

Delayed Marriage (*Bankonka*) & the Struggles of Women in Modern Japan

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About a decade and a half ago, Masahiro Yamada published an instructive book on women in contemporary Japan. In this book, Masahiro blames young people for Japan's economic hardship, the declining birthrate, as well as other major woes disconcerting the country in modern times.

Yamada titled his work, *The Age of Parasite Singles*. His hypothesis, popularized by the Japanese media, has since become a common theory in gender and or gender related themes in contemporary Japan. This is due mainly to the beguiling phrase employed in the title, a phrase that is now stereotypically linked to young working class unmarried men and women from approximately 28 years of age through their 30s.

Precisely speaking, parasite singles refer to those who live rent-free with their parents and enjoy services like free food and laundry provided by their mothers. The savings they accrue from not paying rent, it is assumed, affords them extra income to spend on lavish lifestyles and designer shoes and bags. The book details the lives of such women and explains the conditions that make it necessary for women like them to emerge in modern-day Japan.

Using figures from the 1995 national census, Yamada estimates an approximate 10 million parasite singles in Japan. He further predicts that given the steady rise in the opposition to marriage, parasite singles will probably account for 10% of the Japanese population in 2000 and will thus have "a significant impact on Japanese society and the economy and also cast a shadow on the health of society in the future." Yamada's book on parasite singles, and by implication, delayed marriage (*bankonka*), identifies an existing concern in Japanese society. However, instead of looking inwards to examine,

and possibly uncover the tie between Japan's long histories of patriarchy, a byproduct of which is *bankonka* and by implication parasite singles, Yamada resorts to blaming the victims.

This paper seeks to interpret the views of Yamada's book in alternative lens by arguing that *bankonka* is a choice women in modern Japan are forced to make in the face of the prevailing male hegemony. It also seeks to debunk conventional beliefs and stereotypes attached to delayed marriage by arguing that delayed marriage is one of the practices present day Japanese women are deploying to circumvent patriarchal norms and sexism in Japan. The paper shall deploy evidences and data from the field to show the prevalence of the phenomenon of delayed marriage among young women. Engaging qualitative data (life stories), it shall advance reasons why *bankonka* has become a "necessary evil" in present-day Japan.

The phenomenon of *bankonka* has been well written about by various scholars of Japanese gender and culture. Consequently, there is no paucity of information in regard to delayed married in Japan. Rutherford, Naohiro, Ogawa and Matsukura (2011); Tokuhiko (2011, 2004); Kanai (1991) Atoh (1994; 2000; 2001); and Atoh and Akachi (2003) have all carried out extensive research on delayed marriage in Japan. Most of the existing works on *bankonka*, however, either deployed data that is dated, are comparative studies with other second demographic nations cum South East Asian countries, or are focused more on the relationship between *bankonka* and the dwindling fertility rate in Japan rather than the politics of it.

The decision of career women to postpone marriage however, is in a bid to transgress status and power relations. The ripple effects of their decision is only a by product that bear both practical and political implications on the generality of the Japanese society.

In addition to countering Yamada's assertions, what this research attempts to do is reiterate some of the arguments on *bankonka* and take the debate on delayed marriage a little further especially via its methodology to show the extent of *bankonka* in Japan while arguing that *bankonka* is one of the ways in which the practicalities of patriarchy is being undermined in Japan. It argues that the phenomenon of *bankonka* represents a phase in the evolution (read transformation) of the female gender and gender roles in Japan. This evolution is perceived to be the blurring of gender roles and specialization, which have traditionally defined the sexes in Japan. For as Lebra (1984) argues, "the structural embeddedness of sex roles stabilizes and rigidifies the sex-based

hierarchy” (301) in Japan.

The data for the following section was sourced primarily from the field. This researcher carried out a wide-ranging interview spanning a period of about 18 months across various parts of Yokohama. Additionally, data from the 14th Japanese National Fertility Survey conducted in 2010 by the National Institute of Population and Social Security (NIPSS) is invaluable to this research.

Bankonka and the Theory of Practice/ Agency

Anthropology, sociology, and most emerging multidisciplinary fields of study like gender studies and cultural studies have increasingly deployed “practices” as their fundamental body of study beginning from the end of the 20th century to present times. Sherry Ortner (2006) opines that the practice approach can be seen as an approach that answers questions concerning “the impact of the system on practice and the impact of practice on the system”. At the core of the system are unambiguous actualities of asymmetry, discrimination, and control in a given society.

In other words, what practice theory seeks to explain is the “genesis, reproduction, and change of form and meaning of a given social/cultural whole, defined in - more or less - this sense” (149). It is a study of all forms of human action from a political view. A study of the “functioning aspects of a cultural system through which actors manipulate, interpret, legitimize and reproduce the patterns of cooperation and conflict that order their social world” (Collier and Rosaldo 1981:311), some sort of a “dialectic of control” (Ortner 1975:145).

It is that which constitutes the “acting units” of practices. Ortner (2006) asserts that “most practice anthropology to date takes these units to be individual actors, whether actual historical individuals, or social types (women, commoners, workers, junior siblings, etc). The analyst takes these “people and their doings as the reference point for understanding a particular unfolding of events and / or for understanding the processes involved in the reproduction or change of some set of structural features” (ibid 149).

Fundamentally, agency, being an aspect of practice is the “socially determined capability to act and make a difference,” (Barker, 2012:496) or the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001:112). Ortner sees agency, in a nutshell, as a part of what she termed “serious games”. The idea of serious games is to build upon the core insights of “practice theory,” but also to go beyond it by moving questions of

practice in “several new directions,” especially the more complex questions of power relations and various dimensions of the subjectivity of social actors. (Ortner 2006:129). Agency forms part of the process of what Giddens terms “structuration,” namely “the making and remaking of a larger social and cultural formations” (Ortner 2006:134).

Agency embodies power, or at least closely relates to ideas of power in domination and resistance, as seen in people’s ability to act on the behalf of others, influence others, and maintain control over their own lives. (Ortner 2006). It does not refer to:

“heroic actors or unique individuals, nor is it about bourgeois statagizing, nor on the other hand is it entirely about routine everyday practices that proceed with little reflection. Rather it is about (relatively ordinary) life socially organized in terms of culturally constituted projects that infuse life with meaning and purpose. People seek to accomplish valued things within a framework of their own terms, their own categories of value. (ibid:145)

Ortner identifies “intentionality,” the “cultural construction of agency,” and the “relationship between agency and power” as the key principles that operate within and motivate agency (ibid135).

The central concern of contemporary practice theory, however, is domination: an investigation into the asymmetrical social relations and heart of what is going in a given society and how the fundamental assumption of practice theory in that culture (in the broadest sense of the word) “constructs people as particular kinds of social actors. But, social actors through their living, on-the-ground, variable practices, reproduce or transform - and usually some of each of - the culture that made them” (Ortner 2006: 129).

This brings to the fore the significance of actors who effectually engage all the “on-the - ground” variable practices, “serious games” (Ortner 1996, 1999) that can shape the system.

Bankonka can arguably be said to be a move aimed at creating/achieving agency as a tool for female emancipation. It’s a struggle, a game or what Ortner (1996) terms “serious games” that involves intentionality and practice and are capable of changing the system¹.

Precursors and Data from the National Fertility Survey

Changes in women's attitude towards marriage have been constantly altering since the 1980s and 1990s, as these were the years in which a majority of Japanese women began to realize that marriage and happiness are not synonymous (*Kooseshoo*, 1996).

Younger women, in a bid to break out of the familiar, are resolute on creating a niche for themselves. However, in a society like Japan where until lately, the corporate structure is skillfully entwined with the hegemonic order obtained in a traditional society, it was natural for young women to quit their jobs soon after marriage. Finding no grounds for negotiation, modern Japanese ladies often take the path of least resistance by postponing marriage and childbearing. In *Marriage in Contemporary Japan*, Tokuhiro Yoko argues that "By delaying marriage and childrearing, young women can be seen as 'rebels' challenging Japanese patriarchal society" (Tokuhiro 2011:3). The author further opines:

A large number of people wish to secure control over marriage practices, by ideological, economic, legal or even forcible means, because they are so crucial not only to individuals, but also to the social order (or at least to the understandings of the social order), in all sorts of forms - for example, gender and sexual order, socialization and child-rearing, and demographics and economics.

Japanese women at this juncture, both literally and figuratively, can be said to have heeded to the advice of the editors of *Mores* (a Japanese women's magazine popular in the 90s) to demand for more. As the name of the magazine implies, the writers challenged women to question their marginal positions in society and demand *more* for themselves. (Cited in Sakamoto 1999:185)

In the latest NIPSS survey, some questions focused on Japanese singles' attitudes toward marriage and relationships. The findings revealed that the attitude of young people (aged 18-34) towards delaying marriage, which had consistently been increasing in the past decade, is beginning to stagnate. See fig. 1.

A critical look at the above data however, reveals that the trend has not changed much since the 13th survey conducted in 2005. For instance, in reply to the question "what do you think about getting married within a year from now? 84.4% of the respondents who expressed desire to get married are aged between 30-34 years. This is

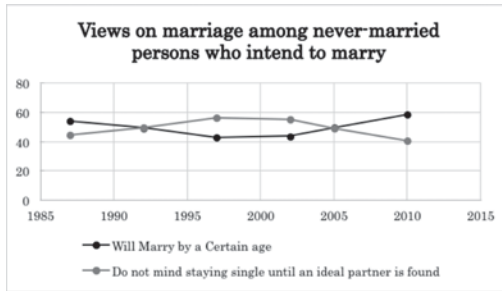


Fig. 1 Data obtained from NIPSS survey, 2011

an indication that women are getting married much later than they used to.

The study also reveals that for married women, the merits of marriage have been on the increase in the last ten years. Equally, the demerits of marriage have been on the increase. The percentage of single women who believe that single life has some merit is also increasing.

These results demonstrate the changing consciousness of Japanese women towards marriage. It also divulges the struggles and dilemmas of women as they experiment with different lifestyles to find a most appropriate solution to the challenges posed by the present gender formulations. It is an indication that more and more women do not believe that marriage holds the key to a woman's happiness but becomes a "necessary evil" as they grow older to find a secure life in old age.

Bankonka: The Struggles, Challenges, and Advancements of Women in Modern Japan

Among the ladies whose life stories this study shall be analyzing are a group of women who have made a conscious decision to postpone marriage to pursue their goals or ambitions. The women, Megumi Iwamoto, Masami Kato, Junko Ishihara, Momoka Nakayama, and Midori Sato (all pseudonyms) have uniquely different experiences as unmarried women. The nuance or strength of their decisions to postpone marriage as well as their motives differ. The women, however, all possess a common feature: their resolve to not abhor marriage entirely but delay it both as a way of getting the most out of a patriarchal society and fulfill personal ambitions.

What follows would be better understood as illustrating how individual women sustained and transformed their feminine identities through their lifestyles and actions in the 21st century. In other words, they are "experimenting and exploring their

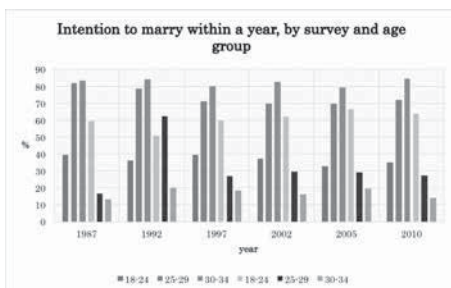


Fig. 2 Women between the ages of 30-34 is represented by the green bar

sexuality and their changing behavior is indeed affecting their identity”. (Tokuhiro 2004:132)

Megumi Iwamoto, - Getting Married in My 20s would have been (Mottainai) - a Waste

Megumi, 42, was born in Tokyo and grew up in both Tokyo and Yokohama. Megumi’s mother passed on when she was still in high school. Her father worked very hard and drank a lot too. Her mother had a difficult time dealing with him. He came back late and extremely drunk most nights, singing and disturbing other neighbors.

Megumi remembers that back then, her mother always had to apologize to neighbors in the morning for the nuisance her father created the night before. Her mother was stressed and sick most of the time. Eventually, she died of ill health. In retrospect, Megumi believes that if her mother had not died, she probably would have divorced her father when the children were grown.

Megumi, it appears, has always been a decisive woman who is aware of the workings of her society and able to fashion out ways to evade any bottleneck on the path to living the life she desires. For instance, she realized her academic deficiencies early on and decided she was not smart enough to study mass communications. She knew she was not talented enough to study fine art, so she opted for the next barrier-free option - photography - and stuck with it. Her father’s threat to not pay her school fees for a degree in photography was not enough deterrence to make her budge.

On graduation from the University where she studied photography, Megumi got a job as a sports photographer and had opportunities to travel to several countries covering sports events, and later worked as a photographer for an advertising company for 10 years.

Being a sports photographer gave her a chance to fulfill her travel dreams it also served to convince her to delay marriage for as long as necessary. Sadly, she had to quit in her early 30s because, “Many colleagues were beginning to make indirect allusions to my status as a single woman. I was not ready to be married yet, and my life was too exciting to be dulled by company gossip, so I moved on”. She then started up a personal business with a friend.

It is worth noting that even though the culture of “shoulder nodding” (indirectly telling or urging a working woman who is over 30 to quit) is fast dying in Japan, it was experienced by Megumi as early as 10 years ago. For Megumi, marriage was something reserved for the far future, as marriage meant the termination of her freedom. In her words:

Getting married at 25 is a timeworn idea. It is completely a waste (*mottatianai*) for people to become mothers in their 20s. What do you do with your life when the children are all grown, and you are in your 40s or 50s? If you have a skill and you waste your skill by just being a mother and nobody knows what you are good at, and then that is not enough. Nobody should do that. Even in the past people wished for freedom but they could not have it but now they can have it. It is not selfish in my opinion to be what you want to be.

Megumi, it can be gathered, has carefully planned a timeline for her life. At a certain age, she wanted to achieve certain goals and then consider marriage and childbirth later. She did not shut out the option of getting married like the women who opt for the life of Singleness.

At the age of 35, Megumi felt she was ready to marry. She eventually got married at 37 to her now ex-husband whom she claimed to have accidentally met and dated for only three months. They were married for two years and lived mostly apart coming together only on weekends and national holidays. (She jokingly referred to her marriage as 週末婚 / weekend marriage). The marriage continued in that manner until they both eventually went their separate ways when the two could not agree on having kids.

For Megumi, marriage is still an option for her because at old age, “we might need someone to rely on” she says. In her characteristically practical approach to life, she opines that there is a chance that she might remain single for life and has prepared for that possibility by saving the money she would need to pay for her retirement care.

The story of Megumi Iwamoto reveals that the modern-day Japanese woman is very alert to the workings of Japanese society and its attitude toward career-driven women and thus has her life mapped out in such a way as to circumvent all or most of the barriers society places in the way to personal fulfillment and freedom. Megumi and her contemporaries represent the crop of women who desire to impact the social society in more ways than one.

Megumi epitomizes the group of women who believe that their impact can be made in more ways than solely guarding the home front. This is due to their understanding that the “traditional married lifestyle which demanded much sacrifice from women was no longer attractive” (Sakamoto1999:186). She has not all together jettisoned the idea of marriage. She still wants to get married and raise a family, but at a later age, after she has worked, travelled, and advanced the career ladder (for those who are career ambitious). By taking her destiny into her own hands and upping the gender game, Megumi confirms Tokuhiko’s (2004) assertion about Japanese women that by “delaying marriage and childbearing... their behavior as a whole could even shake the foundations of the existing system and structure”. She adds:

Young, highly educated single women, in particular, are indeed in the process of redefining the meaning of womanhood in a rapidly changing society and asking a fundamental question- what does it mean to be a woman? This involves questioning and redefining gender identity, as well as the understanding of what is acceptable behavior for women (ibid: 125).

Even though there has been a constant rise in the number of women employed in the Japanese workforce and various areas of government are initiating plans to employ more women in the workforce to quell the shortage of manpower, the work pattern in Japan still makes it difficult to combine reproductive activities with a career. Women like Megumi are not afraid to look Japan’s patriarchal society in the face and boldly assert their opinion and act on their decisions.

Masami Kato

- I will wait until I find a man willing to fit into my Lifestyle

Masami, unlike Megumi, has a less dramatic life. Born in the late 1970s, Masami grew up and lived all her life in Yokohama. She admitted the fact that her mother, who

is a chief medical officer and has always had a flourishing career, was the most influential person in their house. It was her mother who made all the decisions concerning other members of the household.

Masami studied IT engineering at the University and although she neither wants to work as hard as her mother nor be as powerful both in the office and at home, Masami is worried that she is becoming more like her mother each day.

At 37, Masami lives in a rented house away from her parents and pays all her bills from her earnings. She also has a cocktail of unusual hobbies ranging from learning to play the shamisen (a three-stringed, Japanese musical instrument) and traditional Japanese dancing to learning to play the violin and guitar. Because of her dedication to those carefully selected hobbies, she hardly has time for other activities outside of work.

Asked if Masami is dating anyone and plans to marry soon, she replied in the negative. She reports that she broke up with her last boyfriend exactly a year ago because he was becoming too much of a hassle. In her words:

He complains about virtually everything about me. He complains about my energy, the amount of time I put into work, my hobbies (he wants me to cut down on them), and my lack of personal attention. When I felt I had had enough, I told him since this is whom I want to be, it will be better for us to part ways. All he said was okay, and that was the end of it.

Masami still wants to get married, but she is yet to find the kind of man she wants. In her view, her problem is that young men these days hesitate a lot. “They hesitate to assume any leadership role or do what men should ordinarily do in a relationship.” She hopes to find a man who will fit into her lifestyle, but is not in a hurry to go searching for men and does not join dating parties or activities that bring singles together. Moreover, she recently got a new job with JICA (Japan International Corporation Agency) and has been deployed to a foreign post. Masami expects to live outside Japan for the next two years, but she is unperturbed about her relationship status.

Masami’s indifference to gender roles and expectations as well as the mythical “biological clock” is a way of resisting and confronting systemic gender discrimination in Japan. Her decision to break up with a boyfriend for being unable to accommodate her lifestyle is a strong statement on the ongoing negotiation of her feminine self. The

actions of women like Masami bear far-reaching implications on and undermine sexist gendered assumptions.

As indicated from the 14th National Fertility Survey, a whopping 40.5% of women are willing to wait until they stumble across the ideal partner. As the perfect or ideal partner is only a non-existent myth, it can be argued that these women who are already experiencing the “frustration, struggle, confusion, anger and stress of being a woman in patriarchal Japanese society” (Tokuhiro 2004:125) are buying time for themselves. They are positively deploying the excuse of “waiting for the ideal partner” while exploring their options and mapping out an individualized path in the gender cartography.

Junko Ishihara

(It makes no sense to get married just for the sake of it)

Junko, an only child, was born in the early 1980s in Yokohama. She grew up mostly in Japan and studied Electrical Engineering at Tokyo University. She then proceeded to Australia for a Master degree and returned to Japan on graduation. Junko currently works as an engineer and lives at home with her parents. Unlike the typical stereotyped “parasite single”, Junko desires to get married and makes an effort to find her match by attending *konkatsu* (singles club) and other dating clubs.

Nevertheless, Junko has a list of conditions, too. For one, she does not want to be a housewife like her mother. Junko laments the poor social and emotional skills of present-day men and their unwillingness to assume responsibility. She thinks contemporary Japanese men have a fixed idea of girls in their mind and desire only romanticized, “perfect” girls. She believes that even though she wants to get married, she does not want to get married for the sake of it. She wants a partner who fits well into her lifestyle.

Apart from being book smart and competing for excellence in a man’s world, Junko is conscious of her needs and desires in the 21st century. Unlike some foreign educated woman, she refuses to “construct the West as a site of emancipation” (Kelsky 2008). Even though she was presented with a chance to seek a lasting relationship in Australia and avoid Japanese sexism altogether, she came back to Japan. She opted to come back to Japan to marry a Japanese man who would fit into her lifestyle.

During a follow-up interview with Junko, she revealed that she recently had an *omiai* (arranged meeting) with a young Japanese man in his mid-30s. Everything went

well until the man declared that he wants her to quit drinking alcohol (since he does not drink alcohol) and quit her job since he makes enough money (an annual salary of over ¥ 1,000, 000) for them both. Even though they were introduced by a third party and traditionally it was normal for her to convey her disapproval through a third party, Junko dispensed with customary edicts and turned down his request on the spot. She finds it incredible that a man that young was still strongly tied to old, unpopular cultural practices and gender norms.

Since gender is a cultural concept, unlike biology, it is very malleable. However, the degree of its malleability and the success of the struggle for a cultural re-orientation in a society that has hitherto sanctioned and still sanctions the treatment of the female gender as “the second sex” (Beauvior, 1947) is determined by how often young women permit males to wield sexual power over them.

The action of Junko and women like her challenges the generally accepted myth of the three highs (high salary, height, and handsome looks) (Iwao, 1995; Kendall, 2001). It contests the notion that most women would be relieved to find a young man with a high salary and good looks since it is assumed that women are simply interested in rich men with enough money for them to squander, what one commenter at the Japan times referred to as “parasite housewife”.

This socially accepted belief about women has also enabled men to feel a sense of ownership (in the sense of property) over women’s lives. For instance, Junko and the would be partner had only met a couple of times but he was already setting a grand rule for Junko about her lifestyle and future. By refusing, Junko sought to enunciate codify, and legitimize a new meaning of gender relations and sexual expectations in Japan. Her actions also debunked popular myths at least two levels.

Junko and those like her typify a class of women who, by prioritizing their preferred lifestyles as practices, are staying within the boundaries of Japan to create whatever impact they can. Yorburg (1974) points out that the “almost total exclusion of women from the highest positions of power and privilege in the non-family sphere in modern societies rests partly on the continued existence of sex typing... (192). If all resilient and smart women like Junko flee Japan for the supposed ease of the foreign, Yorburg’s account of Japanese society in 1974 will unquestionably remain unchanged.

Momoka Nakayama - Waiting is not always bad

Momoka was born in the early 1980s in Tokyo and spent her childhood in both

the U.S and Japan. She attended international schools for both her elementary and high school studies and studied Art and Design at a university in the United States. She then returned to Japan where she is currently working as a research assistant for a government institution.

Momoka's parents who (are now divorced) had a very turbulent marriage. She confessed that her mother was mostly sick and had a psychological imbalance while she was married but got well soon after she divorced her husband. Her mother had to endure a bad marriage for as long as Momoka was in school since her school fee was highly expensive and her mother, as a housewife, could not raise the money.

Currently in her 30s, Momoka is taking her time to get married because in her words:

My mother has a master degree, and she has never worked, not even for one day. I am not saying I must keep working if I don't have to but, I want to be sure I have developed a sound financial base and skills such that I don't have to stay married to someone I would rather not be with because of financial problem.

Even though Momoka is already 34, a year away from the supposed expiration date of her "biological clock", she is still single and is careful not to rush into a poor relationship. She also does not feel any pressure from her family and keeps herself busy with her job and other activities.

Women like Momoka, Megumi, and Masami, have made choices that were influenced by their mothers lived experiences. Megumi and Junko, for instance, believe that their mothers made sacrifices for them to have better lives and that it would be foolhardy for them to make the same mistake since they have options that were not available to their mothers. In her *Marriage in Contemporary Japan*, Tokuhiko (2011) opines, "By delaying marriage and childrearing, young women can be seen as 'rebels' challenging Japanese patriarchal society" (11). This statement appears to be most true in the case of Junko and others like her who feel the need to be prepared and take as much time as necessary before venturing into marriage.

Discussion

Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1984) analyzed the constraints and fulfillments of the the Japanese woman from the point of view of three models: "the principle of role

specialization”; “the principle of asymmetry in the distribution of social valuables such as status,” and “the principle of segregation of sex” (2). She suggests that the Japanese woman is more likely to find herself at the a continuum beginning with polarization at one extreme and neutralization at the other end.

The women we have encountered here on the other hand are neither unperturbed about the existence of a continuum nor are they ruffled by societal dictates or expectations. They have instead elected to subvert motherhood and female sexuality and dispense with all allusions to the sexist phenomenon of “good mother and wise wife” that has been used for many decades to cower women into staying within their “gendered niches” and observe their assigned gender role. This is because “a woman, Japanese or non- Japanese, is an individual person with inner feelings and thoughts, aspirations and frustrations”, (Lebra, *ibid*:3) who embodies an identity of her own. The myth of being a “good wife and wise mother” cornered women into feelings of guilt that thwarted their desire to exceed their ascribed status in the society (Muriel 2001).

Women like Megumi and Junko are not seeking to jump from one end of a polarized continuum to the other. They are instead seeking to create a Japan that bears no mark of gender based polarizations of any sort. They do not seek to outdo or outshine their male counterparts struggle for a reversal of roles. These women desire an erasure, a blurring of the lines that polarize and assign people to various classes and roles.

To achieve these aims, they have decided to take their destinies away from the society into their own hands. Junko, for instance, rejects any form of condition to what most women in her mother’s generation (40-50 years ago) would consider to be the peak of success. By rejecting anything that holds the prospect of diminishing her as an individual with a unique personality, Junko’s actions might be called “the politics of agency, the cultural work involved in constructing and distributing agency as part of the process of creating appropriately gendered, and thus among other things differentially empowered persons” (Ortner 2006:139).

By their actions, these women are questioning the conventions of their times and attempting to redress male hegemony. Their actions can be interpreted as an act, a way of blurring, an obliteration of the things that once defined them, and subsequently, a construction of new identities for themselves.

Contemporary Japanese women who have opted for lifestyles considered

antithetical from societal expectations are considered poor role models and accredited as the main reason the Japanese population is decreasing, making them vulnerable to poverty, among a host of other vices. These women are focused, however, on their goals and have not been distracted by the sea of difficulties they perceive ahead of them.

It is worth noting that since Japanese society is a male-centered society, the lives and lived experiences of these women are not altogether rosy, neither should it be implied that the women's daily lives are easy as a result of their choices, as "agency is not free".

This goes to show that agencies within the dialectics of domination and resistance are as complicated as power itself can be unstable. Thus, the game of gender is a game of resistance and counter-resistance at the various level within the polity. In other words:

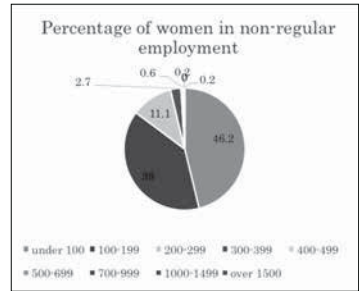
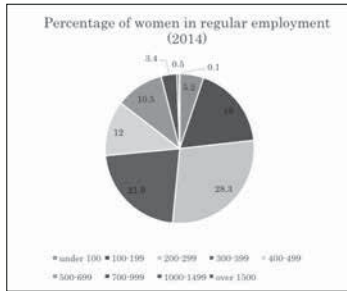
The case that is playing the game [of gender] tends to reproduce both the public

Structures of rules and assumptions, and the private subjectivity / consciousness / habitus of the players, and thus that playing the game - as Bourdieu unhappily and critically insists - almost always results in social reproduction. Ultimately games do change, sometimes because of the entry of some externality that cannot be digested, but sometimes too because of the instability of the internal power relations on which successful play depends on. (Ortner 2006:149).

It is little wonder that even with the game in place, dexterous players would require foresight and new tricks and tactics to prevent reproducing sexism or falling prey to any backlash.

For instance, single women have to work twice as hard to be able to live above the poverty line in Japan. This is because poverty among single women is said to be higher than other among categories of people within the Japanese society². They have, however, made a choice to use their lives as statements capable of inspiring change within the entirety of Japanese society.

Also, it is safe to conclude that the trend of *Bankonka* is not likely to wane as there are equally corresponding high numbers of male *Bankon*. There is also a surge in the number of non-parasite singles (see the cases of Megumi and Masami) who are both financially and emotionally ready to live independent of their parents and be responsible for their own welfare. Some scholars have argued that the growing number



of unemployed youth and the burst of the economic boom in Japan among other factors may have contributed to this trend. These scholars are of the opinion that masculinity, just like feminism should be paid greater attention in the study of gender in Japan (See Roberson and Suzuki eds.2003 *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan*).

All the contributing factors notwithstanding, it is clear that a significant number of ladies are psychologically preparing themselves for lifetimes of singleness and that the era of Yamada's much fêted "parasite singles" may well be over.

Appendix

Category B. Delay of Marriage/ Ohitorisama

1. Tell me all about yourself (academic background, occupation, siblings, and their marital status).
2. What was growing up as a girl in Japan like during your time?
3. What is your view of marriage timing amongst young girls in recent times?
4. Why do you think people postpone or delay their first marriage?
5. What is your assessment of marriage?
6. What informed your decision to postpone your first marriage?
7. Do you wish to get married in the future?
If yes
 - a. At what age in your life would you consider getting married?
 - b. Are you currently in a serious relationship?
 - c. Are there goals you would wish to accomplish before getting married?
 - c. Tell me why you would want to get married eventually?
 - d. Tell me the qualities you desire in a man?
 - e. What are factors (socially, economically etc.) are responsible for your decision. If no
 - a. What would inform your decision to remain single?
 - b. How would you like to spend the rest of your life when you grow old?
8. Do you wish to have children? Why/why not?
9. Are you experiencing pressures from family or relations urging you to get married?
10. Does your job give you time to socialize?
12. What is your assessment of full-time housewives in Japan?
13. Would you ever consider quitting your job to become one? Why?

Age	Academic Background	Occupation	Living Arrangement	Relationship Status
33	University (M.A)	IT Specialist	With parents	No B/F
42	University	Photographer	Alone	No B/F
34	University	OL	Alone	No B/F
37	University	Engineer	Alone	No B/F
40	Junior College	Teacher	With Parents	No B/F
34	University	OL	Alone	No B/F
37	University	Engineer	Alone	No B/F
34	university	OL	Alone	B/F
29	University	Consultant	Alone	No B/F
34	Nursing School	Nurse	Alone	No B/F
34	University	OL	With Parents	B/F
32	Vocational Sch.	Hair dresser	Alone	B/F
39	Junior College	OL	With Family	No B/F
43	University	OL	With Family	No B/F
34	Junior College	OL	Alone	B/F
34	University (M.Sc)	Researcher	Alone	No B/F
35	University	OL	With Parents	B/F
28	University	Student	With Family	No B/F
39	University	OL	Alone	B/F
43	University	OL	Alone	No B/F
50	Junior College	Editor	Alone	No B/F
38	Junior College	Freelancer	Alone	No B/F
26	University (M.A)	Researcher	Alone	No B/F
27	University (M.Sc)	Researcher	Alone	No B/F
40	University	Sales Consultant	Alone	No B/F
33	University	Consultant	With Family	No B/F
35	University	Teacher	With Family	No B/F
41	Junior College	OL	Alone	No B/F

(BF=Boyfriend)

Appendix 1 Profile of interviewees - Bankonka

Notes

- 1 Expounding on what she terms serious games, Ortner asserts: "One of the central games of most cultures is the gender game, or more specifically the multiplicity of gender games available in that time and place. The effort to understand the making and unmaking of gender, as well as what gender makes, involves understanding the workings of these games as games, with their inclusions and exclusions, multiple positions, complex rules, forms of bodily activity, structures of feelings and desire, and stakes of winning, losing, or simply playing. It involves as well, the question of how gender games themselves collide with, encompass, or are bent to the service of, other games, for gender is never, as they say, the only game in town. (Ortner 1996:19)
- 2 It is, however, worth noting that life for the single woman can be harsh and unpleasant in Japan. This is because single women are at the bottom rung of the economy and are most likely to be employed as contract staff or in part-time positions. (Kuchikomi 2011).

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Bankonka (*Delayed Marriage*) & the Struggles of Women in Modern Japan

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Contemporary Japan has been witnessing a series of unprecedented albeit slow changes in almost all ramifications of its beliefs. One such notable revolution is in the area of gender relations and norms. The Japanese culture is etched in patriarchy, via its aboriginal “*ie seido*” or family system. The family system formed the scaffold upon which the structures of essentializing and perpetuating institutionalized sexism was erected. Against this background, women have risen in search of alternatives to the options available to them in the society. A practical search for alternatives must necessarily involve a route that threatens the traditional family system (marriage), being the prime source of their dissatisfaction. This paper argues that by delaying marriage, present-day Japanese women are negotiating, sometimes circumventing and at other times crafting or plotting out a life, an identity that suits them within the present gender chart.