

## LONGEVITY CULTURE IN OKINAWA, JAPAN

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Okinawa consists of many islands which scatter between Taiwan and Mainland Japan. Okinawa has a different history and culture from the Mainland, because it is close to China and Southeast Asia, and also because it was an independent country from the 15th to the 19th century. As you might know, Japan is the No. 1 country in the world in terms of the life expectancy. Among 47 prefectures in Japan, Okinawa always has the longest lifespan. Therefore, you may say that Okinawa is the No. 1 longevity community in the world if you consider communities which have a population of over one million.

For many years Okinawa has held national records in terms of health and longevity of the elderly. First of all, life expectancy is highest in Japan. That is, the life expectancies for the Japanese males and females in 1988 was 74.95 and 80.75 years, respectively, whereas those for the Okinawans were 76.34 and 83.70 years. Thus, the Okinawans live 2 or 3 years longer than the other Japanese. The second point is that the ratio of centenarians is the highest in Japan for more than 18 years. That is, the number of

Okinawan centenarians per 100,000 in 1990 was 14.59 while in Japan it was 2.99. The third point is that mortality resulting from the major causes of death such as cancer, heart disease and stroke is the lowest among all of Japanese prefectures. The fourth point is that the suicide rate of the elderly is much lower than in the other areas. The fifth point is that medical expense per prefectural citizen is also much lower than in the other areas.

A number of researchers have tried to find what the causes and factors of longevity for the Okinawans are. Particularly, the researchers at Ryukyu University(琉球大學校, 琉球는 Okinawa의 다른 명칭임) have explained them environmentally, medically, nutritionally, and socioculturally. I will summarize what they have pointed out so far. First of all, Okinawa is blessed with semitropical climate, with the average temperature 22 degrees Celcius(17 to 18 degree in winter). At the same time, the air is not polluted because there are very few heavy industries.

Second, the diet in Okinawa is really different from that of Mainland Japan. Animal protein intake is much higher in Okinawa because they have a long tradition of eating pork and goat in addition to fish. And this diet strengthens their blood vessels, reducing such diseases as stroke and heart attack. Third, they have a habit of eating lots of seaweed and tofu(두부). And they eat fresh vegetables all year round, so they are not accustomed to eating salted pickles with rice. According to a recent research, salt intake in Okinawa is about 8 grams/day per person whereas in the other areas of Japan it is 12-13 grams. This salt consumption is associated with high blood pressure and stomach cancer.

Fourth, there does not exist an obligatory retirement system in Okinawa, so people can work as long as they want. Economically Okinawa is the poorest district in Japan so the situation doesn't allow people to retire. There is scarcely any cultivated flat land, so the people must work in hilly gardens. These circumstances contribute to strengthen legs and lungs of the people in Okinawa. Fifth, their temperament is optimistic, open-minded, and easy-going. They prefer to relax and enjoy life, so life is less stressful than with other Japanese. Sixth, people in Okinawa highly respect and love the elderly. The spirit of respect for the elderly is very strong. This spirit, the moral principle, was imported directly from China and they still hold this spirit strongly. They are very filial to their elderly parents and grand-parents, and they take good care of them.

Seventh, they have a tradition of mutual support system called "Yuimarlu" (오키나와지방의 사투리임). And they help support the elderly who live alone without any family members. This kind of informal neighborhood support system is very active in Okinawa. Finally, the religion of Okinawa is ancestor worship. Ancestors live very close to the living. People talk and eat with ancestors. Sometimes all the family members get together, eat and dance in front of the grave yard. People realize that after they die they will be one of the ancestors and are worshiped by their descendants. Therefore, death anxiety is far less than with the average Japanese.

These factors seem to influence each other and contribute to the long lifespan in Okinawa. Furthermore, the author would like

to indicate the existence of a particular ritual, which he calls a longevity ritual. The longevity ritual is a ritual or ceremony, in which people celebrate the long life of a related person. This kind of ritual is often found in Japan. We celebrate Kanreki(還暦) at age 60, Koki(古稀) at 70, Kiju(喜壽) at 77, Sanju or Kasanoju(傘壽) at 80, Beiju(米壽) at 88, Sotsuju(卒壽) at 90, and Hakuju(白壽) at 99. People in Mainland Japan often celebrate Kanreki, Koki, Kiju and Beiju, but these events are mostly held in an informal family gathering. In contrast, in Okinawa, they usually do not celebrate Kanreki and Kiju, that is, age 60 and 70. They say, "To be celebrated at age 60 or 70 is a kind of shame. Even if you invite your friends for these rituals few people would dare to come."

Instead they hold a very big celebration at the ages of 85, 88, and 97 by the lunar calendar. These are the so-called longevity rituals in Okinawa which are celebrated not only by the family, relatives, friends and acquaintances, but also the whole community. Among them, the biggest celebration is at the age 97, which is called "kajimayar" in Okinawa. Kajimayar(오키나와의 사투리임) means windmill. They explain that the very old people would become childish again, and play with a windmill. Kajimayar is the grand ceremony with a large attendance. It is bigger than any other ceremonies, including weddings, in Okinawa. The family members of a long-lived person, long enough to celebrate the age 85, 88 or 97, usually make an acting committee to prepare for the ritual six months or one year in advance. Occasionally, they hold this ceremony in a big hall of a hotel, and several hundred people are invited. If it takes place in a small village or on a small

island, the entire community participates in the celebration, and they let the kajimayar person ride in an open car and make a parade throughout the village. The relatives who live far from Okinawa, for instance, in Tokyo or Osaka, often make a tour to attend the ceremony. The ceremony not only takes place at home and in a hotel, but is also held in nursing homes as well. It is the biggest party in a nursing home, where they sometimes make a parade out of the home, and the village headman of the old person's hometown would come and celebrate the person concerned.

Now let me consider why there is a longevity ritual such as I described here. First of all, in Okinawa, people hold sincere and foremost respect and a strong sense of celebration for their fellow countrymen who live long enough to reach the age 85, 88 or 97. They think that living long is a kind of achievement which not all people can necessarily attain. I'm sure that longevity has many things to do with one's genetic quality or one's fortune, but I am also convinced that it can be attained by one's continuous efforts. Particularly, in Okinawa, people have experienced many tragic history such as severe food shortage, so that they hold a special feeling of celebration to those who have overcome these miserable circumstances. Second, in Okinawa, there is a folk belief that a long-lived person has a certain supernatural power, and they also believe that they can share that power by participation in a longevity ritual. In this sense, "ayakaru" (あやかる: 행복한 사람을 닮아서 또는 그의 영향으로 복을 얻다) is the key word. "Ayakaru" means: to share similar good luck with a lucky person. All the participants utter this term such as, "I came here to ayakaru you"

or "Let me ayakaru for your longevity." People try to touch or shake hands with long-lived person, and try to receive a cup of sake from him.

Those who can not attend the ritual would often come and see the person another day. And other elderly who are ill in bed or senile take the trouble to ayakaru him. This behavior indicates that they believe the long-lived person has a supernatural power which attribute to his health and longevity. Last, the longevity ritual in Okinawa is not merely a family ritual but it is rather a community celebration. Twenty to thirty years ago anyone in the community, even those who happen to pass by, could participate in the longevity ritual of kajimayar. So it is really different from weddings and other ceremonies. In 1991 there was a kajimayar longevity ritual in a village of 229 residents, and the number of participants was more than 350. I'm sure the ritual itself has a role of activating the village life which is dull and monotonous. The long-lived person himself realizes this role, that if he or she lives long, the whole community will have a moment of excitement and vigor.

In conclusion, this author would like to indicate that, in Okinawa, there is a way of life in which: People live long, support the lives of the elderly, do not alienate the elderly, and celebrate their long lives. The author calls this way of life "longevity culture." The contents of the longevity culture are: (1) People live long. (2) They highly value longevity. (3) The elderly are active and useful. (4) People try to share the long-lived person's health and longevity. (5) They have various support systems for the eld-

erly. (6) The elderly have a number of occasions where they play the leading roles. (7) People never retire. (8) Death of a long-lived person is rather celebrated than mourned.

\* This paper is based on an oral presentation at the 4th Asia/Oceania Regional Congress of Gerontology held on November 1, 1991, in Yokohama, Japan. The author would particularly appreciate it if readers suggest the existence of any longevity rituals in Korea, or the idea of ayakaru in Korean societies. Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dr. Jun Katata, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University, 8-19- Nanakuma, Jonan-ku, Fukuoka 814-01, Japan.