The comic book diary of Kamayan: the life of a day-laborer in Kamagasaki

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Abstract. In these specially commissioned cartoons, artist Sen Arimura portrays the other side of life in contemporary Japan, as seen through the eyes of Kamayan, working-class hero.

The uncensored guide to Kamagasaki

For those who do not know, please allow me to explain a bit about the neighborhood in which our lovable hero, Kamayan, lives. Geographically speaking, Kamagasaki is located south of the central part of Osaka. It is a triangular area which is about 0.62 km² in area encircled by the JR Loop Line. Kamagasaki can also be reached by either the Nankai Main Line or the Nankai train on the Tennoji line. Kamagasaki is adjacent to landmarks both old and new. The Osaka tower and Jan-Jan Yokocho (a street) are symbols of the new world; the 'gay quarter' of Tobita is a landmark of the past. Kamagasaki is the neighborhood of the day-laborer (Hiyatoi Rodosha).

There are said to be about 18,000(1) day-laborers in Kamagasaki, but this is just an estimate. There are many unregistered residents in the neighborhood because there is a tremendous inflow and outflow of people. The number has recently shown a sharp increase, which is a serious problem; I will tell you the reason later.

People call Kamagasaki a "Doya machi", which means a neighborhood with cheap lodging. This word is the inverse of yado, the standard Japanese word for lodging. Also, doya doya is an onomatopoeic expression for being in a crowded place. Either definition is viable. In the area, there are 200 lodges which have to accommodate some 15,000 people.

Day-laborers and others sally forth to the Kinki prefectural area because of favorable working conditions, and like our hero, Kamayan, they have made this so-called 'Doya machi' their home. Laborers returning from a day's work and the jobless ones fill the stand bars and streets from the break of the day till the middle of the night. There are some who have idealized the life of a day-laborer. They think that split-toe shoes (Jika-tabi), and the baggy worker pants (Nikka-bokka) are fashionable, and such things do give Kamagasaki a special, rather peculiar atmosphere.

The flood of the unemployed to Kamagasaki

Kamagasaki is a place easily reached by public transportation. One can go to Imamiya station, or get off at the Dobutsuen- mae stop on the Midousuji line of the subway. However, the average citizen would never go near Kamagasaki. If one should venture in, the first time would certainly be the last. People used to think if one went into Kamagasaki one would not be able to make it out alive. Kamagasaki is like a solitary island in a distant sea.

However, this island on which our hero Kamayan lives has been bustling with activity. Until recently, the number of day-laborers was about 18,000, but according to the welfare department the number has risen to about 30,000 people in the last

(1) The Japan Times (3 November 1990) puts the number between 20,000 and 30,000.
I feel awful.

A victim of overwork!

Shit! I will disclose the irresponsibility of the company.

Is that the Labor Standard Inspection Office?
What, you cannot come for an investigation?

What is that supposed to mean?
How irresponsible!!

The Inspection Officers were far too busy investigating a succession of deaths due to overwork. It seems the officers themselves die one after the other because of overwork.
two years. Because of the sharp increase, people in this small densely populated island have become panicked about moving closer together. Kamagasaki is expanding outward from the triangular area like some uncanny living creature.

After the Korean war, Japan set out on a voyage spurred on by the winds of prosperity. However, like a ship she has been struck by a gigantic wave, the sudden rise in the yen in the course of the trade war with the United States. The result has been a sudden change in the structure of Japanese industry. Large enterprises have closed local industries and relocated in cheaper countries—a multinationalization of industry. This has left many people unemployed. Luckily, several large construction projects have just been started (such as the New Kansai International Airport and the Flower and Greenery Exposition) and these have magnified the need for domestic labor.

Kamayan: champion of the unemployed
Big cities are oceans and people are drifters who wash ashore on Kamagasaki. Today, too, a steady stream of newcomers continues to flow to Kamagasaki. There are many reasons people come: unemployment, bankruptcy, leaving the farm, debts, accidents, prejudice, and discrimination. The causes lie in the ills of today’s society. Of course, there are some people who come of their own free will.

These victims are the ‘boat people’ of Japan. But these ‘refugees’ of Japanese society are not the only victims. Today, the refugees caused by “hollowing of domestic industry”(1) are conspicuous. For example, the Japanese sarariman is also a victim. He is unable to secure a loan from a bank without paying exorbitant interest rates, and yet these loans are absolutely necessary because the price of land and food is the most expensive in the world. When the loan-shark peril raged among office workers, many fell prey to them. There are many refugees who used to be office workers. As the economy strengthens, the individual is sacrificed at the expense of the giant enterprise.

The types of victims of the Japanese system have changed over the decades, so we must look at the events of the postwar era that have shaped our society. Japan experienced defeat in World War 2, but rose from the ashes of ruin to prosperity. At the end of the 1950s, the government changed its energy policy to keep up with the changing world. The coal mines closed as technology made them obsolete. Farmers flocked to the cities because their work had ceased to be profitable. In order to keep up with the rapid change in technology in the 1960s, the ‘rationalization’ of primary and secondary industries was a major policy initiative by the government: as a result, many people in these industries also lost their jobs. Finally, the sudden increase in the value of the yen (after the 1985 G-5 conference in New York) from ¥240 to ¥120 per US dollar caused large-scale unemployment in the shipping and steel industries. Small-scale factories and subcontractors were also affected because of their reliance on the larger industries.

During the 1964 Olympics, there was a labor boom. But the jobs created during that period were only temporary. The oil shock provided a catalyst for mass restructuring of big business. Many of the people who ‘washed ashore’ on Kamagasaki have been victims of these events. War orphans, miners, and defunct subcontractor workers are just some examples of the victims. There are farmers who leave their homes during the winter because there is no work; there are children of farmers who are forced to leave home, because there will be no work for them when they are older. Finding no gainful employment, many end up in Kamagasaki.

(1) This expression, kudoka, is used quite frequently by the media to describe the shift of domestic industry and qualified personnel offshore because of the increasing cost of operating a business in Japan.
[Head office “White” company]

Hey, Yamamoto, from my college days!

Oh, is that you, Tanaka?

What are you doing here?

I just quit my job at the “Red” company. It was so boring.

By the way, what are you doing here?

My company was boring, too, so I'm getting a new job with the “Red” company.

Haha! Hahaha!
So the routes to Kamagasaki are varied. There are people who have come to Kamagasaki after switching jobs so many times that they no longer have a place in ‘normal’ society. There are also criminals and alcoholics who drift to Kamagasaki, but their numbers are nothing compared with those who cannot find their niche in society. Many meet their deaths here in Kamagasaki.

There are plenty of battered people in Kamagasaki, but there are also people like our hero Kamayan who have learned to be a ‘super-ultra optimist’ to face these harsh realities. Although these people were blown to Kamagasaki after injury and great loss, they can still taste the essence of freedom and feel revitalized. These are the type of people that surround Kamayan.

Life in the day-labor market
Our hero Kamayan’s typical daily schedule begins early in the morning. He goes to the Airin Center(3) to find work for the day. It could almost be called a morning market for day-laborers. Day-laborers are bought and sold as if they were commodities.

At about 5 o’clock in the morning Kamayan leaves his doss house (if he was lucky enough to have a place to sleep that night), and gathers with others at the center. There, minibuses sent by civil engineering and construction companies are lined up with job offers written on small posters pasted on the front windows. There may be more than one hundred buses when working conditions are at their peak. The job offers vary from road work and construction jobs to municipal work for the City of Osaka. The daily wage is around Y12,500 including transportation and lunch.

There is another type of employment that has the nickname ‘contract work’ where the workers leave the neighborhood for a while and live in barracks near the worksite. Such a job would typically be for a construction company for ten to thirty days’ work. The daily wages for these jobs are the same; however, the cost of meals is deducted. Therefore, the laborer actually makes around Y10,000.

Kamayan will look for the best job offer, secure the conditions with the labor agent, and hop on the bus. One might ask why it is necessary to get up so early for the job. Well, if you want to make a yen in Osaka, you have to get to the place and start work by 8 AM.

If a day-laborer is unable to get work for the day, then he qualifies for daily welfare wage from the Public Employment Security Office located on the second floor of the Airin building. Y6,200 is the amount he will receive on the day when work is unavailable.

AOKAN—“blue-canning”(4)
The places that Kamayan usually sleeps in, doya, are called flophouses or doss houses because they are dirty and one pays on a daily basis. But let’s just call them hotels. In the past, a typical hotel had several large rooms with bunk beds.

After the Osaka Expo in 1970, business conditions were favorable. Many lodge owners reconstructed their lodges with individual rooms and Western-style facades. In order to accommodate the same number of people, these hotel rooms turned out to be like detention cells, each room having only three mats and no bathroom.

(3) The full name is Airin rodosha fukushi senta, the Airin Center for Labor Welfare. Airin means ‘neighborhood love’. Kamagasaki was named ‘Airin chiku’ in 1962 because of the negative connotations associated with the riots that made it famous throughout the 1960s.

(4) The term ‘blue-canning’ refers to sleeping under the stars, keeping warm using fires set inside cans.
With great effort we founded a branch in the United States. Yet we've been criticised for only being interested in profit-making.

Deepen your contacts with the local residents!

Like eating together with your neighbors ... or joining volunteer activities ...

[deep silence]

[out to lunch]

It was impossible for these men, with no experience of interacting with their own neighbors in Japan, to understand their bosses.
The rooms have barely enough space to fit a chair and one sweat-stained mattress. Well, one is not expected to be sleeping there for comfort, and anyway the fact is that, if one has money, it is better to sleep inside.

There has also been a rush to make the hotels look exactly like business hotels. The facades look like a white-walled palace, and the insides are covered with marble. But, they are certainly not fit for a king. To a person who has not been to Kamagasaki for a long time, these hotels are a ghastly, frightful sight. It makes Kamagasaki-ites tearful.

Of course, the prices of all these hotels have been raised. The price of the rooms has gone up to as much as ¥3000 (about ten times as much as it was six years ago.) Kamayan, who was raised in a rural environment, prefers to sleep under the stars.

Kamayan, the multifaceted worker

Even though Kamayan has been referred to as a vagrant, he certainly isn't one. He works at various construction sites, making a street, a dam, a bridge, or a housing development. Kamayan is working hard to make Japan a better place to live. He takes pride in being a member of the proletariat.

Usually, construction companies do not do any favors for the people who work on the lowest rung of the ladder. The multilayered subcontracting system is not very efficient (for the workers, that is). There is a very complicated profit-margin system. The master contractor controls a pyramid reaching from the largest subcontractor down through many different sub-sub-subcontractors. The day-laborers are not even included in this pyramid. They are bought and sold as if they were supplies.

'Coolie dispatch' is a popular phrase today. It is a kind of 'rent-a-worker' system which is just fine as far as the fat cats are concerned. The popular word for the labor agents (tiehaiishi) nowadays is 'scoutman' which they don't like. But, they have to be able to recruit the best workers, like talent scouts. These labor agents are closely tied with the yakuzza (gangsters).

The agent's job is to keep supplying the huge development projects from the labor pool in Kamagasaki. These projects are carried out one after another in order that Japan may overcome the recession caused by a sudden rise in the yen. The projects are meant to stimulate domestic activity, but the construction companies are invariably driven by the profit motive. The labor 'reserve' is a great buffer when there is increased demand for domestic labor. Furthermore, it provides a cushion when Japan is hit with recession, because day-laborers are fired immediately when they are not needed. Essentially, the day-laborers are 'disposable labor'. Kamagasaki island is not a sorrowful island—it is a convenient island.

Kamayan, the professional wanderer

Kamayan is elusive; he can appear just about anywhere. Our hero has been all over the world. How is this possible? If you think it because he is a comic book character, you are wrong. It is because his life-style affords the possibility of wandering from place to place. He is a genuine individual. He answers to no one. He doesn't have a thirty-five-year home loan. He is not bound by a nagging wife. He can do anything he pleases. All he requires is money to live a humble existence, for which he needs only to gather information at a yoseba to find some sort of sweaty job.

Kamayan is a day-laborer, so there is no need worry about paid vacations. All he has to do is stop working, and he has his vacation. This type of individual would never be caught working in a company. Kamayan can work at a job where
We, the Japanese trading companies are accused of being the worst destroyers of the rainforest.

That's slander! Start a big refutation campaign in the whole world.

[President]

Yes.

You want to print more!? We have no paper left anymore.

Okay, to secure more paper, cut the rainforests down. Cut them down, slash 'em!
he is not bound to stay; but also, he can do work that will take him around the world. Kamayan wanders around looking for a job, or wanders around at work. When Kamayan was young, he worked on cargo ships and in the harbors. By working on these ships, he was able to travel to many places. However, the work in harbors has been cut, so his alternative is living in dorms all over Japan while working for construction companies. When he gets 'contract labor', the company will put him up in the dorm (hanba) and is responsible for his meals, depending on the terms of the contract. These 'communities' exist all over Japan.

Where is Kamayan's home?
The people drifting ashore on Kamagasaki island come from all over the country, from Osaka to Hokkaido. Most people come from the Kinki prefecture, but there are plenty of people from Kyushu, Okinawa, western and middle Japan. There is an area in Tokyo called Sanyo, similar to Kamagasaki, which usually gets all the people from northern Japan, such as Tohoku. Drifters flock to these places when there is nowhere else to go. Many say that people come from poor areas where they can't make a living, but that is too simple. The exodus from rural areas, the closing of coal mines, the recession in local economies, coupled with the 'hollowing' of domestic industry have been the causes. Such towns are not poor areas; they are just the places that have been afflicted first.

Kamagasaki is a microcosm of many peoples. Many workers there are second or third-generation Koreans living in Japan. There are also many illegal foreign workers from Korea and Southeast Asia. Some years back there were even some Ainu. The Okinawans who work in Kamagasaki are concentrated in an area nearby and have formed special connections among themselves. However, these people's attitudes towards their hometowns are complex. Each person has their own reason for coming to Kamagasaki, which they do not want to talk about with others—hated of their relatives, discrimination, inferiority complex, bankruptcy, divorce, and other assorted reasons. These drifters have been estranged from their own communities. We often hear the words, "I can't go home, it is just too late." Many different types of people are woven together in Kamagasaki: people who are criminals; people who have abandoned (or been abandoned by) families; people who owe debts; and people who have been discriminated against. One often hears, "I just want to go back home", but regrettably, many people have no home to return to.

During O-Bon and the New Year's holiday, people return to Kamagasaki from all over Japan. The working barracks close during the holidays; others simply come for the festivities. Day-laborers return to the streets and bars of Kamagasaki the same way. Students return to the libraries during exam periods. During holiday times, almost 40000 people can be found roaming around Kamagasaki.

Kamayan's childhood
Kamayan is a nickname: He doesn't know his real name or even his age. As far as he knows, he doesn't have one surviving family member; he is an orphan of the war. One good aspect of not having a family is that he has no expectations of getting married or of working at the family business. He is without obligation, and lives in the doya instead of a home. Kamayan is a champion of nihilism. He stakes it all on his 'super-ultra optimism', leading a life in which "the man with nothing wins". The comfortably brought up reader will surely doubt that such a man ever existed. And they are right! I'm just joking. This is just the nature of my fiction. Kamagasaki is perfect for someone like Kamayan.
Efficiency, Japanese style

Japanese trains run very efficiently.

Squeeze up a little closer.
Closer!

With legs as long as these one cannot sit so closely and "efficiently".

Tokyo-based correspondent's report:
Japan's efficiency extends even to the length of their legs ...
Kamayan has no idea of the life-style of the average person, simply because he has been raised in Kamagasaki. The air raids on Osaka during the last year of the war left the city in ruins. Among one of the many destroyed sections, a child was left crying. That was Kamayan. He never knew who his parents were, and thus never really knew who he was. He grew up in an orphanage and repeatedly ran away. As a child, he came to Kamagasaki which at the time was a real slum. When I think of the end of the war, the first image that comes to mind is Kamayan crying in the burned-out rubble somewhere in Osaka.

Orphans of the war, victims with ruined lives, sufferers of the atom bomb: today they live in Kamagasaki, unseen observers of modern Japan. They watch from their solitary horizon.

The day that all of Japan will be like Kamagasaki
What will Kamagasaki be like in the future? After the prosperity generated by the Expo in 1970, Kamagasaki has been relatively quiet. For fifteen years, it seemed to have lost the flow of people. This was the period when everyone expected the miracle of full employment in Japan to continue, and when middle-class consciousness had conquered society. Meanwhile, Kamagasaki suffered from the problems of an "aging society"; the average age in Kamagasaki is approaching 50 years old. These changes threatened to ruin Kamagasaki. It seemed that it might become a deserted island.

However, this fear has been completely confounded by the instability of the yen, widespread unemployment, and a fresh influx of people to Kamagasaki. This pattern has been repeated many times before in Kamagasaki, so I do not expect any real change.

More than Kamagasaki, I worry about Japan itself. Influential companies and their staff are moving offshore, leading to a "hollowing out" of domestic industry and a brain-drain. Domestic industry has sunk to the point where it relies on a multitude of part-time jobs. Mainstream employment has been deflected from the traditional life-time employment system to a 'speciality dispatch' system—a kind of 'rent-a-worker' system. On the surface, this appears to have some advantages. Time in the workplace is shortened, and people enjoy more leisure. But a sacrifice of personal security is being masked by the quality of life in an 'advanced country'. What is really happening is that Japan is becoming like Kamagasaki; Japan is a dressed-up version of Kamagasaki.
[TV]

Reporting from Eastern Europe, where they are enjoying their freedom ...

We want freedom at home too, right?

Yes.

Freedom to have a long vacation!

Freedom from small houses!

Freedom to determine the amount of my own pocket money!

Freedom to have a husband with a good income!

Freedom to have a sweet and kind wife!

Freedom of divorce!

Stop it.

What a shame!
[Information society]

Never forgetting to read several newspapers and to watch news programs.

Gathering information from all over the world with his PC.

Japan's elite businessman is busy even at home.

[tak, tak]

But because of that, he is unaware that his family is falling apart around him.

[tak, tak]
[At school]

This year I will give you no homework over the summer holidays. Instead I have a suggestion: Just enjoy yourselves!

Enjoy?
What does that mean?
Monday: Piano cram school
Tuesday: PC cram school
Wednesday: English conversation cram school
Thursday: Swimming cram school
Friday: Art cram school
Saturday: Abacus cram school

I don't understand ...

The number of kids who don't know what it means to enjoy themselves is increasing, because they're so busy going to cram schools.

["Cram School for Enjoying Life"]

Oh my! One more cram school to go to!
This country outrages me. I work and work, but I can get no spacious, comfortable dwelling and no leisure time.

[First-class hotel]

To vent my anger, let’s have an extravagant evening out!

[Luxury-car show]

Well, I couldn’t care less. Let’s buy a fancy car and put it on credit.

[Developed nations summit]

The booming domestic economy of our country is due to sustained consumer spending.

How I envy you!