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Guest Editors' Introduction

Revitalizing Japanese Folklore

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE of *Asian Folklore Studies* is intended to promote a new direction in Japanese folklore-oriented research. The papers included in this issue address some of the most important theoretical issues that have emerged across the academic disciplines during the past two decades—issues such as gender, ethnicity, multiculturalism, tourism, and the politics of representation. Although each paper deals directly with its own special topic, they all revolve around the negotiation of collective identities, which has emerged as a pivotal issue in related disciplines like sociology and cultural anthropology. This coincides with the recognition that identities shift and boundaries are transcended as people fashion lives for themselves in an increasingly interconnected world.

Japanese folklore studies has been slow to respond to the potential inherent in these theoretical developments. The discipline as a whole has assumed a kind of circumscribed and introspective nativism, having little interaction outside Japan in the wider realm of folklore studies in general. Unless Japanese folklore studies succeeds in shedding this sense of exclusivity, it faces the real possibility of fading into irrelevance. This, we feel, would be highly unfortunate, not only for the practitioners themselves, but also for the world at large.

We believe that Japanese folklore studies has a great deal to contribute; the problem has been a failure to communicate its importance to a wider audience. This is largely due to three related factors, the first being simply

the language barrier. While very prolific in their native language, Japanese folklorists have been disinclined to publish their research in English, let alone other languages. Like it or not, English has become the language of international scholarship. We acknowledge the inequity of this situation, and it is deplorable that so few scholars in the West are able to read Japanese and other Asian languages, but, given the current realities, this lop-sided condition seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, the best we can do is to make more of the work produced by Japanese folklorists available in English and other languages. Of course, many Japanese scholars are capable of writing skillfully in English, but those who lack this ability should not be excluded—their work should be translated by others and published as well.

Underlying the language gap, however, is a far more perplexing impediment—an inherent sense of insularity and distinctiveness that pervades not only the folklore community, but Japanese society in general. This is epitomized by the so-called "island country mentality" (*shimaguni konjō* 島国根性), the pervasive impression that the Japanese are separate and distinct from the rest of the world—supposedly a holdover from roughly two hundred years of self-imposed isolation during the Tokugawa period (1600–1867). Another prominent expression of this insularity is the ever popular, pseudo-scientific genre called *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 (discourse on the essence of being Japanese), an ongoing effort to define what it is exactly that distinguishes the Japanese from other peoples. The assumption, of course, is that such an essential difference exists in the first place. Arguments of this type thus proceed from a preordained conclusion and work backwards, building upon whatever evidence can be found to support them and conveniently ignoring the counterexamples. Within the social sciences, this same kind of thinking sometimes manifests itself in the attitude that the theoretical approaches used in the West are not applicable in Japan due to its unique social heritage.

This leads us to the third impediment to Japanese folklore studies in reaching a wider audience—the failure to engage in the theoretical developments that have transformed the other disciplines. This is not a recent problem, and addressing it requires some historical background.

Folklore studies was systematized as an academic discipline in Japan only in the 1930s. Its brief seventy-year history can be divided into three major periods. The first period corresponds to the career of Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), the founder of Japanese folklore studies. He and his disciples played the major role in establishing and popularizing folklore studies in Japan, defining systematic fieldwork procedures, and generating masses of ethnographic data. Though Yanagita acknowledged cultural diversity within Japan during the early stages of his career (see Shimamura, this issue), he

later turned to the articulation of a unifying essence for the Japanese "main-
stream" population. The *jōmin* 常民, or "ordinary folk," as he called them,
lived in harmonious rural villages, engaged in irrigated rice cultivation, and
venerated their ancestors. Yanagita appears to have intended this idyllic
image in part as a veiled critique of modernizing society (FIGAL 1999,
129–30). It was co-opted, however, by nationalist ideologues in seeking to fos-
ter a sense of unity among the people and allegiance to the state, as symbol-
ized by the emperor. Whatever his original intentions, Yanagita has been a
major influence on Japan's recent intellectual history, inspiring any number
of *Nihonjinron* assertions.

    The second period in the development of folklore studies followed short-
ly after Yanagita's death. During this period, Yanagita's approach was subject-
ed to critical reevaluation, and new methodological techniques were developed
and implemented. This led to an emphasis on recontextualizing sociocultural
phenomena by treating each community in isolation as a self-contained unit.
Unfortunately, however, it also meant that important interactions across com-
munal boundaries were ignored. The study area was simply a methodological
concept with no practical bearing on broader issues relating to the processes of
modernity, such as the money economy, globalizing markets, the standardiza-
tion of educational curricula, and the incursion of mass transportation and
communications networks. Municipal boundaries had been somewhat arbi-
trarily established by legislative design, but many folklorists proceeded to adjust
the scope of their research in conformity with these bounded areas, thereby
helping to "reify" them.

    Even so, with the national trend toward high economic growth contin-
uing, folklore studies was able to achieve a certain level of prestige as an aca-
demic pursuit. Particularly during the 1970s, distinctive local traditions
became economic assets in the burgeoning tourist industry. Municipalities
began to create a corpus of local history, and cities and towns all over the
country established their own museums to attract visitors. Folklorists were
hired by boards of education to serve as local authorities, or to plan and
implement museum projects.

    The strategy of addressing each community or geographical area in iso-
lation resulted in masses of descriptive data, but little theory to render the
data meaningful or enhance our understanding of the human experience.
Thus folklore studies as a whole failed to achieve the kind of theoretical
maturity characteristic of the other social sciences. What folklorists were
doing during this second major phase in the development of their discipline
could not be described as genuine academic research; it was more like sim-
ple survey or documentation.

    Nevertheless, during the 1970s several leading universities established

folklore studies departments where students could pursue the subject as their academic major. Folklore faculty were eager to enhance their reputation as serious scholars, comparable to that of their colleagues in more established disciplines like history and cultural anthropology. Through organization and institutionalization, they tried to construct an independent discipline that could stand on its own merits. Japanese folklorists, in other words, were not pursuing folklore studies but rather *Japanese* folklore studies. Their research was focused exclusively on Japan and their results were distributed only in Japan, with no effort to place themselves in an international context. They neglected even to cite relevant examples from other cultures, except in research involving genealogical associations with neighboring China or Korea. Ironically, the discipline turned inward even as the rest of Japanese society was becoming increasingly globalized.

In this sense, Japanese folklore studies itself became the kind of bounded, self-contained community it was accustomed to taking as its research object. The central tenet of uniqueness functioned much in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy—generating the kind of scholarship that was applicable only in Japan. Japanese folklore studies had in fact come to place greater emphasis on Japanese uniqueness than had Yanagita himself. This led the discipline as a whole to a rather serious impasse, from which it has yet to escape.

The discipline thus finds itself poised at the threshold of the third period—a new era in its development. Its practitioners have gradually come to recognize the stagnation in their discipline and are presently engaged in a reexamination of their intellectual history in an effort to break the impasse. By reexamining existing studies in light of recent theoretical developments in other disciplines, they have identified several issues that were largely overlooked during the second period. The articles that follow serve as apt examples.

It is our hope that this special issue will help to reinvigorate the discipline of Japanese folklore studies as a productive scholarly enterprise. By introducing in English a few representative examples of the more recent scholarship, we hope to make Japanese folklore studies more accessible to a wider audience. And by drawing Japanese folklore into a broader theoretical arena, we hope to help free the discipline from its rather narrow intellectual confines. Our focus on the negotiation of collective identities is a first attempt.

Creating and maintaining a sense of collective identity is a process that applies not only to our research subjects, but to our own academic communities as well. The process begins when significance is attributed to some easily recognizable yet arbitrarily selected variable. This variable then becomes the basis for distinguishing some people (those who share the variable) from others (those who do not), creating a boundary between the two

categories. Physical features such as skin color or the shape of the eyes and nose are obvious examples, but language is also a good candidate. The more conspicuous the feature, the better it serves as a basis for the distinction. Even ideological variables like religious or political affiliation can be made conspicuous through symbolic markings, clothing styles, ritualized activities, and dietary habits.

Once the distinction is made and the boundary established, certain ambiguities must be addressed. Among those who fall on the same side of the boundary, shared attributes are celebrated, while distinguishing features are de-emphasized or ignored. Disparate individuals are thus made to appear as if they were linked by some "natural" affinity. This sense of affinity is further ingrained by alluding to shared experiences and concerns, invoking an apical ancestor or totem as a symbolic expression of unity, perhaps even employing the idiom of kinship in addressing or referring to fellow members. Again, it is important to remember that the selection of distinguishing variables is arbitrary, and therefore so are the resulting categories. In fact, the more significant variables may be completely overlooked simply because they are difficult to recognize, though they would have undoubtedly placed the boundary in a different alignment. As ANDERSON (1991) has argued, "community" is a social construction, made to appear as if it were a spontaneous and self-evident reality.

The mere assertion of common interests or affinities, however, is never sufficient; collective identity depends on the members emphasizing not simply what they are, but also what they are not. They require an outside referent against which to assert their own distinctiveness. The obvious candidate, of course, is the opposing category—the "outsiders." But here again the ambiguities must be eliminated. Thus in relation to people on opposite sides of the boundary, *differences* are now exaggerated and *linkages* ignored. And the greater the distinction between them can be made to appear, the more strongly people on either side will identify with members of their own group as opposed to the "outsiders."

Such manipulations are particularly effective in the face of a common challenge. This typically involves the outsider category in the role of enemy or rival, but might also appear as a natural disaster or state of emergency, or perhaps rigorous devotion to a higher goal or purpose in the face of numerous obstacles. If such a challenge does not exist, it may be imagined or created, explicitly for the purpose of generating greater cohesiveness within the "community." By pulling together toward a common goal, the members come to feel dependent upon and responsible for one another. This infuses them with a sense of belonging that transcends the level of the individual self.

If the boundaries of communal identity are arbitrary, they are also elas-tic—they can either expand to include larger numbers of people, or contract into a more exclusive membership. Which level is mobilized depends upon the nature of the unifying challenge. Ultimately the boundaries can be expanded to include the entire nation, resulting in assertions of a homoge-neous race and culture, distinct from the rest of the world.

The important point, however, is that a sense of common bond does not emerge simply through the existence of inherent similarities, but through the purposeful manipulation of symbolic resources. The consequences can be either positive or negative, depending on the situation. Negative exam-ples include asserting a "mainstream" or majority status and claiming its privileges as a natural endowment. More sympathetic expressions can be found in the banding together of indigenous peoples in asserting their rights or struggling for greater autonomy. Identity becomes a field of contention, with participants attempting to advance their own agendas. The same strat-egy can be used to unite or divide, depending on how the boundaries are drawn.

We suggest that the future of Japanese folklore studies depends upon reconfiguring its boundaries, or, better yet, allowing them the flexibility to shift according to the inclination of the participants or the nature of their inquiries. We should acknowledge, for example, the rich cultural diversity that exists within Japan's rather abstract borders, as well as the commonali-ties that extend beyond them to encompass other peoples and cultures. It could easily be argued, for example, that the Cree hunters of Mistassini in northern Quebec and the *matagi* (traditional hunters) of northeastern Japan have far more in common with each other than either group has with its "fellow nationals."

In theoretical terms, as well, the boundaries should be open to other disciplines, other academic communities. This should not be taken to imply a simple one-way exchange, however, with Japanese folklorists perpetually on the receiving end. Western ethnologists likewise stand to benefit from greater exposure to Japanese theoretical developments. In fact, ultimately, divisions based on nationality should disappear. For example, Japanese and Western scholars have long been divided over the relative importance of the individual as social actor. Sociologist HAMAGUCHI Eyshun (1985) has sug-gested that the Western social sciences place undue emphasis on the indi-vidual as an independent actor, ignoring the extent to which the self is bound up in a complex web of social relations. The Western approach, which he refers to as "methodological individualism," cannot be successful-ly applied to the study of Japanese society. The reason is that, while Western society is characterized by individual actors, Japanese society is character-

ized by "relational" actors. In Japan, in other words, "It is through personal relations with other actors who are nearby that the recognition of self is gradually established and that the principles concerning behavior are formed. In short, the psycho-social identity of the self is established in relation to other actors" (HAMAGUCHI 1985, 298). In Japan, in fact, it would be more appropriate to refer to the social actor not as an individual (*kojin* 個人) but as a "contextual" (*kanjin* 間人), for whom "selfness is confirmed only through interpersonal relationships" (1985, 302). This would help us to better understand the motivations of the actors.

Hamaguchi's point is well-taken, but why restrict it to Japan? Is it not possible that Western social scientists, in their obsession with the individual, have neglected an important aspect of social identity *in their own societies as well*? Hamaguchi's concern with the emphasis on the individual would be better presented not as some kind of sophisticated *Nihonjinron* assertion, but as an important corrective to social science research that can be applied *universally*. It could be used, for example, to challenge the notion of the independent actor that is so prevalent in the West, revealing it as an important "root metaphor," perhaps, but no less a fabrication.

Ultimately, however, folklore studies' major contribution may lie in its descriptive power and the wealth of data it provides. Theories fall in and out of fashion, like clothing styles, but detailed, reliable ethnographic description—upon which all good theories are based—will surely remain in heavy demand. It matters little that much of the descriptive data relates to conditions and activities that no longer exist. In terms of comparative ethnology, the past is as good a source of data as contemporary society. It may be objected that a focus on the past eliminates the possibility of comprehending the dynamics of social processes, yet it is only through a time-depth perspective that such processes can be fully appreciated and understood.

Folklore is particularly adept at supplying "the people's" point of view. As sociologist UENO Chizuko (1987, S75) has noted, "historical research based on written texts often ends up being about the ruling class and its ideology." Folklorists, therefore, with their emphasis on fieldwork and oral tradition, must preserve what historians gloss over or ignore—the attitudes and experiences of peasants, fishermen, wage laborers, and small entrepreneurs (in other words, the vast majority of the population). Ueno herself relies heavily on Yanagita's documentation of pre-industrial village life in challenging the "traditional" image of Japanese women as being subservient. Her work demonstrates that much of the subordination occurred with the transition to an urban-industrial context, when the values of the elite samurai were adopted by (or imposed upon) the masses.

Knowledge of the past is important not only in terms of understanding

what happened and why, but also in recognizing how our images of the past are continually being manipulated for present purposes. This makes historical data a much more relevant and lively topic. The past becomes a source of symbolic resources that is continually "mined" for images and ideas. Even new introductions are often cloaked in "tradition" to enhance their legitimacy and appeal (as in the case of State Shinto).

This leads to the prospect of what we consider an important focus for future research—the "public consumption" of folklore studies. By this we are referring to the way the public receives and utilizes the ethnographic data that folklorists produce. Here again, Japan constitutes a particularly informative field area due to the prolific nature of the publishing industry and the speed and effectiveness with which ideas are transmitted to the public at large. We have alluded to this topic already in relation to Yanagita's impact on popular thinking, and the hiring of folklorists by communities to document local culture and establish museums. Certainly, museums offer a fertile field of study in terms of the politics of representation. Another recent example can be found in the popular animated films of Miyazaki Hayao. Films such as *Mononoke hime* もののけ姫 ("Princess Mononoke") and *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* 千と千尋の神隠し ("Spirited Away") are rife with allusions to Japanese folklore. This is a medium that reaches millions of people worldwide, sparking renewed interest in Japanese folk traditions, particularly as they relate to environmentalism and concerns about the trajectory of the modern world.

As the globalization of economic and political systems drives the expansion of "Western" ideas, attitudes, and assumptions, it becomes increasingly important for folklorists to provide examples of alternative viewpoints and ways of life. History has demonstrated that the best ideas are not always the ones that gain dominance. In time, however, for lack of recognizable alternatives, the dominant model comes to be seen as "natural" or "inevitable." The reckoning of time as a linear progression, for example, enhances the notion that technological "advances" will lead us to a higher and better standard of living, and further removes us from the rhythms and cycles that animate the natural world. And the global market economy promotes the impression that money is the only index of value, so that anything that cannot be expressed in monetary terms is excluded from the decision-making process. Without alternative models, "rational" economic activity based on the profit motive may be accepted as indeed being rational, rather than as a compulsive drive toward acquisition and consumption that often destroys important social and ecological relationships. Folklore ensures that alternative approaches will not be forgotten, and provides a basis for critiquing the

status quo. The future is uncertain, and these alternatives may one day prove useful in our efforts to negotiate the changes that lie in store.

In conclusion, Japanese folklore studies is equipped to address virtually every issue that is now central to the social sciences. These include (1) the formation and maintenance of national identity, and the strategies employed in doing so; (2) the rights of indigenous peoples, particularly the Ainu and Okinawans; (3) the politics of representation, not only of minority ethnic groups but also of peoples in the past; and (4) migration and the crossing of borders, Japan currently being a huge influence in the global arena, but in the past also having been the origin of successive waves of out-migration as well as a colonial power extending its authority into other parts of Asia and the Pacific Ocean.

Furthermore, Japan itself is an ideal research locus in that it offers (1) a historical experience and cultural tradition significantly different from that of the West; (2) a wealth of ethnographic and historical data reaching back several centuries; (3) a highly developed literary and artistic tradition, useful for exploring issues of representation, cultural politics, and performance; (4) an ongoing and well-documented conflict between centralized bureaucracy and local needs and interests; and (5) a sophisticated community of "native" ethnologists who both contribute to and critique the ethnographic project. This final point is particularly significant in confronting the hegemonic status of Western scholarship, as epitomized by the term "orientalism."

In short, the effort to engage more actively in the international community of scholars is more than a self-serving survival strategy. Again, we feel that Japanese folklore studies has an important contribution to make, both in the realm of Japanese scholarship and to the world at large. Therefore, by perpetuating their insularity, not only do Japanese folklorists run the risk of marginalizing themselves; they also deny their valuable insights, knowledge, and theoretical contributions to the rest of the world. The articles that follow are an attempt to redress this situation.

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