

JOHANNA MAYR
LENKA MIYANOHARA
BENEDIKT SCHULTZ

Tanoshimi ga nakunatta: Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social activities in the Aso region

Festivities and village activities create social connections between individuals within a community (NPO A 2022), by providing opportunities for local residents to meet and enjoy themselves and maintain connections with each other. When a pandemic forces important social activities to be held in different ways or stopped completely, social connections will arguably be strongly influenced and possibly changed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our daily lives were shaped by new restrictions and regulations, including body temperature being measured when entering a building, wearing masks, shifting much of our lives to the online sphere, cancelling social gatherings and implementing lockdowns. This situation, of course, took its toll on the everyday lives of people living in the Aso region in Japan as well, influencing the region's social structures and how village residents evaluate the necessity and feasibility of their traditions, festivals and other social activities. In this short article, we examine the impact of the pandemic on social activities, such as Japanese traditional festivals (*matsuri*), the traditional burning of the grasslands (*noyaki*) (Ōtsu 2016, 370; Wilhelm 2020, 223–4) and other communal activities, for example cleaning days, when local residents cut weeds along the roads.

Our research dealt with changes that occurred in the activities of social organisations and in the ways the traditions of the Aso region are carried out due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How and why did these social activities change? What effect do these changes have on the local community? In terms of its impact on social activities, how does the pandemic compare to natural disasters that the people of Aso have experienced in the past?

Unfortunately, travel restrictions prevented us from visiting Aso in person, so we had to move our project into the digital space. In the course of our online research, we conducted numerous interviews with various actors

within the Aso region. These interviews included one-on-one interviews with experts and local residents and group interviews with representatives of local cultural associations, administrations and NPOs. We used Thematic Analysis (Braun / Clarke 2022) to analyse and process our data. This enabled us to search through our data set to identify, analyse and report recurring patterns. We used this method to describe our qualitative data and interpret our selected codes and constructed themes (Braun / Clarke 2022, 8–10).

We start with an overview of the existing research literature on the cultural and social activities in rural areas, including the Aso region, which served as a background for our study. After reviewing the literature, we present our findings. We found that the pandemic had negative effects both on community opportunities to generate social cohesion and the transmission of traditions. It has also led to a loss of opportunities to relax and have fun. Furthermore, the pandemic has proven to be rather different from any natural disaster Aso has faced before. We have also confirmed that the rapid aging and the decline in population in Aso has acted as an additional challenge to the pandemic. We end by reflecting on the research project and the experiences we have made.

Literature review

There is a significant amount of literature available on the topics of our study, including traditions and *matsuri* in rural Japan. Earlier studies focused on the documentation and categorisation of festivities, their ritual aspects and performances. More recent research looks at the socio-cultural purpose and significance of customs and traditions in the community and also discusses the social function of traditions in relation to social cohesion, economic benefits and questions of authenticity (Lahournat 2016, 186–7; Okubo et al. 2014, 1126). This is also the approach our study takes by focussing on the societal aspects of traditions and customs. Okubo Kenji and his team describe the social value of festivals as mainly being a key opportunity to take part in social gatherings and mingle with locals (Okubo et al 2014, 1131). Other studies have found that social participation plays a great role in the well-being and sense of self of participants (Lee 2013; Roemer 2010). We aim to expand on the understanding of the social aspects of traditions and festivities in Aso when faced with a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

We hypothesise that the pandemic poses a risk to rural communities in Japan. Another risk to be considered—one that has already received much attention—is the declining and ageing rural population. Previous studies have found that increasing numbers of elderly inhabitants and depopulation in

rural areas in Japan pose a problem for the continuation of local traditions and festivities, as the preservation and transmission of traditions to the next generation is endangered (Lahournat 2016; Thelen 2015; Traphagan 2000; Yamashita 2021). When it comes to Aso, not only immaterial traditions, but also the physical continuation of the grasslands, which are shaped by cultural practices (*noyaki*), are at risk of disappearing due to the declining population. Volunteer organisations and private foundations are trying to cover for the lack of people (Ötsu 2016; Wilhelm 2022). Further studies link the disappearance of *matsuri* to a loss of local identity. When these activities disappear, the sense of community and belonging weakens as well. The help of volunteers and interactions with the locals are essential for saving and preserving the local traditions (Okubo et al. 2014; Thelen 2015).

The resilience of local communities in Aso when faced with natural disasters has already been described by prior research. After major natural disasters hit the region, such as the torrential rains of 2012 or the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake, residents immediately began actions to help each other. They considered the continuation of traditional festivities essential (Abe / Murakami 2020; Yamashita 2021). These findings will be instrumental in our comparison of the pandemic with other natural disasters the Aso region has faced.

With the pandemic restricting the assembling of larger crowds, we assume that if the elderly are no longer able to continue with local traditions, the ageing society will catalyse the disappearance of these social activities and traditions. Furthermore, the current situation heavily influences the way local traditions are executed, which in our opinion has a strong impact on the sense of community in Aso. As we have outlined above, our study continues and expands on already existing research. Contrary to the mentioned articles, our paper takes a more general approach to social activities and does not focus on just one of the many activities in the Aso region.

Noyaki has also been the topic of much research. Wilhelm provides a detailed look at the workings of local community life, the history of *noyaki* and agricultural development in the Aso region (Wilhelm 2020, 242–3). An up-to-date overview is provided by Yokogawa (2021), who collected information on *noyaki* in other prefectures of Japan as well, and found that many grassland burnings have been cancelled and others have been carried out with restrictions. Yokogawa worries that this may impact both the safety of future burns and the biodiversity of grasslands (Yokogawa 2021, 107). Takeuchi and Shimada (2021) investigated the impact of the pandemic on *noyaki* in the Aso region, focusing on volunteer activities that continued during the pandemic.

This was made possible to a considerable degree by an established system for risk management, coordination by the volunteer organisation and the organisation's flexibility. Furthermore, COVID-19 safety precautions were taken while working, like measuring body temperature and maintaining a prescribed distance (Takeuchi / Shimada 2021, 19–20). We would like to contribute to the existing research by investigating how local community ties within the Aso region have been affected by cancellations and changes to *noyaki* and other forms of social activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

The pandemic has had a great impact on how social activities in the Aso region are carried out. Most were not cancelled entirely, but instead held under different parameters. Some 2021 festivities, such as the *dondoya*, were postponed due to social restrictions enacted by the prefectural administration. Others chose to limit attendance by allowing only a select group of participants. Certain conditions proved to be of utmost significance in the decision-making process regarding if and how an event was carried out: season, year, type of social restrictions in effect at the time, current number of people infected, and whether the event could be held outdoors or not (Interview Expert B 2022).

Social activities are crucial to forming strong social cohesion, which contributes to a greater degree of autonomy in the village (Interview Expert B 2022; Lahournat 2016, 186–7). It is also seen as an important factor in enabling residents to carry out hard work such as *noyaki* and its preparation (Interviewee A 2022). However, if social activities are not performed continuously, they lose their effectiveness (Interview Expert B 2022). For this reason, many activities—including *noyaki*—were still carried out during the pandemic. The public was often excluded from the festivities, with only a small group of actors performing the rituals to keep the tradition alive (Interview Expert B 2022).

To elaborate, Japanese festivities can be separated into two parts: the rituals (*shinji*) and the celebration (*shinshingyōji* or *hōshukugyōji*). The rituals are performed inside the shrine by a select group of people in a restricted area. Following the rituals, the celebration begins. In the case of festivities involving the carrying of portable shrines (*mikoshi*), this means a procession is being held. In contrast to the rituals, everyone is allowed to attend the procession (Interview Expert A 2022). During the pandemic, only the rituals were continued and the celebration was left out, as was the case with the *tanomisai*

(Interview Expert B 2022). Some festivals, like the *hifuri matsuri*, were continued with no such changes (Interview Expert B 2022).

One of our sources commented that, without the sensory memory of attending the event, the effect of creating social cohesion in the community was diminished (Interview Expert B 2022). One of our interviewees lamented: “As drinking became impossible or rare, it started to feel like relationships with my friends were more distanced, a very lonely feeling”. He explained that “while it is possible to have a drink with friends online, similar to the conversation we are having now, it is still lonely” (Interviewee A 2022). Most residents do not have access or a need for digital devices (Interview Expert B 2022). It became apparent to us that the pandemic has had a negative effect on opportunities for a community to generate social cohesion and that, while several private activities were held using online tools, community events did not see a shift to digital spaces.

Some interviewees stated a fear that the pandemic could cause certain festivities or gatherings to disappear, diminishing relationships in the community (Aso Shakyō 2022). One person worried that once festivities and activities are stopped, they can no longer be passed on to the next generation, seeming to refer to the problem of traditional knowledge dying out with the ageing population (NPO A 2022; Aso Shakyō 2022). One of our informants put it as follows, “once cancelled, participants will start to feel like it isn’t necessary to continue holding the event or activity anymore (Interviewee A 2022). Lahournat describes depopulation and ageing as endangering the transmission and preservation of local traditions (2016, 186). The pandemic seems to be a similar risk factor, as interviewees feared that cancellations due to the pandemic might lead to the permanent loss of certain traditions. It seems that while this worry about disappearing festivals and traditions already existed before the pandemic, it is necessary to consider the effects of the pandemic on the continuity of such events, as the chance that traditions are interrupted and discontinued is increased.

Reducing social activities to a smaller scale also meant that they were less fun and there were fewer opportunities to interact. One of our informants described it fittingly as “there is no fun anymore” (*tanoshimi ga nakunatta*, Interviewee A 2022), which means that social events which people used to anticipate and look forward to throughout the year disappeared. “An increasing number of festivals in our district have disappeared recently due to the ageing of the population. This has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. So actually, it feels a little bit like there is a sentiment developing that this [sit-

uation] is bad” (Interviewee A 2022). Even if the activities are continued, they might be drastically changed, like a local village’s *bon-odori* festival “as there are currently no singers in the village, participants would have to dance without music and can therefore no longer dance” (Interviewee A 2022). These festivals and activities were generally considered a fun break from the hard work throughout the year (Interviewee A 2022).

A local resident we talked to in a group interview lamented that there were fewer drinking parties, which he considered crucial in forming relationships and being able to speak freely (NPO A 2022). This is similar to the worry of traditions disappearing in that even before the pandemic there was unease about local community life becoming less enjoyable. During a group interview, one participant connected local culture to local happiness, explaining that “while it is about passing on the local culture, there is also a role of increasing local happiness” (NPO A 2022). This in turn means that increased event cancellations not only lead to difficulties in preserving local traditions but also to the loss of fun and local happiness that is related to these events.

The pandemic has proven itself to be very different from the natural disasters the Aso region has previously faced. High social cohesion in the village led to greater resilience in times of disaster (Aso Shakyō 2022; Abe / Murakami 2020, 37). However, due to social distancing, it was not possible to overcome the pandemic by working together directly. Everyone was on their own and could no longer rely on the assistance and emotional support of their community. Additionally, the pandemic did not lead to visible damages that could be directly addressed (Aso Shakyō 2022). However, some have also voiced the opinion that the prior experience with natural disasters allowed residents to react calmly and with composure in face of the pandemic (Takamori Shakyō 2022). As one local stated, even though both the pandemic and natural disasters are equally destructive, natural disasters seem to have a positive effect on community strength through the collective work of rebuilding. In contrast, the pandemic seems to have had a very destructive effect on community strength (Interviewee A 2022).

In conclusion, there was consensus between our interview partners that there is a clear difference between natural disasters and the pandemic. However, some believed that experiences gained from natural disasters affected personal coping capacities for the pandemic. Abe and Murakami made similar observations: The communities of the investigated wards Kawagoda and Kase were able to fall back on social bonds formed during their many social activities during the year and their previous experience

with a flood disaster during recovery from the 2016 earthquake (Abe / Murakami 2020, 29, 37).

We confirmed that the rapidly ageing and declining population has also been an additional challenge in the continuation of social activities in Aso (Aso Shakyō 2022). A local resident showed us pictures of yearly and monthly gatherings held in his village, clubs dedicated to flower growing and other activities where there were only elderly participants. While some participants are in their 30s and 40s, and there is one event specifically targeting children, there were no events held for younger people in general in his village (Interviewee A 2022).

To conclude our case study, we found that the pandemic has had an impact on social cohesion and community strength. This occurred due to the cancellation of events and festivals along with the limitation of opportunities to exchange socially with fellow locals. Both aspects are important in generating a sense of community. Furthermore, “locals working together means they can freely enjoy the fun of collective work” (NPO A 2022). Local work, such as ward cleaning or *noyaki*, increases the enjoyment of community life. We found that in terms of religious activities, there are certain aspects that simply must be held and that these took place as best as possible in accordance with rules and restrictions. On the other hand, aspects performed for the community were often cancelled. This separation can be described by the Japanese terms *shinji* and *shinshingyōji*. It appears that natural disasters and the pandemic are perceived differently, although both caused great economic and social damage.

Reflections on the research project

The Aso 2022 Winter Field School was divided by topic into four smaller groups. We worked together on both levels, in the individual groups and as a whole. We supported each other and exchanged information: For example, if one of us came across an aspect that might be important for another group, we would mark, send or point it out to them. We participated in the group interviews together and coordinated who and what we would ask. We respected each other's focal areas and deferred the spotlight when another group had more important questions to ask.

Group meetings and workshops helped us focus on our work and develop our teamwork skills. In our personal experience, the option to go to the classroom physically boosted our experience and gave us a stronger feeling of be-

ing involved. Being there, we could also ask our research project leaders for advice and input. Their knowledge and insight helped us on many occasions.

We shared all responsibilities within our team, with everyone involved in all steps of the process. We divided the workload equally and were in constant communication with each other. All of us attended all interviews and each of us asked questions. We transcribed equal amounts of the interviews and coded them as a group. Organisational meetings helped us stay on track and maintain an overview of the project.

Although access to the field was limited to our device screens, we were also aware that hybrid research is very likely to become an important method in the future. The experience therefore provided us with a necessary basis for future academic work. Naturally, not being able to communicate directly with the locals influenced our collected data. Though this was a limitation, we would not otherwise have been able to collect any data at all. Thus, hybrid online research actually decreased the distance between us as researchers and our subjects in Aso. One drawback of online research is the way it filters. Not all people in Aso can be reached online or by the people that generously assisted our research team on site. This meant that members of the local community that may have been crucial in answering our research questions were excluded.

We had to heavily rely on connections established before the project took place, not only in terms of finding residents willing to participate in interviews, but also in order to get an understanding of the local area. We were lucky to have locals willing to carry around a smartphone outside during a video call so that we could see some of the landscape. We feel that remote online research is arguably only effectively possible with strong connections like these in place, while traditional fieldwork might also be accomplished by establishing connections after entering the field. On the other hand, online research, when done correctly, offers an opportunity to students and researchers alike to access a wider variety of research topics by reducing and removing restrictions like being physically in the field.

During our project, we learned that both the traditional methods and remote online research have their merits. As such, careful consideration should be put into the questions of what and how one wants to research, and into weighing whether said topic can be researched remotely (or if it may even be better to research remotely) or if the project would strongly profit from a direct, physical approach. We look forward to utilising both approaches in our future work!

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