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JAPAN: MATURITY AND *KŌNENKI*

1 The Turn of Life— Unstable Meanings

Kōnenki: the turn [change] of life; the critical age;
the menopause.

(*Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary*)

In Osaka in 1984 the organizer of a public lecture about menopause started out the session by asking the entirely female audience, “What do you think of when you hear the word *kōnenki*?”

“The end of one’s prime as a woman.”

“I think of things like migraines.”

“The beginning of one’s second life, when you can start to do what you like.”

“My mother is in the middle of *kōnenki* and complains a lot of shoulder stiffness [*katakori*], so that’s what I think of.”

“My mother had several very trying years suffering from rheumatism and she had a bad time with her autonomic nervous system too, so I feel quite frightened about what the future holds in store for me.”

“I think right away of *kōnenki shōgai* [menopausal disorders], but I don’t know if they’re psychological or physical, or both mixed up together. When I look at my mother, who’s just reached that age group, I notice that she’s becoming more timid. She worries about little things that don’t matter and complains of insomnia and other things going wrong with her body. I came here today to hear about the physical changes, but I also want to learn about how to deal with *kōnenki* by approaching it with the right attitude.”

“I’m already past that stage in life, but I never had any problems—I just laughed it off when people said I was having *kōnenki*, and I was fifty-five before I knew it, and now I’m having a great time.”

“I’m forty-five and right in the middle of *kōnenki*, and I think of it as mother’s time of rebellion [*hahaoya no hankōki*].” A ripple of laughter

mixed with murmurs of agreement ran through the audience at this juncture.

No mention of the symptoms most usually associated with menopause in North America: hot flashes, drenched sheets from night sweats, or even menstrual changes—but perhaps one doesn't talk about these things in public in Japan, even at a small informal meeting of women? These comments did not sound particularly unusual to Christina Honde and me, however; on the contrary, they had a remarkably familiar ring to them. The two of us had visited a total of 105 households in several different regions of Japan for over 150 hours in all, while women between forty-five and fifty-five years old had recounted their experiences, beliefs, and concerns about *kōnenki*.¹ During the course of our conversations we asked everyone to explain the term to us and soon recognized that we would find no easy consensus about its meaning. On the contrary, it was surprisingly indeterminate, usually clustered with several other equally amorphous concepts that varied and nuanced the way women interpret *kōnenki* as both an idea and as experience. *Kōnenki* and terms such as the autonomic nervous system (apparently familiar, yet in this context paradoxically strange to Western ears), were not neatly packaged and separated out in the narratives of the women but spilled over into one another to form loose, relatively unstable associations.

I edit and frame the narratives, artificially separating out the concepts for the sake of clarity in this preliminary discussion. This strategy goes against my natural inclination as an anthropologist, which is to start with a broad sweep of the canvas—to situate the term *kōnenki* in a cultural context in order to understand it. But because in the West we tend to reduce the experience of female midlife to physical changes associated with the Menopausal Woman, I temporarily pare the Japanese narratives to relatively isolated units that focus on the body in middle age. This first set of comments does not, in the end, completely violate the Japanese understanding of *kōnenki*, because the concept includes sensitivity to biological change. Yet before we come close to the usual Japanese understanding of the term, we must recontextualize the subjective experience of *kōnenki*, and the physical signs and symptoms associated with it. Some of the same comments will reappear in later chapters as part of the longer narratives of which they originally formed a part. This strategy highlights from the outset important differences between the concepts and lived experiences of individuals as they go through the transitions of *kōnenki* and menopause, respectively, and the reader will soon see that, despite the dictionary definition cited above, they are not one and the same thing.

Aging and Kōnenki

Ito-san,² born in Korea of Japanese parents, lives in Kyoto in a Buddhist temple that she manages while her husband, the head priest, spends most of his time as a taxi driver. She says of *kōnenki*:

"It's something no one can avoid, but it's nothing to be afraid of or worry about—one should just accept it naturally. It's not simply the end of your periods, though. Things like high blood pressure, becoming far-sighted, and going gray are all included. It isn't really that one's value as a woman is decreasing, it's just part of the aging process. I have high blood pressure now, which I never had when I was young, and I think it's part of *kōnenki*."

"How old are you?"

"Let me see . . . Forty-six, nearly forty-seven."

"You said a lot of women become irritable at *kōnenki*? Do you think this will happen to you?"

"Well, maybe, but given my personality, I think I'll get over it easily."

Matsuda-san lives in an isolated forestry village in central Japan where she works long hours in a tiny factory outlet making car upholstery with twelve other women, in addition to growing her own rice and vegetables and tending the family trees at the weekends. Unlike most of the women we interviewed who appeared to our eyes younger than their age, Matsuda-san looks a little older than her forty-nine years but gives the impression of boundless energy. "I almost never sit down, I'm always on the move," she says, so her comments come as a surprise:

"I'm in *kōnenki*, that's for sure. I get tired easily these days, and I have headaches and my periods are over—or irregular, anyway—I don't think I've had one for about a year. Anyway, I get really tired."

"When did you start to get tired?"

"Last year. I can't stick at things the way I used to. I get something like my sewing almost finished, and then I'll just let it go. Before, I'd have stayed up all night to finish it. It's because of my age . . . I hate it—I'm not young anymore. When I was young I used to try to take care of my complexion at night, but nowadays I'm so tired I don't even feel like washing properly, I just lie in the bath and soak . . . I'm just getting old."

"Were you expecting something like this to happen?"

"Yes. I used to go and work in the rice fields with *obāsan* [mother-in-law] and she always told me, 'Things are fine for women while they have their periods, but once *kōnenki* starts, then you feel irritable and get weaker and can't do anything properly any more. You young people are lucky.' "



Transplanting rice seedlings. This backbreaking work, usually carried out by women, is now mostly automated, but small plots and awkward corners must still be planted by hand.

"Does *kōnenki* have some relation to when a woman stops menstruating?"

"Yes, I think so. While menstruation is regular her body is fine, but when it stops, various problems start to happen. For a lot of people their eyes get worse, and the first thing I noticed was losing dexterity, so I can't tie knots in thread easily or do up buttons smoothly any more."

"When do you think *kōnenki* starts?"

"About forty-five I think. *Obāsan* told me that a few years before they stop menstruating most women start to get irritable, then five or six years after their last period, things settle down again. I'm forty-five now, so I have about another ten years to go I suppose."

Kōnenki apparently means something more encompassing than the end of menstruation for these two women, part of a general aging process in which graying hair, changing eyesight, and an aching and tired body appear to have more significance than does the end of the menstrual cycle. Some women believe that one can avoid *kōnenki* altogether, indicating that, in their minds at least, the end of menstruation is for all intents and purposes not involved. Kawamura-san lives in a fishing village on the island of Shikoku where, about twenty years ago, she was the first woman to get a driving license. She leaves the house at six o'clock in the morning six days a week and goes to the fish market together with her husband

where she buys fish, which she then spends the rest of the daylight hours selling from the back of her truck:

"I think maybe I won't have *kōnenki*. I'm forty-nine, so if I were to have it, it would start right about now. Some people don't have *kōnenki*, you know. It depends on how you let yourself feel about it [*kimochi no mochiyō*]; it's just like morning sickness, which I never had."

"Do you think it has anything to do with the end of menstruation [*seiri no owari*]?"

"Well, I wonder if that's about when it starts? . . . I don't really know."

"Do you think there are specific disorders associated with *kōnenki*?"

"No one really understands it, I think, but maybe *kōnenki shōgai* [menopausal disorders] is something like a 'neurosis,' an illness caused by being nervous, perhaps. Like today, for example, I rushed around selling fifty kilograms of fish in just a couple of hours; then my hands started to shake—I'm wondering if that isn't *kōnenki*? When I was young, even if I was rushed, I didn't have that happen to me; but now when I'm in a hurry, I can't even hold the calculator properly because my hands shake. This must be *kōnenki*—getting older [*toshi no are*]."

Tanabe-san, who works on an assembly line in a cake factory, puts it this way:

"Some women start having problems when *kōnenki* begins, but others never really have *kōnenki*. My co-workers all talk about it, some of them have headaches and shoulder stiffness—the symptoms differ depending on the person, and so does the time when it starts and stops. I still get my periods every month, which is a nuisance since I'm fifty-one already, but I suppose I'll feel I'm in even more trouble when they stop!"

Forty-nine-year-old Yamada-san, a housewife who sews designer dresses in her home now that her children are grown, makes it clear that *kōnenki* is part of aging but nevertheless believes it is avoidable:

"It's a time when a woman's body is changing, when it's just on the verge of starting to get old—it usually starts about fifty, I think."

"Can men have it too?"

"I don't know . . . Yes, I suppose men go through *kōnenki*. With women, their periods start to get irregular, but actually I think men are particularly vulnerable and are likely to get sick in their fifties more often than women. I'm still menstruating regularly so I hope I can get by without noticing it when it's my turn."

"So the first sign of *kōnenki* in women is irregular periods?"

"I think so. Umm . . . Well I wonder if it's related to menstruation or not?"

"Which lasts longer, do you think?"

"Well, I don't really know. I suppose it depends on the person. My friends talk about their bodies . . . The hormones get unbalanced and they get irritable. One of my friends is getting shots from her gynecologist. But there're some people who stop menstruating without any sign of *kōnenki*. I know an older woman who goes swimming every day and plays mah-jongg—judging from her, you can reach the end of menstruation without having *kōnenki*."

Many of the women who state that *kōnenki* can be avoided entirely apparently have uppermost in their minds unpleasant symptoms that they associate with this stage of the life cycle but that they believe not everybody necessarily experiences. In contrast, women who dwell less on specific symptoms and focus instead on the more general signs of aging assume that everybody goes through *kōnenki*. Urushima-san, married to a taxi driver who does the night shift, spends her afternoons giving her sister a hand in a bar that she owns. She focuses her explanation on the end of reproduction:

"It's the first step into old age. I feel sad when I hear the word—it's awful to think of not functioning as a woman any more [*geneki no josei de naku naru*]."

"When do you think it starts?"

"About fifty-two or fifty-three, although my doctor said it's forty-two or forty-three, and according to him it's getting earlier these days."

"So it starts soon after menstruation has finished?"

"Well, I think so, but it seems my doctor doesn't think the same way!"

Eguchi-san, a full-time housewife and mother, paints a broader sweep than Urushima-san:

"I think *kōnenki* starts around thirty-five and goes on until about sixty. I think of it as part of *rōka genshō* [the phenomenon of aging] . . . Don't Western women think this way?"

"Most North American women would say it's a short time, I think, right around when they stop menstruating."

"My sister is fourteen years older than me, and to hear her talk you'd think she's been in *kōnenki* all along, and she's turning sixty now."

"Do you think there's any connection between *kōnenki* and the end of menstruation?"

"No, I don't really. The time when your periods stop is related to when they first start, you know, and also to one's *taishitsu* [physical constitution]. I don't think you can necessarily say *kōnenki* is over when your periods stop . . . There really isn't much of a relation between the two."

Other women express similar sentiments but for different reasons. Some think, for example, that one can pass through *kōnenki* entirely and still be menstruating:

"I'm through *kōnenki*—it wasn't too bad."

"But you're still menstruating, aren't you?"

"Yes, but *kōnenki* is a hormone imbalance, and the body can adjust before a woman stops menstruating."

A few women make a very tight connection between the end of menstruation and *kōnenki* and state that they are in essence the same thing. For these women the meaning of *kōnenki* comes closest to the usual meaning given today in North America to the term menopause. Other women, like Honda-san, a full-time housewife, while agreeing that *kōnenki* and the end of menstruation are intimately connected, conclude nevertheless that they cover a different time span. Honda-san said during the interview that she was in the midst of *kōnenki*.

"*Kōnenki* is when your periods stop, and when your sacred function as a woman, the bearing of children, is over . . . After that you're just an ordinary person. I'm almost forty-nine, and for a while I couldn't decide whether I was in the midst of *kōnenki* or not. I was having so much physical trouble that I thought I was, but I also thought I still had a long way to go. But then I started skipping periods, so I must be in the midst of it."

"So you think *kōnenki* and the end of menstruation are identical?"

"No. I think the body takes time to adjust after one's periods stop, so it's usual to have some [physical] trouble [*chōshi ga warui*] for a while. *Kōnenki* extends before and after the end of menstruation. It starts when you're about forty-two and finishes at about fifty-five or so. *Heikei* [the end of menstruation] takes a year or so, not so long as *kōnenki*."

"You said you're having a lot of symptoms right now. What are they?"

"Mostly dizziness and headaches. I heard from a friend that hormones might help, so I asked my doctor about it, but he said he would only prescribe them if the symptoms got really bad. He suggested that I just learn to live with it."

A primary-school teacher, fifty-four years of age, stated that she "failed" at getting through *kōnenki*.

"*Kōnenki* is a turning point in one's life [*toshi no kawarime*], and everyone probably goes through it. I associate it with a loss of energy, needing spectacles, and getting what we call in Japanese 'fifty-year-old shoulders.' "

"Does it happen to men too?"

"Well, women seem to have more problems, although men have trouble too, but for them it's usually from overwork. For women it's linked to the end of menstruation, but you start to feel it much earlier than that. From about forty-two or forty-three on, you find you tire more easily, you start to feel your age. Somehow you don't feel as healthy as usual. Actually, I guess I really failed at getting through *kōnenki*. I was so tired that I had to take sick leave from work. After fifty, things usually settle down again though."

Many women stress that *kōnenki* is a turning point, a milestone (*kugiri*) or an important change, and often the idea of a descent from the peak of one's physical well-being is implied: "It's the peak of life, just before you start getting old." One woman who farms in northern Honshu stated that the worst part about *kōnenki* was that people stopped calling her *obasan* (middle-aged woman) and started to call her *obāsan* (old lady; grandmother; this term also indicates one's mother-in-law and occasionally one's mother).

Clearly, if accuracy is what we want, we should not translate *kōnenki* as "menopause" because the English term has come to be synonymous with the end of menstruation in the minds of the vast majority of people over the course of the last forty or fifty years in North America. *Kōnenki*, by contrast, sounds a little more like the now rather archaic "the change," or "change of life," terms still used in isolated parts of the English-speaking world such as Newfoundland (Davis 1986). What is most striking about the Japanese descriptions is the lack of agreement about the meaning of *kōnenki*. Almost everyone states that it has something to do with aging, but beyond that, there is little consensus as to what the term conveys.

Even in its timing and the relation of *kōnenki* to the end of menstruation, there is dispute. Some people believe it is a long gradual change from the midthirties to about sixty, while others state that it starts about forty or forty-five and goes on to fifty-five, and still others that it coincides with the end of menstruation and therefore lasts for only a span of one or two years at most. Those who opt for a longer transition usually think of the external markers of aging, among which they give the end of menstruation little or no importance. Less frequently, women focus on internal hormonal changes that they view as taking place gradually over several years. Some women believe that the end of menstruation depends on the time of its onset in adolescence and see both events as physiological milestones. But even these women usually give *kōnenki* a meaning that is much broader than simple physiological change.

While some believe that a woman can be menstruating after *kōnenki* is over, others state that after menstruation *kōnenki* is yet to come. Still

others assert that it can be avoided altogether—by which they apparently mean that not everyone has troubles or disorders at this time in the life cycle. In contrast, some women think of *kōnenki* as a difficult time for just about everyone in terms of physical symptoms, an unavoidable episode, after which full health returns. Others visualize it more as a turning point, so that *kōnenki* signals the beginning of old age and the inevitable approach of declining physical powers and eventual death. Several women stated emphatically that they have no knowledge about *kōnenki*, and that they don't really know what it is.

We might surmise that educational level or occupation account for some of the differences in responses, but such is not the case. A few rural residents, urban blue-collar workers, housewives, and professional women subscribe to a close link between *kōnenki* and the end of menstruation, but the majority of women from all walks of life would either equivocate on this point or actually dispute it.

Signs and Symptoms of Kōnenki

In common with the women who attended the public lecture in Osaka described above, most women when asked to describe the signs and symptoms associated with *kōnenki* report aches and pains of various kinds or else mention rather vague general complaints. Ogawa-san manages a farm in Nagano prefecture where she was born and grew up. Her comments about her friends and neighbors are very typical.

"I hear from other people that their heads felt so heavy that they couldn't get up. They didn't exactly have pain but just generally felt bad and didn't feel like working. Luckily I didn't have anything like that."

A woman of forty-seven, who works in a Kyoto factory where she makes underwear, comments about symptoms:

"It depends on the person. In my case my eyesight became weak and when I visited a doctor for my backache, he told me it was because of *kōnenki*. Some people tell me they have headaches and get irritable and that they become extremely nervous and sensitive. It depends a lot on one's physical constitution."

A rather well-to-do housewife of fifty-one focuses on changes associated with aging:

"All of a sudden I found I had lots of gray hair and my eyes became farsighted—that was when I started *kōnenki*. My eyes started to feel tired and painful in the evenings too. The optometrist explained to me that eyes start to get hard and lose their elasticity with age, and so they tire more easily. After hearing that I thought, Oh! All my muscles must be losing their elasticity just like my eyes. I have high blood pressure too, and when

I went to see my doctor about it last year he said I was just beginning *kōnenki*. Some women get irritable, but it doesn't seem to affect me that way."

A forty-seven-year-old housewife who is still menstruating says that she had a very brief *kōnenki*:

"I had this prickling feeling, like ants crawling over my skin. My husband said, 'Oh, that must be *kōnenki shōgai*.' He'd read about it in some book. It didn't last long, although this one remains [Hosokawa-san pointed to her checkmark beside the question about 'lack of sexual desire']. My husband says it's because I'm too busy during the day—I'm not so sure about that though . . ."

Many women talk about a temporary physical unbalance:

"I think *kōnenki* means that the natural physical balance the body usually has is lost. The symptoms are headaches, tiredness, and irritation."

Rather few people described symptoms that sound more familiar to Western ears. Midori-san, who has spend all her adult life in Ponto-cho, Kyoto, where she is a geisha, was one of them. At fifty-four she still has many working years in front of her:

"I'd heard that in *kōnenki* you feel suddenly hot and then cold, but that never happened to me. They told me that it happens at the age your periods stop. I was all prepared for it, but nothing happened."

"Where did you hear this?"

"Well, I live in a society of women, of course, and so you get to know what happens to everyone else. When you hear about someone saying that they're sweating a lot, then for sure someone else will say, 'that's *kōnenki*.'"

"Did you hear about people becoming irritable or anything else like that?"

"No, not really, but I was quite worried. In the end, though, nothing happened."

"Do you worry about getting older?"

"No, I'm not worried. My periods stopped and I was relieved that it was so easy. Now that's over I think of myself as a little older, but it doesn't bother me much. It all depends on how you let yourself feel [*ki no mochiyō*]. It doesn't affect my work as long as I take care of my appearance properly and keep up with things. I read a lot and watch television and listen to what other people are talking about. I have to keep in touch—especially with what young people are saying—then I can talk with the customers."

Yamanaka-san, now forty-nine, recently quit her job with a bookbinding company. She talks about feeling suddenly hot at times but does not

give this symptom more significance than the others that she mentions:

"I'm in *kōnenki* now. I often have stiff shoulders—especially when I knit or sew and I sometimes suddenly feel hot [*katto atsukunaru*]."

"When does this happen?"

"When I'm in a crowd my face becomes hot suddenly, and it feels as though it turns red."

"Do you perspire as well?"

"No, it only lasts a few seconds—less than a minute."

"Do you have any other symptoms?"

"I get a headache every two or three days, and I get irritated then and take it out on my children. But I don't have any problems that really affect my daily life. I'd heard that *kōnenki* is awful and people get really serious symptoms like dizziness or unsteady feet. My headaches must be *kōnenki* I suppose, but I don't say anything, especially not at home. If I complained to my husband he would just tell me to shut up; I can't expect any sympathy from him so I manage by myself."

Hattori-san runs a farm while her husband works in a nearby town in an insurance company. She says, "The most noticeable thing was that I would suddenly get hot—I'd seen older women have that problem—but then it happened to me, and I thought, Oh, so this is *kōnenki*. It's gone now, it just lasted for about six months or a year. It happened every day, three times or so."

"Did you feel embarrassed?"

"No, I just thought it was because of my age."

"Did you go and talk to anyone about it?"

"No, I didn't go to the doctor."

"Did you take any medicine?"

"No."

"Did you have any other symptoms?"

"My head throbbed, really badly sometimes—that was very unpleasant, but it's better now. I suppose it was something to do with the hormone imbalance, it's just aging really, isn't it?"

A total of 12 out of the 105 women interviewed reported symptoms that resembled hot flashes, but the descriptions were often rather vague, and the experience took on very little significance. Some women had heard other people talking about hot flashes, but an equal number had never heard of this symptom at all. Not one woman we talked to complained of major sleep disturbance, or of waking up with drenched sheets in the middle of the night. When talking about *kōnenki* they usually emphasized various aches and pains and feelings of lassitude, dizziness, irritability, and



Working on the assembly line in a cake factory.

so on, rather than what North Americans think of as the classical symptoms of menopause.

If we dissect the accounts to separate out myth and hearsay from what individual women recall as their actual lived experience, a rather large chasm appears. A good number of women say something to the effect that they heard that "Some women's heads are so heavy they cannot get out of bed," or "*Obāsan* said that after *kōnenki* you get weak and can't do anything." And more often than not they go on to state, "but luckily I haven't had anything like that." Or they talk about changing eyesight, graying hair, aching joints, and other symptoms of aging that many men of the same age also experience. By far the majority of people gave the impression that, although there is plenty of gossip and banter about *kōnenki*, much of it negative, in general it is not a subject that generates a great deal of anxiety or concern; even so, as an augury for the future, as a sign of an aging and weakening physical body, it is not particularly welcome.

Among the women who were interviewed in their homes, the one person who confessed to a difficult time was fifty-two-year-old *Tabata-san* who lives with her husband and his father, together with her son and his wife, in a modernized farmhouse in Nagano prefecture.³ She spends her days tending the rice paddies and row upon row of chrysanthemums that

she sells commercially, and she also works for several hours in the middle of the day making tiny electrical circuits for a nearby factory.

"I've been having *kōnenki* for over seven years. Everyone said it would come early and that there would be lots of problems because I had a really difficult time with childbirth and got sick afterward. I worry about my health, but the doctor just laughs and won't listen to me. I have a heavy feeling around my throat and I feel as if I can't breathe, but the doctor can't find anything wrong with me. It feels like something is stuck there. I've had the problem for five or six years and I'm worried that I have cancer, but the doctor thinks I'm silly. I sweat around my face, even in winter, and when I wipe it off I feel cold. I get the same hot, sweaty feeling at night too. The doctor said that hormone shots would help prevent this, but that it's not good to have them unless it's absolutely necessary. He gave me some medicine, but I don't take it. I keep telling myself that I'm not really hot and that way I can control it. People say my face gets red when I feel hot and then, when I think how embarrassing it is to be sweating in front of other people, it gets worse. I don't care about the family, but it's embarrassing outside."

"Do you have any other symptoms?"

"Oh yes. I get headaches and shoulder stiffness. But the doctor doesn't listen to me when I talk about these problems. My husband's sister started having *kōnenki* about three years ago. She doesn't have my kind of physical problems at all, but she's started to think that people are talking about her and she gets weird feelings about people she never worried about before."

"How old were you when *kōnenki* began?"

"I was about forty-six. We had a big problem in our family then, and I was worrying all the time. I started getting *kōnenki* symptoms then with the big shock that I got."

"How awful for you. What happened?"

"I can't tell you about it, but it made me go mentally crazy, and my hormone balance was all upset."

"I think of myself as a nervous type, you know, because I always worry about people getting cancer. Also I worry that I can't manage to stretch the household money until payday, and then I panic. I'm very tidy about the house too. My daughter tells me that I worry about the tidiness too much, and she thinks that my daughter-in-law who lives with us will start disliking me. I never used to care about this kind of thing when I was young, but since I married into this household I've become very conscious about things like tidiness. It's partly due to my husband and my mother-

in-law (although she's dead now). I'm still scared of my husband—he gets mad just when last week's newspaper is hanging around. He's got me into the habit of feeling nervous, I think. I'm not really like this—it wasn't built into me from the start. It seems like even my basic physical nature [*taishitsu*] has changed over the years since I've been married."

"Do you think some of your problems, like suddenly feeling hot, have anything to do with the end of menstruation?"

"I stopped menstruating last year. I wonder . . . What do you think?"

"Well . . . I think some people would think so, and I'm inclined to agree with them, about suddenly feeling hot at least."

Tabata-san, in contrast to the other women who were interviewed, is noticeably distressed by the symptoms she experiences, but she is reluctant to explain her physical discomfort solely in terms of physiological changes associated with the end of menstruation. Long before the interview (I feel sure), she created a narrative to account for her discomfort, composed of several plausible causes ranging from her husband's intransigence, to the bad shock she received that drove her temporarily "crazy," to her own personality. She distills, condenses, and telegraphs this narrative into the polysemic term *kōnenki*, which represents for her not simply aging and physical discomfort but distress of many kinds. Tabata-san was eager to tell her story to me and started out with the emphatic announcement that she had been having *kōnenki* for seven years. Unlike the majority of women we talked to, who dismiss *kōnenki* as hardly worth talking about or else interpret it simply as an inevitable sign of aging that may entail uncomfortable but temporary symptoms, Tabata-san loads this concept with an array of meanings and almost flaunts her troubles. In contrast to most women in the study, she freely admits that she is not happy and openly acknowledges that the anxiety she experiences is disabling; but she can find no way out, no responsive ear or helpful council. Her doctor laughs at her when she seeks to account for a large portion of her distress as caused by *kōnenki*, and her social problems remain undiscussed and unresolved. She is afraid of her husband; her own mother (to whom she might have turned) is dead, as is her autocratic mother-in-law. Her sister-in-law has her own troubles, and her daughter simply chides her. She is embarrassed to talk to her friends about the secret "family" problem that caused her so much distress and so remains isolated.

Tabata-san was expecting a bad time at *kōnenki* long before she reached this stage partly, she says, because she had a difficult time with childbirth. Both the end of menstruation and *kōnenki* are closely associated by many women with other concepts, one of which, *chi no michi*, posits a rather