

# Ethnological Films

By

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*Mineiken*: A New Institute for the Production of Ethnological Films

On three nights of the last days of June 1977 three movies were shown in a small hall in one of the back alleys of Tokyo's Ginza. There were no big posters and no special advertisements calling for the attention of a large public. A friend of mine, who thought I may be interested in seeing a movie about the life in a particular mountain village, that I happened to have visited personally only a few weeks earlier, was kind enough to drop me a note about the event. This rather casual notice, however, gave me the opportunity to come into contact with the work of a group of young people whose endeavours I cannot but introduce to the attention of a wider public.

The showing of the three movies marked the first anniversary of the *Minzokubunka Eizôkenkyûsho* (Abbr.: *Mineiken*, Research Institute on Films on Folk Culture). The intention of the organizers was to introduce to the public the production of the first year of the Institute's activity. The Institute has its office in Tokyo and operates with a small staff under the direction of Mr. Himeda Tadayoshi.

Those old men and women who still knew the traditions of families and villages are rapidly dying out and nobody is there to take their place. On the other hand, in order to understand present day customs and practices one has to turn to these older traditions for clues. Mr. Himeda's group, therefore, feels it to be their special task to put on record such vanishing traditions, although they understand their recording and their documentation only as a part of their whole work. Their first and main purpose is it to experience personally, and at first hand, basic values of Japanese culture in particular and of human culture at large. What they experience in living with the people they then try to express by means of film. They do not see their work as an objective way of mere documentation but rather as the presentation of a personally lived experience of interhuman relations. On the other hand, they are quite

aware of their limitations in trying to express the almost unlimited variety of human experience by the limited means of a movie.

I want to restrict this introduction mainly to the discussion of the one movie, I have personally had the chance to see, namely "Tsubayama—To live on Slash and Burn Agriculture". It took the group more than two years to produce this movie. Again and again the filming crew returned to this small hamlet, Tsubayama, hidden deep in the mountains of Central Shikoku, with its houses crowded together on a steep mountain slope. Until very recently only a few villagers had actually ventured to leave the village and seek contacts with the world outside. This is one of the reasons why it was difficult for the group to develop a kind of contact with the villagers which was not based on crude curiosity but rather on mutual understanding. The group then got assistance, (if I may be allowed to express it this way) in the establishment of such contacts by the common experience of a disastrous typhoon which struck the village and almost destroyed it.

Tsubayama is one of the last, if not the last, of the once numerous villages which did not rely on wet rice cultivation but relied instead on slash and burn agriculture. There is not a single paddy field in Tsubayama. The terraced fields within the village itself are all dry fields; and still much more important than these are the fields which are prepared on the slopes of the surrounding mountains, by cutting and burning the trees and shrubs of the forest.

The movie follows the villagers and observes their work, their rituals and celebrations, through the cycle of a year. The introduction already presents the two main themes as it focuses on the men of the village visiting the sanctuary of the mountain deity at the foot of a huge tree. The mountain means everything for the village, but work there is arduous and full of dangers. As a woman put it: "No matter how many years we burn the mountain, every single time it is a frightening experience." Hence, people rely on the help of the deity they implore with simple prayers and rituals.

We then witness the preparations for the cleaning of a new field, the actual burning of the mountainside, the sowing, planting and harvesting of the agricultural products. We are led to take part in the rituals, which mark certain intervals in the progress of a year's work or of an individual's life, and finally we are allowed to watch closely the preparation of some of the basic daily food, such as *miso* (bean paste) and *tôfu* (bean curd).

The narration, in Japanese, is kept to a level where it does not

unduly interfere with what the pictures are saying, but still it succeeds in directing the viewer's attention to a number of inconspicuous but nevertheless important instances which otherwise would have been unnoticed, especially by the unexperienced viewer. (I even think that most of the Japanese who will see this movie would have to be considered unexperienced in this respect.)

In his opening speech Mr. Himeda told his audience that, after having watched this and other movies at a showing in Paris, an anthropologist expressed her astonishment about the fact that so many ethnological treasures still exist in Japan. I consider it to be the special merit of this particular film to introduce an important means of subsistence and the characteristic cultural complex that goes with it. This cultural complex differs in many ways from what we usually have in mind when we speak about Japanese culture. The film reminds us, that not everything is fully explained if we try to define Japanese culture as just one of wet rice cultivation.

It may very well be only a question of a few more years until this slash and burn technique will cease to be the only means of subsistence in any village of the Japanese islands. We therefore cannot but commend the efforts of this group and encourage them to proceed further on the road they started. Of course, there are many aspects which are barely mentioned or only touched upon, maybe even left out, although they might have been of special interest to a particular researcher. But if we consider the intention of the producers, who after all are no professional anthropologists, (fortunately so, perhaps), it must be said that they succeeded in giving us not so much a "documentary" but a document of highly scientific, i.e. sound research value as well as of human value. The details may be found in written records. Here is a document of interpersonal experience which manages to relate not only a lot of technical know-how but also the atmosphere and general tenor of the life of the taciturn villagers. At the end of the movie a woman is asked, why, after all, the people of Tsubayama still continue to stay on in their forgotten village and to work on their dangerous mountains. Her answer was: "Because *sora* (sky, heaven) gives us work and food." This simple answer illustrates at once the atmosphere the movie brings across.

Unfortunately, having seen only this movie on Tsubayama, I find myself at a loss to report on the others. Although there may be differences in quality I feel quite confident from what I had the chance to see, that I can recommend this series of movies for all those who are interested in traditional practices and ceremonies of Japan (e.g., also

Ainu: *iomante*, the bear festival) or traditional culture in general. For the convenience of students and of the interested public I add a list of the movies so far completed together with the relevant information.

1. *Yama ni ikiru matsuri* (Hunting Festival in a Mountain Village)

This movie takes us to the winter festival of a small village shrine in the mountains of Kyushu (in the former village of Mera, Hyuga county). People there live on slash and burn agriculture. One of the onerous tasks of this kind of economy is trying to keep wild boars from destroying the fields. Hunting, therefore, plays a prominent role in the life of this village, and the festival is held just before the hunting season starts. It begins with a long series of *kagura* dances on the evening of December 14th. When the dances finally come to an end about noon of the next day, a rite is performed on a sand bar in the river. By doing so the people console the spirits of the boars killed in the last season, and pray for rich game in the season to come.

Production: Group Gendai

Distribution: Educational Film Exchange Inc.

Data: 16 m/m, color, 4 reels, 38 min.

Price: 180,000 Yen

2. *Ainu no kekkon-shiki* (Ainu Wedding Ceremony)

The wish of a young Ainu woman to be married in the old traditional way of her people provided the occasion which brought the Ainu wedding ceremony to life again. Beginning with the exchange of a certain handmade gift, which expresses the intention of the young woman, the movie leads us through all the ceremonies to the excited dancing that marks the completion of the wedding.

Production: Group Gendai

Distribution: Educational Film Exchange Inc.

Data: 16 m/m, color, 3,5 reels, 34 min.

Price: 180,000 Yen

3. *Chise akara, warera ie wo tsukuru* (*Chise akara*: We build a House)

Under the instructions of Kayano Shigeru, himself an Ainu and well versed in Ainu traditions, two houses have been built by the people of Nibutani (Hiratori-chô, Saru-gun, Hokkaidô). They were careful to reenact the oral traditions as faithfully as possible. The movie follows the progress of their work from the selection of the trees to be used to the celebration marking the completion and dedication of the houses.

Production: Group Gendai  
 Distribution: Educational Film Exchange Inc.  
 Data: 16 m/m, color, 610 m, 56 min.  
 Price: 280,000 Yen

4. *Utsuwa—shokki no bunka* (Containers—the Culture of Tableware)

There is no meal where there is not some kind of container, no matter how simple it may be. This movie traces the cultural history of those containers used every day at table. In the manner of a travelogue it follows a trail of different places from Okinawa to Hokkaidô introducing not only different forms and materials but also periods in the history of development.

Planning: Kinki Nihon Tourist  
 Production: Group Gendai  
 Distribution: Educational Film Exchange Inc.  
 Data: 16 m/m, color, 451 m, 41 min.  
 Price: 220,000 Yen

5. *Oku-aizu no kiji-shi* (The Wood Craftsmen of Inner Aizu)

This movie introduces a type of wood working craftsmen who already have ceased to exist. In search of suitable trees for their work, they used to wander from mountain to mountain. After having found a good place they built a small hut where they worked and lived as long as they could find the necessary trees in the area. They produced bowls, dishes, trays and the like. The movie retraces the life and work of these craftsmen with the help of two old survivors of the trade.

Planning: Kinki Nihon Tourist  
 Nihon Kanko Bunka Kenkyusho  
 Production: Group Gendai  
 Distribution: Educational Film Exchange Inc.  
 Data: 16 m/m, color, 56 min.  
 Price: 300,000 Yen

6. *Iomante—kuma okuri* (*Iomante*—Sending off the Bear)

This is a documentary about the Ainu bear festival which was held at Nibutani, Hiratori-chô, Saru-gun, Hokkaidô, in the first days of March 1977. The first part introduces the preparations which lasted from February 25th until the day preceding the festival. The second part then shows the *iomante* itself, which was celebrated for three days, from March 3rd to 5th.

Production: Minzokubunka Eizôkenkyûsho  
 Location: Nibutani, Hiratori-chô, Saru-gun, Hokkaidô  
 Data: 16 m/m, color, 1130 m, 1 h 43 min.  
 Time of production: 25. 2. 1977—5. 3. 1977

7. *Toyomatsu saijiki: Fuyu kara haru, natsu kara aki* (Toyomatsu's Festival Calendar: From Winter to Spring, From Summer to Autumn)

Over a period of seven years the producers have visited the village of Toyomatsu (Jinseki-gun, Hiroshima Pref.) to collect the material for this movie. They emphasize specifically the close connection between the celebration of a year's festivals and the structure of society on one hand, and the agricultural cycle of the rice growing community on the other.

Production: Minzokubunka Eizôkenkyûsho  
 Location: Toyomatsu-mura, Jinseki-gun, Hiroshima Pref.  
 Data: 16 m/m, color, 1032 m, 1 h 34 min.  
 Time of production: October 1969–April 1975

8. *Tsubayama—Yakibata ni ikiru* (Tsubayama—To Live on Slash and Burn Agriculture)

Refer to the above review article for details.  
 Production: Minzokubunka Eizôkenkyûsho  
 Location: Tsubayama, Ikegawa-chô, Agawa-gun, Kôchi Pref.  
 Data: 16 m/m, color, 1043 m, 1 h 35 min.  
 Time of production: October 1974–May 1977

Addresses:

- 1) Educational Film Exchange Inc.  
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