



Reasons for gateball participation among older Japanese

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Abstract. This article focuses upon a game known as gateball which is popular among older Japanese. The game is described and patterns of social behavior among gateball players are also discussed. Using data collected from an open-ended questionnaire, participant observation on a gateball team, and a series of semi-structured interviews with older people living in a rural region of Japan, some of the reasons behind participation in gateball are explored. These motives are then placed into the context of changing patterns of social interaction between younger and older Japanese and are also discussed in terms of the presence of age grading practices which structure the life course for many Japanese living in rural areas. The data for this article were collected during approximately two years of ethnographic fieldwork in northern Japan.

Keywords: Gateball, Japan, Rural elderly, Age grading, Exercise and aging, Intergenerational conflict

People in their 40s and 50s are different from us. They grew up differently from us. Young people get tired of listening to old people. The way old people talk doesn't come into their heads well, it doesn't make sense.

88-year-old Japanese woman

Introduction

One of the most pervasive images associated with old age in Japan is a game known as gateball. According to the Japan Gateball Union, over six million Japanese play gateball. Although no precise data on the ages and number of participants are available, the Japan Gateball Union estimates that 75 to 80 percent of participants are over the age of sixty-five (personal communication, 27 July 1995). This translates to roughly 4.5 million gateball players over the age of sixty-five, which in turn means nearly one quarter of the over-sixty-five population of Japan plays the game at least to some extent. Community centers and parks throughout Japan have gateball courts permanently laid-out for regular use and gateball teams compete in local, regional, prefectural, and national gateball tournaments.

As important an activity in the lives of many older Japanese as gateball represents, there has been limited research in the anthropological and gerontological literature on the game even in Japanese (Hara & Iwamoto 1986; Iwamoto 1984). In English, Kathleen Kalab has provided a general description of gateball and its players, and discussed participation in terms of its importance as a strategy for exercising both mind and body (Kalab 1992). Kalab's research was conducted in the city of Osaka, the second largest metropolitan area in Japan. Here, my primary concern is to begin exploring the role gateball plays in the lives of some older Japanese living in a predominantly rural part of the country.

In general, the findings presented here are very similar to those of Kalab. However, I intend to extend her argument concerning the importance of gateball for exercising mind and body to suggest that this exercise is in large part directed toward the goal of delaying or preventing a folk category of senile dementia known as *boke* (Traphagan 1998b). Furthermore, I will suggest that participation in gateball functions as a framework through which older people can limit social interactions to their age-peers, and, thus, insulate themselves from social change.

Methods

Data for this article were collected during three different field trips, totaling twenty-six months, in 1994, 1995–1996, and 1998. The longest segment of research was conducted in a hamlet called Jônai, which is located in the town of Kanegasaki, and that field trip forms the primary source of data and focus for this article. The Kanegasaki data were augmented by data collection in a neighboring city called Mizusawa. The field sites are located in a largely agricultural part of the Tōhoku region of northern Japan. I call this area 'rural' because it is associated with the word *inaka*, which means rural countryside and often implies a sense of backwardness. However, one must be very careful in the use of this term in Japan, because 'rural' places like Kanegasaki and Mizusawa also may have rather developed industrial capacities. Both Mizusawa and Kanegasaki, for example, have access to a superhighway, local train lines, and the bullet train. Kanegasaki also is the location of an industrial park that includes automobile, semiconductor, and pharmaceutical production facilities (Traphagan 1997). Hence, my use of the term rural is intended primarily to set Kanegasaki and its environs off from large urban centers and to underscore that in the minds of many Japanese, the Tōhoku region as a whole is viewed as being remote, traditional, and comparatively backward. As Keith Brown has noted, the area is sometimes disparagingly referred to as the 'Tibet of Japan' (Brown 1979).

Methods of data collection included participation in regular gateball practices and gateball tournaments from March 1995 through June 1996. In addition, an open-ended questionnaire was administered to members of the gateball team to which I belonged, and a forced-choice questionnaire was administered to residents over the age of 60 of Jônai. Data were also collected via a series of semi-structured interviews that were carried out with approximately 70 residents of Kanegasaki and Mizusawa who were over the age of 60. These interviews were semi-structured in that although questions were organized around the specific theme of quality of life issues for older people, conversations were allowed to widely diverge from the main subject matter in relation to the interests of informants.

The game of gateball

Gateball is perhaps most easily described as 'team croquet'. It employs balls and mallets similar to those used in croquet and players attempt to hit their own balls through wickets, or gates as they are called in gateball, with the ultimate goal of hitting their balls against a post, while preventing other players from doing the same. Unlike croquet, however, a gateball match is played by two teams, each of which has five players, and points are scored for passing gates and hitting the post. Ball colors are alternated so that ball number-one is red with a white number, ball number-two is white with a red number, ball number-three is red with a white number, and so on. Players for the two teams wear bibs that are numbered to match the numbers of the balls that they are using. The red team consists of players using balls and wearing bibs numbered 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9. The white team consists of players using balls and wearing bibs numbered 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10. In tournament play, each team also has a team captain who calls strategies and who may or may not be a playing member of the team.

Gateball is played on a rectangular, gravel court that measures between 20 and 25 meters on one side and 15 and 20 meters on the other. The court has three gates through which balls are directed and one post at the center of the court and is surrounded by a warning-zone that is one meter in width (Nihon gaatobôru rengô 1995: 6). Inside the warning-zone, there is a batter's box from which each player puts his or her ball into play by sending it from the batter's box through the first gate (Nihon gaatobôru rengô 1995: 4).

Strategic thinking is an important aspect of gateball. Players on each team cooperate in moving through the gates by sending their teammates' balls into positions advantageous to the team. At the same time, players will attempt to block the opposing team from progressing through the gates by using strategies such as sending the opposing team's balls out-of-bounds or slowing

the progression of the opposing team through careful ball-placement. Players continually must calculate the positions of the balls and keep track of which numbered ball is in which location. The sequence of turns is particularly important because players must calculate whose turn follows their own in order to select the best locations to send their own and their teammate's balls. Failure to note the positions of all balls at all times may result in a player sending his own ball or one of his teammate's balls into a situation that will result in that ball being sent out-of-bounds during the opposing team's next turn.

Players carefully send their own team's balls into positions that will set-up situations in which several balls can be sent through a gate during one person's turn, or in which a teammate can send threatening balls of the opposing team out-of-bounds. In addition to planning strategies, players must take care to avoid rule infractions that result in penalties. For example, when attempting to send-off another ball, a player places her foot on her own ball and then carefully places the touched-ball next to her own ball. If she accidentally hits her own ball with her mallet, or if her foot slips, her ball is placed out-of-bounds and her turn ends. All of this is done under the pressure of a time-clock, as matches are limited to thirty minutes (for a detailed discussion of gateball strategy, see Traphagan 1997: 151–171).

Gateball players

In 1986, the Japanese public television network, NHK, aired a month-long, nine-part special series on gateball that described the rules of the game and gave instruction on both techniques and strategies. Accompanying this television series was a magazine which people could use to follow the progression of the series and to study the information presented in each installment. Interestingly, the front cover of the magazine shows a woman who looks as though she is in her twenties playing gateball along with an early teenage girl, a middle-aged man, a middle-aged woman, and an older-looking man. Participants in the televised program included several young women in addition to a group of older people, and the magazine contained several advertisements throughout the book showing young people holding gateball mallets, playing gateball, or families playing gateball together. Many involved with organizing gateball are interested in presenting the game as being appropriate for people of all ages. Workers in community centers often state that they encourage family participation in gateball and want to have people of all ages, particularly children, involved. And in some cases, this actually occurs; in the summer of 1995, a gateball tournament reported in the television news included participants aged from middle-school into their mid-

eighties. In fact, according to the Japan Gateball Union, at present gateball clubs exist in some elementary schools (personal communication, 27 July 1995).

Nonetheless, as noted above, most who participate in gateball are people over the age of sixty-five. Of two gateball groups to which I have belonged, all players have been over sixty, the majority being between the ages of seventy and eighty. The reason for this is connected to both the tendency in Japanese society to structure many group activities around notions of age-appropriateness and also, in rural areas, to organize such activities within the context of formal age-grade associations (Traphagan 1998a). In Jônai, as in many other parts of rural Japan (Suenari 1981a, 1981b), segregation of individuals into different age-grade associations for the purpose of participation in group social activities and allocation of specific community work responsibilities is structurally built-in to hamlet administrative organization. This pattern of social organization historically has been an important feature of rural Japanese society and has been described by several anthropologists (Embree 1939; Hendry 1981; Norbeck 1953; Traphagan 1998a).

Although there is no longer a formal limitation on who can participate in gateball practices – up until two years ago only members of the Old Persons Club¹ (OPC) could participate – in Jônai one has to belong to the OPC in order to participate in tournament play. This effectively limits participation to those over the age of sixty. Sometimes rules about age-related association membership are relaxed in order to satisfy the interests of people who desire to participate in a certain activity. For example, one of the current members of the Jônai gateball team decided she wanted to join the team at the age of fifty-eight, shortly after returning to the hamlet after living away for much of her adult life. She had been playing gateball where she was living in another part of the prefecture, and where the rules for participation were different, and wanted to continue in Jônai. This presented a problem for hamlet leaders, because her age meant that the appropriate group for her to join was the Women's Association, which one usually leaves before joining the OPC at sixty-five (Traphagan 1998a). In her case, she ended up becoming the youngest member of the OPC so that she could play gateball while retaining her membership in the Women's Association. In my own situation as a researcher, the rules were also relaxed to allow me to participate in one tournament. However, later the head of my gateball team was told by higher level officials that I should not be allowed to participate in tournament play unless it was limited to the relatively informal tournaments held among teams located in the immediate area around Jônai. These tournaments have no connection to the formal gateball tournament association that operates at the

prefectural level. Although exceptions exist, the normal pattern is that people begin playing gateball around the time they join the OPC.

Indeed, it is quite unusual in rural areas, at least, to find a person under age 65 playing gateball. When asked if they play gateball, people below the age of sixty-five often respond similarly to one 59-year-old woman who stated rather emphatically, and perhaps even a bit irritatedly, 'Me? I'm still too young for gateball; that's a game old people play'. Another woman I asked if she was interested in playing gateball, and who was thirty-seven at the time, laughed and said 'no, no, no, that would be embarrassing'. Indeed, while observing a gateball match in Mizusawa, I asked a man who was awaiting his turn if I could play, too, and he told me 'no, no, gateball is a game for the elderly, young people don't play gateball. Young people like games that are fast, gateball is too slow for them'. When I asked him if young people ever play gateball, he answered rather directly, 'no', and reiterated his comments about the pace of the game being too slow for young people (I was thirty-two at the time).

It is important to recognize that gateball only incorporates a small group of the older residents of Jônai. There are seventy-three members of the OPC in Jônai, of which only fifteen belong to the gateball team. Although the game is popular among many older people, there are many others who, in fact, find the game quite unattractive. Reasons for non-participation that have been mentioned by other members of the OPC include lack of time or a feeling that gateball is a waste of time. Another reason several informants have mentioned is a feeling that the gateball team is a closed group whose members can include only those who have been playing for a long time and who are skilled at the game. This image exists despite the fact that members of the gateball team have been actively seeking new members. In connection with this, some who view the group as exclusive frequently comment that the manner of interaction during play, which tends to be quite blunt and often includes orders from the team captain, is not to their liking. These people describe gateball as an *ijime* game, which suggests that those who are active in directing strategy are bullying the others. This image exists among some who play the game, as well. For example, one informant left her team in Kanegasaki and joined a team in Mizusawa which is near her part-time job. She stated that she left the Kanegasaki team because she didn't like the bullying atmosphere that was, in her view, caused by one member. She said, 'although the atmosphere of the team may have changed since that time, I prefer to be on the Mizusawa team because it is more relaxed and fun'.

Within a gateball team, physical and psychological factors play a role in determining the manner in which one participates in gateball activities. For example, two players in Jônai, Mr Abe and Mrs Morinaga, participate in prac-

tices on a regular basis, but generally opt out of participation in tournaments. Typically, they attend tournaments and cheer-on the other team members. However, they only enter tournament play as alternates in certain situations where one of the regular players is not performing well. Both of these players have gradually withdrawn from tournament play, citing their advanced age (Mrs Morinaga is 83 and Mr Abe is 80) as the main reason for reducing participation. Mr Abe stated that he finds the tournament situation too stressful because there are too many people telling him what he should do and he becomes confused by all of the suggestions. He said that he enjoys playing gateball to spend time with friends and to get some fresh air and exercise, but prefers to avoid the more stressful aspects of the game. Mrs Morinaga stated that she avoids tournament play because it requires her to spend too much time standing. She had hip-replacement surgery five years prior to our conversation and finds it tiring to stand for long periods of time. During practices, she can sit-down and rest, or even return home, when she feels tired or has pain, but tournaments usually last all-day, and when in the midst of a match it is difficult for her to take a break whenever she feels uncomfortable.

Social relations on the gateball court

Wider patterns of male/female interaction in Japanese society, which tend to delegate domestic responsibilities to women and non-domestic to men, are reproduced within the framework of gateball (Lebra 1976; Long 1987: 48–49). In all cases I have observed, women are solely responsible for making sure that tea and snacks are brought to every practice and an appropriate picnic lunch is prepared for tournaments. In some cases men will bring their own lunches to tournaments, but these are usually prepared by women in their families or bought from a local store. Although there is no formal restriction prohibiting women from holding positions in the gateball group that are endowed with some degree of symbolic capital, understood in Bourdieu's sense of the term as the ability to impose one's own ideas upon others, these are predominately occupied by men (Bourdieu 1977). These positions include the directorships of local, town-wide, and regional gateball groups and organizations, team captains, and officials at gateball tournaments. At one tournament in which I participated the officials – twenty in all – were entirely male. Planning for local gateball tournaments is handled by the heads of each hamlet Old Persons Club, all of whom are male.

In addition to holding most official positions throughout local and regional gateball organizations, men often control many of the decision-making activities on the gateball court during play, particularly when it comes to the issue of planning strategies and in relation to decisions about penalty infractions.

In one tournament in which I participated, for example, of twenty teams, all but one of the team captains were men. The lone woman captain was also a playing member of a team that consisted entirely of women. The dominance of males in official and decision-making positions is readily evident by looking at the distribution of umpires in Kanegasaki. There are a total of 130 umpires in Kanegasaki, of which 107 (82%) are men and 23 (18%) are women. Umpires are required to take examinations, for which there are three levels. Those qualified to umpire at the upper levels and, thus, to be involved with higher-level decision making in tournaments, are also primarily men. Of fifteen people qualified at level two, only two are women (13%). Both of the individuals qualified at level one are male. One woman who belongs to the Jônai team states that she is studying for the level 1 exam and hopes to become the first woman in Kanegasaki to achieve level 1 status.

There is, of course, variation in these patterns. For example, social interactions in one group I have observed show a less clearly defined division along gender lines in terms of strategizing. During both practices and tournaments members of the group, which consists of about an equal number of men and women, usually consult each other about the best shots, and one woman is often the strategist, particularly during practices and sometimes in tournaments. She has also passed the exam for umpiring and officiating at gateball tournaments and participates in this capacity on a regular basis at tournaments. Nonetheless, in situations where there is debate over the best strategies or in tournament play where quick decisions are necessary, men dominate the decision-making process and women tend to defer to the decisions of the males.

In general, gateball practices and tournaments can be characterized as opportunities for jovial, relaxed camaraderie and friendship. Most gateball practices I have observed include breaks for tea and crackers, and tournaments are as much opportunities for the group to picnic together as they are to compete against other gateball teams. At most practices where there are more than ten people present, players draw lots to determine who will play for a particular practice round, during which time those who are not playing will watch the match and chat or gossip among themselves while eating homemade foods and drinking tea. Indeed, whether practice or tournament, the pungent smell of Japanese pickled daikon (*takuan*) permeates the area around these groups of people engaged in relaxed conversation as they await their turn to play.

Participants are under little or no pressure to attend practices or tournaments. Members of the gateball groups I have observed go and come to and from practices as their schedules and physical conditions allow. As tournaments approach, the tone of practice becomes more serious and intense, and

during the last week prior to a tournament the number of practices increases and the practices themselves often become simulations of tournament play. But there is no pressure to participate in tournament play; usually a few weeks prior to a tournament members are asked who wants to join for that tournament and those interested pay an entrance fee which is usually around ¥1,000 in Jônai.² There are also special tournaments for which participation requires membership in other organizations such as the Agricultural Cooperative Tournament, which is limited to people who have some sort of connection to the cooperative. In these events, team members who are not associated with the organization often go to the tournament to cheer-on their team and to chat with various people they know from neighboring villages. In some cases, people who want to participate find ways around such restrictions. In one tournament I observed, a woman who was the only member of her team not connected to the agricultural cooperative managed to play along with her teammates by covering her head with a scarf and pulling her hat down low over her eyes to avoid being noticed. Finally, if one chooses not to enter the tournament, there is no pressure to refrain from participation in practices immediately prior to a tournament. In short, gateball provides a relaxed context in which older individuals in Jônai can enjoy the company of members of their own age-cohort.

Reasons for playing gateball

When discussing reasons behind participation in gateball, informants express very clear ideas about why they play. In an open-ended questionnaire given to members of the gateball team in Jônai (n = 11), two common themes related to reasons for playing gateball arose. First, all respondents mentioned the importance of gateball as a means of maintaining one's health, both mentally and physically. Second, all but one stated that gateball is important as a context in which they can enjoy 'communication', 'interaction', and 'conversation' with others. Below are some of the comments informants wrote in response to the question, 'why do you participate in gateball?'

It is like a social gathering and a good opportunity for us (older people), who tend to be lonely, to talk. Also there are about ten tournaments that usually bring about 300 people together and we can communicate with people outside of our group.

1. I can get together with elderly people (*kôreisha*). 2. Strategies are interesting and very detailed, so I can prevent myself from becoming *boké*. 3. It is an outdoor sport and good for your health.

I live only with my husband. I have work as a housewife, but it does not satisfy me. Gateball for me is for health, friendship, reducing stress, and getting information on society. With gateball my life satisfies me. (Social gathering) I can hear different stories that are in society. It is also for prevention of becoming *boke* in old age. I can play no matter how old I am.

In casual conversations with members of the gateball team, these themes usually arise in discussing participation in gateball, with particular emphasis placed on the themes of social gathering and avoidance of the folk category of senile dementia known as *boke*. Concern over becoming *boke* is a major point older residents of Jônai mention when talking about both the process of aging and reasons for activities in which they are involved. There is an extensive popular literature on how to avoid becoming *boke* through keeping active and many of the older people in Jônai regularly take out books from the library that deal with this issue (Hayakawa 1992; Kikkawa 1995). In a semi-structured interview conducted with fifty residents over the age of sixty living in Jônai, concern over becoming *boke* or bed-ridden and, thus, a burden to family members, was among the most frequently cited worries of old-age.

Becoming *boke* is socially constructed by older people in terms of burdening one's family with long-term care (Traphagan 1998a). The *boke* person is problematic in Japanese society because he or she is the recipient of unidirectional help, while Japanese social norms place great emphasis on reciprocity and interdependence (Lebra 1976). Having been helped by another entails having incurred an obligation to return that help at some later date. The *boke* person is unable to do this because the condition is usually seen as one from which people cannot recover (Traphagan 1998a). In fact, for many informants the avoidance of becoming *boke* is a matter of personal responsibility. Some informants indicate directly that becoming *boke* is embarrassing because it suggests that one was too lazy to have made the efforts to prevent it (Traphagan 1998b).

Avoidance or delay of becoming what is called a '*boke* old person' is perceived as being possible through engaging in activities that exercise mind and body – a goal that is accomplished through mental and physical exercise and social interaction. Older people frequently mention the value of having hobbies or activities like sewing or paper folding because many believe that using one's hands is helpful in preventing the onset of *boke*. The use of the hands in activities that require dexterity is viewed as requiring concentration that exercises one's brain. Other activities, although not requiring use of the hands, such as Japanese chess (*shôgi*), are also perceived as being helpful in exercising the mind because they require strategic thinking. As for gateball, both physical and thought-oriented actions are involved. The complex strate-

gies mentioned above, combined with the physical acuity needed to control the stick and regulate the power with which one hits balls and stamina needed to stand for long periods of time, are seen by many participants as a way to exercise body and mind. Through such exercise people believe they may be able to prevent or at least delay the onset of mental and physical decline that could lead to becoming bed-ridden or *boke* and, thus, becoming a burden to family members.

As Kalab notes, players view the game as requiring and helping people in maintaining 'good physical condition and an alert and sharp mind' (Kalab 1992: 37). By staying mentally and physically fit, older people believe they can delay the onset of *boke* and, thus, maintain the ability to function within the framework of interdependencies and reciprocal obligations that characterize normal social behavior and fundamentally define one as a human being in the Japanese context (Plath 1980: 217). In this sense, gateball can be understood as providing a means to maintain one's ability to function as a social entity.

Gateball as a context for social interaction

As noted in the above questionnaire responses, a significant reason for participation in gateball is that it provides opportunities for socializing with others of the same age-cohort. While social interaction is viewed as being helpful in preventing the onset of *boke*, it is necessary to place the emphasis on having a context where people can socialize with age-peers into the broader milieu of social interactions between younger and older Japanese. Several gateball players as well as other older individuals state that they feel as though their age peers, the older residents of Jōnai, are like family. Although this attitude extends beyond the bounds of the gateball team, the gateball team is clearly one expression of the closeness many older members of the community feel toward each other (while it also has a way of creating divisions among some older residents, as well). Social bonds between players on the gateball team are normally strong; players refer to each other using first names plus the diminutive ending *chan* or *kun*. This is a pattern of speech normally reserved for close friendships and family relations and, thus, is an indicator of social relationships that lack formality and a necessity for reliance upon age and status hierarchies that generate social distance. As the spouse of one gateball player, who is in his mid-seventies, intimated during a group outing to a public bath for the hamlet gateball and ground golf (another game played primarily by older people) teams,

when I'm with these people I can relax and I don't have to worry about anything. See those pickles [he pointed to some of the home-made pickles one of the women had brought as he spoke], we don't have to worry about eating fancy foods, but can just enjoy simple, home-made foods we like.

Home-made foods, particularly pickled daikon, carry symbolic value for many older people. Served at social occasions with tea or alcoholic beverages, these foods are perceived as being representative of the tastes of their generation as opposed to younger generations. Older people view highly salty foods like Japanese pickles as appealing to themselves, but state that most younger people eschew those flavors in favor of sweet, pre-packaged foods available at supermarkets (it should be pointed out that the Tōhoku region is known for its salty foods). Many state that other members of the group and the hamlet are *shinboku*, which implies a sense of close familiarity or friendship.

Clearly, this sense of closeness and friendship is an important reason for participation in gateball. All of the people who belong to the gateball team also are regularly involved with other activities of the hamlet OPC such as membership in the ground-golf team, group outings to hot springs, dance and music classes (primarily women), and annual festivals and parties. There are occasional group outings for sight-seeing and study expeditions to places of local interest such as the large automobile factory in Kanegasaki's industrial park. Gateball is one of several activities through which older residents of Jōnai can enjoy friendship, have opportunities to engage in conversation, and experience feelings of group (generation or age-cohort) solidarity. For many in Jōnai, gateball is a natural outgrowth of a desire to spend time with people who have similar experiences and life-histories; neighbors along side whom they have married, raised children, and settled into the patterns of later life, and whose households have in many cases been interacting for as much as three-hundred years.

The fact that participation in most activities is based upon membership in a specific age group is important. This is due in part, as noted above, to the tendency in Japanese society to structure group activities around membership in broadly defined age groups and the manifestation of that tendency in rural areas in the form of age grading practices. But changing patterns of family structure also contribute to this. Recent research on aging in Japan has frequently noted the considerable increase in the number of older Japanese living alone or only with their spouse and the desire of many younger Japanese to live separately from their parents (Martin 1989). This trend has sometimes been associated with a phenomenon Long, drawing from the work of Hasegawa, describes as 'disappointed expectations of co-residence, lack of communication between spouses after retirement due to separate interests and

spheres of activity, [and] a sense of uselessness, and loneliness' (Long 1987: 72).

Although three-generation households continue to exist in Jônai and surrounding areas, the majority of households are two and one generation. In Jônai, of 129 households, 46 (35%) are one-generation, 51 (39%) are two generation, and only 32 (24%) are three generation. The mean household size is 3.2 people, with a maximum of eight people (one household) and a minimum of one person (sixteen households); the mode for household size is two, which represents thirty-nine households. Taken together, single and two-person households represent 42.6 percent of the households in Jônai. The mean age for single-person households is 64.5, which includes one individual who is 25; if that individual is excluded, the mean age is 67 with a range of 46 to 89. The mean age for two-person households is 58.6; this number includes some children living with single parents as well as older couples. There are sixty-two people in Jônai between the ages of zero and eighteen (inclusive), representing only 15 percent of the population.³

For those living either alone or with a spouse, gateball provides one way to cope with feelings of loneliness (as one informant noted in the open-ended questionnaire) and distance from children and grandchildren. Nonetheless, even within multi-generational households some older people mention dissatisfaction with social bonds among family members. One eighty-two-year-old gateball player told me during one of the semi-structured interviews:

Here in our household, for instance, everyone has a television in their own room and we all eat at different times. It is rare for all three generations to eat together. It is as though we are three separate families living in the same house.

While many older people in Jônai talk about a desire to live with children and grandchildren, or at least to live close to them, social interactions with younger people can be strained. Most people in Jônai over the age of sixty-five speak using a form of the Tōhoku dialect. This dialect is distinctly different from that of younger Japanese living in the same area, who tend to speak with a dialect more akin to 'standard' Japanese, which they learn in school and through television.⁴ Older people often comment that younger people cannot understand the vocabulary that they use because the dialect is so different and younger people often comment that they cannot understand their grandparents. As one 75 year-old-woman expressed it, a bit sadly, 'my grandchildren often ask me to repeat what I say. They use the standard dialect that they learn in school, so they often don't understand some of the vocabulary I use'. She went on to say that she thinks that this is very unfortunate because communication between younger and older people has

become difficult. Not only are speech patterns different between generations, but both younger and older residents of Jônai frequently comment that they do not understand the logic of the thought patterns the other uses. This is usually attributed to changes in the Japanese educational system which occurred after the Pacific War.

Furthermore, several older people indicated during the semi-structured interviews that because young people are not interested in hearing the opinions of 'old people', they simply refrain from making comments that express opinions about the behavior and ideas of younger members of their households. In several cases in interviews and in casual conversations, older individuals used the term *furui*, which translates as obsolete, to describe how they believe their ideas and their generation are perceived by younger people. Older people frequently comment that the necessity to hold-back one's opinions and attitudes when speaking to younger members of one's household generates stress.

If I am asked by my children or grandchildren, I will give my opinion, but unless I am asked, I will not say anything. If anything comes up that I want to say, I go someplace where I am alone and say what I wanted when there is nobody around. At the times I am feeling stress from holding back, I go and talk with my friends [age peers]. I have two friends to whom I can tell secrets. When I talk to them, the stress goes away.

Groups such as the gateball team that are limited to older members of society also provide a means to relieve the stresses that arise through interactions with younger generations. Gateball practices and tournaments are contexts of social behavior in which older people interact in ways that seem natural and comfortable. They eat foods they associate with their generation, they can have conversations on common topics and can speak freely about their opinions and attitudes, and they have no need to worry about using dialect or expressing ideas in ways that others will not understand. In short, gateball provides a context in which older individuals can maintain continuity with patterns of social behavior or with a form of life that they associate with their own age group, largely those who were raised prior to the end of the Pacific War.

Discussion

This article has described a game that is popular among many older Japanese and presented some of the main reasons people indicate for participation. At the emic level, several informants state that gateball is an activity that they use strategically to control the onset of both mental and physical decline.

This is accomplished through gateball's ability to help people exercise mind (strategic thinking) and body (physical exertion and coordination) and through providing a venue via which they can maintain active engagement in social interaction with their age peers. When compared to Kalab's research in the city of Osaka, the motivation to maintain physical and mental acuity is common to both locales, a fact that certainly reflects themes presented in the widely read literature on how best to avoid physical and mental problems in old age. Furthermore, in Jônai, the emphasis on exercising mind and body is directly aimed at preventing or delaying the onset of *boke* and through that avoidance of becoming a burden to one's family members.

Viewed at a more interpretive level, and within the context of changing patterns of social behavior between younger and older members of rural Japanese society, the gateball team provides a haven from some of the difficulties older people experience when interacting with younger members of the community. Stress that arises in interaction with younger people is relieved within contexts like gateball that provide opportunities to interact in a manner that is comfortable and natural because it is limited to age peers. Problems such as dialect differences and the need to hold back one's opinion due to ways of thinking about the world that differ from younger people are not present on the gateball court.

Through its connection to the OPC, the gateball team also forms one element in the institutionalized segregation of older people from younger segments of society. Thus, gateball functions not only as a means to exercise mind and body, but also as a framework within which older people can insulate themselves from changing patterns of social interaction. This feature of gateball participation is likely to be evident among urban teams, because throughout Japan age represents a legitimate criterion for differentiating older people from other segments of society. (Hashimoto 1996: 40) It may, however, be more pronounced in rural Japanese society, where institutionalized age stratification through formal age grades is a central feature of the social landscape, framing one's interactions with others throughout life on the basis of membership in a specific age group (Hendry 1981; Suenari 1981a, 1981b; Traphagan 1998a). Here I have only been able to make a broad comparison between urban and rural Japan, based upon Kalab's study. The extent to which age segregation and intergenerational interactions and stresses vary between large metropolitan areas such as Osaka or Tokyo and rural areas such as the Tōhoku region is a subject that calls for further research.

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Notes

1. The term in Japanese for this association is *rôjin kurabu*, which literally translates as ‘old persons club’. I will use this translation because it best conveys the connotation of the term in Japanese.
2. The current exchange rate of ¥140 to the dollar means that ¥1,000 is a little more than seven dollars.
3. In Japan, government statistical sources refer to the first year of life as age zero. In casual conversation, people also sometimes refer to the first year as zero, although they also use months to count age, as in the USA.
4. For example, the term for ‘good evening’ in standard Japanese is *konban wa*. In the Tōhoku dialect it is *oban de gasu*. In addition to pronunciation, there are both significant grammatical and vocabulary differences between the two dialects. It can be quite difficult to understand the local dialect. Simple phrases like ‘where shall we go’ shift from *doko ni ikô ka* in standard dialect to *doko sa iku bei* in the local dialect.

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