experienced by elderly villagers.

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*Moving in with Children*

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T.M. was hospitalized the other day with a broken hip. I went to see her in the hospital and was surprised to find her husband was hospitalized there too. After seeing so many healthy centenarians I have come to think of T.M. as still young, even through she is well past eighty. When I asked her husband what was wrong with him he grinned sheepishly and told me that he was

just there because he wanted to be close to his wife in order to keep her company ! (eight months later) I saw T.M. today with her daughter in front of her house. She was struggling with a cane. She called it her third leg (*sanbon no ashi*). I commented that it was good to see and inquired about her husband. She told me that since she had been discharged from the hospital she had been living in the City at her daughter's place and that her husband had suddenly passed away just recently. I said that I was sorry to hear that and asked her if she would be coming back to the village after the funeral. She said that at the insistence of her daughter that she would be re-locating to the City. I wished her well and we parted.

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*Institutionalization*

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I.S. will turn one hundred years old later this year. She was indeed one of the oldest women in the village until she was institutionalized. Her mind is still sharp but she is now in a wheelchair. "My legs just gradually got weaker and weaker. You see, I always had a chronic bad back (*koshi ga warui*) and it just gradually got worse. Sometimes my back would go out and I wouldn't be able to move for days. Then one day I just couldn't get out of bed," she explains. Apparently she likes living in the "old folks home" (*rojin homu*) because everyday is "*gochisoo*" (treats) and she has a lot of friends there. She also says that by living in the old folks home she doesn't have to be a burden on anyone (*yakkaimono ni naritakunai*). "Living at home I couldn't take care of myself any longer and even through I had home-helpers coming for a while I didn't like being cooped up in the house all day. My son and grand-daughter work and my *yome* (daughter-in-law) has baby grandchildren (her great-grandchildren) to take care of. I'm a social person (*shakaiteki*) and most of my friends have already passed away. That's what happens when you live to my age. It got real lonely around here and I got to feeling depressed. When the new *rojin* (old-folks) home opened up me and a friend my age came together. There were a limited number of spots and it's really nice here. Like a hotel. And close by to the Village so my family can visit anytime."

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*At Home with Formal and Informal Help*

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T.O. and his wife T.S. live in their own home. T.O. is 90 years old and his wife 88 years old. Although not the oldest man in the village T.O. is not doing as well as some of his older contemporaries. He tells me that his heart is bad and that he cannot walk. Indeed, his legs look like sticks under his trousers. Other villagers confirm that the T couple never seem to come out of their house anymore. T.O.'s wife T.S. is in better condition and takes care of T.O. She cooks and washes for both of them. Villagers say T.O. used to be quite a sportsman and an active member of the gateball team until he had a stroke. After hospitalization he lost the use of his legs and hasn't played since. At day service he gets a bath, rehabilitation exercises and recreation activities. Although his mind still seems sharp he says that he spends most of the day watching television at home with his wife. T.O.'s neighbor, is a single man of about sixty who sometimes joins us for gateball. He has never married and lived with his parents until they passed away. He informed that he usually drops by everyday to check up on T.O. and his wife, sometimes buying groceries for them or running errands.

The issue that arises from the foregoing examples is how frail elderly villagers with impairments manage to remain living independently in the community. Mediating factors such as personal and social resources are important. Villagers returning home after a precipitating illness were more likely to have social supports available. T.M., for example, lost both her husband and her mobility within an eight month period and upon the insistence of children re-located to the city. Becoming a widow is a common life course transition among village women. Although in T.M.'s case this was preceded by an accident in the form of a fall. These two precipitating events along with the insistence of her children led to her re-location to the City to live with her children. Although this may be temporary and T.M. may, if she fully recovers from her hip operation, start to once again spend more and more time back in the village. The pattern seems to be a common one for recent widows who often spend a period of transition at their children's places before coming back to the village. Also common is the offer from children to move to the city on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. This offer is almost always refused or at least delayed until

one reaches a stage of functional disability that makes independent living very difficult.

In the second example, T.S.'s increasing age and worsening chronic condition in the form of a bad back and weak legs gradually led to a state of functional disability. The precipitating event was the worsening of a chronic condition combined with psychological changes in the form of anxiety, depression and loneliness. A social person by nature her physical status precluded extensive social interaction. Combined with the feeling of oneself as a burden upon an aged daughter-in-law (in her 60's) busy taking care of her own baby grandchildren (T.S.'s grand-daughter had separated from her husband and was living at home) led to her institutionalization.

In the third example, T.O.'s functional status leaves him without the use of his legs. His precipitating event was an acute illness in the form of a stroke although he also has a number of chronic conditions. Upon recovery and discharge from the hospital he receives formal support in the form of rehabilitation once a week (day service) and a home helper comes twice a week to cook and clean. Informal support comes from his wife who, although frail herself, is more mobile and can cook and clean and look after her physical and psychological needs.

The above processes are similar to how Johnson and Bayer (1997) refer to functional status changes as "transitions" where "thresholds" act as markers of change. Acute illnesses or accidents are examples of thresholds that affect changes in functional status and I observed many such incidents, particularly in the form of falls, among elderly frail villagers over the course of fieldwork. While the complex interactions among physical, social and psychological effects cannot be fully accounted for by the above model, the cases illustrated above help shed light upon how rapidly physical status can change for the frail elderly and the importance of mediating factors such as social support in maintaining the independent living of older villagers in the community. We now turn to an important social support resource for older villagers, that is, association networks.

### ***Association networks and social support***

Associational ties within the Village are strong and operate considerably beyond the realm of kinship. These relationships are of relatively more importance for the young-old (those in their sixties and seventies). Ties develop in various relationships that are primarily based on a reciprocity which characterizes the Village and rural Okinawa as a whole. The process of modernization has often been regarded as a force that operates to promote associational ties at the expense of kinship ties.

However, non-western societies do not necessarily experience modernization as an event, or sequence of events that is comparable to events that western societies supposedly experienced during their own periods of modernization. Instead, what needs to be emphasized is the importance of local cultural context and historical background as factors that greatly influence how any given society will experience the modernization process.

With this in mind, let us now focus upon how social change has taken on its own "flavor" as local Okinawan social and cultural institutions have adapted in their own unique ways. The following discussion will focus upon various associations, some of which have been part of the Okinawan social fabric for centuries, others that have been around for only a few decades, and upon the support functions that these organizations play for elder villagers in modern village life.

### ***Older villagers' organizations and other age-grade associations***

Certain social groups organized on the basis of age have traditionally played an important function in village life. In the traditional Okinawan village there existed three organized age groups. The *wakamung-gumi*, (youth group) consisted of all unmarried youths age thirteen and above and performed certain necessary labor tasks for the benefit of the village. The youth group used to meet at certain houses that were termed *yagamayaa* (noisy house) and also functioned as a working area for young women or sleeping area for young men, as well as a meeting spot for young men and women. Meeting places also included the beach area where young people would engage in *ashibii* (play) that included music, singing, and dancing with sexual freedom as the norm.

Above the *wakamung-gumi* was the *suu-gumi* (father's group), made up of all married males functioning as household heads to the age of about fifty-five. This group was most active in village affairs and leadership roles in the community. The last group was the *ufu suu-gumi* (grandfather's group). This group consisted of the village elders who wielded ultimate authority in village matters. This group normally functioned as an advisory group to the *suu-gumi*. Each of these groups was headed by a *kashira* (chief).

When Japan took control of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, these groups were gradually displaced by organizations sponsored by the national government as devices for greater political control and for modernization. The *wakamung-gumi* was replaced by the *Seinenkai* (Youth's Association). Women became members of the *Joshi-Seinenkai* (Young Women's Association) which has since been

re-joined with the Youth's Association (although it remains mainly male in membership). Married women became members of the *Fujinkai* (Women's Association) and also the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) when it came into being a few years later. And the elder grandfathers of the village who formerly constituted the *Ufu Suu-Gumi* became members of the *Noogyoo Kumiai* or Agricultural Cooperative Association. Each of these was tied to larger district, regional and national groups managed or supervised in large part by the national government. Membership in these groups was (and still is in the Village) generally automatically conferred and therefore all villagers tend to be included. Thus the various age groups that were once self-contained units within the village became new organizations that served strong roles in bringing the villagers into contact with the outside world.

The most important of these groups for our purposes is an age group organization that was formed after the war, in the 1970's, called the *Rojinkai* (Old Persons' or Elder's Club). In one way, the present *Rojinkai* in the Village is no different than the older *Ufu Suu Gumi* that existed until the last century, for like the older association, it represents the last stage in the progression of villagers through an institutionalized system of age-grade organizations. In other ways its establishment represents formalization and administrative intervention in a village group much the same way as age associations were utilized in pre-war days for government purposes. Part of the reason for the government's promotion of the *Rojinkai* is as an effort to deal with an aging society. Thus, in order to receive official government funding, the *Rojinkai* must facilitate activities like health and education classes or other community betterment projects. Although this point deserves further clarification, suffice it to say that government promotion of *Rojinkai* has been quite successful with clubs experiencing a huge growth in numbers as well as participation rates during the 1960's and 1970's. The same cannot be said of other age grade associations within the village.

Currently in the Village, there are the following age grade associations. The Childrens' Association (*Kodomokai*), which consists of elementary school pupils; the Youths' Association (*Seinenkai*), whose members are aged sixteen to twenty-nine; the Women's Association (*Fujinkai*) whose members are married and under the age of sixty-six; the Adult's Association (*Seijinkai*) whose members are aged thirty to sixty; and the Old Persons' Association for men and women aged sixty-six or older.

Some of these associations are no longer viable organizations as their active membership has dwindled such as the *Seinenkai*. The demographic factors discussed earlier along with active high school lives (i.e. sports and other club activities and

cram schools) has wreaked havoc on this association. On the other hand, the Children's Association is a group that remains active, under the direction of parents, in sports activities and many village events. The Women's Association is also active for many village events and has been historically active in political movements such as the village improvement movement following the war and the reversion movement (agitation for the return of Okinawa to Japan from American control). It is often leaders from the Women's Association that go on to positions as *Ku-Choo* (Village Head) which is rare throughout the rest of Japan (there are usually about half a dozen women serving as Village Heads in northern Okinawa at any one time).

Despite the fact that the *Rojinkai* is a relatively new association, it has gradually come to serve an important role in the community. Although most people think that the *Rojinkai* is only doing work activities (*sagyo*) about three or four times a year, in reality, most of the area's events are presided by the Women's Association and the Elder's Association, and the members of the *Rojinkai* serve in positions in the village administration. When one observes village (town hall) meetings, the participants are mostly older villagers. In Town Hall meetings older people do not participate as members of the *Rojinkai* but as representatives of households, and yet often these meetings seem to resemble *Rojinkai* meetings as many of the same people are present, thus, without the "members" of the *Rojinkai*, village administration would likely collapse. In community religious or ritual events, the *Kaminchu* (community priestesses), the traditional dancers and all other leaders of religious ceremonies are elderly. As depopulation and aging of rural village populations such as the Village proceeds, the *Rojinkai* is becoming a more and more important (one might even say indispensable) part of the local social fabric. Let us now take a deeper look at the social support functions of the *Rojinkai*.

### ***The social support functions of the Rojinkai***

The Village's *Rojinkai* was formally established in 1973. It includes all villagers who are aged sixty-six years and older and in the year 2000 consisted of about one hundred dues-paying members. In the Village elderly villagers become automatic members when they reach the age of sixty-six although other elder's clubs (particularly in the city) more often operate on a voluntary membership basis.

Although *Rojinkai* are officially sanctioned, government supported organizations linked in a hierarchical chain (i.e., village, township, region, prefecture, state) to a national umbrella organization they also carry out their own local and traditional activities. Membership rates are also variable with some clubs claiming almost one

hundred percent membership (the Village) while others have memberships that include less than half of seniors in a particular area. As a general principle, *Rojinkai* located in traditional rural areas tend to have membership that is all-inclusive and automatic while newer residential areas are organized on a strictly voluntary basis. The head of the *Rojinkai*, T.T. meets regularly with the other heads of the villages of the Township and the head of the Township *Rojinkai* meets regularly with other heads from other parts of the prefecture. Once a year there is a nation-wide meeting. As mentioned earlier, the *Rojinkai* receives financial support from the Township. This support amounts to about sixty percent of the yearly budget with the other forty percent of costs coming from membership fees (¥1000) per year and donations. Members over ninety years of age or those who have been hospitalized for long periods of time are exempt from fees. Members are also obligated to donate money to other members when they pass away (¥3000), 85<sup>th</sup> year celebration or *seinen iwai* (¥5,000), 88<sup>th</sup> year celebration or *tokachi* (¥5,000), 97<sup>th</sup> year celebration or *kajimaya* (¥5,000) and 100<sup>th</sup> year celebration (¥10,000).

Activities for the recent year included a New Year party, a Chinese New Year party, regular ground-golf and gateball tournaments, two overnight trips within the prefecture, a sports day and daily gateball practice. The *Rojinkai* also cooperates with other organizations and associations such as the *Sejinkai* (Adults' Association) with whom they have a cooperative ground-golf (similar to mini-golf but with spikes instead of holes and larger clubs) tournament; and the *Fujinkai* (Women's Association) with whom they practice traditional dance for the annual festival (a local dance to welcome back ancestors during the annual festival for the dead); the Educational Affairs Committee (*Kyoikuiinkai*) for "life-long educational programs" designed specifically for older persons; and the elderly health awareness program held by the Public Welfare Department of the Township twice a year; a Bon-Odori party (another dance that celebrates the festival of the dead called O-bon in Japanese) and a village gymnastic competition held yearly by the Township. On these township occasions, a bus service is offered to pick up and drop off frail elderly villagers. Some events involve an extra fee if they participate such as the group travel events which involve staying at a hotel for a night. Records revealed over fifty different activities or events (including meetings) in which some or all of club members in attendance for the recent year.

There are also formal work responsibilities (*sagyo*) which the village assigns to the *Rojinkai*. These included a beach cleanup and cleaning (or weeding) of the sacred grove (*utaki*). Also, as stated earlier it is male members of the *Rojinkai* that are also



most active in running village affairs while female members are responsible for carrying out community religious and ritual observances. The head of the *Rojinkai* is a particularly important post in village affairs and usually held by a man (sometimes woman) who commands the respect of the other villagers. The current head of the club was a former member of the Township *Kyoiku Iinkai* and ran the village cooperative store (*kyoodoten*) for twelve years. Although elected (more often appointed) on a yearly basis the current head has held the post for four consecutive terms since the age of sixty-six. He can be seen at all the important village and township functions and at special occasions often gives a speech. The head of the *Rojinkai* is very involved in the day to day affairs of the village alongside the *Ku-choo*, the representative to the Township Assembly and other older men (and sometimes women) who have influence through past service.

Thus, from an organization that only came into existence in the early 1970's in the Village, the *Rojinkai* has come to play an increasingly important role in running village affairs, ironically, much like the *Ufu Suu Gumi* did in the old days. As well, it is an organization that serves to support older villagers and keep them socially integrated into village life. Let us now turn to another association formed on a volunteer basis that plays an important role in elderly villagers' lives, the *moai*.

### ***The moai and social support***

The *moai* can best be described as a small "mutual assistance group." *Moai* groups are formed voluntarily and usually consist of between ten and twenty members. There are literally dozens of *moai* in any small village with overlapping membership between groups. The members of the group might be colleagues, friends, old classmates or other members of one's social network. The *moai* existed as a form of credit association long before modern forms of financial institutions took hold in Okinawa. Members would gather once or twice a month and each member would contribute a certain amount of money. Then members would take turns borrowing that sum at future meetings.

The *moai* system of mutual aid financing was first introduced among the gentry in Shuri by the reformer and statesman Sai On in 1713. This system played a particularly important role among the privileged classes who were dispossessed in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the transition to a money economy (Kerr 2000). Men who were comparatively well off contributed rice to a revolving fund upon which their less fortunate colleagues could draw. Indeed, the "rotating credit association" is an important element in the social life of the Okinawan community.

In Korea, a similar system has been referred to as the *kye* (meaning bond). According to Chun (1984), there are two main forms of *kye* in rural Korea with several variations. The first is the *hon-sang-kye* which relates to marriages and funerals (*hon* = marriage and *sang* = funeral). The other is the *ton-kye*, (*ton* = money) which is a money-saving, rotating credit association. Chun (1984) describes the former as an older pattern that relates to major ceremonies demanding large expense, such as money, food, utensils, and labor, which cannot be quickly prepared for when they are needed. The latter is a newer pattern that developed with the introduction of a money economy.

As part of the East Asian cultural sphere with strong influences from China, Korea and Japan it is not surprising that the Okinawan village has had a similar social institution to the *kye* in the form of *moai*. The function of the *moai*, like its Korean counterpart, has traditionally been that of mutual aid financing although it has taken a slightly different form in the Okinawan village. Rather than financing large ceremonial outlays such as weddings or funerals (which have traditionally been financed by the village as a whole), *moai* have been formed more for specific purposes of mutual aid between small groups of individuals. In this sense, forming a *moai* group may be thought of as similar to the Korean process of "bonding" or "gathering" a *kye*. The members enlist others with similar needs or goals. They then make rules for keeping and organizing the system and note the names of all participants. A record is maintained of payments and accounts. Sometimes a name is chosen for the *moai* group. The groups usually do not consist of more than a dozen or so members and usually meet about once a month.

Depending upon the specific purpose of formation *moai* take different forms. Friendship (*shinboku*), mutual aid (*sougo fujo*) and the provision of a place for social interaction or exchange (*kouryuu*) are the main reasons people give for forming *moai*. They are also a popular means for small and medium sized companies to raise capital and over half the small and medium sized companies in Okinawa are part of *moai*. In my observations most individuals also belong to *moai* whether they live in the city or the village. Many belong to more than one *moai*. The functions of *moai* sometimes get blurred with that of other groups. For example, Sered (1999) reports that in Henza, a southern Okinawan village, women's *moai* have become assimilated into or grown out of the traditional dance groups. Her informant, an older woman, reported that *moai* were not popular in her village, but that recently they had got one together so that the traditional dance group wouldn't fall apart for "if you are in a group then you have group awareness."

As glimpsed in Sered's example, *moai*, like other groups in Okinawan society often divide along gender lines. *Moai* may consist of old high school chums, or ex-university classmates, or be related to one's work or consist of a group of cousins. T-san, 72, the head of the old persons' club (*Rojinkaicho*) explains the meaning of *moai*:

I am currently a member of seven *moai*. One of these is what I call my *keizai* (economy) *moai*. The others are for *shinboku* (friendship). For my *shinboku moai* each member brings 10,000 yen per month. Not so big a number. A couple of my *shinboku moai* are made of friends from within the village. Just a chance to get together for drinking and things like *yuntaku* (chatting). Another one of my *moai* is for all the heads of the village *Rojin* Clubs. There are seventeen of us in the Township you know. Another one of my *moai* is for members of the friendship association (*Kyooyuukai*). They're mostly ex-villagers who live in the City where I commute to once a month. Stay there for the night and come back the next day. Another one of my *moai* is for ex-school chums. My *keizai moai* is for economic purposes. Our membership fee is 30,000 yen per month. In the old days everybody was poor and this was the only way to get a large sum of money together in a hurry. Nowadays most people make *moai* for *shinboku*. It's easy to just lose touch with people even if you live in the same village. You know, people get into their daily routines like taking care of the garden and stuff. If you make a *moai* then people show up. Twenty-nine years is my longest *moai* with S-san and Z-san (other villagers). Now we have sixteen members in that *moai*. We had eighteen before. It gets expensive going to all those *moai*. That's 90,000 yen a month just for *moai*! Yes, especially if you are on a pension! That's why I have a special bank account just for my *moai*! If I didn't then I might get into trouble.

As can be seen from the above vignette, the *moai*, as a social institution, has not only survived the process of modernization but has flourished. The system is still very popular today both in Okinawa itself and among Okinawan communities in mainland Japan or abroad. Some people simply do not like to follow the complex procedures of banks in order to secure loans for constructing houses, buying cars, or for emergency use but prefer to enlist the support of a *moai* instead. For others, however, *moai* are joined for their roles in promoting friendship and emotional support. Not all older

villagers are as enthusiastic about *moai* as the T-san, but almost everybody belongs to one or more. They are familiar social institutions that people can rely upon to keep in touch in a busy and hectic modern lifestyle for as a member of a group one tends to feel more obligated to participate. As villagers like to say, "if you are in a group then you have group awareness." As "structured social support convoys" they help members negotiate the transitions of the life course together and can act as agents of socialization as well.

### ***The Kyooyuukai: Tapping into support from "fictive villagers"***

Although Okinawa seems small in terms of area and population, customs and dialects vary from village to village. The system of endogamy and customs restricting movement of villagers contributed to a localization of many varying traditions. In the 1950's, post-war modernization trends saw an exodus from the villages in the country-side to the cities and Okinawa from a rural prefecture to an urbanized metropolis centered in the central and southern cities of Naha, Urasoe and Koza. In these larger population centers, *Kyooyuukai* (friendship associations) were formed to give support to people who had moved to the cities from rural areas.

The *Kyooyuukai* is therefore an association which was originally organized in larger cities from the unit of *son* as well as *aza* or the purpose of promoting friendship and support of villagers who have re-located to the city. The Chinese characters give a good indication of the purpose of the association for *kyoo* = home village; *yu* = friendship; *kai* = club. Thus, in essence, a club for promoting friendship ties and mutual aid between those from the same home village, town or region. There are many *Kyooyuukai* located both inside as well as outside the prefecture, in mainland Japan and overseas. *Kyooyuukai* activities have strong support in Okinawa with more than a hundred clubs located in the cities of Naha and Urasoe alone. There are several advantages that accrue for the member. Some clubs set aside money for educational promotion in the form of scholarships. Other clubs are very active politically as one can usually count on the members of ones *Kyooyuukai* for votes. Serving as an officer of the *Kyooyuukai* or cooperating in other ways will ensure one of strong political support. *Kyooyuukai* connections also help when looking for a job or getting a promotion as senior members support younger members.

The Villages's *Kyooyuukai*, is one of the most active in Okinawa and has a strong relationship with the home village. The Township has several other *Kyooyuukai* that are run by the individual village hamlets and are well known for their strong ties and political activities. From records made available from the members directory for 1999

from the Village, I was able to discern that the *Kyooyuukai* was first established in 1930 with twenty households originally registered. The association was temporarily unable to meet during and immediately after the war but was started once again in 1949 with 32 households registered. In 1999, member households totaled 464 with a total membership of 1,708 persons. That number is revealing for it amounts to approximately four times the present population of the Village.

According to an ex-village head who had also experienced holding the position as the Director, the position of Director of the *Kyooyuukai*, was much more challenging:

I have held both positions of village head and director of the *Kyooyuukai* and I have to admit that directing the *Kyooyuukai* was a lot more work! Members are scattered in many places but when you bring them together you never know what is going to happen. You end up doing many jobs that you hadn't anticipated besides just organizational responsibilities. I even ended up doing relationship counseling. You see, the *Kyooyuukai* is not only a place for mutual aid and support but it also can lead to private relationships between men and women if you know what I mean...

The *Kyooyuukai* is run by ex-villagers who now live permanently in the City and the surrounding area. Membership dues of the *Kyooyuukai* were 2000 yen per year, per household, in 1999. Activities include those aimed at promoting social interaction through volleyball competitions, gymnastic meets, a celebration for the elderly members, the annual Village festival and home-village tours. These activities bring together ex-villagers and their families with those still living in the village to strengthen ties through social interaction. From the membership directory, Article 4 of the constitution of the *Kyooyuukai* spells out the aims of the organization:

As members we seek to promote the friendship and support of fellow members, and along with these activities of mutual aid, we will contribute to our home village.

Ex-villagers who live in the City bring their children or grandchildren, most of whom were born or grew up in the city and therefore have little connection to the ancestral home village to attend events. Activities attempt to foster a sense of community identity as "Villagers". Activities are also aimed directly at mutual aid for families which have had a death or faced some disaster. Each member household is

expected to contribute 3,000 yen in the case of a death of a member. The collected money is given to the household of the deceased. If a member reaches the celebrated age of 88 or 97 then member households give 5,000 yen as a special gift to the honored elder's household. In the case of a disaster, each household contributes 20,000 yen to the afflicted member household. These are not inconsequential sums if we consider that there were 464 member households in 1999.

However, this is not all. Villagers also rely upon the *Kyooyuukai* for ongoing maintenance and improvement of the village as a whole. For example, the *Kyooyuukai* helped fund the building of the Village community center and also contributes considerably to the funding of village festivals. To stage a festival with dragon boat races for example costs well over 3,000,000 yen. The *Kyooyuukai* members are obligated to donate to these ongoing activities and village improvement projects as well as to the upkeep of village tombs, where after all is said and done, most ex-villagers will return to one day to be buried along with other villagers in the common village tombs.

However, although elderly members of the *Kyooyuukai* have a strong connection and sense of their own identities as *The Villagers*, this identity is not shared among second and third generations who grew up in the cities of central and southern Okinawa, such as City. Participation of younger persons in the *Kyooyuukai* has been gradually decreasing despite the fact that most parents or grandparents try hard to instill a sense of the "village ethos" into their children or grandchildren.

## CONCLUSIONS

In light of the weakening traditional support structures for the elderly in rural depopulated communities such as the Village, elderly people appear to provide social supports to fellow elderly with less attention paid to traditional family ties. Following social exchange theory, there should be some balance between the giving and receiving of support between fellow seniors (Akiyama et al 1997). According to Lebra (1976:337), autonomy and dependency are not incompatible under certain circumstances. As one of the pre-requisites she suggests the "well-balanced reciprocity" of dependency:

To the extent that dependency is exchanged in reciprocal terms the two parties involved can remain autonomous, free from guilt, shame, or obligation of submission. Since the mutuality of such exchange is maximized between

equals, interdependence among intimate age peers may be crucial for autonomy maintenance.

As the foregoing analysis has revealed, an increasingly important strategy that elderly villagers employ to maintain their autonomy in the face of aging and weakened inter-generational support structures, is through an enhanced interdependence among intimate age peers and a reliance on mutually supportive practices. Social integration is sought through social interaction based on a concept of reciprocity. These mutually supportive practices such as informal visiting behavior, gift-giving and the varied ritual processes associated with them, sharing of tasks, and other cooperative activities have become increasingly important as sources of informal social support, both instrumental and emotional.

Moreover, the evolving and ever adapting social support systems of elderly villagers discussed above, help to keep villagers socially integrated and aging in place despite the vast social changes that have swept the Village, including the high rates of single occupant elderly households. In the absence of family, many older people have increasingly come to depend upon their new social networks that emphasize neighbors, friends, and/or *kinkeepers* for both emotional and instrumental support.

The foregoing analysis notwithstanding, a question remains as to the generalizability of the above findings. How representative is the experience of the above Village to other rural villages within Okinawa and throughout Japan? Obviously, the Okinawan experience of changing social support systems has taken some unique socio-cultural twists and turns, with traditional cultural forms adapting to ever-changing demographic realities. The *Moai*, Friendship Association (*Kyooyuukai*), and perhaps the *yuimaru* spirit of mutual help, all seem to have survived and taken on new cultural forms that are contingent upon these new social realities. The (relatively) easy, "taken for granted" dependence upon *yasashii* (easy-going) neighbors and friends, the active associations of the village such as the *Rojinkai*, and the ubiquitous rituals of the village, all help to keep villagers engaged in interwoven webs of social relationships and integrated into village life. Sakihara et al. (2002) report similar findings for the northern Okinawan villages of Nakijin where emotional attachment and support among neighbors and friends was found to be strong and the relationship between social support, emotional well being and life satisfaction was shown to be significant. In these villages, neighbors and friends were also found to be more available sources of support than non-resident children and the high rates of single, elderly households (mostly female) showed similar patterns of support to that

found in the present study.

How social support systems for the elderly in rural Japan as a whole have been adapting to changing socio-demographic realities cannot be ascertained from this analysis. Likely, we are witnessing a similar, though muted, phenomenon in rural villages throughout mainland Japan as well, depending upon how regional socio-cultural and demographic trends are playing out. However, some researchers (Ogawa et al. 1995) have pointed out that expectations of family support may be somewhat stronger in the mainland, despite the weakening family support mechanisms. This may, in some cases, be a source of generational conflict and negatively affect the emotional well being of elders, particularly when emotional support is lacking. For example, Morita et al. (1986) reported high levels of psychological isolation among the elderly in a small town in rural Niigata prefecture, where elderly suicide levels are among the highest within Japan--despite the fact that the elderly were found to be living in extended family settings where physical distances were minimal. Matsumoto (1996) also found that in Niigata, it was actually within the extended family where elderly suicide was *most* likely to occur. Watanabe et al. (1995) also found that two thirds of elderly suicide victims in this region lived in traditional three generation families and *none* lived alone. Although this region cannot be claimed to be representative of the experience of rural elderly throughout Japan, the above studies are suggestive of the havoc that the stress of physical and/or emotional health problems; the lack of social roles; psychological isolation and/or low levels of social interaction (especially with children, relatives, neighbors and friends); combined with rapidly occurring social and economic changes, can wreak upon frail and vulnerable elderly persons who lack adequate social support systems.

Although much more work is needed to flush out the nature and effectiveness of social support systems for both urban and rural Okinawan elderly in order to make firmer (evidence-based) conclusions, it has been suggested that the seemingly stronger social networks of rural elderly Okinawan women may be helping them to buffer stress and decrease psychological isolation, and this, in turn, may be connected to lower rates of associated depression and suicide, as well as to healthy aging, in these women (Naka et al. 1998; Taguchi et al. 1999; Sakihara et al. 2002; Willcox et al. 2007).

Exploring possible factors connected to healthy aging, Shibata et al. (1994) compared two demographically similar villages in Japan. One from Okinawa prefecture where life expectancy was among the longest within Japan and the other from Akita prefecture, where life expectancy was among the lowest within Japan. It



is interesting to note that the elderly Okinawan villagers were found to be employed longer, to have higher levels of social contact, lower levels of admission to hospital, and lower levels of disability (higher ADL), than their elderly counterparts in rural Akita. Living arrangements were also markedly different. Rates of living alone among elderly women from the rural Okinawan village were close to forty percent, while less than ten percent of the rural Akita women lived alone. Informal support differed between the villages with Akita elderly having family centered networks, while (similar to the present study) neighbor and friendship networks were found to be dominant in the rural Okinawan village. High rates of living alone in the Okinawan villages may necessitate that the elderly try to maintain their autonomy through employment, associations, and other means, and thus to have wider contacts with society-particularly with neighbors and friends, when seeking supportive relationships.

The above analysis notwithstanding, many factors affect the availability of social support and therefore impact upon the ability of elders to piece together an adequate social support system that will help them to remain healthy, autonomous, satisfied and living in the community. Generally speaking, in quantitative analyses it has been shown that situational factors, such as "functional health status" and/or "years of residence in a community", tend to show positive effects on availability of social support while "larger size of a community" and "male gender" tend to show negative effects (Koyano et al. 1994). Most research in Japan or the West tends to show that women are more likely than men to have neighbors and friends as available sources of emotional and instrumental support and, in general, tend to have wider social networks, while men are more likely to have family members (particularly their spouse) as the available source of long-term caregiving (Akiyama et al. 1997). The latter finding can be partly accounted for by the fact that men tend to marry women who are younger than themselves and that women tend to live longer than men, leaving women widowed and bereft of spousal caregiving support. Both social networks and social support show tendencies to decrease with age (Noguchi 1991; Koyano 1994; Johnson and Bayer 1997). Needless to say, physical proximity to family, extended relatives and/or neighbors and friends, as well as the ability to form strong emotional attachments, are also important factors for building adequate social support systems.

Rural dwelling elders who lack adequate social support are at higher risk for morbidity, mortality and institutionalization. Without a strong social support system, the only alternative for the elderly is to turn to community voluntary organizations or formal support services provided by the Village and/or the Township. Formal

support in the way of home-helpers, visiting nurses, day service, day care and other services offered under the recently introduced long-term care insurance system (*kaigo hoken*) helps to fill in the gaps that informal social support cannot possibly cover. Most of the formal services provided are meant to support the independent life of older people in the community and emphasize "aging in place," community care, and the improvement of quality of life and/or *ikigai* (meaning in life). These elderly welfare services support or augment family care for frail elderly still living with families and help keep those living alone functionally independent and active participants in community life. Thus, frailty (in terms of both physical and psychological functioning) among the elderly is now seen as a risk or burden that should be borne not only by the individual or family, but by society as a whole. It appears clear that without the formal community-based elderly welfare services now available to older people such as day care, day service, home-helpers and in recent years, a system of long-term care insurance (*kaigo hoken*), it is extremely doubtful that frail older persons could continue to live independently in rural villages with their diminished informal support networks, despite the strengthened peer relations and other positive adaptations that appear to have taken place in the social network systems of rural Okinawan elderly.

Further work emphasizing the qualitative aspects of social support systems of the rural Japanese elderly would be a welcome addition to the current focus on more quantitative work, both are essential in order to inform social welfare policy needs and to improve the quality of life of the growing population of older people in rural villages throughout Japan.

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# 沖縄の農村地域における高齢化、相互依存、 社会的支援システムの変化について

ドナルド・クレイグ・ウィルコックス

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## 抄録

この研究は、沖縄県のある農村地域における高齢者に対する社会支援の性質変容について調査したものである。近年まで、高齢者への社会支援システムに関して、家族の中心的な役割は必然的なものと見なされてきていた。特に親子関係は、親孝行（忠孝）という文化的規範を反映してきた。しかし、過疎地域の高齢者は、このような密度の高いサポートを子ども達に期待することがもはや困難になっている。近代化、都市化、過疎化などの社会・人口学的影響や社会変化のなか、高齢者は社会支援ネットワークをいかにして維持できるのだろうか。この調査テーマのもと、ある農村地域の高齢居住者とその子息、親戚、友人や隣人、そして高齢者を担当する福祉課職員に対し、参与的観察および半構造化面接による質的調査を実施した。その結果、高齢の村民は自らの加齢と低下した支援システムに直面しながらも、公的支援（この分析では調査に含まれていない）に加え、親密な高齢者間の相互支援（情緒的、手段的、提供的サポートを含む）により、自立を維持しようとしていることが明らかになった。日常の訪問、擬制的親族関係（親族関係に類する親密な関係）、作業（家事など）の共同分担、情報交換、贈答品、野菜やその他の物品の交換、その他相互扶助関係などである。さらに、慣習化された相互支援的社会関係で特に重要なものとして、友人関係とグループ組織（老人クラブ、模合、サークル等）の2つがあげられた。最後に、村民および遠隔地から共同体を支える旧村民とも相互支援関係を維持しようとする、「郷友会」の組織構築について考察している。この「郷友会」は特に熟年・高齢者を中心に機能しており、村民の相互支援関係およびアイデンティティの形成に役立っていることが示された。

キーワード：社会的支援、ソーシャル・サポート、相互依存、農村地域の高齢化、沖縄