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## Original article

## Tradition and Japanese vegetables: history, locality, geography, and discursive ambiguity

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional vegetables are produced and consumed throughout Japan. In this paper, we will review the distribution, public standards, and definitions of *dento-yasai*, traditional Japanese vegetables. Individual vegetables, including Kyo vegetables and Kaga vegetables, are individually defined with their own criteria for history and quality standards and are registered in their respective regions. Several traditional vegetables are utilized as symbols of regional revitalization. For example, Kaga vegetables are tourist attractions, and Noto vegetables are promoted in the Noto region and were registered under the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS). In this research, first, the ambiguity and distribution of traditional vegetables are demonstrated. We will show that their origins and relationships with their regions have innumerable ambiguous points. Next, as a case study, the results of a quantitative analysis on the status of the branding of Kaga vegetables and Noto vegetables are provided. Kaga vegetables have their own quality standards and definition, and producers have acknowledged the positive impact of the regional certification, GIAHS, on the amount sold. However, a social conflict has been caused by their standards and definition. On the other hand, Noto vegetables do not have a strict quality standard, and they were registered relatively recently. Because of their comparatively lax standard, producers could not acknowledge the positive impacts of GIAHS certification. The results of the analysis of two types of traditional vegetables show that quality standards and definitions strongly influence branding and brand management.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditional vegetables (or *dento-yasai*) are inherited within certain regions as an aspect of the area and landscape. There is no standard definition for *dento-yasai* or customary history or quality, and the concept is ambiguous [1]. Frequently, definitions are given locally and are not standardized at the national level. This study is the first of its kind to provide an overview of the definitions, standards, and geographical distributions of the so-called Japanese traditional vegetables. These vegetables are frequent ingredients in ethnic goods and are passed on from generation to generation within certain boundaries. We will provide a contemporary overview of traditional vegetables in order to elucidate the general trends and also deepen the public's understanding of their

similarities and uniqueness at the local level. This understanding will contribute to policy formation. We reviewed various definitions of traditional vegetables to see whether they are given in a clear manner or not. We further checked if the clearer definitions had an influence on patterns of consumer choice or collaboration amongst different stakeholders (e.g., producers, tourism, and service sectors).

Traditional vegetables provide us with a unique opportunity to explore products with local names. For example, Kyo vegetables are named after the city of Kyoto. Agricultural products, including traditional vegetables, with regional or local names are promoted as brands in the municipalities of Japan. This is highly relevant to the Regional Collective Trademarks or more recent Geographical Indications (GIs) in Japan (Kohsaka/Kajima et al [forthcoming]).

Despite their importance, the degree of definition and branding of these products remains unexplored as does the relationship between local and regional names. Our study is the first of its kind

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to explore the relationship between the degree of definition and trends in agricultural products with local and regional names.

First, we review the diversity and ambiguity of traditional vegetables from the perspectives of their geographical distribution and varied definitions. Furthermore, we review the existing studies that analyzed products with local or regional names. Second, we analyze two brands from Ishikawa prefecture, where they have different degrees of definition and a relatively large number of items. By doing so, we analyze the effect of clear definitions (and the assumed consensus surrounding the standards) of the brands. We compare two brands with different degrees of definition and examine how the amount supplied and pricing trends differ. It should be noted that the two brands have histories of differing lengths. The brand with established items has a longer history, which could partially explain its clearer definition.

## 2. Review

In the following section, the diversity and ambiguity of traditional vegetables are explored. Their geographical distributions and varied definitions are presented below.

### 2.1. Distribution of traditional vegetables

A group of researchers from Yamagata University played an active role in developing more scientific terms for indigenous and local vegetables [2–6]. Currently, traditional varieties of vegetable are often “re-discovered” or even created in areas throughout Japan. Thus, traditional vegetables are distributed nationwide. This framing is frequently mobilized for regional revitalization. In the modern history of Japan, the distribution of the seeds of traditional vegetables has been implemented by vegetable seed companies [7]. However, their distributions differ significantly and are geographically skewed. The very definition of “traditional vegetables” differs from region to region. The tradition and length of production also differ. For example, the term “Kaga vegetables” is limited to those produced before 1945 when World War II ended. For Kyoto vegetables, those produced before 1868, or the Meiji period, are listed. Alternatively, it is “roughly 30 years of production history” for Noto, Ishikawa, while “from ancient times” is the wording used in Higo, Kumamoto. There are further variations in production mode and quality, but strict modes of production or quality controls are absent for most traditional vegetables. Some traditional vegetables lack any definition. Due to their ambiguity, it is difficult to list or count all of the existing traditional vegetables. Therefore, few studies have captured nationwide trends.

This is all in contrast to the GI system, where a product must have “roughly 25 years of production history” and quality controls are part of the registration. The ambiguity of traditional vegetables may be due to the fact that the framing is for brand promotion purposes, rather than registration. Under such circumstances, the distribution of traditional vegetables was analyzed based on reference documents [8] that introduce these products. Many traditional vegetables are distributed in areas where large cities such as Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka are located (Fig. 1), and Nagano, Niigata, and Yamagata form a continuous area with many vegetables. Although information sources for distribution data are limited, there is enough information to discuss the factors affecting traditional vegetables in each region.

Firstly, the reason that the number of traditional vegetables is high in areas with big cities is probably because there are a relatively large number of consumers seeking traditional vegetables that differ from ordinary mass-produced produce. In rural areas, even if the proportion of consumers seeking traditional vegetables is high, it is difficult to sustainably produce them due to the smaller

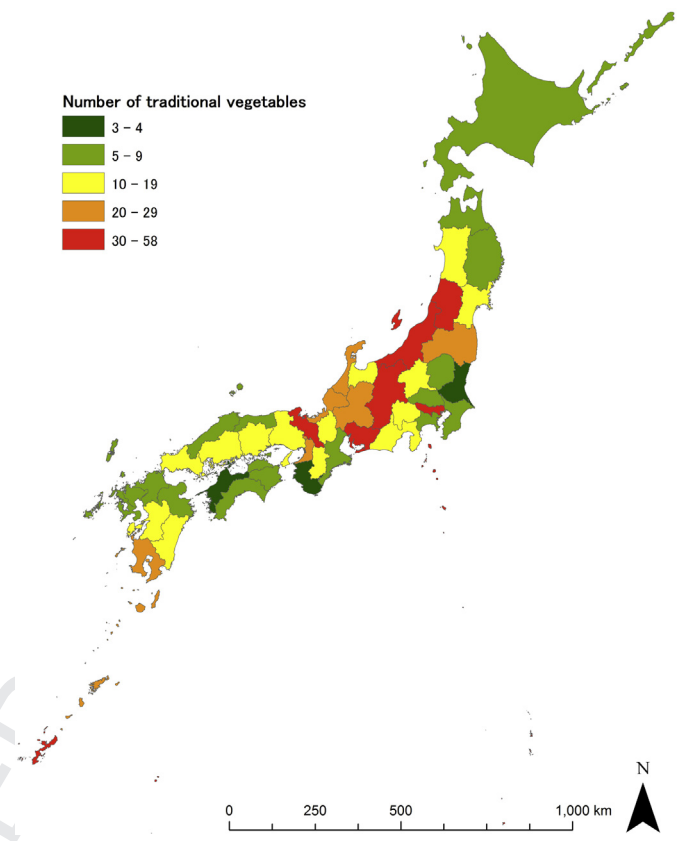


Fig. 1. Number of traditional vegetables in individual prefectures. Data source: Ishikura, H. and Maki, F. (2015) “Japanese Traditional Vegetables,” Iwasaki Shoten.

populations. Nagano is located at the nodal point of trade connecting the eastern and western regions of Japan, and its position may be why it has many traditional vegetables. In Niigata and Yamagata, in addition to the trade route, ecological elements may have influenced the number of traditional vegetables. The distribution of traditional vegetables certified or promoted by local municipalities (Fig. 2) shows the same trend as Fig. 1. Some traditional vegetables are found in Hokkaido and Shikoku, places that are far from large-scale consumption areas. However, efforts to recognize local vegetables as a group including a certain number of traditional vegetables like Kaga and Kyo vegetables are not proactively promoted. Based on the analysis results seen in the Figs. 1 and 2, it can be seen that traditional vegetables are maintained through the relationship with consumption areas and by being branded.

In the next section, we will present the results of our review of the effect of adding a place name to a product's brand name.

Hakata Furusato vegetables were introduced by a private organization with the help of various local stakeholders, and other vegetables are promoted or certified by individual local municipalities.

### 2.2. Branding of agricultural products with local and regional names

In the European Union, there are systems called Protected Designations of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGI) which register products that are linked with the place where they are produced (the degree is different for PDO and PGI). PDOs are products that must be produced, processed, and prepared exclusively within the region. On the other hand, production, processing, or preparation of PGIs may take place outside

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