The Spirit-Captives of Japan's North Country: Nineteenth Century Narratives of the *Kamikakushi*

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TŌNO TALES

Yanagita Kunio's *Tōno Tales* (*Tōno monogatari* 遠野物語) is in form akin to a writer's notebook. In it, Yanagita wrote down all the stories set in the Tōno region told him by a young townsman of Tōno. The book is a classic of folklore, but it has none of the usual trappings of a volume of folktales. There is no attempt to classify. There are no headings and no categories. The book is a ramble, and a hodge-podge. You will find fairy tales and legends and even an occasional myth in it; but you will also find the stuff of the tabloid newspapers: DISTRAUGHT YOUTH MURDERS MOTHER WITH SHARPENED SCYTHE or, HAYSEED KNIFES MOM.

The *Tōno Tales* is in fact no more nor less than a portrait of a town and a locale in a specific time. At the center of the region is the old castle town of Tōno, in what is now Iwate Prefecture. Surrounding the town are fertile valleys dotted with farms, and remote mountain forests frequented only by gun-toting hunters. Yanagita's informant, one Sasaki Kyōseki, is telling his stories and anecdotes in 1909; but much of his material has been gleaned from men in their seventies, and refers to incidents dating back to the earlier part of the nineteenth century.

Tōno is delineated as it was around the turn of the century, with all its visible earthly and human topography, and its invisible burden of memory and hauntings. The hauntings are there in the Ainu place names, echoing dim recollections of an ancient people driven from their land, and in the fresher recollection of aliens with blue eyes who settled briefly in the Tōno district in the mid-nineteenth century, practising the curious underground cult of Christianity. These aliens, some of them, were dispatched by the authorities (on crosses, as seemed appropriate),

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but their descendents lived on through intermarriage, and you will see that Mr. Sasaki reports rumors of strange folk in the forests who are uncommonly tall, and whose eyes have an unusual and menacing *color*.

Yanagita, or one of his readers, might have fashioned the *Tōno Tales* into a novel, something along the lines of *Winesburg, Ohio* or *The House of the Seven Gables*; but they did not. The material remains in its raw form, unused. As with Hawthorne's novel — Hawthorne's novel especially—we are at first glance introduced merely to a town, a byway, a specific household, and then gradually to all of the people of the town who pass along its quiet streets. But as we read on we find that we are examining, with a large and exacting glass, the interior lives of a folk who are profoundly and secretly concerned with crime. Some of this crime is real and some of it is only apparent; but for them the distinction is blurred, veiled in the mists of imperfect self-knowledge. And then little by little we sense that we are unwittingly gaining an acquaintance with some of the milder forms of harmless insanity. Through these very mists of ambiguity enter the gentle insane themselves; and we come to know their strangeness in the full setting of the harsh and brutish social order they have sought to flee. Yanagita's book anticipates a great literary work that was never put to paper, but is there for the reader to create in his mind, by his own fireside and in his own time.

The *Tōno monogatari* is anecdotal more than it is fantastical. It presents the folklorist with the question he does not like to be asked: the question of the reality of folk narrative. Characters who appear quaint and just a bit spooky may in fact have been real human beings seeking asylum in strangeness. Tradition accepts them as ghouls and goblins, thus acquitting itself of any further responsibility for them. The folklorist may naively do the same by not asking himself who these creatures really were, and thus wonder at the circumstances of their pitiful lost lives.

Testimony of the Spirit-Captives

A farm girl goes into the mountains to gather chestnuts, and never returns. Several years later a hunter happens upon her in a forest cave, and asks her where she has been. She tells him that she was captured, that day, by a tall man with oddly colored eyes. She has had many children by him. He has taken them all away, because he says they are not his. She thinks he may have eaten them. Every few days, four or five of his chums come and fetch him, and they go off somewhere for the rest of the day, probably to town, for he always returns with food and supplies. She says she has thought of escaping, but she simply hasn't had the opportunity (!). The hunter takes his leave; she pre-

sumably does not ask to go with him [7].[1]

A woman disappears from her village. She is found, alone in the forest, by a hunter. She tells him that she was captured by a man, whom she does not describe. She says that she has had many children by him, and he has eaten them all. Nonethless she is his wife, and she must and will stay with him. She asks the hunter to go, and leave her as he found her, and *not tell anyone that he has met her* [6].

A young girl is at play under the pear tree in her yard one evening toward dusk, and in the next instant she is gone, vanished. Thirty years later the occupants of her old family home are surprised by a visitor whom they recognize at once as this child, now grown to womanhood. She looks haggard and old. She is silent, except for the half-apologetic remark that she "just wanted to see everyone once more"; and then she departs as silently and mysteriously as she came [8]. Evidently no one attempts to follow her, and no one asks her to stay. Her story remains untold. No one wants to hear it. They know what it is. She is *kamikakushi* 神隠: literally, she has been hidden by the *kami*, by the spirits. She has been enslaved by some supernatural being. So, at least, do the townspeople say of these eerie folk. Of themselves they say little. Their captors, by their accounts, are quite human. A bit cannibalistic, perhaps; but reasonably domesticated and thoroughly monogamous.

The key, perhaps, lies in what the testimony of the *kamikakushi* tells us about the *kamikakushi*, rather than what it tells us about their so-called captors. It is clear that they want their new lives, their secret lives, to remain secret. They are hidden, if not in hiding; and they want to remain hidden, invisible to "polite" society—which, one suspects, they find less than polite. They fear discovery; they do not wish to return to their old lives. Their most important testimony is their silent testimony.

A bamboo cutter, deep in the woods, suddenly sees coming toward him a woman with a vacant look. She carries a baby on her back, in a halter ingeniously fashioned from a wisteria vine. Her kimono is tattered and patched with what appear to be leaves. Without a word or a sign of recognition, she walks past him, hardly aware of his existence. She is *kamikakushi* [4].

A hunter in the deep woods sees a beautiful woman with long, straight hair seated wistfully on a rock. Without giving the matter a second thought, he raises his gun to his shoulder and shoots her. He is a murderer, please note; but nothing is said of that. The trouble, our narrator seems to be telling us, is not with the hunters; it is with these silent, dreamy, estranged beings.

Having killed her, our hunter thinks to take a lock of her hair to show his friends. Content with a day's work well done, he rests under a tree, and dozes off. In that penumbral state of half sleeping and half waking, he is vaguely conscious of a tall man (presumably the woman's bereft companion) approaching him, and gently retrieving that purloined lock of hair, leaving the hunter unharmed [3].

On a mountain outside Tōno, there is a shrine where travelers along the mountain roads may rest. They often scribble strange experiences they have had in the mountains there, as a sort of graffiti. One such scribble reports an encounter with a strange girl, with her long hair hanging straight, who says not a word, but just smiles her Mona Lisa smile [49].

A charcoal maker is in the deep woods, gathering timber for his work. Night comes, and he pitches his tent, using a straw mat to cover the entrance. In the night, a strange woman with her long hair hanging straight raises the flap and stands for a time, silently looking in [34].

It is early evening, at the workshed of a rural matchstick factory. A strange woman appears, and stands in the doorway, looking in. She laughs a mocking laugh [75a].

In all these stories, you will note, the estranged person is a woman; and she shows her alienation from the civilized folk of Tōno occasionally by her mocking laughter, but more often by her stony silence—and by her undone hair, which hangs long and straight down her back. She has no need of a hairdresser. No one says that she is uncombed, or unbrushed, or unbathed. She is simply a creature of nature. She has reverted to the wild state, in keeping with her surroundings. She is like the animals: clean and kempt, yet a wild thing. That is why she may be shot with impunity—and perhaps should be.

When we reach this point of understanding, we are beginning to see matters from the viewopint of the hunter and the townsman; and so it is time to learn more about the polite society these wild *kamikakushi* folk sometimes mock, sometimes fear, sometimes miss, but always avoid with the greatest care.

Glimpses into the Lives of the Townfolk

We have already referred to Tōno's tabloid-style murder case. As is not uncommon in Japan, we find in this cozy household a farmer, his mother, and his wife. The mother is exceedingly cruel to the wife—and this also is not uncommon. The wife is often obliged to leave home and seek temporary refuge in her parents' home. One day the farmer rises in the morning, calmly remarking to himself, " I'll have to kill mother." He locks all the doors, considerately provides his mother

with an indoor potty, and proceeds to sharpen his scythe. The wife pleads; the mother pleads; the mother screams; the townsfolk rush in; the deed is done. The farmer is briefly detained by the police, but they decide he is not responsible, and send him home, where he (and his wife?) live out their lives in relative tranquility [11].

There is a village idiot in Tōno. He ambles through the streets in his idle way, picking up bits of wood and sniffing them. Now and then he tosses a rock at someone's house and shouts "Fire!" That night, or very soon after, the house burns down. He is called Yoshikō the Fool. No one, evidently, thinks to call him Yoshikō the Incendiary [96].

Every now and then a child is born in greater Tōno who has a conspicuously red face, or red skin all over, or a big mouth and webbed hands. Such a child is immediately identified as a *kappa* 河童, and put to death by being hacked to bits (and the pieces placed separately in small *sake* tubs and buried)—or else simply abandoned at the crossroads (from which they quickly disappear, retrieved by their unnatural kin). A rumor is spread that the mother of the child was making whoopee with a river demon. Tōno is, culturally speaking, not so far from Salem, Massachusetts [55, 56].[2]

The story of the hunter who shot the girl [3] has already been told; but here is another story of a cruel hunter. He is toasting himself some rice cakes for supper in his camp. A strange man with a shaved head (this is our first *kamikakushi* male, please note) enters, takes some of the rice cakes, wolfs them down, and departs, saying not a word. Next day, the hunter is ready for him; he heats some smoothly rounded stones with his rice cakes. The stranger comes in, gulps one down, and rushes out in awful pain. The hunter finds the man's body in a ravine the next day. He is quite pleased with himself [28].

There is no need to belabor the point. Mountain men and mountain women (as these quiet strangers are sometimes called) may at times appear gruff and tongue-tied, but they are gentle people at heart. Their townsman counterparts carry blunderbusses, and claim the power of death over animals—indeed over all wild creatures that do not take their place obligingly within the pale. If the silent people of the forests are in hiding, they are in hiding from these cruel folk of the town. The townfolk call them *kami*-hidden, implying that they are possessed by demons. The mountains and woods are alive with *kami*, and with *kami* power; and that power is perceived by the townsman to be a demonic power, a power hostile to the settled life of village and farm. The *kami* who hide or posses or enslave these lost souls of the forest are malicious *kami*. The woods—nature itself—are malicious, and alien to town life.

But are the *kamikakushi* folk enslaved? To the extent that they may consider themselves hidden by the *kami*, or even hidden in the *kami* (and we do not know that they do), there is a sense in which they are thereby sheltered, cloaked and protected by the *kami*. The *kami* of forest and mountain might be thought of as their guardian spirits, their watching angels. They are estranged from human society (we are never told of their lives before their disappearance into the woods, and so we can only guess how and why they might have become so estranged); but they are adopted by the *kami*, and shielded by them.

Now, this is probably not an accurate picture of their true, inner, mental state. When they speak of their protectors (usually women speaking of oddly tall and carnivorous men), they speak of them with ambivalence. Their protectors are also their captors. They fear them, but are loyal to them. The mountain man is demon, master, husband and provider, all in one. But the townsman's choice of the word " hidden " in characterising (nay, stigmatizing) these bewildered souls suggests depths of understanding that are surprising. If we did not know better, we would suspect the Tōno folk of a measure of sensitivity. For these mysterious folk of the woods are surely nothing less than gentle souls who have been irreparably damaged by a violent society. They have gone into the woods as the Lord Buddha did, seeking respite and healing. Yet hiding from madness, they may, like Launcelot, have found in the woods a greater terror, the terror of a vast loneliness and an awesome darkness. Chastened by nature's awful inconstancy and enormity, they are left speechless, vacuous, gentle and fearful.

In the ninety-third chapter of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville tells the story of a young boy who has gone overboard in the chase for a whale, and is left to flounder in the waters until he can be rescued an hour later, when the chase boats can return for him. Swimming in the open ocean, says Melville, is easy, in calm weather; but watch how sailors, bathing in a dead calm, hug their ship. For that abandoned boy, the awful lonesomeness must have been intolerable. " The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it? "

The boy is rescued, but he has gone mad. " The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes. . . . He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad."

That boy was *kamikakushi*.

POSTSCRIPT

Yanagita followed his 1910 publication of the Tōno Tales with a sequel, containing an additional 299 stories and fragments.

A fisherman sits by the river bank grilling his catch. A beautiful woman carrying a parasol saunters toward him, from out of the woods. He heaves a rock at her, and says, " None of your tricks, Mr. Fox; I'll not give up my dinner." A man appears with a scythe, and begins cutting the grass growing alongside the river. " You can't fool me, Fox," he says, chucking another stone. Dusk falls. Our fisherman spies a procession of paper lanterns, far across the river. " What a sight to see," he muses; " a fox wedding! " A moment later he turns and finds his fish are gone [Sequel, 195].

Of course, some stories are told to amuse. They exist to be told. Story-telling is a congenial social entertainment, a country pass-time. It is the embarrassment of the academic that he is sometimes serious when it is quite inappropriate to be serious. But let's risk it, this once. Our fisherman: has he invented his tale from whole cloth? Or *did* a strange woman, then a man, approach him from the woods, as he says? If he knows his fox tales, and *if* he has taken them at least half seriously, his behavior is quite consistent with his understanding, and is not surprising. He has followed the cowboy's motto: shoot first, ask questions afterwards. It is not the way to understanding; but he is not interested in making new friends, just in having his dinner.

As for the story, we delight in its ambiguity. The fisherman may be a fool; naive, and more than a little afraid of the woods, and the dark. Or he may be very smart, and take his listener for a fool. Or then again, he may know that his listener enjoys playing the fool as much as he does, and so they share an unspoken joke. That is the way of rural humor.

The point is this: We think at first we have been hearing a fox story; but with just a little reflection, we find we have in fact been listening to a fisherman story. The fox is imagined; the strange woman, the grass-cutter and the moving lights may not be; the fisherman is a reality. One begins with the reality.

And now to return to our original theme: *kamikakushi* women. The story generally goes like this: a hunter meets a woman who had, years before, disappeared from the village. She tells of marrying a tall man with a strange glint in his eye, who eats their children. The hunter is real. So, in all likelihood, is the woman. The simplest explanation is always the best explanation. The tall man may exist; but his purported behavior is outlandish. He is imaginary, at least in part. The key to the story is in the woman's state of mind.

In Yanagita's Tōno sequel, the Tōno folk come out and say, on at least one occasion, what I have tried to suggest all along: that we are reading, in these *kamikakushi* tales, of a gentle form of insanity.

A hunter reports seeing a barefoot woman wearing tattered clothes, her hair hanging loose and wild. He raises his gun; she laughs; he hesitates; she vanishes in haste. The townsfolk, hearing his description, tell him *they know her*: she is the madwoman of Oguni, who disappeared into the woods four or five years before [111].

The Tōno sequel contains another first: the story [109] of a woman who is *kamikakushi* that mentions the circumstances that drove her into seclusion. She too is found in the forest, dressed in rags patched and mended with leaves. She says that she knows she cannot see her (townsman) husband and children again, but wishes she could, if " only from a distance." The children, hearing of this, go into the woods to look for her, but do not find her. The husband does not accompany his children. The townsfolk recall that she was last seen in town, standing silently by her household gate, after an angry domestic dispute. We are left to guess the rest. Was he a violent man? Did they quarrel often? Was his mother involved? Had she no parental home to escape to?

Much has been written about the *Tōno monogatari*. Richard Dorson, in his foreword to the Morse translation, compares the book to the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the brothers Grimm in its importance " as a landmark collection in the history of folklore studies " (Dorson 1975: x). Morse himself seems now inclined to stress its literary merits over its folkloric merits (1985: 16, 20, 23–23); and, indeed, Yanagita had literary aspirations and tastes—not incompatible, I think, with his role as path-finder of folklore studies in Japan.

Marilyn Ivy calls the book " a romantic, almost Gothic, work which nevertheless directly describes the realities of folk life "; the " Bible of Japanese folklore studies "; and " Yanagita's substitute for the ' novel ' (*shōsetsu* 小説) he never wrote " (1986: 4, 11).

Victor Koschmann has drawn attention to Yanagita's own speculations on the identity of the mysterious men of the mountains (*Yamabito* 山人). Yanagita was at first inclined to regard them as resisters of domestic imperialism who had fled the rising powers of the state by escaping to the hills; then he broadened his vision to include all who sought refuge from the settled life (Koschmann 1985: 146). In suggesting that these stragglers may date back to the very beginnings of Imperial rule, Yanagita seems to stand on uncommonly thin ice. In any case, some Tōno defections happened within the townspeople's memory. A household is mentioned, whose menfolk neglected their fields, preferring only to hunt and fish. Eventually they lost their lands and home, and moved

to a shack in the hills. Their hair hangs loose, their eyes glare; they are "like *yamabito*." Sometimes they feed on a songbird they have brought down with home-made bow and arrow [108].

Another story: In a village near Hanamaki there lives a man who is said to be descended from a Tengu who settled there many generations ago. The Tengu (a kind of mountain bird-man) liked to say he was the King of All Creation. He was very fond of *sake*, which he paid for with rusty coins. The present daughter of the household worked in Tōno for a time, as a prostitute. She was fond of eating stolen apples [99].

Yanagita was fascinated by marginality. His materials, gathered in Tōno, were largely what folklorists call "memorates." Again quoting Dorson (1975: xii): A memorate ("a remarkable and extraordinary experience told in the first person") "often grows into a legend" ("a collective property of a group of people with some common associations"). So these tales of the *Tōno monogatari* might one day have evolved into legends, had Yanagita not caught them as a photographer catches an image of a thing in motion, and freezes it in place. That is the wonder of the Tōno book. We are looking at tales in the making. Yanagita gives us a rare glimpse of story-telling as process, rather than product.

NOTES

1. Yanagita's text is divided into 119 numbered sections which will be cited by number, parenthetically, in the discussion that follows. The Japan Foundation, in 1975, published an excellent English translation, done by Ronald A. Morse under the title *The Legends of Tōno* (Yanagita 1975).

2. Salem, Massachusetts, was the site of the famous witchcraft trials of the 1690's, and also the locus of Hawthorne's novel, mentioned at the outset. Hawthorne's great-grandfather had in fact served as a judge at the trials—a piece of family folklore that haunted Hawthorne.

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