

## Forests as Seen by Yanagita Kunio: His Contribution to a Contemporary Ecological Idea

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A forest is only a part of the landscape if seen from the distance. However, it is the important place where people living nearby pick and gather seasonal wild plants or mushrooms. It provides wood that feeds the forestry business. In a forest we generally experience something that leads us to an original memory of our childhood home.

As a comprehensive thinker Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), the distinguished Japanese folklorist, regards the many facets of a forest as a composite of people's customs, legends, way of life, etc., all of which reflect his interests: a poet when he was young, a passionate innovator in rural agricultural districts, and, as an old man, a folklorist akin to an archaeologist who inquired into the origins of the Japanese people. He was an idealistic researcher with a view of *keisei saimin* (ruling the world appropriately and relieving people of their distress), and he thought deeply about where the Japanese people came from. How did a forest look to such a thinker?

I wonder if he had a simple view of a forest. He deals with great legendary trees and divine trees in *Nihon Densetsu Meii* (The Lexicon of Japanese Legends), but we do not find any stories about a forest. He tells of a legend around a special tree: 'a pine-tree on which a god descends', 'a pine from the top of which we can see stars even in the daytime', 'a pine or cedar for a sedge hat on the branch', and he collected such legends to do with a tree as 'a cherry-tree for a horse to be tethered to' and 'a cherry-tree for a man to sit on', and others. When he travelled to the Okinawa Islands, he focused on a particular tree with some legendary connection with rural people's life and customs, rather than a forest in general (*Kainan Shoki*, Little Writings on the Southern Sea). His great power of memory and imagination always helped him store in his mind individual plants associated with the life and destiny of the islanders.

Yanagita's method may be characterized as observing through time rather than

looking at a scene in space. He catches acutely and with great sensitivity a change in the social scene and never overlooks it. In his *Meiji Taisyō-shi Sesō-hen* (History of the Meiji and Taishō era: the part relating to social phenomena), he describes scenes and smells he experienced with his five senses, and he extends his curiosity to 'changing facets of a quarrel between husband and wife' (*Kōkyō nanaju-nen*, Seventy Years at My Hometown). This perspective based on temporality might be relevant to looking at a forest as a landscape, as time does not stop when we see a forest. Yanagita himself observes a forest as it is affected by violent change in time and society.

Yanagita expressed sympathy with Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941), another great folklorist of modern Japan, and supported Minakata's action against the Meiji government, which planned to merge Shinto shrines. Minakata was adamantly opposed to the government wishing to stop the development of sacred precincts by cutting down trees in and around shrines. The government's policy of merging Shinto shrines was part of a modernization programme to reform local areas and combine local towns and districts. Merging shrines meant accelerating the amalgamation of local communities and integrating all the shrines in a community into one, sweeping away the groves around village shrines. Against this policy, Yanagita argues in his *Tsuka to Mori no Hanashi* (A Tale of Mound and Forest) for the significance of 'the forest' as a place for worship of divine spirits. It was because of the modernization movement, instigated by central government, that villages died, with migration from country to town, and development of new rice fields was promoted by cutting down forests. In contrast, Yanagita's vision focused on the ordinary people who grew rice and practised ancestor worship, and on the village as a place to live; on that basis he considered the future of the nation state, looking back to the old tradition of community. He says: 'Though villages are disappearing, people's attachment to the land is so strong that anyone who tries self-interestedly to rise in the world, disregarding his family and losing belief in the country's gods, can never imagine the spirit.' And he had confidence in his folklore studies, claiming that 'the greatest science to explore the new future is based on the fact that our life has its roots several thousand years ago'.

He hated to teach reverence toward the gods through words and says: 'without deep forest around the shrine a feeling of worship will not be induced in us', and 'it is not good to destroy reverence for forests that were planted with feeling more than a thousand years ago'. His idea was that 'as the place itself is appropriate for revering the gods, our worship of the gods originates not in some sacred body, or shrines, but in the land itself and the forest growing densely on the land'.

As well as in exact observation and fieldwork, Yanagita's research competence was exercised in focusing on naming and terminology. As regards the etymology of *mori* (forest), he lists several hypotheses: (1) *mori* comes from another *mori*, i.e. 'guard'; (2) the verb *moru*, i.e. 'pile up', then *mori* means 'a mound with clods of earth piled higher than a field'; (3) from the old Korean language, *mure* corrupted (see *Nihonsyoki*); (4) from *furo* in China or Asia, such as *inari-buro* for *Inari*'s forest (the god of cereals) or *ten-o-buro*, a forest of the Buddhist god in the lowest rank in the world of desire, Yanagita refers to a village where a shrine is called *furo*. In short, the original meaning of *mori* is the centre of a community.

Yanagita's representation of a forest may have emerged from his interest in the shrine grove during his opposition to the government policy of merging shrines, and at the same time, from his research in the north and south of the Japanese archipelago. His interest in the north is shown in his theory of *yamabito*, 'mountain man', discussed in *Tohno Monogatari* (Tales in Tohno, 1910), *Yamabito Gaiden Siryo* (Unofficial Documents of Mountain Man, 1913), *Yamabito Ko* (Considerations on Mountain Man, 1917) and *Yama no Jinsei* (Life in the Mountains, 1926). According to Yanagita *yamabito* is the original natives of Japan. Folklore belief in *Oshira-sama* (the god of agriculture or the silkworm), *Zashiki-warashi* (the divine guardian of the house who has the red face of a child, the symbol of prosperity) and other legendary gods or ghosts, appears in the forests of the north. Yanagita's interest in the south was aroused by his research on immigrants to the Japanese archipelago, who brought the skill of rice-growing and are the ancestors of the Japanese of today. This interest led him to Okinawa and the southern islands.

A prototype of forest that produced Shintoism and shrines was found by Yanagita in *Otaki* (a holy mountain forest on an island) in Okinawa. What interests us is Yanagita's juxtaposition of the north and the south in Japan. People in the south see a forest as something like sanctuary, worshipping the forest and nature, while to the people in the north a forest means the world of spirits, a place where mountain man lives.

Yanagita must have observed coniferous forests during his stay in Europe, when he worked for the League of Nations for two years from 1921. Probably because of the stress caused by European colleagues' chauvinistic attitudes, the language barrier and other factors, he recalled his unpleasant memory of those days, writing: 'I felt lonely in winter in Geneva (*Kainan syoki*)'. Voluntarily resigning from the post on the occasion of the great earthquake of 1923 in order to return home to Japan, he widened his interest in forests in Japan from the temperate to the subtropical zone. While he was staying in Europe, he seems to have studied ethnology or cultural anthropology, which were then on the rise, and to have had a feeling of 'hatred for books' and a wish to 'speak through actions' (*Emile*) in common with Rousseau, a citizen of Geneva. Yanagita never looked at a forest from afar. He always tried to know and understand how a forest is related to the life and customs of people who live there. His attitude could be called 'understanding from within'. For that purpose, he went to the spot, talked with local people, and focused on the mentality they had inherited from their ancestors. He showed the same attitude to people as to a forest: appreciating the endogenous.

The 20th and 21st centuries have seen worldwide deforestation, from forests in East Asia to those along the Amazon in South America. The policy of modernization and the priority given by global capitalism to the economy are to blame. The complexity of the ecological problem can be analysed through the following five aspects: (1) political: harmonizing national interests; (2) economic: distributing resources; (3) scientific: collecting data in order to analyse precisely the earth's ecological status quo and predict the future; (4) philosophical: assessing the humanistic implications of science and technology; (5) cultural and ethical: considering people's way of life and their customs. Yanagita's attitude to the forest comes into the fifth aspect, among others.

The fundamental belief of Yanagita's folklore is that a region or land cannot be known except by those who live there, and that those people have their own way of life that is closely related to and coexists with the forest, which forms and preserves their belief and culture. This understanding comes from the dichotomy between central government and rural people, the state and ordinary folk, desk planning and field research, etc. In most cases, the second term is dismissed as symbolizing the 'pre-modern' (underdeveloped), whereas the first is seen as 'modern' (advanced). In opposition to the Meiji government's policy of state Shintoism (institutionalization of Shintoism under government control, *Kokka-shinto*), Yanagita tried to emphasize people's Shintoist belief in their family's guardian shrine. That is because he expected people's traditional life and customs to be the key for the Japanese to live independently and endogenously, while most Japanese intellectuals saw the modernization of Japan as only westernization from outside and nothing more.

With regard to ecological ideas, should we treat Yanagita's way of thinking as retrospective, looking back to a medieval type of peaceful community far from capitalism and globalism? In reality the complexity of the problems related to the earth's environment requires a supranational organization in this globalized age. However, when globalization, driven by political and economic motives, results in the destruction of forests, culture and customs, what we need is to preserve people's self-respectful customs and their power to continue creating an endogenous culture that maintains their dignity. Yanagita's ideas suggest the route to be followed.

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