JAPAN

BRANDON, REIKO MOCHINAGA and BARBARA B. STEPHAN. *The Japanese New Year: Spirit and Symbol.* With essays by Enbutsu Sumiko and Ian Reader. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. 144 pages. Illustrations, select bibliography, index. Cloth US$34.00; ISBN 0–8248–1626–N. Paper US$20.00; ISBN 0–8248–1627–7.

May it be said right away: this volume will be much welcomed by all those who have always heard how important a festival New Year is in Japan, but who have never had a chance to see more than the public side of it. Here such people are given the chance to taste at least some of the more intimate aspects of this festival. The texts blend well with carefully selected and beautiful illustrations to transmit some of the true spirit of New Year. Taking a variety of approaches, from personal reminiscence to objective report, the texts focus on particular aspects of the celebrations. Together, they illustrate both the common features of Japanese New Year as well as some of its local variations.

Brandon, in the title essay of the book, offers a straightforward and at times poetic description of what it meant to prepare and celebrate New Year at her parental home. Stephan then introduces the reader to a very important feature of New Year: its decorations. Her essay is a balanced survey covering the main forms, materials, and meanings of the decorations, supported by a careful selection of fascinating photographs. In my opinion this section succeeds best in conveying the natural beauty of the materials (straw, paper, pine tree, bamboo, etc.) and a bit of the mystique they radiate. Her photographs transmit some of the decorations' simple quietness, and convey their captivating nature even outside of their original context. Enbutsu describes a more "local," and yet important, aspect of New Year—local because she focuses on the area of Chichibu, a region almost synonymous with remoteness, and important because the celebration of the Little New Year around the fifteenth of January centers on the farmers' work.

While these contributions describe what we might call "traditional" New Year, the essay by Ian Reader introduces the "modern" New Year. Reader not only explains how urban Japanese celebrate New Year today, but goes beyond simple description to interpret the New Year activities as a complex that blends social and religious activities of various kinds for the purpose of creating a state of social harmony and peace of mind. According to Reader, New Year is the season when people renew their basic confidence in the prospects for a prosperous life, not the least because they are Japanese.

Reader's contribution differs in tone from the others, as it does not depict a celebration supported by somewhat idealized beliefs. Instead, Reader points out how precarious it is to try to isolate "religious" from "social" activities when one attempts to understand the spirit of New Year (an important fact to keep in mind when one looks at other annual celebrations as well). I cannot help thinking that in this sense the other contributions suffer from a good deal of nostalgic beautification. The authors have good reasons for describing the celebrations in the way they do, or for choosing certain remote areas to illustrate the rural New Year. Nevertheless, I wonder if a reader unfamiliar with the present situation in Japan might not come away with the impression that the descriptions reflect the situation in modern rural Japan. Nothing could be more misleading, since in so many areas the residents have decided to "rationalize" the celebrations. There are many and variegated reasons for this phenomenon, such as the mechanization of farming methods, the loss of population, and, not least, a lack of interest in the traditional ways. New Year in the villages has taken on a modern face that is often quite prosaic, such as when people watch television until midnight on New Year's Eve and then go and visit their local shrine in their work clothes.

We also have reason to ask whether things were any better, at least for the average farmer, in pre-television times. When old people speak of life in the old farmhouses they mention the dimness and the ever-present smoke, but never the "divine beauty" where white

rice and wood-shavings reflect the moonlight (93). And how could the moonlight reach the decorations, placed as they were in the innermost part of the house? The texts, despite the wealth of data they present, must be taken *cum grano salis* to the extent that they reflect such nostalgic longings for a poetic past. Enbutsu claims that such images are inspired "in the mind of a modern audience" (93), and if one is to believe the glossy publications that appear regularly around New Year one may be tempted to agree. This does not, however, say much about the reality of the rural New Year.

A problem of a different but related kind appears in Stephan's text when she describes the decorations as sacred symbols. She points out that the decorations are meant to be a seat where the deity "can be welcomed and entertained," but mentions that people are often not conscious of this and put the decorations up simply because custom demands it (47). This statement identifies the two extreme positions that can be found with regard to the decorations, and can therefore accommodate the range of possibilities that lie in between. However, when the same author says that people decorate tools or machines because "spiritual forces are thought to *animate* the material as well as the natural world" (56, emphasis mine), it is a different matter. If a farmer says that he decorates the tool that supports his livelihood because of a feeling of gratitude towards it, do we then have to conclude that he thinks of a spiritual force animating the tool? Could not gratitude be sufficient reason for such behavior? Or could not the decoration, in some cases at least, be considered a kind of talisman (*o-mamori*) that extends the blessing of the New Year deity to the farmer's tools and vehicles? If such interpretations are regarded as unacceptable, then it seems to me that much in the study of folklore would amount to little more than an attempt to recreate a pristine and idealized past that might satisfy a certain "modern audience" but that would not tell us much about customs and their meanings.

These observations are not meant to discredit the authors' work, but to draw attention to aspects of Japanese reality that tend to get hidden behind the book's poetic text and wonderful illustrations. Since the book was published on the occasion of an exhibition organized by the Honolulu Academy of Arts, it is not surprising that it emphasized the aesthetic aspects of the Japanese New Year. Nevertheless, its nostalgic quality leaves a rather unreal image of the present-day rural New Year, a world in which we no longer hear even the sound of pounding *mochi*, a sound that not so long ago was said to attract the New Year deity to the house.

Peter KNECHT

SAWADA, MINORU. *The Origin of Ethnography in Japan: Yanagita Kunio and His Times*. Translated by Toshiko Kishida-Ellis. London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993. 186 pages. Notes, index. Cloth US$76; ISBN 0–7103–0450–1. (Available from Columbia University Press.)

Although Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) remains well-known and often-read in Japan, this pioneer in ethnography has not come fully to the attention of readers in the West, largely due to the lack of good translations and evaluations of his work. Yanagita authored more than one hundred books, a substantial number of poems, and numerous agricultural pamphlets and essays; his collected works (published in thirty-six volumes) have sold over sixty thousand sets. If not *the* founder of Japanese ethnography, he is certainly *among* the founders, and his influence in the field is still pervasive — indeed, his methodology anticipated the current concept of participant-observer fieldwork and "reflexive" scholarship. His approach to *minzokugaku* has weathered the tests of time far better than those of many of the European scholars who are thought of as his models.