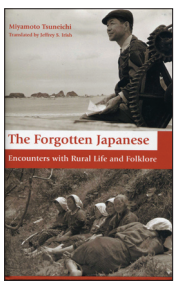
Japan



Miyamoto Tsuneichi, trans. Jeffrey S. Irish. ***The Forgotten Japanese: Encounters with Rural Life and Folklore***

Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2010. 315 pages. Illustrations, b/w photographs, glossary. Cloth, US$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-933330-80-8.

Although not well known in the English-speaking world, Miyamoto Tsuneichi (1907–1981) was one of Japan's greatest and most popular folklorists. If there were a Hall of Fame for folklorists, his bust would share a room with images of Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu. A prolific writer, Miyamoto's selected works alone extend to fifty volumes in length. In those volumes we find the voice of a man who was curious, humble, and concerned with those too often neglected by policy makers and scholars. Unlike Yanagita and some of his disciples who traveled the countryside in search of a unifying essence of the Japanese, Miyamoto was often content to document the diversity of stories, songs, dances, customs, and artifacts he found. When conducting research, he commonly walked to the villages he studied, covering on foot a distance of what is believed to have been about 100,000 miles. As a result of his extensive travels on foot, he came to know intimately more rural villages than perhaps any other Japanese folklorist.

Born into a family of agriculturalists, Miyamoto grew up in a rural area on Suō Ōshima, an island in the Inland Sea between Shikoku and Yamaguchi Prefecture. Around age sixteen he moved to Osaka to find a job because his family could not afford to pay for his education beyond middle school. There he worked and went to school. He eventually became an elementary school teacher but resigned in 1939 to become a full-time folklorist. To support his research, he received financial assistance from the ethnologist and onetime Governor of the Bank of Japan, Shibusawa Keizō, who Miyamoto regarded as a mentor. He also worked on occasion

as a consultant for the government on projects related to agriculture. After spending most of his career as a freelance folklorist, at age fifty-seven he finally took a salaried position at a university.

Among his many books, *The Forgotten Japanese* (Japanese title: *Wasurerareta Nihonjin*) is probably the most widely read. The book has been reprinted over fifty-five times since the first edition appeared in 1960. It is an engaging work of ethno-history that covers the lives of Japanese who lived or traveled in rural areas between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century. The translator, Jeffrey Irish, captures well the vitality of Miyamoto's prose. He also makes the text more readable by rearranging it slightly. He puts, for example, the afterword to the 1971 edition as the foreword and rearranges the essays, categorizing them into two parts: "Life Stories" and "Village Stories." In total there are eighteen stand-alone "stories," most of which focus on a person, practice, or place.

Although Miyamoto's writing often reads like that of a traveler, the fieldwork methods he describes indicate that he did much more than just arrive at places and talk to people. To understand a village he is studying, he tells us that he first walks though it; then he goes to the local government office to examine historical documents about the village. He asks local officials questions that are raised while reading these documents. After that, he visits the Forest Owners Association and the Agricultural Association. If he finds valuable documents, he copies them by hand. Then he focuses his research on a sampling of households. Only after he has obtained background knowledge on the village through such preliminary research does he start informally interviewing people in the area.

Using these methods, Miyamoto was able to learn about a wide range of people and convey their stories in a compelling manner. Miyamoto introduces us to farmers, hunters, fishermen, wanderers, homeless stragglers, and others with such intimacy that readers might feel they could identify each individually in a group photograph. Miyamoto's gift for capturing ordinary life histories and showing how they can be extraordinary is particularly evident in his profile of "Tosa Genji." In 1941 Tosa Genji (a pseudonym for a man of the Tosa region in Shikoku) told his life story to Miyamoto, which lingers in the mind after reading. Tosa Genji was an eighty-year-old blind man who had been living in a shack under a bridge for decades when Miyamoto met him. He tells Miyamoto that he knows nothing and spent his life "deceiving people and meddling with women" (109). He describes how as a boy of ten or so nursemaids, when bored on rainy days, engaged him in sex. He says he "didn't think it was good, but all in all it was the most interesting way to play" (111). As an adult he tells how he became a philandering, dishonest man who made his living as a cow trader, a profession that had the reputation that used-car salesmen have today. As he outlines his life story, we come to learn not only about one man's life, but also how those unattached to a particular village lived freer, albeit less stable lives. For example, he recalls how his womanizing boss was murdered but that the killer was never found or apparently even looked for because for the people of the village where it happened "getting involved would've been a nuisance" (116).

As was the case with Tosa Genji, Miyamoto collects much of his data through informal interviews with the elderly, many of them over seventy years old. The inter-

views used in the book took place between the 1930s and 1950s. Two reoccurring topics the elderly talked about were travel and sex. The details aspersed throughout the book on these topics are particularly important because English sources on Japan and its modern history rarely deal with them as they relate to the majority of the population that lived outside cities before the mid-twentieth century.

Miyamoto indicates that during the century or so before World War II many Japanese traveled extensively on foot, by boat, or on horseback. In Chapter 18, "The Wanderers' Family Tree," he distinguishes between two types of travelers. First are those who travel far from home for religious purposes (for example, pilgrims) or for work, such as fishermen and carpenters described in Chapters 3 and 8. Second are those who wandered throughout their lives without a settled home to which they could return. Among this second type were those who wandered the seas on houseboats, those who wandered in the mountains, such as "mountain gypsies" (*sanka*) and some hunters (*matagi*), and "stragglers" who were homeless beggars who often did performances for alms.

Many also traveled for periods of time before getting married. Miyamoto tells us that "Walking the villages of Japan, I have encountered a surprising number of people who traveled freely when they were young, people their fellow villagers refer to as 'worldly'" (145). Among these were young women. In a fascinating chapter titled "Women's Society," which may challenge some readers' stereotypes of Japanese women, an informant in western Japan tells Miyamoto that "In the old days, no one would marry a girl who didn't know the world. Someone who wasn't worldly—someone who 'only knew how to behave in front of an oven'—was inevitably narrow-minded" (94).

With regards to talking about sex, we find that middle-aged and elderly women were not shy. Women farmers Miyamoto met openly referred to their genitalia as Kannon-sama (which Irish translates as "Goddess of Mercy") and sang sexually explicit songs while working. They would joke about how the god of the rice paddy probably had a hard time getting work done because he was so busy comparing their Kannon-samas as they squatted without underwear while planting. Humorous sexual banter would go on at length to make the work go faster. A snippet of a typical conversation among women planting rice separate from the men gives us a sense of what it sounded like in the fields:

> "You can tell right away if a face is pretty or not but it's not so easy to tell with Kannon-sama."
> "That's why they say you don't know a horse 'till you try riding it…."
> "Look! In no time we've planted two-and-a-half acres."
> "That was quick."
> "That's because the god is pleased."
> "I'm going to head home and please my husband." (106)

Some of the elderly spoke of how there was greater sexual freedom in the past. One old man interviewed in 1936 in Osaka Prefecture recalls how as a teenager he lost his virginity at an annual one-night celebration in the spring called the "Prince's All-Night Orgy," during which "anyone could sleep with anyone else" (165). Young men, he says, would put their hand on a girl's shoulder. If she did

not shake it off, it meant she was willing and they would go off into the forest to sleep together.

The elderly also talk about how "nightly visits" (*yobai*) were popular. During *yobai*, teenage men (fifteen was the traditional age for becoming a man) snuck into the homes of teenage women at night for amorous "play" (*asobi*) when the parents slept or at least ignored them. One old man remembers walking about eight to ten miles after dinner to get to a girl's home because "it was boring just playing with the girls in the neighborhood" (73). Another relates how he could quietly enter a girl's house by urinating on the runners of the door so it would not squeak when opened (74). Yet, lest we form an image of rampant teenage promiscuity, one informant points out that "Because girls married at sixteen or seventeen, it's not as if they had known a lot of boys. Probably half were married without having experienced a night visit. Actually, the young men most often frequented the homes of girls that had missed the chance to marry, or who had divorced and come back home" (88).

As a whole, the book will delight those interested in rural life in the Meiji and Taisho periods. It will also benefit those who teach courses on modern Japanese history and want to include details about the non-elite and life outside the cities. I am sure undergraduates will enjoy many of the chapters and be able to gain from them a perspective on Japan quite different from what is presented in histories that emphasize major political and economic trends. Even students who have never taken a course on Japan will be able to read the book with ease because the translator provides notes in brackets on Japanese terms. At one point, for example, he even points out that Shikoku is "one of Japan's main islands" (94) and at another that *shōji* are "sliding paper doors" (156). For readers who desire in-depth explanations of key terms, they can refer to an eleven-page glossary.

Despite the many virtues of *The Forgotten Japanese*, some present-day ethnologists may read it as being less than scholarly. It does not, for example, contextualize a scholarly state of knowledge on a subject nor formulate a research problem that it uses to contribute to scholarly discourse. It does not deal with issues of constructed memory or nostalgia when relating the life stories of the elderly about their youth. Nor does Miyamoto show much concern with how his position as a scholar or the questions he asked might have affected what he learned. Yet for Miyamoto, contributing to academic discourse or methodological issues were not among his primary concerns in the book. Rather, he strives to document fragments of the cultures of little-known rural Japanese during a time of rapid modernization, so that we will not forget how they lived or the knowledge they acquired. In what Miyamoto sets out to do, he succeeds. He has made the "forgotten Japanese" eminently memorable.

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