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## WIDOWS IN CROSS-CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL SURVEY

Anthropologists, as well as other scholars, have long been interested in the family, kinship, and other forms of social organization. From the publication of *Ancient Society* (1877) by L. H. Morgan, followed by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), there has been much analytical attention devoted to the roles of women and men and the process of creating and maintaining ties of consanguinity in familial social settings. While not all scholars agree that kinship exists as a postulated, culturally constructed domain in all cultures (e.g., Schneider 1984: 75), issues regarding kinship, the household and family relations occupy a continuing place of importance in anthropological studies (Feldman-Savelsberg 1996: 177-197; Lock 1996: 73-103; Rosenberger 1996: 12-45). Many societies examined in anthropological research clearly delineate the different roles of wives and husbands, widows and widowers, concentrating on functional aspects and the inheritance of property and assets as historically transmitted through men. However, the ordinary lives, problems and economic realities of widows have been largely absent from anthropological literature. Occasionally, a brief reference in recent anthropological discourse acknowledges the critical role that women play in funeral and mortuary rituals. Family-based and necessary services such as arranging burials and caring for the souls of dead family members are commonly left to widows (Buitelaar 1995: 3; Owen 1996: 2-3; Bremer and van den Bosch 1997).

There is a wide range of cross-cultural

variation regarding the status, as well as the social and economic position of widows. Women throughout the world may be forced through economic, or by other means, to re-marry or may be prevented from re-marriage, and they may or may not inherit all (or even a portion) of the possessions and assets of their deceased husband. Variations in social practices regarding widows are intrinsically linked to the maintenance of the existing order within specific cultures, which continue to re-enforce and perpetuate asymmetry in power, family roles, divisions of labor and inheritance of property and assets, between men and women. These practices function to produce a clear stratification among women based on whether they are married, widowed, single or divorced, and whether or not they have or do not have children; this assignation of women to particular categories is not applied to men. This article will explore the historical context and roots of some of these customs within various cultures in order to better understand how they influence the lives of widowed women.

Additionally, the linguistic and symbolic images of widows in Japanese culture and folklore will be examined as well as their present status and problems. As has been noted, Japanese women have long had the attention of moralists, politicians, and government policy-makers for over 300 years; they have had gender roles suggested and even prescribed for them through law codes, slogans, folk tales and family pressures and responsibilities (Bernstein 1991: 14). Many widows in Japan, who live

within this crucible of persistent and relentless advice, have continued to struggle and resist such forces in order to support themselves and their children. Informal networks that extend and employ disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society (Foucault 1979: 298), such as exclusion from group functions and activities, gossip, discrimination and in severe cases, the eventual isolation of the offending individual, will also be detailed.

### Anthropological Perspectives on Widowhood

Anthropological studies which concentrate exclusively on widows are scarce and have tended to focus on the exotic or obscure, especially as related to mortuary practices. The most prevalent entries within this literature regarding widows in general are concerned with the self-immolation of women in India. Thus, there is an abundance of research regarding India and Brahmin "sutti'ism" (Dube 1963: 174-203). Some anthropological research has clearly shown the gendered aspects of bereavement when widows, but not necessarily widowers, are encouraged to assume greater responsibility for displaying extreme suffering and ritualized behavior. Entire villages may prohibit widows from speaking for long periods of time and some women may stop speaking for the remainder of their lives. Though all relatives of the deceased may be viewed as "contaminated" by death, widows are among those persons who are the most dramatically affected. Like her husband, who is transformed by death, she undergoes a parallel liminal phase through which her identity is re-evaluated and re-defined (this idea represents an important theme which will be explored in more detail in this article).

Cross-culturally widows may be confined to the house, may be prevented from bathing, or allowed to eat only small amounts of food. They may be forbidden by law to re-marry, while others may be pressured to remarry quickly in order to prevent competition among males for the attentions of newly widowed women or out of societal fear of a woman living alone. A woman who can live on her own and does so happily and successfully, presents a challenge to the very foundation of patriarchal-based family-centered societies. Yet, in a paradoxical sense, a woman who wishes to re-marry quickly after the death of her husband, also challenges Confucian ideology in Japan and Korea of the "grieving widow" who remains chaste and perpetually devoted to the memory of that husband.

The above Janus-faced themes are illustrated through cross-cultural and historical surveys. Upper-class widows in Korea (before 1389 CE) seldom remained single after their husband's death. Because many widows preferred to take a new husband as soon as possible, the government attempted to discourage women from re-marriage by giving widows special awards and citations. However, these societal inducements proved to be inadequate in dissuading women from marrying again. By 1485 CE, the Korean dynastic powers determined that upper-class widows should be forbidden by law to remarry. Serious consequences awaited any widows who dared to challenge the new edicts. If a widow violated the decree, her sons and grandsons would be disqualified from taking any kind of governmental service exam, thereby excluding them from high-status positions. However, these prohibitions applied only to women of the upper classes. For commoners and women of lower classes, re-

marriage was not forbidden, though eventually Confucian societal taboos filtered down to women of all classes. Even young women with no children were forced to live alone after the death of their husbands, and many of these women chose suicide rather than lead such a solitary, isolated life. Confucian scholars and governmental figures praised these suicidal actions interpreting such cases, not as an escape from a lonely, unendurable existence but rather, as the "noble conduct of a chaste widow" (Kim 1976: 97-99).

Widows in Colonial America were permitted by law to re-marry, and encouraged by local customs to do so quickly. Colonial society allowed widows to take over their husband's work so that they could earn their own living, rather than depending upon the state to support them. In patriarchal fashion, a widowed woman could only receive up to one-third of her husband's estate with the remaining two-thirds inherited by her husband's male heir. Only sons, not the widowed wife nor the daughters of the deceased exercised final control over all family property. Even a son-in-law could claim rights over the deceased father's estate in the name of his wife. However, by 1776, widows had won the right to dispose of their husband's property in order to support themselves or to make investments. During this era, widows became the targets of accusations of witchcraft in part because they were considered easy prey for the "devil," since they lacked the guiding and controlling force of a husband. In this atmosphere, one unfortunate widow became the only high-status colonial woman ever hanged as a witch (Norton 1996: 147-165, 394-395). Widows with little or no property worked at various jobs or lived with the help of community alms and support, but overall

widows experienced uncertainty and discriminatory treatment in maintaining their proper roles in the community and as household heads.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead's historical 1935 study in New Guinea suggests that Arapesh widows were frequently encouraged to re-marry, preferably to one of the dead husband's relatives. In this group, there was strong pressure for widows to remain within the husband's family because she was judged to be a member of that family. There was no special period of mourning or particular clothing that a widow had to wear nor was she expected to remain celibate for the remainder of her life. Among Arapesh widows, 75% of them re-married by entering the home of the dead husband's younger brother. These women had both a motherly and sexual role which they were expected to perform. Among another group in Mead's study, the Mundugumo, it was common for grandmothers who became widowed to quickly re-marry, and many older women ardently pursued a new husband (Mead 1935: 100-106, 223-229). These kinds of behavior seemed reasonable since women were viewed as having a stronger sexual drive than men. Thus, there was no cultural expectation that required women to wait for men to make the necessary advances in order to form a new marriage.

In a similar fashion, among the !Kung of South Africa, both younger and older widows were encouraged to re-marry and to build a new family life. If an older woman could not find a new husband on her own, then she had the option of joining a sister or another close female relative as a co-wife. Some older women chose not to re-marry, but lived in a separate hut in the same village as their married children. Widows were sometimes en-

couraged to marry as soon as possible, in order to prevent fights among males in the same village who were competing for the attentions of newly widowed women (Shostak 1981: 203, 325). Older women who became widows, especially if they had a large family, were influential and respected members of the !Kung group.

Through such cross-cultural examples, it is clear that different societies exercise control over women for various reasons (Palazzi 1996: 215-230). Through ritualized behavior widows perform various functions such as deflecting the "envy" of the deceased husband's soul, or exemplifying the conduct of a chaste widow while reinforcing societal traditions and values. Even in the case where widows are encouraged to or choose to re-marry quickly, they may be reducing the threat within a community of a single woman living on her own (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 49-82). Households that are headed by women are frequently described in terms that reflect a societal fear of women who are living "without a man" (Mullings 1997: 96).

In the case of Japan, a female headed household is a condition which is an aberration from the "normal" male-headed, state-supported family, and widows are frequently placed in a group along with other outsiders and among those persons with no family (Cornell 1991: 87). Divorced women are also classified as outside of society, i.e., in a position of marginality (Valentine 1990: 36-43). However, these women live with the additional stigma of being *batsu ichi* (having one strike out or one strike against them), and present an even greater and more dangerous challenge to the traditional family in Japan. Thus, for all of these historical and current reasons, members of society attempt to exercise control over women. Especially in the case of "women

alone," instilling differences in power and status between women and men and instituting a clear hierarchy among women themselves based upon whether or not they are married, divorced, single, single with children, widowed with children or widowed without children, effectively splinters the experiences of women. It provides a system of reward and punishment meted out along the clearly delineated lines, dictated by society, of appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Palazzi 1996: 215-230; Hanawalt 1996: 201-213). This hierarchy exists only for widows; widowers are able to escape the permutations of the stringent nature and intransigence of such a control system.

Furthermore, this article will show that even if widows comply with these rigorous standards, they are not always able to automatically rely on the support of society members nor upon family networks. Based upon historical examples, widows may become destitute; they may lose most or all of their possessions, and may or may not be aided by members of their own natal family, much less by those relatives of the deceased. Sometimes widows may even lose custody of their own children after the husband's death (Left and Levine 1997: 97). It is also important to remember that not all widows are elderly women with grown children. However, when there are adult children involved, their willingness and ability to provide services and care as well as financial support for an elderly widowed mother cannot be facily assumed. The treatment and status of widows is greatly influenced by historical context, a theme to which we will next turn.

### The Status of Widows in Japanese History

Social practices and customs regarding the position and proper conduct for widows vary

widely depending on the historical period and culture in which such behavior is set. In many societies, especially in the case of virilocal (or patrilocal where the husband and wife live with or near the husband's parents) residence, many widows are expected to remain in their deceased husband's family and devote themselves to the continued care of that husband's family and children. However, in the Heian period of Japan, divorced and widowed women were permitted new love affairs or even remarriage. Women could freely inherit property and family residences, as well as agricultural property, from their parents and such valuable assets were frequently given to daughters. It was common during this time for uxorilocal (or matrilocal where the wife and husband live nearby or with the wife's parents) marriage residences to be established (Bingham and Gross 1987: 56). If a husband died or even in the case of divorce, a woman was protected and supported by the financial assets of her own natal family, and over time could control these resources. Therefore, women's status is dramatically affected by post-marital residence patterns. Of course, this idea is not a new one in anthropology, but continues to be employed as a marker of women's prestige and power within the family (Brown, Subbaiah, and Sarah 1998: 100-123).

In the case of Japan, all of the above practices changed dramatically with the growing influence of Confucianism and samurai adoption and endorsement of this ideology. According to this newly imported view from China, a widow should remain celibate and unmarried for the rest of her life, while a widower was expected to remarry as soon as possible in order to strengthen and perpetuate his own family line. With the continued

growth and acceptance of Confucian familial ideology, patrilocal residence patterns emerged. The new wife or *oyomesan* entered her husband's family and fell under the control of not only her husband but also that of her husband's parents. A woman who resisted marriage or was "without a man" was considered dangerous, since she was free from the established societal framework of the overlapping obediences to her parents, parents-in-law, husband and sons (Jennifer Robertson 1991: 94). While some women were undoubtedly protected and nurtured within the family, others simply moved from the not-so-benign control of a father to that of her new husband and his parents.

Some scholars have questioned the somewhat contradictory status of elderly women in Japan, since legends abound regarding the uselessness and burden of caring for widows; yet, many of these stories also argue that aged parents should be revered. One important factor in the survival of older widows was whether they could perform labor that was essential to the household such as caring for young grandchildren (Cornell 1991: 71-87). If she could do so, then she could greatly enhance her overall survival prospects.

There were a variety of stipulations regarding all aspects of behavior including clothing and even hairstyles for widows. During the Edo Period (1600-1868), Japanese widows were admonished by custom to wear mourning attire for thirteen months, approximately four times as long as the requirement for widowers. Some individuals expressed their continuing faithfulness to their deceased husband by arranging their hair in the ponytail style *kirisage* common to widows at that time (Cherry 1987: 127). If a widow wanted to re-

marry, it was customary to obtain permission of the head of the family (the family of her deceased husband) in order to do so. This principle was fully expressed in legal terms in the Meiji Civil Code of 1868 (Article 750) which stated that if a family member married in contravention of the wishes of the family head, that person, within one year from the date of such a marriage, could be expelled from the family or forbidden to ever return to the family, even to see her own children (Gubbins 1897: 11). In this way, the *ie* system could effectively control its members, especially the females in the family.

In the village of Suye, widows were frequently impoverished and had a reputation for sexual license along with the freedom to have many lovers. They were also the subject of much gossip and isolation, practices used as disciplinary mechanisms to regulate their behavior, though the widows appeared to resist such methods (Smith and Wiswell 1982: 42, 187-188). Iwao (1993) suggests that before World War II, widows had little in the way of a safety net (the *ie* system notwithstanding) or social security if their husband died. If women were trained in conservative traditions such as the tea ceremony or flower arranging they could support themselves and their children; if not, many widows had to arrange to re-marry simply in order to survive. Other "women alone," such as unmarried women and widows between the ages of twelve and 40, were conscripted during the war for compulsory work in the munitions industry (Miyake 1991: 276). These women were deemed as unnecessary in the family, but they could make themselves useful through contributing to the war effort. Thus, in a sense, justifying their very right to exist as a solitary woman.

As discussed earlier, society frequently sends contradictory messages to widows regarding re-marriage. While praising the faithful widow who remains dedicated to her deceased husband, through an idealization of love and duty, there may also be pressure to re-marry within acceptable frameworks dictated by that society. According to Hendry (1981: 112), while levirate marriage was prohibited during the Edo Period, during World War II widows were encouraged to marry their deceased husband's brother. This type of levirate marriage was common among war widows, not only throughout Kyushu, but also throughout the rest of Japan. Even ghost marriages on behalf of unmarried sons who had died in the Pacific War were not uncommon (van Bremen 1996: 134).

The harsh reality of the struggles of many widows is shown by the state of war widows after the Pacific War. The number of widows in Japan in 1950 was about 5 million with 1.8 million of these war widows. The struggle of war widows to obtain economic relief after the loss of their husbands is clearly revealed in a series of three slim volumes (Suzuki 1983) based on a bulletin written by these widows started in 1950 entitled *Hahakogusa* or *Boshisō* (Mother and Child: Strong Like Weeds). In 1946, an association for bereaved families, who had lost a son or husband in the war, was formed. There were two main groups within this association. The first group was initiated by fathers and grandfathers, who had lost sons and grandsons; the second group was established by war widows. The widows focused on obtaining economic security through the implementation of a widow's pension and the passage of legislation to help support their children, which became the primary objectives of the move-

ment.

Contrary to the assumption that widows (even war widows) were historically supported and cared for by members of their husband's family as part of the security and benefits of the *ie* system, the idea of feminine modesty was clearly manifested by widows who were independent and able to support themselves without asking for help from family or society (Nolte and Hastings 1991: 172). In fact, many women found it difficult to obtain a new husband or to receive financial help from relatives. Even the children of widowed women were discriminated against, since a fatherless boy might be seen as not receiving the kind of moral and strict training that is necessary for a successful company employee. Companies also have traditionally worried about whether a "fatherless son" might succumb to temptations of stealing due to the additional family pressures which may fall upon him (Vogel 1963: 17-18). Therefore, the state of widowhood for both the wife and her children was fraught with discriminatory treatment, isolation, and sometimes poverty.

With this information in mind, it is not surprising that many widows who participated in the War Widows Association after World War II were forced to work as day laborers. Some of these women carried goods on their backs, and sold them directly to customers in a kind of free-lance vending system. As one eyewitness to this practice stated, "I saw the widow of an army captain buying items from a wholesaler. She then wrapped them up and put them on her back to sell retail. She did this so that she could support her three children. It was the most pitiful thing that I have ever seen" (Suzuki 1983: 11-12, 103-106).

The economic strain which some widows

endure is illustrated by a portrait of a widowed Japanese mother who became the sole family breadwinner at the age of 49 when her husband died. It was necessary to earn a living for herself and her five children through the performance of odd jobs such as sewing, working in a cannery, and doing laundry for commercial companies (Lebra 1984). Other widows may be forced to support themselves as full-time workers or may set up their own businesses, while upper-class widows are frequently able to take over the late husband's position on village councils and in the government (Nolte and Hastings 1991: 153; Hastings 1996: 278-279). Some widows become managers of a family-business at the time of the husband's death. However, in many cities of Japan, widows are still the focus of charity drives and receive support from women's auxiliary clubs (Bestor 1989: 167). Thus, widows may not be adequately supported by members of her own natal family nor by her deceased husband's family within the bounds of the *ie* system, even though such a system purportedly cares for all its' members. Widows are frequently the objects of discrimination, surveillance, and control as they struggle to overcome the death of a husband as well as financially support their families.

#### Linguistic and Symbolic Images of Death and Widowhood

In order to understand the contradictions and ambiguities of widowhood in Japan, it is useful to explore some of the images of widows in the Japanese language and in folklore. The most common word used for widows in Japan is *mibōjin*, but its meaning is rather negative suggesting that a widow is "one who is not yet dead." Such a term implies that the wife is

simply waiting for death, since a wife should be willing to follow her husband into the grave (Endo 1995: 29). Other terms for widows are *yamome* or the more academic word, *kafu*. Linguistic terms for men who are widowed, such as *otoko yamome*, do not invoke a prejudicial meaning though the phrase, *Otoko yamome ni uji ga waku*, reflects the idea that after the death of a wife, men become like maggots due to their helplessness and lack of skill in performing the most basic household labor, such as cleaning and cooking.

After a woman's husband died, it was believed that a wife no longer had a clear purpose, position, or function in her husband's family (Cherry 1987: 127). Thus, widows are placed in a condition of liminality, which accompanies changes of state in social status or age. This concept initially formulated by van Gennep (1960 {1908}: 33, 190) and later refined and elaborated upon by Turner (1995 {1969}: 94-96), has been adapted to reflect its gendered nature manifested in rituals of bereavement. The concept of liminality is neither static nor gender-neutral, but is clearly linked to the idea of change, transformation and process highlighting the theme of transition not as a fixed point, but rather as a moving continuum. A widow becomes a symbolic "passenger" or "liminar" with an ambiguous status; at times shifting and serving as a transitory bridge between the separated, but at times intermingling worlds of the living and the dead.

The above outlined theme is prevalent in Japanese folklore expressing a continuity between two worlds where the dead do not leave for some far away place, but are closeby as a part of the living world (Hori and Ooms 1986: 9-15). The deceased are thought to freely visit the living, illustrating the relationship

between death and life itself as one of circularity and complementarity, not of absolute opposition in the form of otherness. It was believed that there was a concealed corridor between the living and dead, between the "clear" world and the "dark" world (Yanagita 1986: 136-152). Having entered her husband's family on the basis of her position as wife to the now deceased husband, the widow is frequently viewed as a rather divested and lonely figure due to the uncertainty of her position.

The pattern of loss and lack of clarity in status is the most common inheritance of widows in highly developed countries, as well as developing nations (Owens 1996: 4-14). The liminal state of widows is a highly gendered one which locates them in interlocking positions encompassing both power and vulnerability, and arousing fear, pity, as well as suspicion from others. These complicated and contradictory emotions underpin the foundation of and set the stage for the careful monitoring and controlling that many widows endure.

#### Widows in the Web of Family Politics: Issues of Inheritance, Care-giving and Economics

The above discussion clearly indicates that women who are widowed frequently occupy marginalized positions, since they are viewed as representing a different state from that which society views as normal and desirable, such as being married or involved in a heterosexual "couple" relationship. That is particularly the case in societies, which have been historically dominated by a system of property and asset transmission that is male-centered (Pallazzi 1996: 216). This, of course, is the case in Japan where family assets are usually inherited by the oldest son or *chōnan*. Customs and family

pressures may bar widows from owning or inheriting assets even if the laws of the state allow them to do so. Because many Japanese still consider that a woman belongs to her husband's household, many widows and daughters are strongly pressured to waive their full rights of inheritance (Toshitani 1993: 66-82). Thus, women's confidence in the parity of Japan's inheritance laws may be seriously misplaced, putting widows in a condition of economic vulnerability (Aoki 1997: 87-103). This situation leads to the severe financial situation in which many widows are placed.

Widowhood includes women of all ages, and it may well represent the most economically and socially vulnerable group within diverse populations throughout the world (Owen 1996: 4-5). This is a growing problem since it is estimated that by 2020, Japan will have the world's highest percentage of citizens aged 65 or older expanding from the present rate of 15% to approximately 25% of its overall population (Isamu 1990: 255). As of June of 1998, the Japanese population aged 65 and over totaled 19.54 million people (Kawanishi 1997: 21). The number of women aged 65 or older living alone has almost doubled in 10 years to 1.75 million in 1995 from only 913,000 in 1985.

More clearly, the growth in the number of widows has risen consistently from 1960 as shown below:

Year	Total Number of Widows in Japan (1960-1995)
1960	4,836,267
1970	5,240,236
1980	5,716,939
1990	6,395,705
1995	6,900,957

Source: *Danjo, Nenrei, Haigū-kankei Betsu Jinko* (Population by Sex, Age, and Marital Status). 1995 Population Census of Japan, pages 131-138. Statistics Bureau, Management and Coordination Agency, Government of Japan.

The above figures represent a steadily increasing group of widowed women who face many problems as they negotiate family politics and economic realities. They make up a large percentage of the elderly population and perform the vast majority of the home-management, care-giving, and household labor on behalf of the aged and infirmed. Rather than gaining prestige, control and power along with aging as has been reported in other anthropological research, (Dickerson-Putnam 1998: 69-72) widowed women in Japan may be subjected to greater pressure to meet societal standards.

In Japanese society caring for the elderly and sick has historically been a highly feminized type of work provided by wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law (particularly those women married to the oldest sons). Government policies continue to support such roles encouraging and using women in families to furnish care for elderly parents and in-laws, as a way to avoid government funding and responsibility for the aged (Lock 1996: 80; Long 1996: 156-176). However, some improvement has been made with the passage in December 1997 of a government proposed bill to create a mandatory insurance system to provide nursing care for the elderly. The new system will take effect in April 2000 and will help elderly households in need of in-home nursing care for ailing relatives. Services will include dispatching workers to perform care at home and help with household chores, sending nurses to private residences, providing daytime and short-term stays at care facilities and long-term stays at nursing homes. In order to receive such services, all people living in Japan aged 40 and over must initially pay about 2,500 yen per month starting in April 2000, and this cost will

rise in later years.

While seemingly self-evident, it nevertheless should be pointed out that not all widows are in the 65 or over group. Widows come in all age groups and in all classes, and for many of them economic realities present serious challenges with little financial help forthcoming from children or other family members. Even middle-class widows may be placed in positions of economic vulnerability because they receive only half of their husband's estate and pension, so they must struggle to maintain their lifestyle on only one-half of the household resources that they once received (Aoki 1997: 97). A clearer picture of the financial status of widows and of other single women can be succinctly shown by the fact that in 1995 the average yearly income for women living alone (including widows, single and divorced women) was 228.9 *man en* (approximately \$23,000 U.S. dollars depending on the current exchange rate). This amount can be compared to the average yearly income for men living alone (including widowers, single and divorced men) of 375.3 *man en* (approximately \$38,000) reflecting the highly gendered financial status of women who are single (*Kokumin Seikatsu Kiso Chōsa* 1996). Furthermore, the lower figure of \$23,000 annual income for single women is close to the poverty level in Japan.

Insurance benefits are paid to widowed mothers living on their own through the Widows and Survivors' Benefits Pension. However, for women who have children and must support them, the picture is even more grim. The income of lone mother families relative to two-parent families has declined since the 1970s, dropping from 46.4 percent of the average two-parent family income in 1978 to 45.0 percent in 1983 and just 39.4 percent in

1988. This trend has been attributed to the fact that unlike families of the middle class headed by male breadwinners, widows and other lone mothers were not able to take advantage of Japan's "bubble economy" which occurred between 1976 and 1988. It was during this time period that the average income of two-parent families rose by 63.2% while that of all lone mother families rose by only 29% (Peng 1997: 120-123; Yuzawa 1998: 6). Overall, lone mothers in Japan, whether divorced or widowed, may be placed in a fragile position relying on a support system that is incomplete which provides inadequate assistance and has no enforcement power. As illustrated above, the number of widowed women and women living alone is steadily increasing and represents a significant challenge to the family and to the Japanese government. Serious planning and consideration must be given concerning how to adequately address the needs of this burgeoning population of "women alone" in terms of inheritance, care-giving responsibilities and financial assistance.

### Conclusion

This article provides the foundation for a research project regarding the present status and situation of widows in Japan. As such, it will fill a major gap in anthropological literature by examining significant and varied aspects of widowhood in Japan. As discussed throughout this article, for many women in Japan and in other countries, widowhood represents a singularly traumatic event. It is a state, which presents opportunities, challenges and possibilities for various manifestations of resistance. Cultural and societal values, as well as current beliefs and historical practices contribute to shaping the life and experiences

of widowed women in multidimensional and complex ways. Ideologies regarding suitable gender roles and obligations for widows, lone mothers, married women, and older women, prohibitions and anxieties about re-marriage or any kind of sexual relationship, economic provisions or lack thereof, laws governing inheritance and control of property, and division of assets, affect those experiences in individual and personal ways.

In Japanese society women are expected to exhibit particular behaviors such as modesty, faithfulness and obedience in order to maintain their status as a "chaste widow." She "follows" her husband into a kind of enforced sexual abstinence, lest she be chastised by society as a licentious widow. In return for compliance with these rigorous societal standards, widowed women may well hope to be respected and cared for in accordance with Confucian teachings of filial piety and morals embedded in the *ie* system. Yet, in practice, many widows have struggled in order to financially and emotionally survive while their behavior is closely scrutinized. They may be encouraged to marry, if they do so within society mandated constraints (e.g., in the case of war widows through the levirate practice), or they may be admonished to remain the perpetually grieving widow.

As women face challenges and difficulties in the gendered terrain of widowhood, they must conform to traditional ideologies of women, especially to those for older women. In effect, even after the death of her husband, a widow continues to be defined by her relationship to him in terms of how she conducts herself in the community. Thus, there are many questions which remain to be answered such as: the way that society disciplines, encourages, and

rewards women to act in accordance with its dictates; how violations of prescribed gender roles are punished; and how women actively resist and challenge the application of these disciplinary and controlling mechanisms. These important issues will be the subject of future research and critical analysis in order to further illuminate the lives of widows in Japan.

#### NOTES

1. All translations are the work of Dr. Deborah McDowell Aoki, Associate Professor, Hokusei Women's Junior College.

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