

A Cross-cultural Comparison of Filipino and Rural Japanese Women

Etsuko SCULLY

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, a significant number of Filipino women have married into rural Japanese households— a minor trend made highly visible by the Japanese media. The reasons why these marriages have captured so much attention are closely associated with core Japanese values that exert a strong influence even though the country has long since converted from an agrarian to urban-centered society. In traditional Japanese families, the eldest son holds the Confucian responsibility of continuing the family line and, in many cases, the family business. In addition, many rural Japanese men who are the eldest sons in their families still feel a strong obligation to take care of their parents, whether they marry or not. Due to these and other traditions, young Japanese women tend to reject rural Japanese men as potential husbands, preferring instead to live in urban centers that offer better vocational and educational opportunities. These factors have contributed to the rural marriage crisis that has attracted so much media attention.

Relaxing strict immigration rules to allow the entry of Filipino women into rural communities has been tried as a one of several solutions to the problem. Despite the significant differences that exist between the cultures of Japan and the Philippines, many of these marriages have endured, yet some have failed. Yadotani (1988) and Higurashi (1989) have suggested that Japanese men and their families must become more sensitive to the realities of cross-cultural

marriage, especially since young rural males are more dependent compared to their urban counterparts on meeting potential marriage partners through their parents (Higurashi, 1989). Awareness of cultural differences need to go beyond Filipino women having similar skin, hair, and eye color as Japanese, or the simplistic perception of Filipino women as optimistic and friendly, or capable of speaking some Japanese (Sugai, 1985).

In this paper, the author will examine cultural, social, and historical factors behind the similarities and differences in the status of women in the two countries, which may help to explain the motivations for Filipino women to marry into Japanese households. An attempt will also be made to identify those factors that Filipino women take with them to Japan, and which make them acceptable to rural Japanese families. It is believed that to understand this phenomenon it is important to consider similarities and differences in women's roles in each country, especially in response to expectations dictated by their respective male-dominated socio-economic structures. Most importantly, differences in conscious and unconscious attitudes toward marriage between Japanese and Filipino women need to be considered.

1. Japanese Values

(1) Historical Background

Traditional Japanese rules describing male-dominated relationships and female conduct were first published in *Onna no Shikitari*, written during the country's Edo period (1603-1867). Japanese women had been subjugated by strict rules dictated by men since feudal times, and the book served to formalize and reinforce gender separation and inequality based on a combination of Confucian and Samurai ethical codes. Uchiyama (1985) notes that during the Meiji restoration period (1868-1911), the central argument of *Onna no Shikitari* was re-interpreted into a new concept, which he described as "womanhood" — a combination of domestic duties, maternal responsibilities, and filial obedience to mothers-in-law and husbands. This view of women was more friendly, but their status still depended on gaining approval from autocratic husbands. This societal bias remained virtually unchanged until the end of World War II.

During the post-war period, extended families gave way to nuclear families, and for the first time ever Japanese women held a small amount of domestic power from the very beginning of their married lives. Their primary roles, however, remained the same: bearing children, looking after their husbands' needs, and caring for all other family members. Their focus was on the home, their world was described as *uchi shakai* (meaning "inside society"), and their expected behaviors remained centered around the traditional "womanly" traits of humility, servitude, and grace. While this traditional view has lost much of its grip on young women in urban areas, it maintains some strength in many parts of rural Japan.

A number of Japanese researchers, including Sugai (1985), Mitsuoka (1987, 1988b) and Higurashi (1989) have studied the issue of why rural Japanese men are currently having so many problems finding wives. Mitsuoka (1987) argues that one important reason is the historical lack of economic and social support given by the Japanese government to farmers and agricultural communities. He points out that during the period of intense poverty that existed in post-World

War II Japan, the government consciously chose to establish policies that encouraged young people to live and work in industrialized urban areas.

Another important factor concerns the major improvements that have occurred in women's education. By 1987, Japanese high schools boasted a 95.8% enrollment rate for male and female students in 1998, 49.1% of all Japanese high school graduates entered colleges and universities (Education Ministry, 1999). The current generation of intelligent, creative, and ambitious Japanese women have expectations of better lives and more equal marriages. According to his survey of 1,506 high school- and college-aged Japanese females, Mitsuoka (1987) found that 59.4% wanted to marry college graduates, and that 61.7% wanted to marry for romantic love. Many of his respondents stated that they did not want to live with their spouse's parents, and that they preferred marrying businessmen instead of farmers for reasons of income and lifestyle.

(2) Family Roles

In domestic affairs, Japanese women hold more power than men, but that power stems from an unequal social structure. According to Vogel (1977), a Japanese housewife's responsibilities are clear: enhance and protect the well-being of her children and husband. Since both men and women are subject to intense abuse and manipulation by the Japanese political-economic system, these responsibilities are taken very seriously; the support of a loyal wife is viewed as indispensable to a Japanese man. One central reason is that children's education in Japan must be managed very closely because individual success is highly dependent on educational achievements from grade school on. As Makiyama (1992) points out that the average Japanese secondary school student spends 12 hours a day studying—including Saturdays and Sundays. Japanese mothers must give large amounts of emotional (encouragement and criticism) and financial (from part-time jobs) support to children who are subjected to the intense pressures of this system.

A housewife's other major responsibility is to provide support for her husband. Typically, Japanese men feel stronger allegiances to their companies than to their families, as illustrated by a 1988 government survey showing that most (Makiyama, 1992). Given this sacrifice, housewives are expected to act responsibly towards their husbands' careers by creating "proper" home environments and by taking care of all business related to child raising. While the dependent attitudes which Japanese women adopt are useful for becoming successful housewives, they work against individual women wishing to embark on business or political careers. Although Japanese women are aware of the gender-based discrimination which exists in their country, the majority usually accept their situations without complaint.

(3) Cultural Values

Japanese culture places great importance on the preservation of relationships based on social structure and the family system; ideally, each paves the way for smooth and harmonious relationships that are the foundation of Japan's hierarchical social structure. At the core of this structure are the concepts of conformity, obligation, and harmony. Kitano (1976) also adds the central cultural values of human sensibility and modesty to this list, especially in the form of *enryo*—best translated as "modesty in the presence of one's superiors and others outside the

family." Aggressive and independent social behavior is considered unacceptable because it leads to the breakdown of harmony, conformity, and obligation. An effective deterrent to such behavior is the sensitivity with which Japanese pay attention to what others think about them. Fear of shame or making a fool of oneself in front of others effects strong control over public behavior.

These values are reinforced by the Japanese educational system. Students have no choice but to give full respect to superiors in the pursuit of good grades. When compared to their American counterparts, Japanese students are extremely quiet, obedient, and hesitant to the point that they will not ask questions no matter how confused they are about a subject. Westerners who teach in Japan quickly learn about *enryo* when they notice that their students are terrorized at the thought of standing in front of their classmates and making a mistake out loud.

2. Filipino Values

(1) Women's Responsibilities

Traditional Filipino families are also structured along authoritarian lines. Women tend to stay at home and manage household affairs, and are expected to follow norms of obedience to all members of their extended families—especially their in-laws (Das & Bardis, 1979). While this might be considered identical to rural Japanese values, Filipino women enjoy a more dominant and influential position within their households. In addition, unlike most Asian cultures, many Filipino women also receive support from their natal families. Responsibilities are the same for women in both countries: children's education, family health care, housework, budgeting, and economic security. During the 300-plus years of Spanish influence (1521-1899), Filipino husbands maintained positions of legal dominance, but more recent Western influences have led to greater equality for women both inside and outside the home. Filipino women are much more active economically, politically, and socially compared with Japanese women, and are much more likely to fill the multiple roles of wife, mother, business partner and financial contributor to the family. Filipino women share responsibility for family finances with their husbands, in large part because—as Gonzalez and Hollunsteiner (1976) point out—they are viewed as having "an occupational and economic role to perform not only for the family but also for the country as a whole. This attitude stems from modern values of gender equality, but also from the economic realities inherent to the Philippines and the desire to improve individual family living standards.

In addition to domestic and economic spheres, Filipino women are more integrated than Japanese women in terms of community activities (Gonzalez & Hollunsteiner, 1976)—that is, men and women share responsibility for Filipino social and political affairs. Ever since Corazon Aquino—the widow of a dissident Senator who spent most of her life in the traditional role of supporting her husband's career—became the country's first post-Marcos regime President, the participation of women in these areas has become increasingly accepted. A sense of egalitarianism also exists in Filipino civic and religious activities to a much greater degree than that normally found in Asian countries.

In addition to child raising, women are expected to work in order to improve their families'

chances for social mobility. As a result, they have equal legal privileges with men inside and outside the home, although many cases of gender discrimination can still be found in both arenas. While mothers are responsible for maintaining family health and providing such basic material needs as food, they share responsibility for disciplining their children with their husbands — usually along same-sex lines.

(2) Core Cultural Values

Filipino families show a strong concern for discipline and obedience as a means of protecting familial reputations and fostering what is referred to as *pakikisama*, or "smooth interpersonal relationships." Directly translated from Tagalog, *pakikisama* also means "to get along with and accommodate," an idea reflected in the Filipino willingness to accept outsiders on a social basis and to avoid open aggressiveness and conflict, and the reason why Filipinos have a reputation for openness and friendliness to strangers.

Two additional concepts of great importance to interpersonal relationships are *utang-na-loob* and *kapwa*. According to the ideal of *utang-na-loob*, people are encouraged to stay out of debt and to show gratitude by returning favors given in the form of emotional support, money, or material goods. Regarding family life, the *utang-na-loob* concept spells out the duty that parents have to raise their children, and the obligation of children to show respect and obedience in return. *Kapwa*, meaning "to share one's inner self," is very important to psychological stability. *Kapwa* is closely tied to the Filipino kinship system and the value of cohesiveness, by which individuals depend on extended and nuclear families for protection, intimacy, and assistance. All parents are expected to teach the three concepts of *pakikisama*, *utang-na-loob*, and *kapwa* to their children, since they serve as the basis for the most important value of Filipino culture: building and preserving personal relationships based on the family unit system (Schwalbenberg, 1993).

Based on these concepts, one might surmise that Filipino cultural values are compatible with those held by traditional Japanese families. However, a major distinction exists in the way that Filipino and rural Japanese women view themselves. The latter do not see themselves as occupying unequal positions with men because most have never challenged the domestic support ideals taught to them in their youth. Also, while Filipino women are currently very active in terms of organizing for equal rights and other political freedoms, feminist ideology is not widely supported by Japanese women because it challenges deep-seated perceptions of proper social, emotional, and economic dependencies.

3. Comparative Marriage Motives

As Mitsuoka (1988a) points out, the large majority of young Japanese women prefer marrying salaried workers to farmers based on their desire to achieve economic security. Farming not only lacks financial stability, it also entails a great deal of hard physical labor. In addition, relationships between young wives and mothers-in-law--rarely considered easy in any household--tend to be most difficult in rural families, as new brides have traditionally been expected to bear the brunt of housework duties without expectations of economic reward or

freedom. Therefore, most Japanese mothers now discourage their daughters from marrying farmers or anyone else from rural areas, and instead encourage them to get good educations so that they can marry more sophisticated husbands. This partly explains why over one-third of all Japanese women are graduates of colleges or universities (California State Department of Education, 1987).

In contrast, Filipino women view marriage as their most important opportunity for social and economic mobility, with many describing marriage in terms of "a better future for myself and my children" (Buttny, 1987). Thus, many Filipino women consider marriage into a Japanese family as a wise tradeoff: economic security and social mobility for themselves and their children in return for leaving their home country. Many believe that they will gain in status by marrying a Japanese due to the many stories they've heard about Japan's national wealth; most are severely disappointed when they discover that the status of Japanese farmers is very low.

A second similarity in marital patterns between the two countries concerns arranged marriages. While rapidly disappearing in many parts of Japan because of Western influences, the practice endures in some rural areas. However, a matchmaker's job has never been more difficult than it is today, since so many young Japanese females wish to marry for romance, or at least desire to make their own decisions in terms of life partners. In the Philippines, arranged marriages still exist because "marriage is viewed as an alliance between two families and kin groups, not simply between two individuals. Arranged marriages still take place in spite of the strong desire of Filipino women to also make their own choices. Buttny (1987) reported that 45% of Filipino women interviewed for a study on marriage patterns expressed a desire to marry for love. Primarily for reasons of social and economic mobility, inter-marriage (that is, marital unions between people of different linguistic, racial, or religious backgrounds) is quite common in Filipino society (Das & Bardis, 1979). This includes the significant number of marriages between Filipino women and rural Japanese men that occur today; so far, the phenomena seems acceptable to both sides, but the results (in terms of enduring unions versus divorce) have been mixed.

Finally, it is important to discuss the notion of fate as part of the vocabulary of motive for Filipino marriages. Buttny (1987) describes fate as a lack of control over unknown or unexplainable events or situations, adding that fate does not admit [to] rationalistic considerations in marriage partner selection. The motive of fate suggests an irrational dimension. The Filipino wives of Japanese men that I have spoken with frequently use the fate concept to justify their cross-cultural marriages, although more detailed interviews reveal economic considerations to be equally if not more important. But clearly, social and economic mobility are more important motivating factors than romance and love in Filipino women's decisions to marry into Japanese families.

4 . Conclusion and Implications

The number of cross-cultural unions between Filipino women and rural Japanese men reflects the increasing need of those men to travel farther and farther outside their communities to find

suitable marriage partners. These marriages are considered acceptable to traditional Japanese families, who watch many young women leave their villages to achieve better educations, more freedom of choice, and higher standards of living than ever imagined by their parents or grandparents. Older generations of farmers and other rural residents must face the reality that the vast majority of young Japanese women are choosing the economic security associated with marrying office workers over the hard physical labor associated with agricultural lifestyles; they must also acknowledge the de-emphasis of traditional expectations that wives completely devote themselves to their husbands, children, and mothers-in-law. Vestiges of these values can be found in Japanese and Filipino cultural traditions (especially those values associated with women's roles and gender divisions within families), and so Japanese men have turned to the Philippines as a source of acceptable wives.

These cross-cultural marriages face at least three major challenges: discrepancies between marital expectations, difficulties encountered in cultural adaptation, and lack of communication due to either cultural contrasts or linguistic constraints. Many rural Japanese men fully expect their new brides to immediately behave as would be expected of traditional women--that is, to focus their complete attention on housework and taking care of family needs. In contrast, Filipino women not only want economic security for themselves and their children, they also want their husbands to provide money for their families in the Philippines. While these differences in expectations are important, perhaps the most crucial problem arises when the children born to cross-cultural couples attend school and are forced to contend with racial discrimination. For the most part, non-Japanese are viewed as untrustworthy outsiders regardless of whether or not their passports show them to be Japanese citizens. This may make it difficult for mixed-race children to marry or to gain equal access to employment opportunities outside of farming.

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(Etsuko SCULLY)