RESEARCH REPORT

Rethinking Rural Festivals in Contemporary Japan

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I

The cover of Taiyō magazine’s February 1966 issue announced two special articles—“Travel to Outer Space!” (on American lunar exploration) and “Noh: Secret Ceremonies of the Snow Country!”—offering its readers glimpses of both the outermost limits of modern Western technology and the innermost sanctums of unique Japanese tradition. The ritual secrets it promised to reveal were the performances of noh drama during the winter festival of Kurokawa village in the Shōnai region of Yamagata Prefecture. While its team of journalists, photographers, and scholars uncovered few secrets, the magazine issue, together with a subsequent, lavish volume, brought wide exposure to the “farmer-actors” from the northeast.

My own research has taken me frequently to Shōnai during the last ten years, but only this year have I had an opportunity to live in Kurokawa for the several months surrounding its February festivities. Like any anthropologist, I am not immune to the allure of its elaborate social organization and ritual symbolism, which seem to be rare vestiges of organic ties and authentic beliefs. One easily elicits a litany of nostalgic verities about Kurokawa noh. It represents, above all, enduring “tradition.” It expresses “communal production.” It is an artistic achievement of “ordinary farmers.” And it is ceremonial “Shintō ritual noh.”

Kurokawa noh would thus seem to fit comfortably into the debates that have raged since folklorist Yanagita’s lament about the fate of festivals in a disenchanted modern world. He held that exclusive, inner circles of believers would be gradually surrounded and replaced by outside spectators; communal sacrament would become touristic spectacle. The exclusive was the spiritual, and the spiritual, the authentic. The analyst must winnow the precious survivals from the crass descensions.

It is, however, illusory to reduce the authentic to the exclusive, and I think that calibrations of spiritual entropy and commercial pressure miss the more significant intersections of culture and politics in and about places like Kurokawa. I was drawn to Kurokawa for what it could reveal about the present predicament of the larger Shōnai region and, by extension, the many “countrysides” of contemporary Japan.

Put simply, nation building in twentieth-century Japan has involved the countrysides’ simultaneous incorporation into and differentiation from the larger society. Several developments since World War II have exacerbated these tensions between inclusion and exclusion. First, the imperatives of economic growth in the recent “miracle” decades have required that regional and class differences be muted even as they are perpetuated. On the one hand, the postwar variant of “Confucian capitalism” is the uneasy articulation of a small core of fulltime, lifetime, trained male employees and a peripheral cushion that includes female parttimers, second-career retirees, seasonal rural labor, and small regional subcontractors. This fuels a continuing but unequal struggle between metropolitan centers and peripheral regions over the concentration of resources and the culling of talents, a struggle waged through the hierarchies of government bureaucracies, education, and employment.

On the other hand, such differences are muted by the widely shared vision of contemporary Japan as a homogenous “New Middle Class” society. That is, in the last three decades, both official policy and public opinion have idealized career employment in large organizations, meritocratic educational credentialing, and a nuclear household division of labor between the working husband who takes care and the domestic wife who gives care. These patterns of “interests and emotions” fly in the face of the realities of life for many Japanese, especially those outside the urban centers. Nonetheless, they have effectively defined standards of achievement and images of the desirable.

These tensions of political economy and cultural ideals are compounded for people in regions like Shōnai by the recent, feverish celebration of “tradition,” especially the nostalgic exultation of rural folklore. This furusato būmu (hometown boom)
has sought to locate and preserve a ‘‘world we have lost’’ in an idealized notion of country life and country folk. Recent Japanese entries in international film festivals, such as Himatsuri (Fire Festival) and The Ballad of Narayama, are examples of an extensive packaging of a homogenized ruralscape as national heartland, forming a necessary, romantic counterpoint to the ‘‘modern’’ vision of a New Middle Class society.

Thus, there is no simple contest between an incorporating center and regions striving to preserve autonomy. Japan’s countrysides are now both its inaka (rural districts) and its furusato (home town). As the backward provinces, they must be assimilated into a modern society, but as home of the nation’s ‘‘folk,’’ they must be preserved as a testament to a moral society. My interest in Kurokawa arises from my concern with this larger dilemma. It produces a local festival built around performances of Japan’s most difficult ‘‘traditional’’ dramatic art by rural folk whose ambitions and whose lifestyles are in many respects indistinguishable from those of the Tokyo tourists. The festival expresses this fundamental tension of being both drawn in and held apart. It is also an arena where the forms of inclusion and exclusion are contested and negotiated.

II
Kurokawa, now part of Kushibiki town on the southern edge of Shōnai Plain, was a Tokugawa-period village of 13 nucleated settlements, which still define the parish membership of its Kasuga Shrine, overlooking the village and the plain. About 270 of the 300 households of the 13 Kurokawa settlements are parishioners of the shrine, and are divided into two guilds of noh actors.

The annual centerpiece of observances at Kasuga Shrine is the Ōgi-sai, or Fan Festival, held on February 1-2. This is a festival to invoke, entertain, and supplicate the tutelary shrine god. The ‘‘fan’’ is formed by three long, tufted poles, bound together with white cotton; when opened in a triangular shape, it both attracts the god and becomes its temporary abode. Broadly speaking, the festival lasts throughout the month from January 3 through February 3, filled with practice, preparations, and purification. The festival proper is the two-day sequence of processions, feasts, prayers, competitions, and divine entertainment in the form of noh drama. In addition to being offered at the shrine, these noh plays are also performed at the private homes of a member of each guild. The ‘‘hosts’’ each year are selected by seniority—the oldest male of each guild who has not yet served in what many still regard as the final honor and most onerous responsibility of one’s life.

Within the parish and guilds are several hereditary positions, including the shrine priest, the shrine deacon for each guild, and the chief actor of each guild. Most performance roles are not hereditary, but the principal stage and music roles tend to remain in certain household lines. Children and youth are used extensively in secondary roles, while older men in their 60s and 70s fill the chorus positions. About 70 males from each guild appeared on the stage in the February 1987 festival.

For many, the festival is an aesthetically and emotionally satisfying experience of the rhythm of the frenetic and the stately, the ludic and the formal. Early in the morning of the first day, the hosts and certain officers of the two guilds meet at the shrine to entreat and greet the descending god. Each guild bears one of the fan as they process to their respective host houses to ensconce the god. Throughout the day, there are meetings and feasts for all guild members and invited relatives and guests. Toward evening, a noh stage is set up in the central room of the house, and by 7 p.m., all have gathered for an all-night celebratory entertainment. The program begins with an invocation before the open fan: this is a chant and stamping dance, performed by a selected five-year-old boy. This is followed by three dances of felicitation (the shikisa sanba; the origin perhaps of the play Okina in the traditional noh repertoire) and a sequence of five noh dramas separated by four kyōgen comedies.

At dawn of the second morning, the host, the performers, and the other guild members return in procession to the shrine—or more precisely to the house at the foot of the shrine, where they meet and exchange greetings with members of the other guild. Side-by-side, they climb up the stairs to the shrine in what becomes a race between the youth of each guild to be the first to place their fan in its place at the back of the shrine stage. A joint invocatory dance is followed by a noh presentation by each guild, several more competitions between the young men of each guild, and prayer sequences by the shrine priest. The festival proper concludes by late afternoon with a fast sanbasō dance and a final competition to rush the fans into the interior of the shrine where, no longer animated by the god-spirit, they will be stored for a year.

While the Fan Festival is the principal ritual occasion for noh presentations, the guilds perform on six other fixed occasions during the year, and usually accept two or three special invitations to perform in Tokyo and elsewhere in the country. In
A child-actor performs an invocation and stamping dance (daichifumi) before the fan.

fact, the Fan festival and its noh drama has become one of rural Japan's most well-known and long-studied "folk arts." It has been the subject of TV documentaries, scholarly dissertations, and tourist guidebooks. It was designated a "national intangible cultural treasure" in 1976, and has been awarded several important cultural prizes, including the Yoshikawa Eiji Prize in 1984. In short, all the trappings of designated authenticity.

The outsiders who lavish such attention on Kurokawa are a mixed lot—professional noh actors, university scholars, media people, amateur photographers, festival freaks, casual tourists, and curious relatives. A Noh Preservation Association, with an office within the town education board, has served as a buffer and a channel for what some locals refer to as their "foreign relations." In recent years, a lottery system has been used to regulate outside visitors to the night of the performances. The Ministry of Agriculture donated funds that were used to build a "Learning Hall" adjacent to Kasuga Shrine, complete with a practice stage, exhibition space, and lecture rooms. There are ambitious plans to add parking and restaurant facilities to attract, entertain, and educate visitors on a continuing basis during the year. This only begins to suggest the range of incidents and issues that spark debate among Kurokawans about their place in a national cultural milieu and the intrusions of that larger society into their local life.

III

It is easy to imagine why Kurokawans and their supporters might project an image of the festival as unchanging, communal, indigenous, and spiritual—and only recently discovered and now properly appreciated by sophisticated audiences and serious scholars in the capital. But it is no more difficult to recognize the antitheses of these qualities. There is a constant undercurrent of change; despite the norm of a single unbroken line of the guild's chief actor (tayû), the upper guild's tayû post has changed lines four times in this century. There is, too, a healthy dose of competition, marked in the ritual, unmarked elsewhere, but remarked about everywhere, as in the maneuvers to have one's young son selected for the daichifumi role and in the bitter rivalries among several leading actors. Far from isolation and indifference, there has been longstanding intercourse with the larger society, beginning 300 years ago with command performances before the feudal daimyo and public subscription runs in the castle town and elsewhere. The repertory has been learned from outside teachers, and the extensive collection of robes and masks has been received from patrons or purchased from professional artisans. And the focus of feast talk, well-lubricated with sacred rice-wine, is less communion with the god than comparison with one's fellow performers: "Wasn't the lower guild chorus so weak as to be inaudible this year?" "Wasn't musician K too inexperienced to handle the last section of Takasago!" "Didn't C's student do better in the daichifumi than M's!" Feast talk is artistic talk, incessant appraisals of one's family, friends, and foes.

This is not a simple matter of frontstage and backstage, of pious conventions voiced for outside consumption and actual intentions revealed among insiders. What is crucial to understanding Kurokawa noh—and, I suspect, many other such folk spectacles—are the complicated collisions and collusions of insiders and outsiders necessary to its proper showcasing.

Outsiders, for example, are literally inside; this year, as usual, it was the lottery-selected visitors who were accorded the largest and most honored seats (front-center) for the main performance, while ordinary guild members peered in through windows from the cold night. Outside scholars, too, have been critical in "authenticating" the Fan Festival, with their photo archives, dance diagrams,
nalists and tourists in the 1950s came in response to his first book and articles. It was he who persuaded Kurokawans to cooperate with the team from Taiyō Magazine in the mid-1960s, and he who advised the guilds in their trips to Tokyo and in negotiations with NHK-TV. Yet he was also a tireless critic of state agricultural policies, and in the 1960s he laced his accounts of Kurokawa with sharp criticism of the regional development plans that were intended to "modernize" such a "traditional" way of life—even as his Kurokawan friends were working actively to implement those same programs in their town.

Indeed, locals regard most experts ambivalently. Central to the festival image is noh as shrine ritual, not as professional drama. Probing specialists always provoke some discomfort. "We aren't pros" is the frequent disclaimer, and there are certainly many residents who prefer those who come at festival time to socialize and drink rather than to attend closely to the full details of performance (nomi ni kuru rather than nō o mi ni kuru, as the local saying goes).

In part, this reflects a more general ambivalence about the authenticity of festival noh. On the one hand, it requires disciplined training and careful preparation of a complexly structured art form; on the other, it is an emotive and uncritical celebration of mood, easily disrupted by self-conscious analysis. What and how Kurokawa noh ought to be is something that brings outsiders in and drives insiders out; it is a case of tradition-as-it-is against tradition-as-it-should-be.

This ambivalence alerts us to issues more interesting than secularization and commercialization of Japan’s rural festivals. What we should be looking for is not the authentic performance but arguments about what an authentic performance is. These arguments range over a shifting field of residents and outsiders. They are not only arguments about the proper shape of the festival, they also deal with the proper nature of personal and collective engagement with a larger society.

Suggested Reading on Kurokawa Noh


