

# International Symposium on Japanese Folk Culture

By

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There have been others to write on Japanese customs and folklore, but Yanagita Kunio is probably more than just the most prolific among these writers. He was the first who tried to establish a solid base for the scientific study of Japanese folklore, and therefore, may rightfully be called the "Father of Japanese Folklore".

On July 31st, 1875, Yanagita Kunio was born as the sixth son of Matsuda Kenji and Take in Tsujigawa, a hamlet of the village of Tahara in Hyogo Prefecture. After graduation from the Tokyo Imperial University he started a career as an official in the Ministry for Agriculture and Trade. Soon, his interests shifted from agronomy to the customs and beliefs of the farming population. At the age of 36 he published his first work on folklore, the now classic "Tôno monogatari", the "Legends from Tôno".<sup>1</sup> This was the startingpoint of 50 years of studying, writing and lecturing on Japanese folklore. The fruits of this labor and this dedication fill more than 30 volumes of collected writings. Yanagita died at the age of 88, on the 8th of August 1962.

To mark the centenary of Yanagita's birth the "Association Commemorating the Centenary of Yanagita Kunio's Birth" and the Folklore Society of Japan together with the cooperation and the support of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Foundation for International Exchange convoked an International Symposium on Japanese folk culture in Tokyo from July 28th to 31st, 1975. Its general theme was: "The Universals and the Particulars Found in Japanese Culture—Commemorating the Centenary of Yanagita Kunio's Birth."<sup>2</sup>

On the first day the presentation of the Yanagita Award for the

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1. An English translation of "Tôno monogatari" is soon to be published by Ronald A. Morse.

2. Since the translation of the Japanese in the official program has its intricacies we would like to add the Japanese original in the footnotes. For technical reasons, however, we can give only the English text.

best publication on Japanese folklore took place. In the evening a reception was given in honor of the foreign guests. The International Symposium went under way the second day, July 29th. Four topics had been selected, each with a foreign guest as main speaker and three commentators, one of them also a foreigner. Only the last topic was intended for two speakers and four commentators. In order to give a general idea we list the four topics, the main speakers and the exact title of their papers.

Topic 1: The Kami Concept

Report: The Kami Concept of the Japanese by Naumann Nelly  
(Germany)

Topic 2: Life Way and the View of Nature

Report: Japanese Life and Nature by Im Dong-Gwon (Korea)

Topic 3: Folktale

Report: Characteristics of the Japanese Folktale by Dorson  
Richard M. (U.S.A.)

Topic 4: General Perspectives

Report 1: Notes on Yanagita's Scholarship by Kreiner Josef  
(Austria)

Report 2: The Logic of Yanagita's Folklore Studies by Morse  
Ronald A. (U.S.A.)

The day after the Symposium was fully given to reports and discussions on a number of topics on folklore as the 27th regular annual meeting of the Folklore Society of Japan. The discussions took place in two halls, where papers were presented under six general headings as follows: Farming Technology and Ritual, Material Culture and Folk Life, *Oyabun-Kobun* (Fictitious Parent—Fictitious Child Relationships), *Yamano kami* (Mountain Deity) Beliefs, Burial Customs and the Concept of the Soul, The Transmission and Dissemination of Folktales.

The official end of the meeting was marked by two public lectures, one by Ronald A. Morse on "Yanagita Kunio and Tōno Monogatari", the other by Josef Kreiner on "Japanology, Japanese Studies and Yanagita's Folklore Studies". These lectures were delivered the night of July 31st, at the lecture hall of the Asahi Newspaper.

Since it is planned to publish the papers in a commemorative volume, we feel we can restrict ourselves to a few remarks especially in connection with the International Symposium.

The difficulties to organize an international meeting on a scholar, whose work is so much concerned with his own country as in the case of Yanagita, was felt from the beginning. The selection of the main topics presented some difficulties, since they had to be selected in such

a way as to fit into the field of research of a particular scholar.

In her paper Nelly Naumann stressed the difficulties one encounters in trying to define what the Japanese mean by *kami*. First, one has to keep in mind that function and meaning of a certain *kami* may undergo far reaching changes in the course of history, although the name of the *kami* remains the same. And secondly, one must consider the fact, that a belief found in a certain group of the population cannot by itself be assumed to exist in the same way, among any other of the social groups. She also pointed out the problem of Yanagita's assumption that the Japanese belief in Ancestor spirits is unique to Japanese culture and the very base of the Japanese concept of a *kami*. Fuji took up the same problem in his comment, but from the viewpoint of Buddhist thought. He also advocated strongly that this whole complex of the *kami* concept should be restudied applying much broader views and different methods, especially those of the so-called *ningen gaku* (Science of Man), in order to arrive at a more general and adequate understanding of the problem and its settings.

The second topic was very loosely formulated and led to a certain divergency between the main speaker, Im Dong-Gwon, and the commentators. Im spoke mainly on the natural, physical and climatological particulars of Japan and her annual cycle of festivities, which depend heavily on the natural cycle of the seasons. The commentators on their part focussed their remarks more on the way Japanese understand nature, and the implications of such an understanding in the field of attitudes (Knecht), beliefs (Mogami) and politics (Hashikawa). To the Japanese, nature seems to produce feelings of closeness and/or of a certain fear, relative to the intensity of contacts between man and nature. Basically, man feels to be participating in the same source of life as nature, which surrounds him, but although he feels strongly and emotionally linked to his immediate surroundings (*yashiki*, fields), the outer circle of nature (e.g., beyond the borders of his hamlet) may sometime assume a more threatening aspect (Knecht). Hashikawa then showed how on the political level from late Edo up to the present time an increasing gap between nature and man developed, produced by an ever increasing tendency to rely more and more on political measures and fictions, which finally led to a stand against nature. In the brief discussions from the floor it was further stressed, that the position which defines Japan simply as a society determined by the cultivation of rice ought to be reviewed, since there are large parts of the population which rely on other products and, therefore, also may have another worldview (Iro-

kawa).

Dorson, speaking on the characteristics of the Japanese folktale, considered the role of the legends (*densetsu*) much more important than that of the fairy-tales (*mukashi banashi*) and saw in them a main characteristic of the Japanese Folk narrative. A second and related characteristic he saw in its strong connections with folk belief (*minkan shinkô*). Another characteristic of the Folk tale, finally, is its closeness to several forms of Japanese dramatic art. As for the problem of classification, Ozawa pointed out that concepts and criteria, which have been developed in Europe could be used as a first step in confronting the Japanese material, but they are not to be allowed to force certain European images on it. Others insisted on the close relationship between Japanese tales and legends on the one side and everyday life on the other side. Summing up the discussion, Obayashi proposed to study the Japanese tales and their motives on a wider, much more international comparative base, in order to assess their particular Japanese characteristics.

In the first contribution to the last topic, Kreiner discussed Yanagita's scholarship. Although Yanagita knew about the latest developments in Anthropology, especially in England, he restricted and focused his studies on his own country, trying to grasp its culture's essence. In doing so he was not historical in the scientific sense of the word. He concentrated first of all on the non-written tradition of the common people, the "history" of the ordinary man. Further, he was convinced, that Japanese culture is unitary in its basic conceptions. Although his methods may be questionable in several points, the reason for his strength and enduring influence has to be seen in his insights. Morse, for his part, changed the original aim of his contribution and insisted particularly on the importance of international exchange of scholars and the need to give Japanese scholars and students of folklore the opportunity to study abroad, in order to provide them with a broader look at their own culture. Ji and Naoe further followed this theme in their comments, stressing particularly the need for cooperation with scholars of the immediately neighboring countries, not only to find new material and then use it unilaterally for one's own purposes, but to coordinate research and fieldwork programs with those of scholars of these respective countries. Others warned here against a mere enlargement of the field of folklore, because by doing so it could lose its particular "*raison d'être*". More important, therefore, than enlargement of the field would be deepening of the insights (Makida).

Commenting on Kreiner's paper, Sumiya showed that Yanagita as a

scholar of agronomy was deeply involved with the wellbeing of the farming population. First he wanted to make clear, what their wellbeing meant, and what were their requests, and then to think about the necessary means to make them possible.

Although certain elements of universality or particularity have been pointed out in the contributions and discussions, it was widely felt that after all it was not clear which were the universals and which the particulars of Japanese culture. To make this clear would have meant much more time for discussion, but this was not possible with the tight schedule of the Symposium. As far as we could follow the contributions and discussions of the following day, there, the Japanese speakers were dealing mostly with particulars or at least with traits they thought to be particular of or unique to Japanese culture. In his opening speech on this second day of discussions Kitami expressed hopes that these days of study and mutual discussion might open a new page in the study of Japanese folklore. On the first day, Yanagita's work had been largely recognized as the pioneering achievement it is, but in every topic it was also noted, how important new ideas and new approaches are, and especially how significant a wider outlook would be, in order to make the universals of Japanese culture known. But from the discussions of the following day we got the impression that insistence, and belief, in Japanese "particulars" is still very much alive. In this sense, it seemed significant to us, that many of the participants felt relieved by the simple fact, that all the papers and contributions were delivered in Japanese.

For several days before the Symposium got under way, series' of articles appeared in the major newspapers, dealing with the manifold aspects of Yanagita's work and thought. The organizing committee, on its part, had arranged for trips for the foreign guests to spots, which are closely related to Yanagita's work. One group visited Tôno in Iwate Prefecture, the village, whose stories and legends Yanagita had collected and published as his first book on a folklore subject. A second group went to Okinawa, the site of Yanagita's last book, *Kaijô no michi* (The Sea Road), in which he finally tries to sum up his knowledge into an explication of the origins of Japanese culture.

At the end of this report we wish to thank all those who collaborated and made this symposium possible, providing foreign scholars as well as their Japanese colleagues with the opportunity to meet each other for several days and discuss mutual problems. We hope that new impulses for the study of Japanese folk culture may arise from this shared experience.