

*Concept of Satogaeri Shussan in Japanese Childbirth Rituals: From the Perspective of Contemporary Japanese Women*

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**Abstract**

This paper will study the current trend of *Satogaeri Shussan*, a traditional Japanese childbirth custom when the pregnant woman customarily returns back to her paternal home for seeking physical and mental support as well as childcare assistance from her parents particularly during prenatal or postpartum period. There is no doubt that the custom of *Satogaeri Shussan* has always been given significant importance in Japanese culture since ancient times. However, with many changes over time, this age-old traditional ritual has witnessed some changes. The purpose of this paper is to explore what does *Satogaeri Shussan* mean? how does this traditional ritual play an important role in Japanese women's life? how do the Japanese women think about this ritual? why do the Japanese women still prefer to perform this ritual? what are the major changes observed in this ritual? These questions will be addressed based on the primary data collected from the field work from 2018 to 2020. In other words, for the first time perspective of Contemporary Japanese women will be emphasised in order to study the trend of *Satogaeri Shussan*. Finally, this paper will conclude that the custom of *Satogaeri Shussan* helps not only the Japanese women to overcome any kind of stress, anxiety for Childbirth or childcare related assistance but, it also helps them to make a strong bond with their parents. In addition, as like earlier days even today, most women still prefer to perform *Satogaeri Shussan* by returning back to their parental home, but interestingly there is also a new trend or change like to request their mother or mother-in-law to come and stay with them at their own residence so that they can get help and support from them without performing *Satogaeri Shussan*.

Keywords: Japanese Childbirth Rituals, *Satogaeri Shussan*, Nagoya City, Japan

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## Introduction

Childbirth rituals, customs and its folk traditions have been given significant importance in Japanese culture since ancient times. Like other countries in the world, people in Japan also celebrate several traditional rituals and customs related to pregnancy and Childbirth. There are numerous traditional childbirth-related rituals and customs followed all over Japan even in the 21st century. Such as *Anzankigan* (a prayer for safe delivery), *Haraobi-Iwai* (a celebration for tying maternity belly band during pregnancy), *Satogaeri Shussan* (a custom of returning back to one's paternal house for delivery), *Omiya mairi* (one month after birth, parents and grandparents in Japan, usually bring the newborn child to a Shinto Shrine in order to receive blessings from the enshrined deities of that specific Shinto Shrine for ensuing future prosperity and healthy growth of a newborn child) and *Okuizome* (a celebration that takes place hundred days after birth in order to give a first meal to a newborn baby) etc. However, these traditional rituals have gone through many drastic changes with the passage of time. Especially, due to the rapid modernization, urbanization that took all over Japan and most importantly, the changes that occurred in the Childbirth delivery process like home to Hospital delivery, introduction of new medical procedure in Childbirth brought so many changes not only in the lifestyle of the Japanese people but also in the way of conducting these traditional rituals and its related folk beliefs.

Now, I would like to discuss about the concept of *Satogaeri Shussan*. What does *Satogaeri Shussan* mean? In Japanese the word "*Satogaeri*" itself means to return back to one's paternal house or village and the word "*Shussan*" means giving Childbirth. Therefore, for the Japanese women "*Satogaeri Shussan*" is always considered as one of the significant Childbirth rituals that they should perform during their pregnancy or postpartum period. By performing this traditional ritual, Japanese women are able to return back to their paternal house for delivery or for receiving Childcare support that is very much needed after delivery. According to age-old traditional ritual, earlier days Japanese women were bound to return to their parental house for labor and childbirth. If we look back in history then it can be found that earlier days when Japanese women entered into the phase of pregnancy, at that time, their parental family members used to pay a customary visit to their in laws house in order to bring back their daughters with them for *Satogaeri Shussan*. Here, I would like to add one more point that since ancient times, Japanese people are fond of following their traditional age-old customs that have been passed down by their previous generation. In addition, earlier days after giving childbirth, they had to stay at their paternal house for a long time because they were bound to receive childcare support and assistance from their own parents rather than depending on in laws family members. In short, to strengthen a relationship between the parents and daughter after marriage, the ritual of *Satogaeri Shussan* has been playing an eminent role in the life of Japanese people.

Similarly, even in contemporary Japan also, most Japanese women when they get pregnant, they usually prefer to give childbirth at the hospital, which is very close to their own paternal house and often prefer to visit the doctor, who is working at local hospital nearby their paternal house in order to perform this traditional *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual so that they can overcome any kind of difficulties that may occur during pregnancy or post delivery.

## A Brief Survey of Literature & Research Problem

Numerous researches have already been done in order to study Japanese traditional childbirth rituals and customs. However, very small number of researches have been conducted to study the role, significance, function and the changes that took place in the ritual of *Satogaeri*

*Shussan*. In short, particularly from the perspective of contemporary Japanese women, how is the *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual observed in the present time, why do the Japanese women prefer to continue this age-old traditional ritual even in the present time, have not been discussed yet by any previous researcher. However, there are some research to study the role, function and significance of performing *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual during pregnancy or postpartum period. Such as Kobayashi (2010: 28-39) mentions that the age-old custom of *Satogaeri Shussan* has been continued not only for strengthening the relationship or bond between a mother and her daughter more in a deeper level after marriage but this ritual provides an opportunity to the Japanese women for getting childcare related support from their parents after post delivery. In addition, Kobayashi has also pointed out that with the passage of time various changes are prominently observed even in this traditional *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual. For an example, nowadays most women after marriage ended up living far away from their paternal or in laws family members due to their own carrier, work or their husband's work. As a result, they do not have time to return back to their paternal house for performing *Satogaeri Shussan*. Unlike returning back to their paternal house, there is a new trend in Japan among the women to stay at their own residence and to request their mothers, mother-in-laws, sisters to come and stay with them in order to look after them and their newborn babies.

However, Kobayashi research has focused only on the role and function of *Satogaeri Shussan* in the life of Japanese women. It has described in detail about how does this ritual help to reduce the anxiety of raising a newborn baby, how does this custom provide an opportunity to the Japanese women to overcome their physical weakness after delivery, how does it help them to learn and acquire new parenting skills and knowledge from their mother and most importantly it has described how to strengthen the bond between a mother and a daughter, a daughter and her child by performing this age-old ritual. Therefore, some important questions related to the trend of *Satogaeri Shussan* are not thoroughly discussed yet. Such questions include, what do the Japanese women in the present time think about *Satogaeri Shussan*? When do they perform this ritual? How many Japanese women are interested in performing this age-old traditional ritual? Why do they feel necessity to perform this ritual even in the 21st century? How much is it important to Japanese women to continue this ritual? What kind of thoughts do Japanese have by performing this age-old ritual? In order to address these research questions, for the first time, I am going to focus on the case study of Nagoya city, Aichi prefecture in central Japan. The reason for choosing Nagoya city for case study will be mentioned later in this research paper. Again, regarding the role of *Satogaeri Shussan* Takeda (1999: 90-93) has pointed the importance of performing the ritual of *Satogaeri Shussan* during pregnancy in Japan particularly based on life story of the women, who were born in Showa period (1926-1989). However, Takeda's research is solely based on the literary materials rather than conducting any field work for gathering information about the trend of *Satogaeri Shussan*. Moreover, her analysis on the role of *Satogaeri Shussan* is based on the information gathered from the five respondents. Therefore, in order to generalize the trend and role of *Satogaeri Shussan*, it is necessary to conduct a questionnaire survey as well as Face-to-Face interview survey with a large group of Japanese women. The main objective of this paper is to shed a light on the current trend of *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual from the perspective contemporary Japanese women in Nagoya city.

## **Background of Field Work Area**

I have chosen Nagoya city for my field work area because according to previous literature review, I have noticed that until now there is no research to emphasize on the Nagoya city and to discuss about how the people living in Nagoya city celebrate the traditional childbirth rituals

like *Anzankigan*, *Haraobi-Iwai*, *Omiya mairi*, *Satogaeri Shussen* during pregnancy and after delivery. No case study has been done to indicate where do the people living in Nagoya city or its surrounding areas conduct their *Anzankigan* ritual and the purification of *Haraobi* belt and the time of conducting *Satogaeri Shussen* ritual for labor and childcare. Therefore, I have decided to emphasis on the case study of Nagoya city, Aichi prefecture. Nagoya is Japan's fourth largest incorporated city and also it is the third most populas urban area in Japan after Tokyo, Yokohana and Osaka. Nagoya city is very close to the Toyota city, which is known as the giant hub for Toyota automobile industry. As we know that every year Toyota automobile company manufactures a large number of Toyota car for its domestic use and export purpose. Area wise, Nagoya city is around 326.50km<sup>2</sup>. According to 2021 population statistics, the population of Nagoya city is around 9,565,642. Historically, this city has a long history with Tokugawa Owari clan, one of three main branches of Tokugawa clan, who ruled all over Japan during Pre-modern time (1603-1867). At present this city is divided into sixteen wards such as Atsuta, Higashi, Nishi, Minami, Showa, Chikusa etc. For conducting the field work, I have decided to visit various local Childrearing Support centers for collecting primary data directly from the Japanese mothers, who have just experienced of giving Childbirth.

It is necessary to mention here why Japanese parents bring their newborn babies to these places? What kind of information they gather by visiting these places? It is to be noted that there are numerous Childrearing support centers all over Japan in order to provide various facilities, particularly to the newly become parents for raising their newborn babies so that they can overcome any kind of hurdles or obstacles that might occur during parenting. Actually, these places are primarily established by the regional authority of each city in Japan, in order to provide a safe and comfortable environment to the people who have just become parents. Therefore, they can receive and gather valuable information about parenting and childcare from the experienced staffs, who work at these places after receiving a proper training on childcare. As like other areas in Japan, similarly in the Nagoya city also, there are numerous childrearing support centers in various ward. Usually, at free of cost, Japanese parents who have newborn baby or the children under three years of age are allowed to visit and spend time at these place according to their convenient time. By visiting these childrearing Support centers, parents get an opportunity not only to interact with other people who have just become parents like them, but they can receive valuable advices from the specialized experties or staffs. Such information includes how to raise a child, how to play with a newborn baby, how to breasfeed a newborn baby, how to take care of a newborn baby etc. Moreover, those who want to discuss about their personal problem related to childrearing confidentially, then they can receive that facility by booking an appointment prior to visiting these places. The reason for choosing Nagoya city local Childrearing support center for conducting field work because I have relized that the life of numerous newly become mothers are very much dependent on these local childrearing support centers for gathering information about parenting and they come to these places along with their newborn babies to spend some quality time. By visiting several Childcare support centers, I have also noticed that not only they enjoy spending their time with their newborn babies by playing wih many toys but they really enjoy chatting with other mothers or the staffs.

I thought this place would be the perfect place for gathering lots of information about the trend of childbirth rituals in an informal manner by conducting a questionnaire survey and the Face-to-Face interviews with them. Regarding research methodology, I have actually applied both the quantitative and qualitative methods. For the questionnaire survey, around (N=747) participants and for the Face-to-Face interview survey around (N=61) participants have participated. I have collected the primary data by visiting these local childrearing support centers several times in between 2018 to 2020 during my doctoral course at Nagoya University.

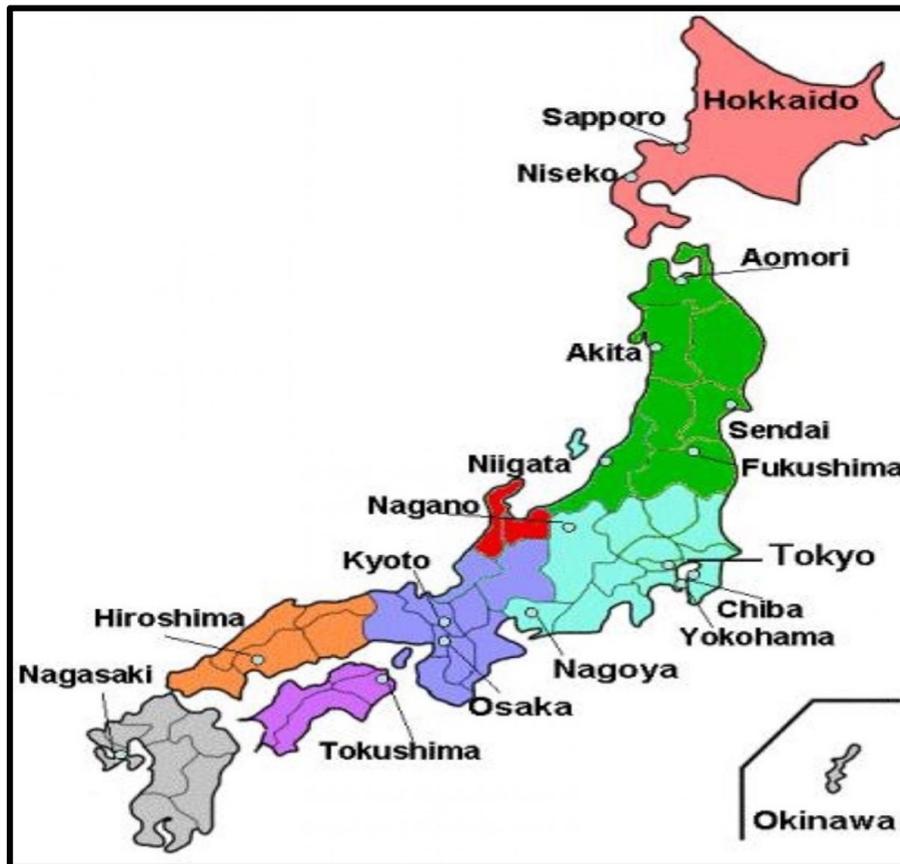


Figure 1: The Geographical Map of Japan, From Internet Source Date- 19.12.2021

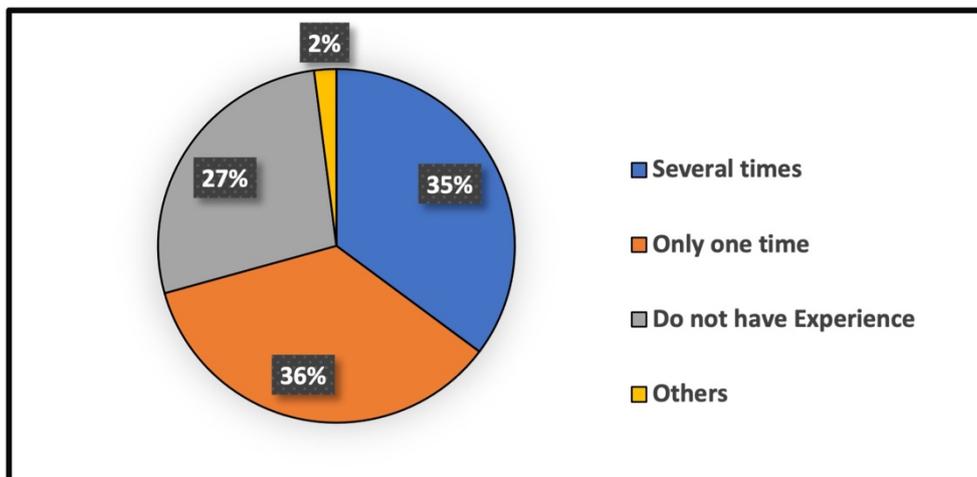


Figure 2: Experience of Returning to Paternal House for Satogaeri Shussan, N=747

According to (N=747) respondents, 35% have replied that several times in their life, they have actually experienced of returning back to their paternal house during pregnancy or postpartum period for performing this traditional age-old ritual *Satogaeri Shussan*. 36% have told that they have conducted *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual once in their life. 27% have replied that they have never experienced of performing *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual during their pregnancy or postpartum period. And the rest of 2% have chosen the option “others.” From this pie chart, it can be said that most Japanese women in the present time during their pregnancy or postpartum period preferred to return back to their paternal house in order to get support from their parents for childrearing. On the other hand, 27% who have not performed this ritual because probably

they wanted to take care of their newborn baby with the help of their husbands or they desired to give childbirth in the presence of their husbands during delivery or they wished to request their parents (mother or mother-in-law) to come and stay with them at their own residence for helping them with their household chores and to look after their newborn baby or their paternal house was not so far away from their residence.

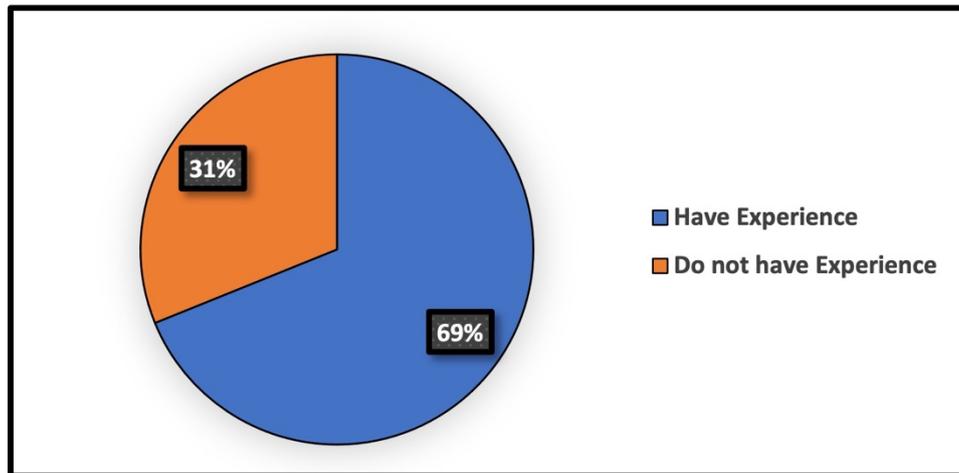


Figure 3: Experience of Returning to Paternal House for conducting Satogaeri Shussan, N=61

As I showed the result in the Figure 2 based on the information gathered from 747 participants, similarly I wanted to know whether the other 61 participants, who have participated in the Face-to-Face interview, performed the ritual of *Satogaeri Shussan* or not by asking them same question. According to figure 3, 69% have replied that they have performed *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual either during their pregnancy or postpartum period. However, remaining 31% have responded that they have never performed any kind of ritual like *Satogaeri Shussan* before and after Childbirth. From this pie chart, it can be interpreted that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century majority of Japanese women still prefer to return to their paternal house for seeking help from their parents in order to raise a newborn baby. 69% those who have returned to their paternal house, confirmed me during interview that they returned back to their paternal house according to their convenient time. Some of them preferred to return back to their paternal home during delivery in order to overcome their loneliness, stress and anxiety for first childbirth. In addition, some of them confirmed me that they preferred to return back to their paternal house after their childbirth because they wanted to receive childcare support from their parents. On the other hand, 31% respondents, who have not returned back to their paternal house for conducting this age-old ritual, they have shared with me an interesting fact for not opting *Satogaeri Shussan*. Such as they wanted to give birth to a child in the presence of their husband during delivery, they wanted to overcome obstacles related to parenting as a couple, they did not want to bother their parents for doing household tasks for them or to look after their newborn baby. they wanted to raise their baby at their own house so that the newborn baby can adapt to that environment from the very beginning etc.

### **The Reason for Performing the Ritual of *Satogaeri Shussan* in Contemporary Japan**

Among the 61 participants, around 42 participants who have already experienced of returning to their paternal house for *Satogaeri-shussan* ritual, I have asked them the main reason for performing this age-old ritual even in the present time. Here, I would like to mention some of the very interesting responses that I received from them during Face-to-Face interview. Such as “I have performed it because to get help and support from my parents;” “I totally wanted

to dependent on my mother during my pregnancy because it was my first pregnancy;” “ I returned to my paternal house because as it was my first Childbirth, I was feeling nervous;” “ I returned to my paternal house because I wanted to regain my physical strength after delivery;” “ I decided to return to my paternal house because it was my first Childbirth and I wanted to get advice from my mother;” “ I decided to return to my paternal house because my husband was so busy with his work. He did not get time to look after me during my pregnancy;” I returned to my paternal house because for me my mother is my teacher who can teach and guide me what should be done or what should not be done during pregnancy.”

### **The Reason for not Performing the Ritual of *Satogaeri Shussan* in Contemporary Japan**

Among the 61 participants, around 19 participants have confirmed me during Face-to-Face interview that they did not perform this ritual for specific causes. Such as “ Even if I could return back to my paternal house, probably I could not get proper help from my parents because they were very busy with their work, they did not have enough time to look after me during my pregnancy;” “ I could not return to my paternal house *for Satogaeri Shussan* because my mother was very sick at that time;” “ I did not want to return to my paternal house because my husband would probably feel lonely if I stay away from hime for a long time;” “I did not need to return to my paternal house for *Satogaeri Shussan* because my mother used to come to my house almost every day in order to look after me and my newborn baby and to help me with my household tasks after childbirth;” “ I did not need to return back to my paternal house or mother-in-laws house for conducting *Satogaeri Shussan* because my mother-in-law used to live in the same city, therefore everyday she used to come to my house in order to look after me and my baby;” “ I did not want to perform *Satogaeri Shussan* because I wanted to take care of my pet dog at my own house;” “ I wanted to overcome the challenges for raising a newborn baby with the help of my husband;” “ My husband wanted to see that our baby is growing up little by little”

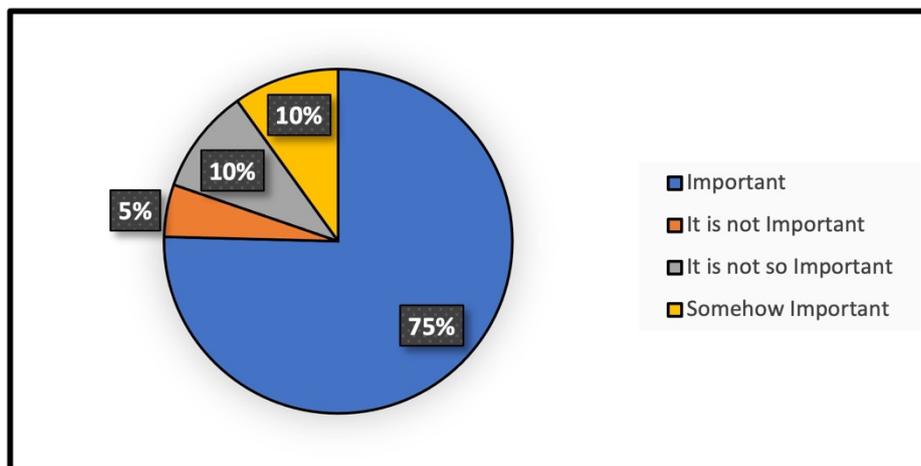


Figure 4: Importance of performing *Satogaeri Shussan* Ritual, N=61

According to figure 4, based on the information gathered from the 61 participants, around 75% have replied that it is important to perform and continue this age-old traditional ritual even in the present time. On the other hand, 5% have replied that it is not important to perform and 10% have confirmed that it is not so important to conduct this ritual during pregnancy or postpartum period. And finally, the remaining 10% have replied that somehow it is important to continue this age-old ritual. From this pie chart, it can be concluded that majority of Japanese women have positively confirmed the importance of performing this traditional ritual even in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When I asked them why it is important for them to follow this custom. They have shared very interesting facts with me. Such as, “By following this ritual, it is possible for them to give birth to a healthy baby without any worries;” “ It is important because you can give childbirth more in a relaxed way when you know that you are surrounded by the elder members of your family who have already experienced of giving childbirth;” “ It is important to follow this age-old traditional ritual because if you are surrounded by your own mother then probably there is a chance to give childbirth in a peaceful state of mind;” “ It is important to follow because after giving Childbirth it is quite natural for a woman to feel very exhausted physically and mentally, therefore at that time if she is given proper care by her mother then she will be able to overcome her stress and depression after delivery.”

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to shed a light on the concept and current trend of *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual followed in Japan based on the case study of Nagoya city, Aichi Prefecture. Particularly, unlike the previous researches, through this research I have tried to focus on the trend of *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual from the perspective of contemporary Japanese Women, who have just become mother in Nagoya city. If I make a comparison with the previous study that has been done by Kobayashi, then we can find similar kind of trend like after childbirth some Japanese women prefer to request their mother or mother-in-law to come and stay with them at their own house in order to look after them and their newborn baby. However, Kobayashi has tried to focus mainly on the role, function and significance *Satogaeri Shussan* in the life of Japanese women from the relationship between a mother and a daughter. But unlike Kobayashi's research, I have tried to discuss about how do the Japanese women think about the *Satogaeri Shussan* ritual in the present time, why do they conduct this ritual even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, why do they feel necessity to perform this age-old ritual, how many Japanese women are interested in following this custom. All these questions are addressed from the perspective of Japanese women who have participated in the questionnaire and Face-to-Face interview surveys conducted from 2018 to 2020. Based on the primary data, I have showed that even if modernization and urbanization that took all over Japan, still when Japanese women get pregnant they are very much dependent on their parents by following the ritual of *Satogaeri Shussan* or not. It is because even if they do not wish to return back to their paternal house for performing *Satogaeri Shussan*, they love to request their parents to come and stay with them at their residence in order to look after them and provide them help in doing their household chores. Here, I would like to mention one more point that the opposite trend of *Satogaeri Shussan* is often known as *Yobiyose Shussan* in Japan. It means to call your close relatives or family members to stay with you for overcoming stress related to post delivery and managing day-to-day household tasks like cooking, doing laundry, washing and putting away dishes, sweeping, cleaning the bathroom and living room etc. Finally, it can be concluded that as long as the child is born in Japanese society, *Satogaeri Shussan* or the new emerging trend “*Yobiyose Shussan*” will always play an important role in the life of Japanese women during their pregnancy or post delivery.

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