CHAPTER **13** The Rural Imaginary: Landscape, Village, Tradition

Scott Schnell

Agrarian images seem out of place in the highly urbanized and cosmopolitan society Japan has become. When the subject of Japan is broached these days, one is far more likely to think of bullet trains and robotics, the fashion industry, *anime*, and popular music idols than rustic villagers in sedge hats bent over a flooded rice paddy. In fact, the rural population in Japan has been steadily decreasing for several decades, and the challenge of how to stem the flow of young people to the cities or to lure new residents to take their places is heavy on the minds of local administrators.

If rural areas are in such decline, why should they warrant more than a cursory glance by students of contemporary Japan? One could argue that the Japanese government's decentralization policies hinge on the revitalization of rural communities; that frustration with traffic congestion and cramped living conditions has led thousands of urban residents back to the countryside in search of a more satisfying lifestyle (the so-called "u-turn phenomenon"); that increasing concerns about air, food, and water quality and their effect on human health have led to a recognition of urban–rural linkages as the key to a more sustainable future (Knight 1994; Moen 1997; Moon 1997). Moreover, as an anthropologist who has conducted fieldwork for several years in Japan's mountainous interior, I can attest that many rural communities are alive and well, and deserve our continuing attention as interesting, dynamic places. In this chapter, however, I will confine my discussion to the significance of rural Japan as an abiding source not only of natural and human resources, but of symbolic ones as well. Whatever the actual case may be, Japan's cultural identity is *perceived* as being heavily rooted in the agrarian traditions of its rural areas. This in itself makes them important.

Many theorists have sought to demonstrate how the institutional structures of the past live on in the present (Nakamaki 1992; Nakane 1970; Umesao 1984, 1989). Indeed, Japan's distinctive historical experience is a major element in *nihonjinron* assertions. The more compelling issue, however, relates to strategic uses of the past

for present purposes. The past, in other words, is commonly reconfigured in response to present needs. Thus tradition must be seen not simply as a static holdover from former times, but as an ongoing conceptual project – one that figures prominently in contemporary social and political agendas. Tradition, then, is qualified less by the passage of time than by the gravity of shared perception. Of course, historical precedent adds legitimacy and appeal to tradition, but this can be asserted retrospectively through creative theorizing.

Certainly, the topic of "invented tradition" has been widely addressed, with illuminating results (see, for example, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Ivy 1995; Vlastos 1998). My objection to the concept, however, is that it seems to imply that some traditions are genuine while others are spurious and deceptive. The actual process of tradition-making is far more ambiguous. Quite frequently it *can* be demonstrated that certain institutions or activities have been of long duration. This does not mean, however, that they have always been interpreted the same way or have held the same significance. Furthermore, even if a particular custom has been handed down unaltered from long ago, it may have been practiced or observed by only a tiny minority of the people in question and thus cannot be taken as broadly representative. "Tradition" is rarely the product of either careful preservation or pure invention. Rather, it is a matter of reconciling past with present through the mediation of value-laden symbols, thereby rationalizing a favored agenda.

Take, for example, what is surely considered one of the most traditional of Japanese institutions, the *ie*, or "stem family" household. Once the mainstay of rural society, the patriarchal, multi-generation, ancestor-worshiping *ie* now seems destined to fade from the rural landscape along with the oxen and mulberry trees. Young women are so averse to marrying into traditional farm households that a serious bride shortage now exists in many parts of the countryside. Desperate households have resorted to recruiting "mail-order" brides from less economically advantaged areas in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia. And what of the eldest son, destined to succeed his father as head of the household? At one time considered fortunate by virtue of his rank in the birth order, he is now more likely to be pitied than admired. He remains stuck in his natal village while his siblings run off to fulfill their dreams of higher education, salaried employment, and more stimulating social opportunities in the cities.

The problem is magnified by the many challenges facing Japanese agriculture. The Japanese government has been protecting its farmers for decades with subsidies and import restrictions, but because the scale of their holdings is so limited it is virtually impossible for any particular household to support itself through agriculture alone. For the vast majority of farming households, most income derives from outside employment. As the eldest son matures, he typically finds a job at an office or factory nearby. Farming has thus become a part-time enterprise conducted on weekends or in the evenings after work, perhaps given over entirely to aging grandparents. Many households are dying out through lack of an heir, or yielding to development pressures to sell their land.

To say that the *ie* is fading away, however, is not entirely accurate. In a sense it has survived the transition to an urban-industrial context by serving as an organizational blueprint for other social groups, most notably the modern business corporation (see chapter 9 in this volume). As Rohlen (1974), Kondo (1990), and others have indicated, skillful managers promote the notion of "company as family" among

their employees. Once this conceptual leap has been achieved, other ideological elements can be called into play: the company as the primary object of loyalty and locus of identity formation; filial piety expressed as respect and obedience to managers and senior employees; reverence to "the ancestors" in the guise of company founders and former executives; and, perhaps most importantly, a pervasive conviction that the needs of the collective take precedence over those of the individual.

The analogy may be extended beyond the household to the community level. The arrangement of work groups in an office layout, with the desks pushed together and facing inward toward one another, calls to mind the famous village dictum *mukō sangen, ryō donari* ("the three houses opposite, and the ones next door on either side"), indicating the households having the closest ties of mutual support with one's own. And the structural relationship between a major company and its subsidiaries is reminiscent of the *dōzoku*, the hierarchical pattern of genealogically related households (main household and subordinate branches) that is so prominent a feature in some parts of Japan, particularly the northeast.

How should these urbanized evocations of the traditional household be seen? Are they tenacious holdovers from the past, or elements of a clever administrative strategy that serves the interests of managing executives? Steven's description of the relationship between a large rural political network and the local population might just as easily be applied to a modern business corporation, its subsidiaries and employees: "[b]ecause all the organisations in this network . . . take on the identical form of the traditional household, exploitation is made to look like *benevolence*, contradictory interests appear *harmonious*, and the submission of the exploited takes on the form of *obedience* and *loyalty*" (Steven 1983:119). Note that the aforementioned office layout is conducive not only to easy interaction among fellow employees, but to mutual surveillance as well.

The suggestion of vested interest makes "tradition" far more compelling than the term at first implies. Who has the power to manipulate tradition, and for what purpose? These are the questions Sugimoto (1997:12–13) raises by drawing our attention to certain privileged and influential minorities which he refers to as "core subcultures," examples being "the management subculture in the occupational dimension, the large corporation subculture in the firm-size dimension, the male subculture in the gender dimension, and the Tokyo subculture in the regional dimension." Through their control of the educational system and mass media, these elite subcultures are able to present their own values, ideals, and priorities as representative of the nation as a whole.

In this vein, it is useful to note that the *ie* was originally an institution of the premodern samurai class, which comprised less than 7 percent of the total population. The *ie* was important to the samurai as a way of maintaining their hereditary privileges and passing on their wealth. While a few peasants were able to acquire enough wealth and property to achieve pseudo-samurai status, most members of the peasant class had little wealth or property to maintain, their rights to the land being granted at the discretion of their feudal overlords. For them, maintaining an *ie* of the type described above was simply out of the question, both practically and economically. Obviously, the peasants occupied households of some type, but they did not follow the same structural pattern, gender roles, or rules of succession as did the elite samurai (see

Bachnik 1983, Befu 1968, M. Ema 1943, and Muto 1985 for examples of various exceptions to the "norm").

The four-tiered class system (samurai, peasant, artisan, merchant) was abolished shortly after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The new leaders, however, being themselves of samurai descent, naturally drew upon their own ideals and values in pursuing their reforms. The Meiji Civil Code, debated for years but finally promulgated in 1898, established the samurai-style *ie* as the basic social unit. Every citizen was required to register as a member of an *ie*, and every *ie* was to be represented by a patriarchal head who held legal authority over the other members. The Civil Code also established male primogeniture (succession by the eldest son) as the preferred pattern of succession. The eldest son's siblings eventually had to leave – his sisters marrying into other households, his younger brothers perhaps seeking employment in the burgeoning towns and cities.

The new Meiji leaders were thereby able to impose their own ideals and conventions on the entire population. In fact, practically all of what the general public outside of Japan now perceives as being quintessentially Japanese – patriarchal authority, male primogeniture, arranged marriages, submissive and subservient women, fanatical loyalty to lord or emperor, the martial arts, Zen-inspired austerity, haiku, ink painting, the tea ceremony, and, of course, the *ie* system itself, were products of the samurai tradition and had little or nothing to do with the majority of the Japanese people until well into the modern era. As Ueno Chizuko and others before her have pointed out, "democratization meant not the 'commoner-ization' of the samurai class but the 'samuraization' of the commoners." Interestingly, however, Ueno also acknowledges a "push–pull" dynamic, with many "commoners" eagerly embracing the changes as a means for achieving upward social mobility: "When social change abolishes a hierarchy, it is always the lower class that wants to escape the imposed class distinction in habits and behaviors. Thus the *ie* system, modeled on the patrilineal family system of the samurai household, was established by Meiji family law" (1987:S79).

There is one notable exception, however, where the favored images have emanated not from the top but from somewhere in the middle – where "commoner-ization" seems to have prevailed, in other words. This relates to the cultural significance attached to growing rice, which is widely considered the staple grain and a "key metaphor" in Japanese culture (Nakane 1970; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). More than any other occupational activity, it is irrigated rice cultivation that is seen as conveying the distinctive elements of a Japanese social ethos.

In traditional rice-growing communities, the irrigation system was central. Water, which supplied the plants with most of their nutrients, was siphoned off rivers or channeled down from the mountains using an intricate system of ditches and weirs. In the spring, when the fields had been plowed and harrowed and the dikes between them repaired, the irrigation channels were opened and the water let in. The water then trickled from one paddy to the next through notches in the dikes, filling each paddy in a stepwise manner until all had been flooded. Owners of contiguous paddies were thus obliged by the flow of water to coordinate their efforts.

The saturated surface soil was churned and paddled into an even layer of soft mud covered by a few inches of standing water. Then the transplanting work began. Seedlings that had been grown in tightly packed nursery beds were now inserted

into the mud at regular intervals. This allowed the roots to expand, anchoring the plants in the soil and absorbing nutrients for their growth and maturation. The integrative nature of the irrigation system, combined with the extra labor required at particularly busy times like transplanting and harvest, made it virtually impossible for any single household to act independently; each maintained reciprocal ties with other households in order to subsist.

Here again, a traditional pattern appears to have survived the transition to an urban-industrial society. This heritage of interdependence is routinely cited in explaining the Japanese propensity for group behavior – so prominent a feature in organizational settings. And as with the *ie* model, the notion of rice-growing villages as cultural exemplar coincides nicely with the needs of administrators, as it encourages individuals to put the interests of the collective ahead of their own. It also appeals to the nation's rice farmers who, despite their dwindling numbers, still maintain a prominent voice in electoral politics.

The privileged status of rice cultivation is further reinforced through myth and ritual. According to the Japanese creation myth, knowledge of growing rice originated with the sun goddess Amaterasu, and was entrusted to her grandson Ninigi when he was sent down from the heavens to establish an earthly government. As the myth unfolds, Ninigi first alights on Mount Takachiho in southern Kyushu. Later, his own great-grandson battles his way east along the Inland Sea, eventually establishing himself as the first Emperor Jimmu in what is now the vicinity of Osaka. The territory he occupies is referred to in the narrative as *mizuhō no kuni*, the land blessed with abundant rice. All subsequent emperors derive from this (mythological) single line of descent, and during an emperor's coronation he supposedly becomes the living embodiment of Ninigi, the "god of the ripened rice plant." Even today the emperor conducts an annual fertility ritual in the spring, transplanting some rice seedlings in a special paddy within his palace grounds to ensure a successful growing season for the entire nation.

Realistically speaking, however, the vast majority of the Japanese people get no closer to the nation's rice paddies than passing by them in a speeding car or train. The question thus arises once again: is contemporary Japanese groupishness merely a cultural survival from a bygone era? Or have rice cultivation and the cooperative images it evokes been strategically woven into an explanatory narrative, projecting contemporary values into the past to enhance their validity?

One problem with presenting rice cultivation as the cultural prototype is that over 80 percent of Japan's surface area is comprised of mountains, where the slopes are too steep to make rice cultivation feasible. Yet it is clear from the archaeological evidence that the mountainous areas were populated for thousands of years before agriculture was introduced. The people who occupied these areas maintained their own traditions, which were more suited to the forested landscape that encompassed and sustained them.

Consider, for example, an alternative image from the mountainous Hida region of central Japan, where I have been conducting fieldwork for many years. Though located in the very heart of the archipelago, Hida has historically been rather isolated due to its distance from major population centers, the rugged terrain, and heavy snow accumulation. Furthermore, in a political economy based on rice production, mountainous areas like Hida were at a distinct disadvantage. Most of the local residents

made their living as hunters, timber cutters, charcoal producers, and swidden cultivators, none of which was held in particularly high esteem from the "mainstream" point of view.

Hida is mentioned briefly in the *Nihon shoki*, or "Chronicles of Japan" (720 C.E.), an interesting blend of myth and history written from the perspective of the imperial court. After a detailed account of the creation story, it proceeds to record various achievements of the early emperors. A brief passage relates that, during the reign of Emperor Nintoku (313–399 C.E.), there existed in the province of Hida an unusual character referred to as Ryōmen Sukuna – literally "Two-Faced Demon." As the name implies, he purportedly had two faces, oriented in opposite directions but joined to a single head and torso. Each face, moreover, was served by its own set of appendages. With two pairs of arms he displayed great skill with weapons, which he used to threaten and plunder the people. The Sukuna refused to comply with imperial directives, whereupon the emperor, during the 65th year of his reign (377 C.E.), dispatched one of his generals to vanquish the creature (see Aston 1886:298). This episode is thought to represent the Hida region being drawn under the authority of the newly emerging Yamato state (Ōno 1983:108).

The *Chronicles* were, of course, written with the aim of legitimizing imperial authority. The military campaign is thus described as an act of liberation, freeing the people of Hida from an evil despot. Local folk legends, however, relate a different point of view. They describe the Sukuna as a wise and benevolent leader who died defending his people from an invasive foreign power. The two faces represent both a strong and a compassionate side to his personality. Indeed, a famous local wood carving of Ryōmen Sukuna shows his face on one side with a menacing snarl, the hands grasping a bow and arrow, while the other side shows a peaceful and calm demeanor, the hands clasped in front of the chest in a gesture of devotion reminiscent of the Buddhist goddess Kannon. And while the "official" account in the *Chronicles* describes the Sukuna as wielding two swords, local images invariably show him holding an ax, an unmistakable allusion to the forested mountains that were his realm.

In short, the local legends suggest an alternative cultural identity and underlying opposition to outside control. This theme is repeated throughout Hida's history, which is punctuated by various acts of rebellion. Perhaps the most notable occurred during the second year of the Meiji period – the very dawn of the modern era.

The Tokugawa regime had ruled for well over 200 years through feudal ties of loyalty and obligation, but never represented the kind of strong, centralized authority associated with the modern nation-state. "Japan" was at the time divided into more than 250 semi-autonomous domains, each administered by a resident feudal lord. Hida, however, with its vast timber and mineral reserves, was one of the few provincial areas directly controlled by the Tokugawa from their locus in Edo (now Tokyo). Thus the people of Hida were accustomed to a certain degree of autonomy due to their geographical isolation and the absence of the kind of domineering samurai normally employed by resident feudal lords.

When the Meiji leadership took over in 1868, they immediately set about establishing a strong, centralized government that could unify the people and stand up to the encroachment of Western colonialism. In Japan, as elsewhere, national identity was not a "given"; it had to be actively created and maintained. Nationalist

ideologues began to propagate the notion of state Shinto in an attempt to draw people's allegiances away from their local areas and toward the all-encompassing figure of the emperor. Not everyone welcomed the new order. Later that same year, the government sent Umemura Hayami, an idealistic but inexperienced young samurai, to serve as Hida's first governor. With little prior knowledge of the local people or their distinctive lifestyles, Umemura embarked on a program of bold but draconian socioeconomic and political reforms. Consequently the people of Hida rebelled, smashing and burning Umemura's administrative offices and attacking his supporters. In a climactic skirmish with angry rebels, Umemura himself was shot, and later died in prison pending an official inquiry into his abusive policies.

This incident is little known outside the Hida region, which seems unusual in light of its scale and level of violence. Japanese historians, if they address the incident at all, treat it in the manner of a standard peasant uprising directed at unpopular rice distribution policies and an increase in the land tax. The peasants themselves are portrayed as being ignorant and resistant to change, not understanding the progressive reforms the young governor was trying to implement. Local sources, however, reveal much more to the story: the peasants were reacting against Umemura's attempt to regulate not only their economy, but even the most intimate aspects of their daily lives, including cherished social institutions, religious beliefs and practices – even sexual behavior. These were the major factors that led them to rebel (see S. Ema 1997 [1949]). The entire incident may thus be seen as a clash involving two distinctive cultures, that of a local mountain-dwelling peasantry versus that of the centralized bureaucratic elite.

Labeling the rebellious peasants as ignorant or backward is a convenient way of avoiding the real issue, namely, that they had legitimate concerns about the nature and pace of the changes being foisted upon them. This technique has been employed all over the globe throughout the modern era for the purpose of dismissing anyone who stands in the way of state ambitions. The Meiji Restoration is widely portrayed as a time of progress, whereby Japan emerged from the darkness of feudalism through the institution of (as the reign name Meiji implies) "enlightened government." Incidents such as the Umemura rebellion pose an embarrassing challenge to this optimistic vision, and an interesting counterpoint to the rhetoric of unified nationalism. This perhaps explains its absence from standard historical accounts.

Nevertheless, local areas had to comply with state directives under threat of penalty and, perhaps even more threatening, serious loss of face. The pressure to conform was particularly intense among young people, who may have been led by the educational system to view their parents' lives as hopelessly old-fashioned and crude. This situation is poignantly illustrated in Natsume Sōseki's novel *Kokoro*, which is set at the end of the Meiji period. At one point the narrator, a young man originally from the countryside who has recently graduated from a university in Tokyo, returns to his natal village when his father falls ill. Throughout the visit he is very condescending to his parents and their neighbors, noting shortly after his arrival that "I began at last to dislike my father's naive provincialism" (Natsume 1957 [1914]:82). His mother, he observes, is quite ignorant about medical matters, "[a]s is commonly the case with women who live among woods and fields far from cities." (1957 [1914]:83). When talk turns to inviting the neighbors for a dinner party to celebrate his graduation, he confesses the following:

> I hated the kind of guests that came to a country dinner party. They came with one end in view, which was to eat and drink, and they were the sort of people that waited eagerly for any event which might provide a break in the monotony of their lives. . . . But I could hardly say to my parents, "Don't invite those rowdy boors here." (1957 [1914]:86)

The young man's father, though, offers the most telling observation on the social impact of uniform educational policies:

> "You know," he once said to me, "There are advantages and disadvantages in having one's children educated. You take the trouble to give them an education and, when they are through with their studies, they go away and never come home. Why, you can almost say that education is a means of separating children from their parents." (1957 [1914]:95)

Nagatsuka Takashi provides a more sympathetic look at late Meiji village life in his novel *Tsuchi* (The Soil). Among other things, this novel depicts socioeconomic relations within the village, particularly between the small owner and tenant cultivators and the wealthy landlord household referred to as "East Neighbor." Though hardly egalitarian in its relations with the rest of the community, the landlord household nevertheless stands in stark contrast to the detached arrogance of centralized bureaucrats. As Ann Waswo observes in the introduction to her English translation (Nagatsuka 1989 [1910]:xii):

> it is clear that East Neighbor's family remains "of the village" and involved, directly and indirectly, in its affairs. Precisely because they are relatively affluent and possess knowledge of the wider world, they are part of the cement that holds the community together. . . . The other villagers respect them and value the services they provide.

Nevertheless, among the less affluent villagers life was harsh, especially in light of the economic and technological developments that were transforming agriculture at the time. As Nagatsuka explains in the novel:

> It was no longer possible to obtain free compost from the forests as they had always done in the past. Now the forests were privately owned, and one had to pay to collect leaves or cut green grass. . . . As the forests became depleted, all sorts of artificial fertilizers appeared in the countryside. But once again only those with money could make use of them. Poor farmers were caught up in a vicious circle. Lacking fertilizer they were unable to grow much more than they owed their landlords in rents. So they had to find other work in order to obtain the food they needed. But when they found such work they fell behind in weeding and cultivating their own fields. If they missed even a few days during the hot, wet summer the weeds would shoot up and stifle the growth of their crops. That alone was sufficient to reduce yields. It was just as if they had uprooted the crops before they had matured and eaten them. (1989 [1910]:47–48)

Waswo notes that Sōseki himself had written the introduction to the 1912 edition of Nagatsuka's novel. In it he is quite frank about his disdain for village life (Nagatsuka 1989 [1910]:xvi). Quoting Sōseki:

> Those who read *The Soil* will feel themselves dragged into the mud. That is certainly how I felt. . . . When my daughters are older and talk of going to concerts and plays . . . I will

give them *The Soil* to read. No doubt they will complain and ask for some more entertaining romantic novels instead. But I will tell them to read it . . . [precisely] because it is painful to do so. I will advise them to persevere in reading it . . . to learn about the world, so that something of the dark, dreadful shadows of life will be [impressed] upon their character. (Bracketed words in Waswo's version)

Clearly, Sōseki is using Nagatsuka's account to underscore the advantages of the modernization, to which he and other urban intellectuals were so deeply committed. It is ironic, therefore, that the harsh living conditions and inequalities described in *The Soil* were largely engendered by "progressive" reforms, such as the introduction of a fixed annual land tax, private ownership of forested mountain lands once held in common, and the promotion of new technologies that were beyond the means of less affluent cultivators.

Waswo goes on to relate how this same novel has been reinterpreted over the years: as a Marxist critique of exploitative social relations during the 1920s and 1930s; as a call for communal solidarity and resolve during the war years; and, interestingly, as a vision of a lost utopia in the late 1970s. Citing one reader's reaction from the latter period, Waswo explains: "The villagers lived in harmony with a bountiful nature; they ate safe, uncontaminated food; old people were well cared for by the community, in contrast to rural Japan today, where the suicide rate among the elderly surpasses that of urban Japan" (Nagatsuka 1989 [1910]:xvii). Here the "dark, dreadful shadows" have become shining emblems of virtue, a striking demonstration of people's ability to mobilize images of the past in pursuing new agendas.

How was such a turnaround effected? Part of the answer lies in the influence of the Japanese ethnographer Yanagita Kunio (1872–1962) through his establishment and promotion of folklore studies. Midway through his career, during the late 1920s, Yanagita turned from an interest in fantastic tales and regional peculiarities toward an effort to discover a unifying essence for the Japanese people. This led him to articulate the concept of *jōmin*, or the "ordinary folk," whom he saw as being typified "by ancestor worship, rice cultivation, and a fixed domicile" (Figal 1999:173; Harootunian, in Vlastos 1998). These, to him, were the defining elements of a distinctive Japanese identity. Yanagita's work found great appeal among nationalist ideologues attempting to unite the diverse regions and peoples of Japan under a single imperial umbrella. He had seen in ancestor worship the roots of a cult of reverence for the emperor, and the images of diligence and cooperation conveyed by rice-cultivating villages were conducive to a broader emphasis on service to the nation. Conveniently left out of this scenario were the hunters, timber cutters, and swidden (*yakihata*) cultivators who populated the mountains at higher elevations, not to mention the residents of the many fishing villages lining the coast.

The notion of rice cultivation as cultural exemplar has been adopted and refined by a number of influential theorists, and Befu (2001:17–20) includes it as one of the major and recurring elements of *nihonjinron* conjecture. One of its leading advocates was philosopher-historian Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), who adhered to a kind of environmental determinism in explaining the evolution of Japanese culture. More specifically, its location within the "monsoon belt" lying along the eastern coast of the Asian continent made the Japanese landscape particularly conducive to rice cultivation. In fact the moist, tropical air of the monsoon, combined with cold air

flowing in from the continent, has given rise to some of Japan's most distinctive cultural features (Watsuji 1935). Befu (2001:18) provides an example:

> According to Watsuji, the open architecture of Japanese homes, which are adapted to humidity and heat, was necessitated by the monsoon climate. This open style of architecture in turn relates to the absence of privacy in Japan and even to the denial of individual rights and promotion of collective orientation.

Influential anthropologist Ishida Eiichirō (1903–68) elaborated on Watsuji's ideas in attempting to distinguish Japan and other East Asian nations from the West. Japanese society, having developed within the context of irrigated rice cultivation, took the form of closely knit, insular communities that were firmly rooted in place. Western society, on the other hand, originally developed out of the pastoralist subsistence economies of the Middle East, which explains its penchant for mobility and independence (Ishida 1969).

Though highly speculative and overly simplistic, such explanations have enjoyed unusual popularity. Even today, when people engage in discussing the basic differences between Japan and "the West," the image of "group-oriented rice farmers or company men versus the independent cowboy" distinction is almost invariably recounted. The very simplicity of the image partly explains its appeal, for it accounts for both the perceived groupishness and insularity of Japanese society on the one hand, and the selfish and intrusive nature of "the West" on the other. But it persists mainly because it is *useful* in justifying attitudes that have already become institutionalized and naturalized in schools, companies, and countless other organizations. Like all *nihonjinron* assertions, the rice cultivation model is the result of reasoning retrospectively from a present condition, making the condition itself appear natural or inevitable.

If some influential ethnologists have been guilty of promoting such stereotypes, however, others have endeavored to break them down. Folklorist Akamatsu Keisuke (1909–99) was particularly opposed to Yanagita's *jōmin* concept, claiming that it implied a uniformity that did not exist. It also encouraged discrimination against people who did not fit the standard image. Akamatsu subsequently declared his own interest in the *hijōmin* ("*un*ordinary folk"), devoting his research not only to those who had been marginalized but also to the kinds of topic that other folklorists had long been avoiding, such as the somewhat more relaxed sexual attitudes among rural villagers, or ethnic discrimination in towns and cities (Akamatsu 1986, 1991, 1995). Though largely avoided at their initial publication, many of Akamatsu's works have recently appeared in new editions and have attracted considerable interest and acclaim.

Other scholars have contested the primacy of the "mainstream" rice-based culture itself. Tsuboi Hirofumi (1929–88) persistently argued that dry-field cultivation was at one time equally important, if not more so. Though rice came to predominate in the coastal areas through a combination of political favor and economic policy decisions, a variety of crops continued to be grown in swidden or permanent dry-field plots at higher elevations. These included cereal grains as well as root crops and tubers. Tsuboi (1979, 1982) focused in particular on the cultivation of *imo*, a category of food plant that includes potatoes, taro, and yams. Based on these distinctive

subsistence patterns, Tsuboi divided the cultural landscape of Japan into two broad categories: the lowlands (*sato*, meaning literally "village" or "hamlet"), typified by the standard rice-cultivating tradition, and the uplands (*yama*, or mountains), which included not only dry-field cultivation but hunting and logging as well. Of course, fishing villagers and merchants added to the diverse array of landscape categories. Tsuboi underscored the fact that the people who occupied these various niches were *interacting* with one another through complex exchange relationships, each providing what the others did not have (see also Kalland 1995). This suggests a much more dynamic model of social and economic activity in rural areas than is acknowledged by the dominant and naturalized model of paddy cultivation.

Most adamant in his opposition to conventional (and misleading) images of rural Japan has been Amino Yoshihiko, a revisionist historian heavily influenced by historical ethnography. Amino (1996) insists that the focus on rice cultivation as a defining element of Japanese culture derives from a misunderstanding of the term *hyakushō*, which is generally equated with the rice-farming peasantry. He claims that *hyakushō*, written with characters meaning "many names," originally included a variety of non-agricultural occupations such as hunting, timber-cutting, mining, fishing, and shipping. It also applied to dry-field cultivators who grew various grains, vegetables, and fruit. "In the everyday lives of the people, rice had no particular significance. Therefore [he concludes] the common view that Japan was an agricultural society based on paddy fields and rice must be seen as a fabrication, completely at odds with reality" (1996:237).

Cultural diversity exists not only between regions and occupations, but within them as well. Once while visiting the home of a Hida farmer, who happened also to be a Shinto priest, I noticed on his bookshelves the entire collected works of Origuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), whose prominence as a folklorist is second only to that of Yanagita. I asked my host what he thought of Origuchi's work, to which he replied, "Well, he conducted thorough research and gained deep understanding of the places where he worked, but he did not recognize that the neighboring village might be completely different." Motioning around us to his own community, he continued: "Even this tiny hamlet is divided into three contingents, and each has different ways of doing things."

These various sources underscore the point that the Japanese countryside is not a cultural monolith. The variations, however, have yet to be fully addressed. This is due in part to the sense of uniformity that Yanagita's term *jōmin* inspired among cultural ideologues. But it also relates to the difficulty of recovering data about people who were not considered particularly noteworthy by the literary elite. This is what makes the work of Akamatsu and others so important.

Diversity often implies competing interests, which in turn raise doubts about another hallmark of rural society, its alleged commitment to harmony and cooperation. Anyone who spends a significant amount of time living in a rural community will soon recognize that, although on the surface things seem placid, tensions and animosities seethe underneath. This is not to disparage the residents of such communities; the truly admirable achievement is how well they are able to hold their animosities in check, allowing the antagonists to peacefully coexist. Tensions are given free rein, however, on certain prescribed occasions or celebrations, such as a drinking bout or – one of my own special interests – a local Shinto shrine festival.

Kelly (1990:71) nicely captures the rationale underlying such events in his description of the Ōgi-sai in Kurokawa, a village in northeastern Japan. "This is a festival to invoke, entertain, and supplicate the tutelary god of the shrine and of its parishioners; the god is called upon to descend from its mountain abode, commune with parishioners, and bestow good fortune on their lives and livelihoods." The entertainment in this case centers on the local claim to fame: an amateur yet highly accomplished form of *nō* theater. Though ostensibly offered on the deity's behalf, the performances involve competition among the various members of two rival guilds. Kelly notes that, during the requisite feasting, the participants evoke little sense of a religious experience: "the focus of feast talk, well lubricated with sacred rice-wine, is less communion with the god than comparison with one's fellow performers. . . . Feast talk is artistic talk, incessant appraisals of one's family, friends, and foes" (1990:74).

Moreover, the performances themselves are hardly timeless and unchanging, as official descriptions lead outsiders to believe. In reality, this festival, like similar events all over Japan, has had to accommodate the various symptoms of modern society – busy work schedules, demographic changes, the higher cost of living – as well as the needs and expectations of tourists from the city. This leads Kelly to consider what he describes as the "cultural politics of heritage." To the performers, the festival is a contest for prestige and position; to tourists, *nō* aficionados, and the media, it is a celebration of the Japanese national heritage. Thus the local people find themselves ironically cast as authentic embodiments of tradition, even though their daily lives "are in many respects indistinguishable from those of the Tokyo tourists" (1990:70).

This relates to a more general dilemma involving the Japanese countryside and the way it is perceived by central bureaucrats and the urban public at large. As the backward and declining "boondocks," it must be drawn into contemporary society, presumably through economic development, educational reforms, and infrastructural improvements. But as the repository of Japan's distinctive cultural heritage it must be carefully preserved for future generations. "The festival expresses this fundamental tension of being drawn in while being held apart. It is an arena where the forms of inclusion and exclusion are contested and negotiated" (Kelly 1990:70; Robertson 1987).

My own research (Schnell 1999) has taken a historical approach in attempting to examine these articulations across national, regional, and local boundaries. The setting is a small agricultural and commercial town called Furukawa, located in the Hida region alluded to previously. The annual shrine festival, celebrated after the snow melts away in early spring, showcases an interesting ritualized event in which a large drum is placed on a huge rectangular platform made of overlapping beams and borne at night through the narrow streets in a rowdy procession. Meanwhile, teams of young men bearing smaller drums of their own rush out from the alleys and attack the platform as it passes through their respective neighborhoods. The platform is guarded by burly defenders, so the procession becomes a running battle that continues into the early morning hours.

In every sense a "tradition," the drum ritual is the result of an ongoing evolutionary process. It originated as an innocuous preliminary to the other events, which were performed in honor of the local guardian deity. Shortly after the Meiji Restoration, however, it began to expand, both in scale and level of intensity, eventually assuming center stage as the festival's defining element. I have related the transformation to

dramatic social, political, and economic changes that were inundating the community at the same time. The drum ritual came to enact a scenario in which local residents band together in challenging authority. Through its performance, the spirit of resistance that motivated the Umemura rebellion and other historical incidents has been celebrated, perpetuated – even exercised, on several occasions escalating into politically motivated violence. One of the most famous examples occurred in 1929, when the massive drum platform was employed like a battering ram to crash into the local police station, which at that time was the local agent of an increasingly militaristic and oppressive central government. Scores of bystanders took this as their cue to pelt the station building with rocks, an act that was surely premeditated. The festival, with its massing of people, consumption of alcohol, and atmosphere of temporary license, offered one of the few opportunities available to local residents for publicly airing their grievances. The tradition continues to change in response to changing needs. Foremost in people's minds at present are not the predations of some callous landlord or abusive administrator, but the growth and vitality of the local economy. The festival is now being packaged as a tourist attraction, a compelling evocation of *furusato*, one's "native place."

Most contemporary Japanese were born in urban areas and have no personal experience of growing up in a rural village. For them, *furusato* has come to refer not to a specific location but rather a pervasive, nostalgia-driven ideal – one that represents whatever is felt to be lacking in contemporary industrialized society (see Robertson 1988, 1991, 1997, 1998). Surely this relates to one of the great ironies of the modern era: we yearn for the intimacy and simplicity of the past while investing ourselves ever more heavily in the trajectories of "progress" that destroyed them. The rural landscape thus becomes a kind of pilgrimage destination, with thousands of huddled city dwellers setting out into the countryside on weekends and vacations in search of reaffirming doses of *furusato*.

Robertson (1995), Ivy (1995), and Creighton (1997) have all described how the railroad companies helped to promote a sort of home-grown "orientalism" by marketing the countryside as an exotic landscape of adventure and discovery – an elaborate backdrop for staging one's own personal experiences. Furukawa, with its boisterous festival, quaint streets, and newly constructed folk museum complex, has been a willing partner and major beneficiary in such campaigns. By the same token, however, local residents are obliged to assume the role of entertainment and service providers, catering to tourist expectations and thereby reinforcing preconceived stereotypes. As Kelly (1990:65) suggests, communities like this one are "caught between having a past and being a past."

A recent development epitomizes this tendency. Furukawa was chosen as the setting for the morning NHK serial drama *Sakura*, which aired every weekday in 15-minute segments for a period of six months (April through September) in 2002. The plot revolves around the title character, an irrepressibly optimistic young Japanese American woman from Hawaii, who travels to Japan to discover her roots and ends up working as an English-teaching assistant at a middle school in Takayama (the Hida region's major city). Dissatisfied with the unmarried teachers' boarding house, Sakura opts for more culturally evocative lodgings and negotiates a home-stay arrangement in nearby Furukawa. The home is a traditional *ie*, whose primary occupation in this case is not agriculture but candle-making. The house itself

replicates an actual *ie* that has been making candles in Furukawa for six generations. The characters in the program, however, are purely fictional. While most of the filming was done on a set built in Tokyo, some stock footage and authenticating sequences were shot in front of the actual house and at other locations in and around Furukawa.

The popularity of the television program has brought hordes of tourists to Furukawa in search of "Sakura's house." On a visit there in the summer of 2002, I was surprised one Sunday morning to witness a steady stream of tourist buses careening into town and disgorging their passengers to roam about the streets. Not surprisingly, I later found a throng of people gathered in the narrow street in front of the original house itself, some taking photographs and others attempting to buy candles as souvenirs. The current head of the household sat in his customary workplace, just inside the entryway and off to the left, busily fashioning handmade candles and greeting the tourists. There was a signboard propped in the doorway leading to the interior of the house where the family lives. The sign asked visitors to please not enter, this being an actual family's home. The current head explained to me that before they put up the sign, people had sometimes wandered freely through the door and into the living area as if the entire house were on display, perhaps expecting to catch a glimpse of Sakura or members of her host family. He added that visitors often greet him as "Numata-san," the name of his fictional counterpart in the television series.

Though they are often viewed with condescension, it could easily be argued that rural residents are far more knowledgeable about the urban center than the center is about them. After all, television, newspapers, and other forms of mass media emanate only from the major cities; the flow of information is unidirectional. Thus the people of Furukawa found great amusement in critiquing the Sakura program, from the actors' attempts at rendering the local dialect to the outlandish domestic situations and confusion of geographical references. While purportedly "about" the Hida region, the program was more a projection of urban attitudes and perceptions onto a generic rural background, yet another example of coopted images. It is ironic that visitors came to bask in the environs of fictional characters rather than to interact with and learn about the actual living residents.

Many of my friends in Furukawa lament that because of the crowds and traffic it no longer seems like the idyllic little town they have always known and loved. Indeed, every time I return there I am astonished by the changes that have taken place in the interim. The most recent include the construction of two large hotels and a spacious new bus terminal adjacent to the rail station, as well as an access tunnel through the mountains to connect with a nearby highway. While some residents have benefited economically from these changes, others clearly have not. The hotels draw business away from the more traditional, family-run *ryokan*. And while new highways and tunnels make Furukawa more accessible to the outside, they also make the outside more accessible to local residents. People are driving farther afield to do their shopping and socializing, with the result that many shops and services not directly related to the tourist industry are closing down.

But the changes do not stop there. The towns and villages of Hida, whose territories were originally defined by natural watershed boundaries, will soon be lumped together to form three new administrative districts. These, in fact, will be the largest such districts in the entire country in terms of surface area. This

will mean more centralized educational and administrative facilities, and undoubtedly will result in the further erosion of local identities. Similar amalgamations (*gappei*) are being promoted all over rural Japan in an effort to streamline local administrative services and costs. In a sense, the perception of the countryside as being culturally uniform has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as blanket policies are imposed by central bureaucrats upon a vast and varied landscape.

If the people of Hida were apprehensive about the amalgamation, why did they acquiesce? One reason is that, while they were offered nominal opportunities to air their reservations, they were never actually allowed to vote on the issue. The decision was made for them by local politicians, who were subjected to heavy carrot-and-stick incentives by the central government, which promised economic assistance for going along with the restructuring and threatened the withholding of funds for refusing to do so. Local administrators, facing a rapidly aging population that will require extensive health-care services and dwindling enrolment in remote village schools that are costly to maintain, saw little recourse but to comply. Many felt that the government was simply too powerful to oppose, and that the changes were probably inevitable.

But there is a more fundamental problem in interpreting the lack of opposition as implicit consent. In a society like Japan's where harmony and cooperation have been relentlessly promoted as fundamental principles of social interaction, it is often difficult to pose a direct challenge to the authorities. As mentioned earlier, there is also an inherent fear of being ridiculed as old-fashioned or backward for standing in the way of "progress." Thus when people feel compelled to express their opposition, they are likely to do so through less direct means, such as in the form of festivals that "spontaneously" escalate into violence, or in invoking vague fears of upsetting the ancestral spirits. If we do not learn to recognize the underlying anxieties inherent in such expressions, we will likely dismiss them as eccentric or superstitious, further justifying the implementation of "reforms."

REFERENCES

Akamatsu, Keisuke. 1986. Hijōmin no minzoku bunka: seikatsu minzoku to sabetsu muka-shibanashi (Folk Culture of the Unordinary Folk: Everyday Folk Customs and Tales of Discrimination). Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.

—— 1991. Hijōmin no seiminzoku (Sexual Folk Customs of the Unordinary Folk). Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.

Akamatsu, Keisuke. 1995. Sabetsu no minzokugaku (The Folkloric Study of Discrimination). Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.

Amino, Yoshihiko. 1996. Emperor, Rice, and Commoners. *In* Multicultural Japan. Donald Denoon, Mark Hudson, Gavan McCormack, and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, eds. pp. 235–244. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aston, W. G., trans. 1886. Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697. London: Kegan Paul, French, Trubner & Co.

Bachnik, Jane M. 1983. Recruitment Strategies for Household Succession: Rethinking Japanese Household Organization. Man 18:160–182.

Befu, Harumi. 1968. Origin of Large Households and Duolocal Residence in Central Japan. American Anthropologist 70:309–319.

Befu, Harumi. 2001. Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of *Nihonjin-ron*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.

Creighton, Millie. 1997. Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry. Ethnology 36:239–254.

Ema, Mieko. 1943. Shirakawa-mura no daikazoku (The Great Family System of Shirakawa Village). Tokyo: Mikuni Shobō.

Ema, Shū. 1997 [1949]. Yama no tami (The Mountain Folk). Tokyo: Shunjūsha.

Figal, Gerald A. 1999. Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds. 1983. The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ishida, Eiichirō. 1969. Nihon bunkaron (Theory of Japanese Culture). Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.

Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kalland, Arne. 1995. Fishing Villages in Tokugawa Japan. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Kelly, William W. 1990. Japanese No-Noh: The Crosstalk of Public Culture in a Rural Festivity. Public Culture 2:65–81.

Knight, John. 1994. Rural Revitalization in Japan. Asian Survey 34:634–646.

Kondo, Dorinne. 1990. Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moen, Darrell G. 1997. The Japanese Organic Farming Movement: Consumers and Farmers United. Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars 29(3):14–22.

Moon, Okpyo. 1997. Marketing Nature in Rural Japan. *In* Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives. Pamela J. Asquith and Arne Kalland, eds. pp. 221–235. London: Curzon Press.

Muto, Atsuko. 1985. Miyagi-ken m-gun k-chō ni okeru "ane katoku" ni tsuite (Elder Daughter Inheritance in K Township, M County, Miyagi Prefecture). Minzokugaku-kenkyū 50:27–51.

Nagatsuka, Takashi. 1989 [1910]. The Soil: A Portrait of Village Life in Meiji Japan. Ann Waswo, trans. New York: Routledge.

Nakamaki, Hirochika. 1992. Mukashi daimyō, ima kaisha: kigyō to shūkyō (Once it was the Feudal Lord, Now It's the Company: Enterprise and Religion). Tokyo: Tankōsha.

Nakane, Chie. 1970. Japanese Society. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Natsume, Sōseki. 1957 [1914]. Kokoro (Heart). Edwin McClellan, trans. Chicago: Regnery Publishing.

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. 1993. Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ōno, Masao. 1983. Hida no kuni shoshi (A Short History of Hida Province). *In* Hidaji no bunkaten (Cultural Exhibit of the Hida Road). Chūnichi Shinbun Honsha, ed. pp. 108–110. Nagoya: Matsuzakaya Honten.

Robertson, Jennifer. 1987. A Dialectic of Native and Newcomer: The Kodaira Citizens' Festival in Suburban Tokyo. Anthropological Quarterly 60(3):124–136.

—— 1988. Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia. Politics, Culture, and Society 1:494–518.

—— 1991. Native and Newcomer: Making and Unmaking a Japanese City. Berkeley: University of California Press.

—— 1995. Hegemonic Nostalgia, Tourism, and Nation-Making in Japan. *In* Japanese Civilization in the Modern World IX: Tourism. Tadao Umesao, Harumi Befu, and Shuzo

Ishimori, eds. pp. 89–103. Senri Ethnological Series, 38. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

—— 1997. Empire of Nostalgia: Rethinking "Internationalization" in Japan Today. Theory, Culture and Society 14(4):97–122.

—— 1998. It Takes a Village: Internationalization and Nostalgia in Postwar Japan. *In* Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan. Stephen Vlastos, ed. pp. 209–239 and nn. 611–623. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rohlen, Thomas P. 1974. For Harmony and Strength: Japanese White-Collar Organization in Anthropological Perspective. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schnell, Scott. 1999. The Rousing Drum: Ritual Practice in a Japanese Community. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Steven, Rob. 1983. Classes in Contemporary Japan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sugimoto, Yoshio. 1997. An Introduction to Japanese Society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tsuboi, Hirofumi. 1979. Imo to nihonjin: minzoku bunkaron no kadai (The Potato and the Japanese: A Problem in Folk Cultural Theory). Tokyo: Miraisha.

—— 1982. Ine o eranda nihonjin: minzokuteki shikō no sekai (The Japanese Who Chose Rice: The Realm of Folkloristic Thought). Tokyo: Miraisha.

Ueno, Chizuko. 1987. The Position of Japanese Women Reconsidered. Current Anthropology 28:S75–S84.

Umesao, Tadao. 1984. Keynote Address: Japanese Civilization in the Modern World. *In* Japanese Civilization in the Modern World: Life and Society. Tadao Umesao, Harumi Befu, and Josef Kreiner, eds. pp. 1–15. Senri Ethnological Series 16. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

—— 1989. Keynote Address: The Methodology of the Comparative Study of Civilization. *In* Japanese Civilization in the Modern World IV: Economic Institutions. Tadao Umesao, Mark W. Fruin, and Nobuyuki Hata, eds. pp. 1–11. Senri Ethnological Series 26. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

Vlastos, Steven, ed. 1998. Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Watsuji, Tetsurō. 1935. Fudo: ningengakuteki kōsatsu (Climate and Culture: A Humanistic Analysis). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.