Labor Exchange Systems in Japan and DR Congo: Similarities and Differences

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Abstract: In this essay, I attempt a comparison of two labor exchange systems employed respectively by Japanese and Congolese (Tembo) peasants. The Japanese system is known as yui, while the Tembo system is called likilimba. Yui and likilimba have several basic principles in common: (1) mutual assistance, (2) exchange of equal amount of labor, and (3) no use of money or hired labor. At the same time, they are completely different in several points. The most distinctive difference between the two systems is in the basic unit between which labor is exchanged. In the case of the yui system, it is between households that labor is exchanged, while, in the case of the likilimba system, it is between individuals that labor is exchanged. In the closing part of this essay, I argue that, with the development of the market economy, these non-monetary systems of reciprocal labor exchange will become more needed, rather than disappear, by demonstrating the recent revival of yui in Japanese society.

LABOR EXCHANGE SYSTEMS IN THE WORLD: AN OVERVIEW

What is labor exchange?

Labor exchange is a common phenomenon that can be observed in different peasant societies throughout the world. It is a way of exchanging one's labor for another's labor without using money. To put it another way, it is a way of exchanging labor for labor as a gift. Today, when the market economy has spread to every corner of the world, we are inclined to think of labor as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market. In fact, however, there are still many agrarian people in the world who still engage in labor exchange without buying and selling labor.

Among different labor exchange systems in different agrarian societies of the world, this article focuses on two examples, one from East Asia and the other from Africa, and attempts a comparison of the two systems by carefully taking into account the difference in farming systems between the two regions. The example from East Asia is a labor exchange system known as yui practiced among Japanese farm households, and the example from Africa is a
labor exchange system called likilimba practiced among the Tembo living in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), formerly known as Zaire.

Labor exchange as a measure against labor shortage

Why do many agrarian societies need some sort of labor exchange system? There are several reasons for this. In the first place, it should be noted that in most agrarian societies, labor exchange is often employed during the busy farming seasons in which farming households temporarily need an expanded labor force.

In rural Japan, for example, cooperative work parties known as yui are formed most frequently at the time of rice-transplantation and second most frequently at the time of rice-harvesting. During these two seasons of the year, most Japanese farm households come to be faced with a serious labor shortage, and thus become obliged to procure extra labor force through labor exchange, because both rice-transplantation and rice-harvesting are not only highly labor-intensive work, but also need to be completed up within a very short term (preferably one day per paddy field).

When a yui work party for rice-transplantation is formed by, for example, five households (A, B, C, D, E), the exchange of labor is normally done in the following way. On the first day, all the households work together on A's paddy. On the second day, all work on B's paddy. Then, all work on C's on the third day, on D's on the fourth day and on E's on the fifth day. In this manner, all households' paddies will have been transplanted when one cycle of labor exchange ends. Chie Nakane, Japanese social anthropologist, describes the yui system as follows:

Exchange of labour, such as at the time of transplantation in spring, was normally done with the co-operation of two or three households. This form of exchange is known throughout rural areas as yui. The term yui signifies literally 'co-operate' or 'unite'.

The work team would be formed by more than two households by yui, though theoretically the yui contract is established on the basis of two households. The labour given to X household by Y household should be similarly reciprocated by X to Y. It is borrowing in the form of labour with the obligation of future repayment. One day of work should be repaid by one day of work, not by money or in kind.1

Normally, Japanese rice farming households employ this yui system of labor exchange almost exclusively in the work of rice-transplantation and rice-harvesting; in less labor-intensive stages of rice cultivation, such as at the time of tilling or weeding, they use household labor alone. Moreover, the formation of yui groups is not limited among rice farmers alone. It is reported that yui groups were once widely formed also among Japanese shifting farmers (who survived in mountain areas at least up to the 1960s) at the time of labor-intensive work, such as opening a field by felling the forest or harvesting crops. In many agrarian societies, as in the case of rural Japan, labor exchange is required particularly in the busy farming seasons when individual farm households come to be faced with a labor shortage.

Labor exchange as a form of reciprocal cooperation among smallholders

Labor exchange is normally done among smallholders of equal social and economic status. It is a form of mutual help or reciprocal cooperation, especially in the busy farming seasons.
However, there are some cases where labor exchange is done between large-scale and small-scale farmers. In these cases, it is highly questionable whether the exchange of labor between the two sides is actually done on precisely equal terms. Between farmers of different economic status, a so-called patron-client relationship is often established. In such cases, we must consider the possibility that large-scale farmers (patrons) and small-scale ones (clients) may exchange, in fact, not labor for labor, but labor for something else, even if on the surface they seem to exchange labor with each other. This possibility is extensively discussed, for example, by Japanese sociologist Kizaemon Ariga (to whose studies of labor organizations in Japanese rural communities I will refer later in more detail).

Labor exchange as a beer party

There is another view of labor exchange, that is, a view of labor exchange from its aspect as a beer party. This view is shared particularly among European scholars who study labor exchange systems in African societies. William Allan, for example, describes them as follows:

Further evidence of the general existence of a grain surplus is to be found in the practice, almost universal throughout Africa, of the working ‘beer party’. Beer-making played an essential part in the economies of most of the traditional systems of food-production, and the changes of recent years have not greatly diminished its importance. De Schlippe has described the role of the working beer party among the Zande of the southern Sudan and pointed out that the practice tends to maintain some degree of social inequality.2

In most labor exchange systems in the world, the recipient of labor normally has to organize a feast after the work, in order to entertain the providers of labor with beer in return for their help. In Africa, for example, it is common that not only beer, which is normally brewed from millet, banana, palm, etc., but also food, such as the meat of goat or chicken, or ugali, a porridge-like meal made from the flour of cassava, millet, maize, etc. are served at such feasts.

When dealing with a labor exchange system, European scholars tend to focus their attention on its aspect as a beer party, rather than on the exchange of labor itself. On the other hand, such a strong interest in the festive aspect of labor exchange cannot be found among Japanese scholars. In this clear contrast we can see a critical difference in approach to the issue of labor exchange between European and Japanese scholars. In addition, under most labor exchange systems in the world, including the yui system in Japan, it is not rare that attendants at a communal work party work together while singing songs or playing music instruments like drums, in order to keep pace with one another. In these cases, we may say that a cooperative work party is not an occasion for mere hard labor, but also an occasion for pleasure.

THE YUI LABOR EXCHANGE SYSTEM

Labor exchange between Ooya (patron) and Nago (client)

Japanese rural sociologist Kizaemon Ariga, made an empirical study of cooperative labor organizations in rural Japan known as yui (or sukeai), through the method of writing a detailed ethnography of one rural community, namely, Ishigami village in Iwate Prefecture of northern Japan. In his work titled, Daikazoku-seido to Nago-seido (Large family system and tenant system),
Ariga analyzed *yui* work groups in Ishigami village, which were formed by a set of households of different types: the original household and landowner called *ooya*; branch households called *bekke*; and tenant households called *nago*, which were in most cases former servants of *ooya*.

Ariga’s study of *yui* has two distinctive features. First, Ariga did not see *yui* as a mere cooperative labor organization formed solely for agricultural tasks. Rather, he thought that such a limited view would make it difficult to understand the entire social relationship between the households of patron (*ooya*) and client (*bekke* and *nago*). Then, by introducing Marcel Mauss’s concept of “prestation totale” into his analysis, Ariga made a full investigation of the exchange of labor and goods that occurred between *ooya* and *bekke* and *nago* on various occasions in the village life, such as at ceremonies, like weddings, funerals and festivals as well as at times of non-agricultural tasks, such as roof-thatching and house-building.

Second, Ariga analyzed social relations in Japanese rural communities almost exclusively in terms of the *ooya-nago* (landowner-tenant or patron-client) relationship. He asserted that the formation of *yui* had taken place at first between households of different status, such as between *ooya* and *nago*, and later had spread between smallholders of equal status. In short, Ariga considered that the *ooya-nago* relationship was the very basis of social relations in Japanese rural society.

Ariga’s theory that social relations in rural Japan were organized on the basis of hierarchical inter-household relationships represented by the *ooya-nago* (landowner-tenant) relationship, soon achieved wide recognition in the Japanese academic world of that time, and continued to have extensive influence on later scholars of Japanese society. For example, in her book *Japanese Society* Chie Nakane refers to Japanese society as a "vertical society", arguing that the most distinctive characteristic of Japanese society is that various kinds of personal relations are vertically organized on the basis of a fictive parent-child relationship called *oyabun-kobun* or *oyakata-kokata*. Nakane further argues that this vertical, fictive parent-child relationship still persists in modern Japanese society as the basic organizing principle of various kinds of modern institutions, such as factories or schools. Of course, Nakane’s argument in *Japanese Society* is not based solely on Ariga’s rural sociology, but these two scholars share the same view that social relations in Japan are organized along a vertical line.

My view about the basic principle of social organization in Japanese society is in marked contrast to that of Ariga and Nakane. Through my own research on *yui* working groups in different rural areas of Japan, I have reached an understanding that not vertical, but horizontal social relations based on the norm of reciprocity are of great importance in Japanese rural society.

Why did we arrive at such opposing understandings of Japanese rural society? A possible reason is that each of us conducted fieldwork at different periods of time. Ariga’s fieldwork was done from the 1930s to the 1960s, and Nakane’s was done from the 1950s to the 1960s, whereas mine was done from the 1970s to the 1980s. Considering the fact that rural Japan had undergone great changes from the 1930s through the 1960s to the 1980s, it is reasonable for us to suppose that those historical changes that had actually happened in rural Japan were directly reflected in the opposing views of Japanese rural society - Ariga’s and Nakane’s view of it as a vertical society and my view of it as a horizontal society.
Another possible reason is that each of us carried out fieldwork in different parts of Japan. As contrasted to Ariga, for example, who conducted fieldwork exclusively in the northeastern part of Japan, I conducted fieldwork mainly in the central and western parts of the country. In particular, I conducted intensive fieldwork in the Okinawa Islands during the 1970s.

**Yui-maaru**: The Okinawan system of labor exchange between smallholders

In Okinawa, instead of "yui" in the standard Japanese, "yui-maaru" in the Okinawan vernacular is widely used as a term signifying labor exchange. The yui-maaru contract is normally established between small-scale peasant households for the purpose of mutual help, and is rarely established between large-scale and small-scale peasant households connected by the patron and client relationship.

In Tarama Island, where I conducted fieldwork, yui-maaru was practiced strictly according to the basic principle of exchange of equal amount of labor. However, there existed one exception to this rule: that is, if a yui-maaru group included a physically weak old person, the labor given to the old person by other members did not have to be reciprocated, which means that old persons were allowed to receive labor one-sidedly from other younger and physically stronger members.

In addition, it should be noted that, in Tarama Island, yui-maaru was employed most frequently at the time of sugar cane harvesting, but is also arranged in various non-agricultural occasions. From these observations, I agree with Ariga and thus with Mauss from whom Ariga borrows key concepts, that yui or yui-maaru must be understood not as an organization for labor exchange in agricultural tasks alone, but as an organization for "prestations totale."

**LIKILIMBA AND SHIFTING CULTIVATION**

Tembo people and their land

This section examines the likilimba system among the Tembo as an example of labor exchange systems in agrarian Africa. The Tembo are an agrarian people numbering less than a hundred thousand who live in the eastern part of DRC. They occupy a mountainous area at an altitude varying between 800m and 2000m above sea level, where they practice shifting agriculture. They grow more than twenty kinds of crops, the main being cassava, maize, kidney beans, and bananas. Their staple food is ugali, stiff porridge made from cassava flour.

The Tembo have a labor exchange system called likilimba, which they employ in all stages of their shifting farming. Before proceeding to an analysis of the likilimba system itself, I would like to give an outline of Tembo agriculture. The area has two rainy seasons and two dry seasons, and the Tembo sow crops in each rainy season, thus twice a year. The long dry season starts in May and lasts until August, while the long rainy season starts in September and ends in the beginning of May. Then, in the middle of the long rainy season, there is a short period of no rain (from the end of December to the beginning of January), which is referred to here as the "short dry season". The annual rainfall of the mountain area in which the Tembo live can be estimated at more than 1400mm from the fact that Bukavu, a big town in the region, has a
rainfall of around 1400mm per year.

Tembo agriculture and likilimba

There are two types of fields in Temboland. One type is opened in the short dry season, and the other type is opened in the long dry season. The former type is almost twice the size of the latter type.

During the long dry season, forest trees and bushes are cleared to open new fields, and this task is exclusively the work of men. In the work of forest-clearing, Tembo men rarely practice likilimba, and even when they do it, they normally form very small work parties of two or three persons. At the time of bush-clearing, by contrast, they often form large likilimba work parties of twenty to thirty persons. In the case of the latter, it is possible for a man to finish clearing the bush in a day with the assistance of the work party, meaning that, if the work party consists of twenty members, it takes twenty days until all members' fields have been opened. After the work, the man who has received labor services on the day has to provide all the workers with banana beer and some food.

After having been opened, the fields are left unattended for three to four weeks until they are burned. Usually, at the time of field-burning, likilimba is not employed. This task is normally carried out separately by individual households. Then, comes the work of field-cleaning, which is also done on a household by household basis. After having been cleaned up, the fields are cultivated with hand hoes, and this task is also performed by individual households with family labor alone. Then, crops are sown in the fields. This task is almost exclusively associated with women. Only sorghum is sown by men. But men just sow it in their respective fields, without any cooperation with each other or with women. On the other hand, women organize large-scale likilimba for sowing. Twenty or so women form a work party to jointly sow maize and groundnut in their fields. This group-sowing is done everyday in a different member's field, and continues for thirty to forty days until all members' fields have been sown with the two crops. After the work is done, meals are offered to all the participants by the woman who has received assistance on the day. However, unlike at male work parties, beer is never provided at female work parties. For this simple reason, we cannot call women's work parties "beer parties."

After sowing the crops comes the work of managing and weeding the fields. This activity is performed on a household-by-household basis and is carried out by both men and women. One or two months after the sowing of maize and groundnut, cassava is planted in the fields. Planting of cassava is the work of women. Tembo women perform this task by organizing small likilimba work parties of two or three members who have close relations with each other in most cases.

Harvesting is also the work of women. In the case of maize, they form likilimba work parties of about ten members. In these work parties neither food nor beer is offered to the participants after the work by the day's host woman, but the participants are allowed to take with them a small portion of the day's harvest. In the case of groundnut, on the other hand, women usually form larger likilimba parties of about twenty members. In this case, too, the participants are allowed to take a small portion of the day's harvest with them. These female work parties for
the harvesting of groundnut normally last for twenty to thirty days, everyday moving from one member's field to another member's field. As for cassava, since this crop can be harvested once in a week, Tembo women do not form large likilimba parties to harvest it. It is harvested by small female likilimba parties established among two or three close friends.

The principles of likilimba

The Tembo, as stated above, frequently form work parties known as likilimba in various stages of their shifting agriculture. The way in which they organize likilimba is quite in accordance with their farming system. That is, they form likilimba work parties of different sizes and gender compositions, according to the kind of crop, as well as the kind of farming practice (in this regard, whether it is men's work or women's work is especially important). In addition, the reward for labor takes different forms, depending on the type of likilimba: in some cases, the host rewards the participants with both food and beer and in other cases, the host provides them with food alone. In some cases, the host does not offer them food or beer, but instead gives them permission to take away with them a small portion of the harvest from his or her field.

Large-scale likilimba is practiced almost exclusively during the busy farming season. By contrast, small-scale likilimba is often employed even in everyday farming activities. This small-scale likilimba may more accurately be viewed as Tembo's means to bring an atmosphere of joy and conviviality into their otherwise lonely and tedious routine work, rather than their means to raise the efficiency of the farm practice.

As we have seen so far, the Tembo employ different types of likilimba in different agricultural tasks. However, what should be emphasized here is that every likilimba is organized according to three basic principles: (1) mutual assistance; (2) exchange of equal amount of labor (one day of work should be repaid by one day of work); and, (3) no use of money.

Here, let me briefly touch on the third principle, no use of money. Today, of course, money is widely used among the Tembo. For example, if a foreigner hires a Tembo man as a worker, the foreigner must pay him money for his services (I actually did so when I hired some Tembo workers to transport my baggage). Besides, nowadays not a small number of Tembo people are working as wage laborers in nearby plantations. However, the Tembo never use money as the reward for labor services they have received from their fellow villagers. Likewise, any kind of meal can never be exchanged for money between Tembo peasants of the same village. Within a Tembo village, meal is never sold. It is always given to or shared with fellow villagers.

Kwanza and lukoo: sub-systems of likilimba

In the case of likilimaba that is arranged between women, the three principles mentioned above are almost always strictly observed. The reason is that there are no great inequalities of wealth among Tembo women. In the case of likilimba that is arranged between men, by contrast, those three principles are not always observed, but are sometimes abandoned. This can be explained by the fact that the Tembo society is a polygamous society. A husband with two or more wives has to work at least twice as hard as his monogamist fellows; otherwise he cannot open a new field for each of his wives. If he is a young, sturdy man, he can do this. However, the fact is that the majority of polygamists are old men. For very old polygamists or polygamists...
with more than three wives, it is in fact impossible to participate in normal likilimba and continue to reciprocate one day of labor with one day of labor. It is in cases like this that a sub-system of likilimba, which is called kwanza in Tembo language, has an important role to play.

*Kwanza* is a form of work party that only rich old men can organize at the time of bush clearing. If a rich old man needs assistance in clearing the bush for opening a new field, he forms a kwanza work party by giving a costly feast as an incentive for fellow villagers to work for him. To prepare the feast, he buys goat meat and chicken in large quantities at a nearby marketplace and buys a lot of banana beer from women in the village (banana beer is the only locally-produced food that is sold in Tembo villages). By this arrangement, he can mobilize many village men to assist him in work. In this sense, we may say that kwanza is a form of festive work party or working beer party. Normally, kwanza work parties are willingly participated in by a large number of male villagers, who have few opportunities to eat meat in their everyday lives.

However, in the case of old men who are not rich enough to organize kwanza and, even worse, have no grown-up children to support them, what can they do? In this case, another sub-system of likilimba known as lukoo is used. *Lukoo* literally means “compassion” in Tembo language. It is a form of communal work party that is organized to help old men who are no longer able to participate in normal, thus reciprocal likilimba for bush clearing. In this lukoo type of work party, participants offer their labor for nothing. They do not expect anything in return for their labor service. Normally, it is a very small field that a lukoo work party opens for an old man in need of help. However, once a new field has been opened, it becomes possible for the old man to carry out all the remaining farm work with family labor alone. It is clear that only with the assistance through the lukoo system can old aged Tembo men continue to lead their lives as independent peasants. Finally, it is worth noting that both sub-systems of likilimba, kwanza and lukoo, are never employed by Tembo women.

**FINAL COMPARISONS**

Similarities and Differences between *Yui* and *Likilimba*

Agriculture in Japan and that in Temboland of DRC are of a completely different character. The former is based on paddy rice farming, while the latter is based on shifting farming with mixed cropping practice. Despite this fundamental difference in agriculture, both Japanese and Tembo societies have similar systems of labor exchange: the *yui* system in Japanese society and the likilimba system in Tembo society.

*Yui* andlikilimba have some characteristics in common. First, both systems follow the same basic principles: that is, exchange of equal amount of labor (one day of labor should be reciprocated with one day of labor) and labor exchange with no use of money. Second, both are systems of mutual assistance and thus are most frequently employed in highly labor-demanding stages of agriculture. Third, both have sub-systems within them, including a system of one-way giving of labor without seeking return.

At the same time, however, *yui* and *likilimba* are different in several respects, and these differences seem to originate in differences of the social system in Japanese and Tembo societies. The most distinctive difference between *yui* and *likilimba* is in the basic unit between which
labor is exchanged. In the case of the yui system in Japan, labor exchange is done between households, not between individuals. Thus, if household A sends both husband and wife to a yui work party held at household B’s paddy, the labor given by the husband and the labor given by the wife are summed up into the labor given by household A, and this total amount of labor given by A to B is later reciprocated by B to A. It is not between individuals, but between households that yui contracts are established.

In contrast to this, under the likilimba system among the Tembo, labor exchange is done between individuals, not between households. Thus, even husband and wife (or wives) in one household form separate likilimba work groups, using his or her own network of relatives, friends, and neighbors of the same sex.

As stated above, both under the yui system and under the likilimba system, labor must be exchanged for labor, not for money, meaning that hired labor is never employed in both yui and likilimba. So, if the market economy grows more widespread, are these non-monetary systems of labor exchange being replaced by the buying and selling of labor in the market?

Yui in revival

In Japan, the practice of yui had sharply declined in the 1970s and 1980s. The reason was not that yui had been replaced by hired labor, but that the mechanization of paddy rice farming had advanced swiftly during this period. The decline of yui was accelerated particularly by the invention of various kinds of small-size agricultural machines, by which all stages of rice cultivation, including transplanting, harvesting, threshing, and bundling of rice straws, were mechanized. In this robotization process of Japanese agriculture, it became possible for even small-scale farm households to own different kinds of agricultural machines, because of the smallness of those machines. This rapid spread of agricultural machines enabled Japanese farmers to carry out all stages of paddy rice farming with family labor alone. In this way, rural Japan saw the sharp decline of mutual labor exchange without undergoing the formation of the agricultural labor market.

Then, is yui going to completely disappear from Japan? I think the answer is no. The reason is that a wave of new types of yui is now gradually spreading throughout Japan. This is evident from the fact that, from the 1990s onward, the word "yui" has been reviving in Japanese society. The word is now widely used across the country, not only in rural areas, but also in urban areas. In practice a number of different kinds of organizations have the word "yui" in their names. The following are some examples of such organizations: a group for supporting the handicapped in finding employment in Okinawa Prefecture; a not-for-profit organization for mutual help in Aichi Prefecture; a center for promoting civic activities in Kiryuu City, Gunma Prefecture (a public institution); a public corporation for nursing-care services in Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture; a group of members of a consumers’ cooperative society for mutual help in Kanagawa Prefecture; an NPO for life-long education in Okinawa Prefecture; a group of teachers of social studies in Shizuoka Prefecture; a group for promoting the use of community currency in Fukuoka Prefecture; and, a private farm for organic agriculture in Nagano Prefecture. As is clear from this list, groups whose names include the word "yui" are diverse in
type of organization, ranging from private individual to cooperative society to NPO to public body.

Most of these new types of *yui* groups have been organized for the purpose of mutual exchange of volunteers, rather than mere exchange of labor. In Japan, until the mid-1990s, volunteer activities were shouldered by a very narrow circle of people. In my view, however, Japanese people dramatically changed their attitude toward volunteer work when the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake hit the country in 1995. Indeed, immediately after the earthquake, many people, young and old, from all over the country voluntarily rushed to the struck area to help the victims of the disaster - some were students, some were workers of private companies, some were public officials. Before then, Japanese society always gave the highest priority to economic growth. However, I think that when the country was hit by this earthquake many Japanese people must have felt that a terrible disaster like this could happen to themselves at any time. This was why so many people rushed to the struck area to work as disaster-relief volunteers.

While acts of one-way charity do not awake much sympathy among the Japanese, acts of mutual assistance are, as the above case clearly shows, understandable and acceptable to most Japanese people who have a long tradition of *yui*. Let me add another example. When another big earthquake struck Niigata Prefecture of northwestern Japan in 2004, a number of people living in the area struck by the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji Great Earthquake, including the cities of Kobe, Nishinomiya and Ashiya, hurried to Niigata to work as disaster-relief volunteers. I think that these people's actions must have been motivated by their "*otagaisama*" ("all in the same boat") mentality, as well as by their wish to help the victims by their own labor, not by money.

It is against this background that various kinds of Japanese organizations, including volunteer groups, self-help groups and NPOs, have recently begun to include the word "*yui*" in their names, seeing the word as a symbol of the spirit of mutual assistance. I suppose that from now on these new types of *yui* will spread more widely and play more important roles in Japanese society, where the development of market economy seems to be still advancing with increasing intensity.

This article has shown that the moral economy phenomenon exists in societies of very different economic backgrounds. It is not merely part of the past or confined to backward societies. The principles of moral economy exist side by side with the market economy and bureaucratic organizations. It keeps being reinvented and reenergized as the *yui* case of Japan illustrates.

Notes:

2. Allan, 1977, p.44.
References:


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