

QUESTIONING METRONORMATIVE POWER AGAINST LGBTQS IN RURAL JAPAN  
– QUEERING AND REIMAGINING RURAL (JUST) SUSTAINABILITY IN JAPAN -

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ABSTRACT

“Rurality” is tricky, and yet it has attracted people’s interest. It has been mythologized as a space where people and nature interact with each other in a harmonious manner. It is oftentimes supposed that the rural local level plays a significant role in implementing sustainability efforts. It is also where thorough contextualization is in particular pursued. When considering sustainability and the interaction between society and the environment, we cannot avoid passing by the discourses and experiences around rurality.

It has been pointed out that queer people, especially in Japan, have generally been excluded and “erased” from ruralized discourses. Contemporary researches have taken various approaches to study the relationship between gender, sexuality, space, environment, and society; and yet there are a few efforts done in the Japanese context. This study approaches the rural queer issue in Japan through an aspect that is significant in Japanese rurality, farming background.

Since this area of research needs more exploration, the research questions addressed in this paper are:

- A) What is the structural and normative mechanism which alienates queers in Japan from realizing livelihood in “rural” areas?
- B) How do their lived experiences show the role of gender and sexuality in transition to

sustainable local community and sustaining rural queer identities in Japan?

The data were collected through key-informant and semi-structured interviews via a network expanded on snow-ball sampling method. Key-informants who confirm the following conditions were selected purposefully: a staff member of a non-profit organization which works on sexuality issues; and has participated in events featuring rurality, sexuality, and gender. These events were held in the Kanto region from 2017 to 2019. The data from key-informant interviews illuminate the discourses about the rural queer in Japan possibly shared amongst the mainstream LGBTQ activism in Japan. Here, the importance of examining the components of rural queer experiences is shown. The activists' motivation and struggles over SDGs will also be shown, which suggests the potential obstacles certain sustainability conceptions can hold against achievement of just sustainability. Key-informants connected me to the other interviewees for semi-structured interviews. The conditions for recruiting interviewees are: those who identify themselves as queer (性的マイノリティを自認する方) and 1) those who engage in farming; 2) those who are from farming family; or 3) those who used to, or wanted to, engage in farming but gave up. Life history analysis and critical thematic approach were chosen both to delve deeply into the entirety of the data collected through semi-structured interviews, and to analyze the components that construct their experiences. The data were analyzed using an application, MAXQDA 12.

The insights newly drawn from this research are that: 1) the alienating mechanism is not limited to discourses; 2) the observed elements of rurality point to different sources of the rural queer struggles; and 3) their strategies have been woven in the complexity of their lived rurality. This research suggests that the imagined and experienced ruralities, both of which are highly intertwined, first significantly deter the rural queer from settling in and moving to a rural area. These seem severer when the element of rurality as “home” cannot be separated

from the one of “local community.” Even when they openly participate in the rural local governance, certain systems based on heteronormativity and cisgenderism significantly reduce their capability in realizing rural livelihood embedded in the rural local community such as systems assuming household as the smallest unit, and managing the membership of local associations using one’s assigned gender and registered name.

The purposes of this research are: to confront metronormativity by depicting the practices rural queers make; to shed light on the mechanism that makes them imperceptible both discursively and materially; and to show an example of the role of a sexuality and gender lens in considering sustainability issues especially in Japanese context. The insights drawn from this research suggest that reimagination of Japanese rurality is necessary to decouple ruralized heteronormativity and cisgenderism from the potential contributions rurality holds to just sustainability. This research contributes to the series of efforts in bridging the gap between rural queer studies, rural studies in Japan, and sustainability studies.

*Keywords:* rural queer, gender, sexuality, LGBT and social sustainability, LGBT and local, power