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Building Friendship Networks and Intercultural Spaces: The Case of Japanese Women in Spain*

SUMMARY

This study examines the associationism of Japanese women living in Spain who are members of the Tanpopo-no-kai/Sociedad Tanpopo, and their intercultural experiences through their written personal narratives. This associationism has resulted in attempts to create a social network and space for intercultural communication at a national level between Hispanic-Japanese families and Japanese residents in Spain. The research is based on numerical data and narrative data, however Japanese narratives from the quarterly association bulletins provide the main source of information. By using the narrative analysis method in the form of questions we have been able to study the writings in order to explore issues such as: their transcultural experiences, their processes of adapting to life in Spain, the evolution of their identity, their interpretation of the social reality around them and the passing on of their social and cultural heritage to their children, among others. The study of the Tanpopo association has demonstrated a close-knit and relaxed transcultural and female space for intraethnic communication. It reveals a joint strategy of emotional and instrumental support to overcome the isolation, the loss of social networks and the geographical separation from their own cultural region, resulting from the immigration through marriage of Japanese women living in Spain.

KEY WORDS: Japanese immigrants, international marriage, Tanpopo association, written narratives, narrative analysis method, Spain

1. Introduction

The issue of transnational mobility as a result of marriage and its cultural dimension has received little academic attention within the field of geography. This article therefore aims to bridge this gap with a multilevel research project on Japanese-Spanish marriages resulting from transnational love relationships.¹ In particular, this research examines the immigration and residence of Japanese women in Spain and their intercultural experiences through an analysis of their associationism (Tanpopo association) and their written personal narratives (*Tanpopo bulletin*).

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Globility sessions of the 31st International Geographical Congress, Tunis, 12–15 August 2008.

¹ This analysis forms part of a multidisciplinary global research project carried out over a period of three years (2006–08) on the causes and impacts of the increase in international marriages in contemporary Japan. The project is financed by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), Kakenhi 18320134, and the principal investigator is Prof. Yoshitaka Ishikawa from Kyoto University.

The conceptual focus of the research is the humanistic approach, since it is interested in the perspectives of the association members and hopes to give prominence to human agency and imagination (Riessman, 1993). The research studies the members' cultural experience, behavior, thoughts, feelings, and their priorities with regard to their relationships with the family and surroundings. It also examines how they interpret events that take place around them and how they try to build a coherent representation of reality.

The present study hopes to contribute to human geography and studies on ethnic feminine socialisation and associationism in particular (Johnston, 1987; Sarno, 2007). It also contributes to gender studies, in its attempts to interpret feminine experiences from their own writings (Riessman, 1993; Jackson, 1998), as well as cultural studies, since it looks at non-Western collectives in Spain.

2. The object of analysis: Tanpopo association

The object of analysis is the socialisation and associationism of first generation Japanese women living in Spain with Spanish husbands. The socialisation has resulted in attempts to create a social network and space for intercultural communication at a national level between Hispanic-Japanese families and Japanese residents in Spain. This is the result of a pioneering initiative led by four Japanese women married to Spanish men and living in different provinces throughout Spain (Granada, Barcelona, Málaga, and Madrid), who created the Tanpopo association (Tanpopo-no-kai), in 1994, as an informal group and meeting point for exchange and to establish friendships. The association gained legal status in 1999 under the official Spanish name of "Sociedad Tanpopo". The association is based on a huge organizational and collective effort, resulting in the manual publication of bulletins (*Tanpopo-tsūshin*), newsletters, and up to four types of notebooks: the "national edition", "Barcelona edition", "edition for the other regions (Madrid, the Basque Country, Andalusia etc.)" and the "childcare notebook" written entirely in Japanese, which are circulated among the members. A website was also set up in 1998; however, this has not been updated since 2003. The costs of these are covered by the annual membership fees.

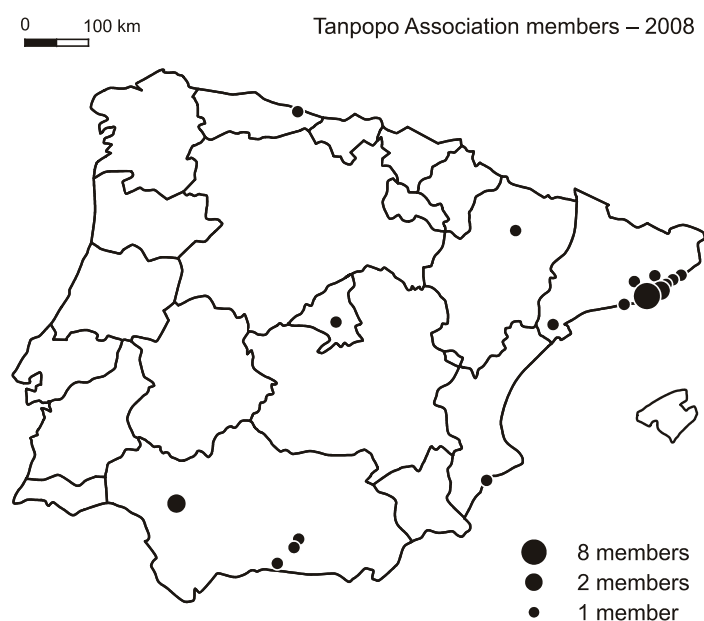
Despite the fact that this is an open association that welcomes all members regardless of their place of residence, sex, nationality or age, in practice, all members are Japanese and, with the exception of one, all are women. The number of members has varied considerably since the association's creation and there has been a high turnover of members (the trend has been to join for a few years while the children are young) with a maximum of 46 in 2001 and 26 at present. According to the information given to us by the current president of the association, their ages range from 34 to 78 years, the age composition being 12 members in their thirties, 12 members in their forties, 1 member aged 50 years, and 1 member aged 78 years; and the average number of children per member is 1.5 (2007). The survey results of their last questionnaire on "Foreigners' Feelings" (February–March 2008) indicate that over half (53%) of the 17 respondents had been living in Spain for 15 years or more, and just a 6% had been living for less than 5 years (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 54).

Reasons for ethnic feminine socialisation and associationism. From an insider's point of view, and in their own words, the associationism of Tanpopo was born out of an interest in exchanging information and building friendships between Hispanic-Japanese families and Japanese residents in Spain, as well as the creation of a "place of communication". The *Tanpopo bulletin* provides them with a means of expression, which in their own words "hopes to be a means of sincere communication" (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 1). The use of the word *honne* is to be noted. In Japanese this means sincere communication of a person's most inner feelings and desires, which is the opposite of *tatemaie* which refers to behavior and opinions demonstrated in public, those expected of society and required in accordance with the person's position within society. It is important to recognize that Japanese culture is nontransparent by nature: there is an *uchi* (inside) and a *soto* (outside), an "us" and "them", a *honne* and a *tatemaie*. It is therefore understood that the authors choose to speak sincerely, communicating what they normally retain for their most intimate friends (Lebra, 1976; Sugimoto, 2003). They therefore consider the association as an internal, private and relaxed space, as is the *uchi*. In contrast to this is the exterior, public and most stressful, the *soto*: Spanish society (Kurotani, 2005). It may therefore be said that the main reason for group formation was to create a communicative space that was sincere, internal, private, and Japanese and to facilitate the process of adaptation to their new surroundings and compatriots. It was also created to educate their Hispanic-Japanese children in the Japanese language and culture. It may then be considered as a space for the international family, in the sense that it serves the Japanese mother and her children, rather than the international couple. The association responds to a need for an intimate space for friendship between Japanese women.

Looking from the outside, several external and internal factors can be observed acting upon and resulting in associationism among these women: several internal factors such as a need for ethnic interpersonal communication, to share the experiences of those who are going through the same processes of transcultural adaptation and formation of an intercultural identity, as well as the experience of a transnational family life (Kim, 2001). It has been shown that transnational families tend to gravitate towards other transnational families since they share the same "common destiny" and basic social experiences (Lauth Bacas, 2002). Several external factors from the *alien milieu*, in terms of Spanish family, social and cultural life which surrounds them, have also led to group formation. On the one hand, the lack of a large ethnic Japanese community in Spain or institutions that may help these women with the process of adapting to their new context, gives rise to a need to create a new association enabling them to interpret the surroundings as a collective, in particular when they need to interact with these surroundings via their families. On the other hand, indifferent or negative host receptivity has created an interest in associating with their ethnic counterparts. Spanish society is still not very aware of or sensitive to Asian cultures, including Japanese culture. Sometimes the reception is negative, thus resulting in discontent, frustration, misunderstandings and even experiences of racism. Despite this, Japanese people feel that they have a progressively better social recognition due to the ethnic prestige gained by Japan in recent decades.

Regionalization of the association. The Tanpopo association had a national vocation from the start, thanks to the use of modern communication technologies for contributing to, editing and distributing their publications and other related activities, thus facilitating the dispersion and relocation of its members. However, the association has gradually become regionalized within the Barcelona region and there has been a fall in the total number of association members (Figure 1). According to the association's president, this is due to the importance of personal contact and face to face meetings in friendships and the social interaction within the association. Closeness and frequent meetings thus seem to create more trust and honesty within good friendships. It may therefore be said here that the effects of spatial location are important, transforming telemediated relationships into place-based relationships.

Figure 1: Distribution map of members in 2008



3. The source of data: numerical and narrative data

The research is based on numerical data and narrative data. Numerical data on the association and its members was provided by the president of the association. However, personal narratives from fifty-four bulletins (*Tanpopo-tsūshin*) published over the last fourteen years (1995–2008) provided the main source of information.

The bulletin of the association has been published regularly every three months without fail since January 1995. It is written in Japanese, on A4 paper, in black and white, and is distributed by conventional mail. For fourteen years the bulletin has been split up

into sections, some of which have remained and others which have not, and new sections have also appeared. Throughout the fourteen years the format has remained the same: each issue is devoted to a single subject on which two or more members will write, and also includes other sections, such as: interviews with members and contributors, cooking, child-care and education, surveys, free talk, yoga, opinions, and a section for free-style editing which is rotated between the members. Although not a section in its own right, the bulletin also includes adaptations of traditional Japanese stories for children, and reports of activities and news.

The narratives included in the bulletins are mainly written in the first person. However, the main purpose is to initiate communication with the reader and invite them to share the author’s intercultural experiences and reflections and to suggest certain issues for the reader to think about. The narratives are written in Japanese, by members and collaborators of the association. They are normally signed with the authors’ names and surnames and their place of residence in Spain. The narratives are also relative to the date on which they are published, they are not historical narratives (Figure 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Tanpopo bulletin, no. 16, 1998



Figure 3: Tanpopo bulletin, no. 50, 2007

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Tanpopo es una asociación sin ánimo de lucro para familias Hispano-Japonesas y Japonesas residentes en España

■今回のテーマ
スペインあれこれ…



あれから10年、これから10年
ウエスカ 三田貴広

ナがいたわけです。 ああ、なんてお手軽な話でしょう。

それで、次の年の夏休みに彼女の実家に行くことになりました。バルセロナからウエスカ行きのバスに乗ってしばらくすると、どんだん緑がなくなって、乾いた大地が延々と続くようになりました。まるで、西部劇の映画のような荒涼とした景色に一体どこに連れて行かれるのか、不安になってきました。雑草でも雑木林でも、放っておいたら緑になる土地しか知らない身にとって、スペインは、まるでアフリカに来たかのような印象を与えました。 実際、その後にアフ

日本を出てから、この夏でちょうど十年になります。ブリュッセルの音楽院に数年の留学のつもりでしたが、このまま、日本に帰らないこともあるかな、とは思っていました。でもまさか、スペインに暮らすことになるとは、まったく予想外のことでした。

アバトマンがひしめく都会で、ピアノを弾ける場所は限られていて、結局楽器屋が経営している、音楽院の学生専門のアパートに落ち着きました。その階上にスペインからの留学生、エレ

(2ページに続く)

4. The method of analysis: narrative analysis

The writings which appear in the bulletins have been studied using the narrative analysis method. This method facilitated a systematic and exploratory study of the women's personal transnational experiences and the meaning of these experiences. This identifies how the events are constructed, what they reveal and how they are determined in terms of culture (Riessman, 1993; Heikkinen, 2002). The analysis is not complete and is still in progress.

More specifically, the method created by the Finnish geographer Hannu Sirkkilä (2007) in the form of questions² (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Jackson, 1998; Bruner, 2001) has been used, with a few adaptations.

² I am greatly indebted to Professor Hannu Sirkkilä (HUMAK University of Applied Sciences) for bringing this to my attention.

Key questions for narrative analysis:

- (a) Why have the narratives been written?
e.g. What are the common reasons? Individual reasons? Reasons found in the narratives?
- (b) Who are the authors and readers?
Authors: e.g. Who are they? What is their predisposition? What is their background?
Readers: e.g. What is the reading situation? Why do they read the bulletin?
- (c) Who is speaking?
e.g. How many voices are heard in the stories? What social roles do the voices play?
- (d) What is the literary genre and style of the narratives?
- (e) What is the internal structure of the narratives?
e.g. Is the structure similar? How do they begin? How do they end? Is the purpose to educate? Do they perhaps provide moral advice?
- (f) What issues are dealt with in the narratives and how do they change?
e.g. Are there common issues? What are they? Why are these issues so important? Do they perhaps deal with different issues? How and why are they different? Do the narratives describe incidents, events, people, places, or opinions? Can turning points be identified in the stories?
- (g) How do the authors deal with their experience of immigration and the evolution of their identity?

5. Answers to certain key questions

By using the narrative analysis method described above, we have been able to study the writings of women belonging to the Tanpopo association in order to explore issues, such as: their transcultural experiences, their processes of adapting to life in Spain, the evolution of their identity, their interpretation of the social reality around them, the passing on of their social and cultural heritage to their children, among others.

a) Why have the narratives been written? The narratives have been written because of a declared interest by the association to “discuss relevant issues, recount personal experiences, offer information and exchange opinions among the members and collaborators of the association” (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 9), as stated in the invitations to participate, which appear in the bulletins. It might be said, therefore, that this opportunity for personal and subjective expression, along with the psychological need for communication in Japanese and intraethnic contact, would be considered in principle as the general reasons which lead to these narratives being written.

It is also possible to observe hidden motivations, such as the desire to give advice, teach, explain, reflect, review, let off steam etc. On other occasions, however, the motivation is explicitly stated in the narrative, for example: the desire to raise awareness about the progress of a medical treatment in Spain (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 35), or to inform people about how to obtain their driving license (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 19) or how to set up a business in Spain (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 37) etc.

b) Who are the authors and readers? The authors of the narratives are normally the members of the association themselves. However, on occasions, collaborators who are not members (e.g. family members or acquaintances) or who are no longer members (e.g. ex-members) also contribute. The authors identify themselves as being women who are “born in Japan, with Japanese as their mother tongue, and educated within the Japanese culture, but who now live here in Spain, in a foreign country” (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 11). Common traits also include being married to a Spanish man and having children (although there are members who are single, married without children or married to a non-Spanish man); maintaining their original Japanese nationality; using their Japanese first name and last name; having completed higher education etc. There are also significant differences among them, such as: age, personality, knowledge of Spanish, social extraction and standard of living in Spain, among other things. They themselves recognize that there are marked socioeconomic differences and “a class gap” between them, which seems to constitute a barrier to the development of friendship – the ultimate aim of the association.

The readers of these narratives are its very authors. They read the bulletin at home after receiving a copy by post every three months. If the readers wish to respond to any of the narratives or they are interested in the next topic proposed, they write a new narrative and send it by post, fax, email etc. to the editor. Although the association is aimed at multicultural families, and the husbands get involved in logistical matters, the latter do not read the narratives of their wives and, generally, neither do their children. Over the last few years, however, the children’s texts and handicrafts have been published in Japanese or Spanish (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 50, 52, 53, 54), which demonstrates the intention to involve the children in the association.

The bulletin appeals to the readers because they are interested in its content and because of the style of the bulletin. The content is interesting because it helps the women to deal with and understand the somewhat chaotic and strange experiences they go through in Spain from a Japanese, female and immigrant’s perspective, and allows them to empathize; it is also appealing because it encourages women to reflect on vital issues. The narratives are written accurately, and in a clear, smooth and easy-to-read style, with entertaining and funny anecdotes, making it a good read.

c) Who is speaking? There is normally only one voice, that of the author, who is the protagonist in the narrative. However, sometimes various voices emerge when a dialogue is constructed between two or more participants, usually members of the association. The social roles of this voice or these voices are “female roles”, with private responsibilities relating to family life, rather than to the social or political sphere in Spain. Most of the voices belong to married women and housewives, which convey a certain

helplessness and economic dependence of the woman on the Spanish husband. This female social role as wife and mother appears to be culturally shaped and accepted by these women; nevertheless, changes in these social roles have been revealed, with husbands getting involved in domestic chores, and the women working outside of the home, receiving a wage, and having access to the public domain, to Spanish society.

d) What is the literary genre and style of the narratives? The open and free nature of the bulletin allows for many different types of textual communication and, therefore, we find various literary genres: short essays, remarks, comments, informative pieces, interviews etc. The narratives on the main topic are normally short essays written in a simple, natural and friendly style, similar to a “chat”, in which the author defends her personal and subjective point of view about the proposed topic, and adds anecdotes and personal memories relating to the topic. This is all written in a rather unsystematic and free style, in a personal tone, and expresses the state of mind of the author, who is normally the protagonist.

e) What is the internal structure of the narratives? The narratives can be structured in a variety of ways. However, the basic structure of: introduction – development – conclusion is the most common in the essays on a certain topic, and is set out as follows:

Introduction: this may include a recent or past culturally strange experience, current affairs, a dream, or a matter related to the bulletin’s topic, about which we may be confused or for which we do not have a clear idea or a valid interpretation.

Development: this includes a narration of the experience and a development of the author’s opinion.

Conclusion: the author reconsiders the experience or problem in light of new transcultural considerations, and attaches meaning to it. Advice is sometimes offered or final questions are posed to encourage the readers to reflect on the topic together.

f) What issues are dealt with in the narratives and how do they change? The narratives deal with basic life experiences, such as marriage (international), maternity, moving home, growing older, illness, work, including turning points (e.g. change of profession) etc.; members illustrate their intercultural experiences in Spain, such as coexistence, discrimination, adjustment to the new physical and human surroundings, learning Spanish (and also Catalan and Basque), Spanish education of their children etc.; they write about their moral and cultural values, their vision of life, their stereotypes, their shared and individual survival strategies etc.; they admit to having feelings of loneliness, social isolation, they have thwarted hopes and hopes of “freedom” etc.; they confess to rivalries and general and personal hatreds; they recognize changes in attitude, transformation and identity ambiguities. They also write about current affairs, legal matters, health and wellbeing, technology, television, *manga* (comics), cooking, beauty, yoga and other topics.

g) How do the authors deal with their experience of immigration and the evolution of their identity? The immigration experience seems to involve a constantly adaptive effort (acculturative stress) and an internal conflict between the desire to maintain

and convey the norms and values of their own culture, and the practical necessity to adapt to Spanish culture. It also involves intercultural transformations and identity ambiguities, such as having evolved from being *nihonjin* (Japanese) into *japainjin* (a Japanese-Spanish hybrid) (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 27). The Tanpopo women recognize that they all face the same challenges, irrespective of where they live in Spain. This is why a space for communication was set up on a national scale so that they could tackle these challenges together, as a group, and not individually, akin to Japanese custom. The association has enabled them to achieve a close-knit, relaxed and fraternal space, despite not being personally acquainted in some cases. One woman even wrote about the association: it is a “source of information”, I have met “my friends” and it is “my world” that I want to preserve (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 46). Being part of the association therefore allows them to find the emotional and instrumental support they need to overcome the social isolation and the loss of social networks (family and friends) resulting from their immigration to Spain. Through their narratives and meetings to carry out organizational activities (editing the bulletin, Japanese education of their children etc.), the association endeavors to offer this support role, although, as they themselves recognize, not always successfully (*Tanpopo bulletin*, no. 31, 33, 34, 46, 48). This is because the culture shock, social isolation and distance from Japan is huge, and also makes them vulnerable to mental illnesses, which can develop into psychopathological illnesses (Al-Issa and Tousignant, 1997) that cannot be treated.

6. Concluding remarks

The study of the Tanpopo association has demonstrated a close-knit and relaxed transcultural and female space for intraethnic communication. It reveals a joint strategy of emotional and instrumental support to overcome the isolation, the loss of social networks (family and friends) and the geographical separation from their own cultural region, resulting from the immigration through marriage of Japanese women living in Spain. The study of the members’ written narratives allows us to examine thoroughly their immigration experience and the transformation of their identity. Through this we recognize that the immigration process is not just a cultural experience, but also a stressful experience, that immigration can be “liberating” and an opportunity for personal growth, an opportunity to learn about “differences” and to enrich our vision of the world. However, it is also accompanied by loneliness, frustrations and disillusionment. All these cultural and psychological aspects related to international immigration and the status of minority are of growing importance in our increasingly multicultural contemporary societies; it is therefore necessary to give these issues closer academic attention.

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Rosalía AVILA TAPIÉS

Izgradnja prijateljskih mreža i interkulturalnih prostora: primjer japanskih žena u Španjolskoj

SAŽETAK

U radu se istražuje udruživanje japanskih žena koje žive u Španjolskoj i članice su Društva Tanpopo (Tanpopo-no-kai/Sociedad Tanpopo) te njihova interkulturalna iskustva kroz osobne pisane priče. Iz tog su udruživanja proizašli pokušaji stvaranja društvene mreže i prostora za interkulturalnu komunikaciju na državnoj razini između španjolsko-japanskih obitelji i Japanaca koji borave u Španjolskoj. Istraživanje se temelji na brojčanim i narativnim podacima; glavni su izvor informacija pripovijesti Japanaca u tromjesečnom biltenu Društva. Primjena metode narativne analize u obliku pitanja omogućila je proučavanje napisanoga kako bi se istražila, između ostalih, sljedeća pitanja: njihova transkulturalna iskustva, procesi prilagodbe životu u Španjolskoj, razvoj njihova identiteta, njihova interpretacija društvene stvarnosti koja ih okružuje i prenošenje njihova društvenoga i kulturnog naslijeđa na djecu. Proučavanje Društva Tanpopo pokazalo je da postoji čvrsto povezan i opuštajući transkulturalni i ženski prostor za unutaretničku komunikaciju. Ono otkriva zajedničku strategiju emocionalne i instrumentalne potpore za prevladavanje osamljenosti, gubitka društvenih mreža i geografske odvojenosti od njihove kulturne okoline kao posljedice imigracije putem udaje japanskih žena koje žive u Španjolskoj.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: japanski imigranti, međunarodni brak, Društvo Tanpopo, pisane priče, metoda narativne analize, Španjolska

Rosalía AVILA TAPIÉS

Construyendo redes de amistad y espacios interculturales: el caso de las mujeres japonesas en España

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina el asociacionismo de las mujeres japonesas residentes en España y miembros de la Tanpopo-no-kai/Sociedad Tanpopo, y sus experiencias interculturales a través de sus narrativas escritas. Este asociacionismo ha intentado crear una red de amistad y un espacio comunicativo intercultural a nivel estatal, entre familias hispano-japonesas y japoneses residentes en España. Esta investigación se basa en datos numéricos y narrativos, aunque la fuente de datos principal han sido las narrativas de sus boletines trimestrales. Con la utilización del método de análisis de narrativas en forma de preguntas, se han podido analizar sus escritos para explorar temas como: sus experiencias transculturales, sus procesos de adaptación a España, la evolución de su identidad, su interpretación de la realidad social que las envuelve, la transmisión de su herencia social y cultural japonesa a los hijos, entre otras. El estudio de la Sociedad Tanpopo nos muestra un espacio femenino transcultural íntimo y relajado para la comunicación intraétnica, y nos desvela una estrategia conjunta de apoyo emocional e instrumental para superar el aislamiento, la pérdida de redes sociales y la separación geográfica de la propia región cultural, que han acompañado a la inmigración por matrimonio de las mujeres japonesas residentes en España.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inmigrantes japonesas, matrimonio internacional, Sociedad Tanpopo, narrativas escritas, método de análisis de narrativas, España