

# Sciences sociales du Japon contemporain I : Politiques dans le Japon contemporain (JAP4A02F)

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## Journée d'étude: 13 décembre 2017 Grossesse et accouchement au Japon Pregnancy and birth in contemporary Japan

La journée d'étude qui a eu lieu à l'INALCO, dans le cadre du séminaire, accueille Christian GÖHLERT (ethnologue spécialiste du Japon à l'Université de Munich), Tsipy IVRY (anthropologue à l'Université de Haifa) et Amanda C. SEAMAN (spécialiste de littérature japonaise à l'Université du Massachusetts à Amherst).

This conference was divided in three sections, with the main thematic being how Japanese people perceive and live pregnancy, with a focus on women's point of view. Each one of the three speakers talked about pregnancy and childbirth from a different perspective, coming from the different lens through which they analyse it during their research.

- Christian Göhlert, from Munich University, talked about the changing practice of *anzan kigan* (安産祈願, prayer for safe delivery) in modern Japan, referring to the fieldwork he did for his research in Gumma and Kagoshima, as well as his analysis of recent maternity journals;
- Tsipy Ivry, from the Anthropologist Department of the University of Haifa, talked about how pregnancy is treated in Japan from the medical point of view, in particular of the impact of NIPT on pregnancy and childbirth;
- Amanda Seaman, from University of Massachusetts Amherst, talked about how pregnancy is described by women in literature, focusing on two important figures for women's pregnancy literature, Yosano Akiko and Nogami Yaeko, and on some manga.

### **1. Première présentation:**

#### ***Contemporary Japanese Rituals of Pregnancy and Childbirth. Christian Göhlert***

Before the modern obstetric job arrived in Japan, people had to rely on folk medicine and on several religious and magical practices to try to reduce the dangers linked to pregnancy and childbirth. Collectively, these practices are known as *anzan kigan*. Modernization, and the consequent changes in society and technologies, had a profound effect on these practices since the Meiji Restoration.

The practices linked to *anzan kigan* change from shrine to shrine. So, for example, people can go to the shrine to pray for safe delivery, and then return to leave there a writing of their new born child's name and birth date to show gratitude. Or, in another shrine, the mother to be goes to pray and then takes home a pebble, when the child is born she returns to the temple to give it back. There are shrines where the parents can pray also for conception. The most famous shrines for *anzan kigan* practices are probably Suitengū shrine in Tokyo and Ōbara Jinja in Kyoto

But how have the rituals of pregnancy and childhood changed? To explain it Mr. Göhlert presented his case studies regarding groups of women from different temples.

- Gunma Buddhist group in Takasaki. This group used to be a very important *anzan kigan* institution but now its popularity had declined considerably. In fact, this Batō Kannon group seems not to be any more in line with the needs of young women, as they still provide the old remedies such as uncooked rice.
- Yamana Hachimangū (山名八幡宮) temple group. People come from everywhere to this Shinto temple. This group is very active also on the Internet, inviting people to come to the shrine to pray. Also, their ‘*anzan kigan set*’, contrary to the Gunma’s one, contain remedies, like decaffeinated tea, that are in line with modern taste.

Since there are many shrines that provide *anzan kigan*, they tend to compete. This competition and the fact that they adapt their products to the tastes of modern people, is an index of the process of commercialisation of this practice. Mr. Göhlert based his studies also on women’s pregnancy magazines, where various cases are analysed. Most important things for these magazines are: the advertisements, done by religious institutions for their *anzan kigan* practices; testimonies done by pregnant women; a list of the things that the mother to be is supposed to buy.

## Conclusions

The religious aspect of the practice is disappearing completely, the rituals are now part of the daily life and thus not considered as such, the focus switched from the community to the individual, his friend and family and people prefer activities that allow active and creative engagement.

## 2. Deuxième présentation

### **Pregnant with meaning in contemporary Japan. Is NIPT transforming Japanese prenatal care? Tsipy Ivry**

In Japan, during the very first phases of pregnancy, women are already considered mothers and they are already expected to rectify their parenting skills. Tsipy Ivry talked about whether this it’s starting to change, how and what? In her studies she treated how societies reacts to technologies of prenatal diagnosis, specifically the NIPT test, a non-invasive prenatal test that analyses the DNA of the baby through the mother’s blood to understand if he has any chromosome anomaly. In most countries these technologies raise debate as to if they are acceptable or not.

What surprised her the most during her studies is that NIPT have been introduced in Japan before every other country. At the time of prenatal test all the technologies where already there, but the possibility of not keeping the baby was putted in background, as they expected pregnant women to be fully bounded to their non-born babies(赤ちゃん, *akachan*) so when NIPT came full-front was very surprising to her.

The problem was that when NIPT was introduced in Japan, even if they did say to women older than 30y/o that for them the chance of giving birth to a child with chromosome anomaly is higher, nevertheless Japanese doctors exempted to tell women that there was a screen test like this and they still don’t consider diagnosis of fetal anomalies as a reason to abort.

The pregnant woman's health is monitored through all the pregnancy, since the tenth week, considering her already responsible for her baby's health, causing a sense of guilt if she is not able to provide a safe environment for her non-born child.

In 2013 NIPT issued new guidelines, limiting the access to the test to women over 35. In Japan undergoing this test: requires genetic counselling also to receive the results of the test, is not comprehended in health care and is expensive. And it was only after NIPT's guidelines were issued that genetic counselling became more popular. In fact, public discussion on genetic were silenced, and only in 2015 human genetic was introduced in education. As a result, the idea of explaining body parts by animating them in cartoons and humanizing them was alien to the genetic counsellors Mrs Tsipy talked to.

As for the moral aspect of NIPT diagnosis, genetic counsellors are conflicted on how much they should say of dangers linked to chromosomes anomalies. Knowing them would cause a lot of stress to the mother and then she wouldn't have done her job correctly, because the stress would harm the baby. In Japan, in fact, the counselling is a collaborative work in which the counsellor share worries and problems with the parents, putting the knowledge part to the side.

Mrs Tsipy also talked about the eventuality of the death of the baby. If the baby dies, the mother dresses him in a kimono and puts him in a coffin-like box with flowers. Then she takes it downstairs in the hospital basement where a prayer room is provided. This ritual materialise all the expectations put on the mother, also the fact that 'death is not a good enough reason for miscarriage'.

## **Conclusions**

When asked on the father role, she said that the fathers are crucial for NIPT, as there is no way to do the counselling without them. Also, the family is important, especially when the parents come from a relatively low social level of society, to provide the money to do the test. In Japan the target for the test are mostly the women over 30 because of the greater possibility to have babies with deformities and the raise of the mothers age.

### **3. Troisième présentation**

#### **Women, literature and pregnancy in Contemporary Japan. Amanda Seaman**

*How do women write about pregnancy in literature?*

When she started to take interest in 'pregnancy literature' she was focusing on what goes through the men's mind when they learn women are pregnant but didn't look in women literature. In pre-Meiji time, pregnancy was strictly linked to spirit possession and in the Meiji period was still considered a taboo. She gave as an example Natsume Soseki describing his feeling of revulsion when seeing his new born child. It was not until the emergence of two women writers that pregnancy in literature changed.

Namely:

- Yosano Akiko, who had lots of children and to maintain them she relied on her writing career. After a while she started to write tanka about the experience of being pregnant. In her poetry the baby is considered alien, like an insect, alien to the body. But even though people loved her work, still no one took on her thematic.

- Nogami Yaeko, student of Natsume Soseki. One of her stories is about a woman that decides to have a baby in a clinic. The protagonist is described in pain, pain, that she described. As soon as the pain is over she is resting in bed with the baby and the next focus is on happiness and family life, emphasizing the mother side.

When the popularity of manga begun to rise, particularly in 1994 with the Taiken manga (manga about personal experience), two women started to write about pregnancy with humour: Matsui Natsuki and Uchida Shungiku.

Mrs Seaman also talked about the story series of *Go shussan!* (ご出産!), a work done by a group of women in which they collected, with their friends contribution, birth stories commented and criticized by a midwife. Most of the stories collected in this work end with the birth of the baby, but each woman depict herself and her experience differently and with a different style and message.

There are then also manga that express a refusal to have children, like *Undeha ikenai* (産んではいけない!) where the author funnily tells women not to have kids.

## Conclusion

The birth is considered a transformation, and in Japan this ‘transformation’ causes a lot of problems to women, explaining the amount of attentions given to post-partum depression. Asked how she found her sources she said that is very difficult to find pregnancy literature in Japan, as the motherhood section has a very small area between the illness section and the others. Even if each speaker treated the matter from a different perspective, each speech helped to better understand how Pregnancy and childbirth are considered nowadays in Japan and putted to the light how these positions on this thematic are everchanging.