



*Tsukimi Ayano dances among some of her dolls displayed in a local school. | AFP-JIJI*

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## The village where scarecrows help keep the community alive

by [Natsuko Fukue](#) - AFP-JIJI. - May 5, 2019

In the tiny village of Nagoro, deep in the mountains of Tokushima Prefecture, western Japan, the wind howls down a deserted street where not a living soul is to be seen.

Yet the street appears busy, dotted with human-like figures. Outnumbering people 10 to one, these life-size dolls are the work of one woman, who in a bid to counter the emptiness and loneliness felt in Nagoro, a village decimated by depopulation, has been creating a community of stuffed companions.

Nagoro, around 550 kilometers southwest of Tokyo, has become known as the valley of dolls after local resident Tsukimi Ayano began placing scarecrows on the street to inject some life into her depopulated area.

“Only 27 people live in this village but the number of scarecrows is tenfold, like 270,” the 69-year-old doll maker says.



*Tsukimi Ayano, a resident of Nagoro in Tokushima Prefecture, makes the head of a life-size doll, which she will add to the approximately 270 others displayed in her village. | AFP-JIJI*

It started 16 years ago when the dexterous Ayano made a scarecrow and dressed it in her father’s clothes to prevent birds eating the seeds she had planted in her garden.

“A worker who saw it in the garden thought it really was my father and said hello to it. It was funny,” recalls Ayano.

Since then, Ayano has not stopped creating the life-size dolls. Each is made with wooden sticks, clothed bodies stuffed with newspapers, hands and faces detailed by stitching in stretch fabrics, and heads topped with knitting wool for hair. To give the dolls life, she applies pink color to their lips and cheeks with a make-up brush. Ayano says it only takes three days to make one of the adult-sized dolls that are now scattered all around the village.

At the local school, she has placed 12 colorful child-sized dolls at desks, positioned poring over their books as if taking part in a class. The school closed seven years ago as there was no one left to teach.

“Now there are no children,” she says sadly. “The youngest person here is 55 years old.”



*Tsukimi Ayano's life-size dolls sit by a roadside to welcome passersby in Nagoro in Tokushima Prefecture.*  
AFP-JIJI

Down the street, a family of scarecrows sit on a bench in front of an abandoned grocery shop, while another, dressed as an old farmer, window-shops next door. Near the bus stop, a group of figures appears to be gathering as father doll pulls a cart full of children.

While never humming with people, the Nagoro that Ayano remembers was once a well-to-do place with some 300 residents and laborers supported by the forestry industry and dam construction work.

“People gradually left. ... It’s lonely now,” she says.

Nagoro’s plight is replicated across Japan, as the world’s third-largest economy battles a declining population, low birth rate and high life expectancy. The country is on the verge of becoming the first “ultra-aged” country in the world, meaning that 28 percent of people are aged 65 or above.

The latest government report shows that 27.7 percent of a population of 127 million (one in four people) are aged 65 or older and the figure is expected to jump to 37.7 percent by 2050. According to experts, around 40 percent of Japan’s 1,700 municipalities are defined as “depopulated.”

After World War II, when forestry and agriculture were the main economic drivers, many Japanese lived in rural villages. But young people started to leave for Tokyo in the 1960s, says Takumi Fujinami, an economist at the Japan Research Institute.

“The economy was booming in Tokyo and industrial areas at that time. They were the only places people could earn money, so a lot of young people moved there,” Fujinami says.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pledged to revive regions outside Tokyo by pumping in tens of billions of yen, but this is not enough to stop young people from leaving their hometowns to work in Tokyo.



*Life-size dolls look on from a bus stop in the tiny village of Nagoro, Tokushima Prefecture. | AFP-JIJI*

“In order to combat depopulation, we need people moving into depopulated areas. But recovering the population is extremely difficult,” he says. “Instead, it’s important to increase income or improve working conditions for young people in rural areas.”

As an example of conditions, he mentions that companies in rural areas tend to have fewer holidays than those in Tokyo.

“We need to create communities where young people can make a long-term living,” Fujinami says, adding that subsidizing them to move in is not enough.

While there is little evidence of citizens returning to Nagoro, Ayano’s dolls have attracted visitors from as far afield as the U.S. and France.

“Before I started making scarecrows, nobody stopped by. Now many people visit here. I hope Nagoro will become lively again and many people come here for sightseeing,” she says. “I don’t know what Nagoro will look like in 10 or 20 years ... but I’ll keep on making dolls.”