

THORNBURY, BARBARA E. *The Folk Performing Arts: Traditional Culture in Contemporary Japan*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. xxi + 203 pages. Map, illustrations, appendix, bibliography. Paper US\$17.95; ISBN 0-7914-3256-4.

Since the beginning of the century, the study of Japanese folk performing arts (*minzoku geinō*)—familiar today even to the average tourist—attracted the attention of Japanese scholars of ethnology, folklore, anthropology, and theatre. Most forms of the folk performing arts, which originated in religious rituals, have remained inseparable from their locality. Some, however, have developed into purely demonstrative art forms. The folk performing arts are an essential feature of the Japanese cultural heritage, and are basic to the understanding of its formation. Though extensively studied in Japan for decades, Western scholarship (with the blessed exception of the pioneering work of Frank HOFF)<sup>1</sup> has only recently begun to touch on this field.

Barbara Thornbury is thus to be commended and thanked for this thorough study. *Folk Performing Arts* is an ambitious attempt at summarizing this vast, diverse, and extremely complex field of study. The book is informative and updated. It demarcates this field in its various aspects, spanning the varieties, types, history, and modern developments, all in the light of modern national and scholarly efforts to preserve and sustain these traditional art forms. Such an endeavor is indeed a bold attempt, for it tries to squeeze its length and width into the corset of a 155-page book (including numerous illustrations). Too often, the readers may find themselves lamenting its brevity.

In the author's own words, the focus of this book is the "folk performing arts as an object of scholarly, governmental, and community interest" (xviii), and thus it concentrates on examining the "efforts to sustain traditional culture in contemporary Japan" (xxi). The first chapter opens with some impressions of folk performances that the author experienced, and proceeds to provide an informative, though too brief, introduction to the folk performing arts: it discusses the various scholarly definitions and classification systems of the folk performing arts, traces their historical dissemination, and sketches out the various elements of presentation: the stages, costumes, musical instruments, and performers. In Chapter 2, the author recounts the history of the scholarship in the field of *minzoku geinō*, emphasizing the role scholars have played in encouraging, at times even reviving, traditional performing art forms.

What might be conceived as the book's argument appears in Chapters 3 and 4, where the author delineates the public policies that led to the recognition of the folk performing arts as important cultural properties worthy of protection and preservation. In discussing the Cultural Properties Protection Law and the Festival Law, the author presents the scholarly research debates that preceded the passing of these laws and the launching of preservation activities. She holds that "in many respects cultural preservation is the current *raison d'être* of the folk performing arts" (66), and that they survive today mostly by the grace of these protection laws and through the help of various preservation societies, organizations, and institutions established in their wake. Thornbury also discusses here some of the issues raised by the attempted commercialization of the folk performing arts under the Festival Law, and mentions the main debate over the degree and the manner of protection and preservation of the *minzoku geinō*.

Chapter 5 presents the various constructed occasions where what the author calls "center stage" performances are now enacted. These are performances taken outside their traditional locality and rendered accessible to wider audiences, i.e., turned into "stage arts." Chapter 6 characterizes some of the most nationally renowned *minzoku geinō* forms in relation to their localities. Thornbury returns to her own point of view in Chapter 7, where, although carefully presenting the pros and cons of such a project, she argues in favor of the establishment of a national center for the folk performing arts, and presents the Saitama Prefectural Folk Culture Center as model for it.

In Chapter 8 the author sidetracks to introduce a few of Japan's poets and novelists who express nostalgic feelings towards the folk performing arts in order to emphasize again the claim that they are worthy of preserving. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the book with a look at the future of the folk performing arts as sustained by government and society, as well as the future of research in the field of the folk performing arts. An appendix adds an updated listing of the Nationally Designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties.

While one ought to applaud Thornbury for her vast research and highly informative study, one must quibble with some structural problems that typify the book. Although a general survey such as this book is not expected to debate a theoretical argument, the study would have benefited from presenting the author's perspective more clearly and in the first chapter.

Further, Chapter 8 disrupts the flow of the book and should have been included in the book's introduction or placed closer to the beginning of the book. Similarly, the theories mentioned at the end of Chapter 9 belong in the book's introduction. The introduction of theories at the beginning would have given the reader a notion of the theoretical tool kit through which Thornbury analyzes the richness of her data.

In her endeavor to present the modern efforts at preservation, the author puts great emphasis on institutions and organizations established to support and promote the folk performing arts. This orientation towards the political, economic, and institutional aspects of the folk performing arts comes at the expense of some fundamental aspects of the arts themselves. The author rarely gets around to tell us what is "cultural" about the folk performing arts in Japan. In other words, the author rarely discusses the contents and artistic value of the folk performing arts, and neglects their ritual, ceremonial, or religious aspects, referring to them only in passing as "folk beliefs." This perspective even permeates the author's choice of words. For example, she describes a *gongen mai* dance, a sacred dance of hierophany and blessing, as "ritualized" dance (12, 105; emphasis mine). The absence of bibliographical mention of Japanese scholars who approach the *minzoku geinō* from the perspective of ideation and practice<sup>1</sup> is also noticeable.

One ought not to ignore the ritual and ceremonial dimensions and functions of the folk performing arts if they are taken as traditions to be preserved. The ritual aspects often form the main reason for the difficulties in transporting *minzoku geinō* presentation to "center stage." Or, conversely, the ritual aspects can sometimes contribute to the relative ease of transition to "center stage" presentation, as seen in the case of Hayachine kagura, one of Thornbury's examples in Chapter 6. (Hayachine kagura is an itinerant kagura adapted so it will carry its ritual context with it. Even in "center stage" events, any performance of Hayachine kagura will open and end with a ritual act of inviting the kami and then sending them away, so it functions as a *matsuri*, no matter where the stage stands [see AVERBUCH 1995].)

As in any work of this kind, some minor imprecisions can always be found; but these are a small price to pay for such an all-inclusive guidebook for the multiplex phenomena known as the Japanese folk performing arts. Seen in this light, Thornbury's work is admirable: it covers the wide array of this fascinating phenomenon in a clear manner; it provides us with a panoramic view of the field, its history, its variety, and its conflicts; and it brings us up to date on the current state of affairs. Overall, *The Folk Performing Arts* is a very welcome and beneficial addition to our bookshelves, which desperately need more works on the subject.

#### NOTES

1. Only a few additional works on the subject have been published in English since Thornbury's book (e.g., LAW 1997).
2. A comprehensive list of scholars would be too long to list here, but the work of a number of scholars who take this approach can be found in the two volumes edited by MIYAKE (1984). Honda Yasuji and Yamaji Kōzō, both of whom Thornbury quotes extensively, follow this perspective in many of their writings (e.g., HONDA 1974 and YAMAJI 1974).

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