

Ethnologist Yanagita Kunio: Long road to recognition

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The glory won by Yanagita (Matsuoka) Kunio (1875–1962) is rarely attained by “real” humanitarian scholars, especially as he was dealing with such a narrow field of knowledge as ethnology. Yanagita was unknown to the general public before the war, but gained official recognition and nationwide fame in the post-war period. The reason for the wide recognition was that he studied and created reality. The reality was the people of Japan, mostly Okinawa residents.

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Matsuoka Kunio was the sixth son in a family with many children. He was born in 1875 in the village of Tsujikawa located in today’s prefecture of Hyogo. Kunio’s father, Matsuoka Misao, was a low-rank samurai, an expert in Chinese literature, and a doctor. The family ran into financial problems after the father was diagnosed with a mental condition and could not be a doctor any longer. So the elder son, Kanae, started medical practice in the Ibaraki prefecture, and invited Kunio to stay with him. Kunio was 13 at that time. There is a rather big difference between the lifestyles of Hyogo and Ibaraki, which might have evoked the future scholar’s interest in ethnology¹.

Kunio had to move again to attend high school – he went to Tokyo and stayed with another brother, Michiyasu, an ophthalmologist. By then, Michiyasu was adopted by the Inoue family and changed his last name. Inoue Michiyasu (1866–1941), already quite a celebrated poet, introduced Kunio to the writers’ community. He got acquainted with remarkable Mori Ogai, made friends with Tayama Katai and Shimazaki Toson, and personally knew Kunikida Doppo and Tokutomi Roka. Their influence inspired Kunio’s interest in writing poetry (*shintaiishi*), which was published in the magazine *World of Literature (Bungakukai)* and poetry collections. His poems were full of the epoch’s clichés: he was dissatisfied with ‘this world’, longed for mythic otherness, and hailed platonic love, which implied inevitable non-meetings, tears, and loneliness. Kunio’s parents died in 1896 when he was still in high school. The loss changed his life priorities. He did not part with his writer friends, but stopped writing poetry. The student in the *Wives* novel by Tayama Katai, the character based on Kunio as his prototype, said, “I am tired of poetry... My poetry is amateur. My eyes are now wide open. What’s the point in writing love poems? If you have time, you should better read a page on agrarian issues.”

¹ Seeking to avoid confusion, we always call Yanagita Kunio an ethnologist, although he is sometimes called a folklorist and ethnographer. To learn more about this largely scholastic argument, see: [Bronson 2008].

Indeed, Kunio developed a keen interest in the agrarian policy after he was admitted to the Tokyo Imperial University's Faculty of Law. He was wondering why Japanese farmers were so poor, and what needed to be done to improve their life. In other words, he stopped glorifying his personal world and chose to take care of the world of others, primarily people in the countryside – the primary source of material and spiritual life of the city.

Kunio refused to include poems in collections of his works, and described them as empty and useless. He never stopped being poetic though. Far from all his academic works meet the positivist criteria, his style is intricate, and his definitions are quite vague, which gives room for interpretation. In short, his scientific idea travels through space and time much faster than that of a “real” scientist.

Having graduated from the university in 1900, Kunio started his career with the Legal Affairs Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce. The establishment of industrial cooperative societies was the task of the day. Kunio traveled a lot around the country to give lectures at metropolitan universities and in provinces. He traveled all over Japan, from Sakhalin to Kyushu. The voyages forged his knack for communicating with various sorts of people, which was extremely important for an ethnologist, especially a Japanese ethnologist dealing with introverts who were not eager to interact with strangers.

Back then regions of Japan greatly differed from one another, which caught the eye of the official who was clearly demonstrating the makings of a scholar. The observations he made in that period provided field material for Kunio's inference. He published his poetry under the name of Matsuoka, and travel notes and articles as Yanagita. In 1901, Kunio was adopted by the old prosperous family of Yanagita. The family had no sons, and legislation of that period required that only a son inherit the family's fortune. Kunio moved to the Yanagita house, and married Taka, the daughter of Naohira serving in the Supreme Court, in 1904. It seems Naohira pulled some strings to ensure a fast career of his son-in-law. Michiyasu Inoue hardly stayed aside either. Being a protégé of Yamagata Aritomo, he was employed by the Imperial Household's poetics division in 1907, taught poetry to members of the Imperial Family, studied the poetic legacy of Emperor Meiji and classic literature, and became a member of the parliament's upper house in 1938.

It must have been by recommendation of his brother that Kunio Yanagita received a concurrent position in the Ministry of the Imperial Household in 1908 and was tasked with putting government archives in order. Yanagita headed the secretariat of the parliament's upper house in 1914. The position gave Yanagita access to top-ranking officials, many of whom he knew personally. He participated in preparations for the burial of Emperor Meiji (1912) and the inauguration of Taisho. The positions he occupied were largely technical and did not involve broad executive powers, but he was well aware of the sentiment of the bureaucratic community.

Even though he was a public servant, Yanagita longed for writing, and far from all his creations were work-related. Yanagita's prose covered different subjects: cooperative societies, travel notes, local customs, people's beliefs, archaeology, historical geography, and essays urging young people to follow the example of Russian and North European students and learn about rural life.

Yanagita's works dedicated to the rural community revealed that his vision of the situation contravened the strategic course of the government. The government saw the countryside as a source for industrialization, exports, and expansion, above all. The government encouraged exports of capital (primarily to Korea and Manchuria), and Yanagita disagreed and called for spending money on an improvement of the domestic situation in Japan. The international ambitions of the country, which proudly called itself the Great Japanese Empire, were at variance with Yanagita's aspiration for improving the life of people of the empire. The primary objective of measures proposed by Yanagita was the transformation of tenants (about two-thirds of Japanese farmers) into their own masters, which implied the eventual disappearance of the landlord class.

Yanagita had an opinion on the country's agricultural policy but too little leverage to influence it. He was a cog in the huge government machinery based on the principles of strict hierarchy. Yet scientific work gave him a much broader opportunity of being independent.

It was clear from the very beginning of Yanagita's ethnological activity that he prioritized the gathering of original folklore material. The first book by Yanagita directly related to ethnology was released in 1909. It was titled *Nochi no Karikoroba no Ki (Continuation of Hunters' Tales)* and contained stories told by the elder of the Shiiba village in the Miyazaki prefecture on the Kyushu Island. The book was not for sale and had a circulation of only 50 copies meant for friends and acquaintances. The next book titled *Tono Monogatari (Tales from Tono)* was published in 1910. The book included 119 legends told by a young writer from the Tono village in the Iwate prefecture, Sasaki Kizen (1886–1933). The book was a fruit of creative cooperation between the two young men who believed that folklore should be integrated into intellectual life of the city. The book, which was named Yanagita's trademark and a model of literary style after the war, had an initial circulation of 350 copies and received practically no feedback. In fact, the book provoked mixed feelings. Tayama Katai ambiguously described *Tono Monogatari's* 'magnificent savagery', and Yanagita clearly realized that his work "was at odds with the tide of time" [Oto 1990, p. 102].

Yanagita exhibited independent thinking and unwillingness to live by mainstream ideas. His writer friends were interested in Western literary trends and novelties and did not find the "vulgar" folklore attractive. Yanagita was not mature enough to write down the speech of his informers the way

it was (a standard practice for folklorists), but preferred to transform the stories told by Sasaki Kizen into the written literary language (*bungo*). This is why Yanagita was named the author of *Tono Monogatari*.

Numerous ‘societies’ and in-house seminars which lacked any institutionalized status were an intellectual manifestation of the then Japan, in addition to books and lectures. One of those organizations was the Local History Society (*Kyodokai*) founded by an influential official and publicist, Nitobe Inazo (1862–1933). To a large extent, the society was a response to the policy of the government, which energetically resumed reorganization of the impoverished countryside after the war against Russia. The government sought to increase agricultural produce, rid of regional diversity, and unify and homogenize rural life for the purpose of better governability of the nation.

The Local History Society held meetings at Nitobe’s home from 1910 till 1917. This “Village Society” was not an assembly of ethnologists, and reports delivered at its meetings addressed various aspects of rural life. The seminar gathered together people who felt nostalgic for the old Japan mercilessly destroyed by “modernization”. It was attended by officials (back then uniform thinking did not reach the stage that would keep them away from ‘dissidentish’ gatherings), geographers, agrarian scholars, and even Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1871–1944), who in 1930 founded the neoreligious organization *Soka Kyoiku Gakkai* (the forerunner of Soka Gakkai, a major neoreligious organization of contemporary Japan). Another permanent participant of those seminars was N. A. Nevsky (1892–1937), the gatherer of unique folklore material (especially about Okinawa) [Gromkovskaya, Kychanov 1978; Ikuta 2003; Baksheyev, Shchepkin (ed.) 2013]. Remarkably, the seminar failed to attract popular writers who were seeking inspiration in European capitals, rather than in the Japanese countryside. The time of writers praising village life had yet to come.

Ethnology was not an institutionalized discipline in the then Japan, and customs of “average” Japanese looked much more interesting to foreigners than to the people of Japan. Interestingly, the 1,000-volume encyclopedia *Koji Ruiien* comprising historical information about various aspects of Japan’s life from written sources (dating from the ancient times till the middle of the 19th century) did not have an ethnology section. The encyclopedia was published under the aegis of the Meiji government and reflected the viewpoint that the life of the country and its upper classes should be the subject of history. Since day one, the Meiji government was fighting ‘prejudices’, ‘backward’ customs, and rites, i. e. the actual focal points of ethnology.

We should say that the life of average people got some attention as time passed. Yanagi Muneyoshi (Yanagi Soetsu, 1889–1961), the founder of the influential movement Mingei Undo (widely recognized after the war) that sought to study, popularize, and support handicraft, started his activity in the 1910s. [Gerasimova 2016].

The late 19th – early 20th centuries saw high social mobility: lots of villagers received access to education and career opportunities. People born in villages or small towns who did not come from samurai or aristocratic families became the backbone of the elder generation of Japanese ethnologists. For instance, Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), another famous Japanese ethnologist usually put on a par with Yanagita, was born in a village. Those people were carriers of the tradition they were trying to preserve.

In 1913, Yanagita became a co-editor of the magazine *Local History Studies* (*Kyodo Kenkyu*, published until 1917), an organ of the Village Society. His partner was Takagi Toshio (1876–1922), who rapidly quitted his position in the magazine because working together with intolerant Yanagita burdened him. Since then, the magazine was published by Yanagita alone, which suited his independent nature. Yanagita admitted later that the breaking off with Takagi was his fault. [Oto 1990, p. 18].

The magazine publishing process was described by N. I. Konrad: “Ten to twelve authors contributed their articles to every issue of the small magazine. We were amazed at the large number of ethnographers cooperating with it. Once Nakayama [ethnographer Nakayama Taro] got tired of listening to us, and said, “See, these six authors are Yanagita Kunio, and these five are me.” [Gromkovskaya, Kychanov 1978, p. 48]. The remark might seem too radical, but the then Japan did not have many people capable of filling the ethnographic (ethnological) lacuna. Most of them were “village correspondents” sending their notes on local customs to the magazine, which had about 600 readers.

The magazine publishing required the search for authors. It was when Yanagita got acquainted with Orikuchi Shinobu and started active correspondence with acclaimed biologist Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941) who was interested in ethnology. Yanagita was a charming man who inspired interest in biology in many people, including young banker Shibusawa Keizo (1896–1963), a man who came from a big business family, engaged in ethnographic studies, and sponsored ethnographic projects in his spare time. He opened a small private museum in 1925 to exhibit folk culture artifacts.

Yanagita’s magazine published articles on agrarian relations and folklore. He was also interested in ethno-genesis. Consistent with contemporary ideas, he acknowledged that “our insular empire” was first populated by aborigines. The newcomers (the Japanese) had a higher level of culture (based on growing rice), they defeated the aborigines, and forced them to move to the mountains. The highlanders became a separate ethnos. Some of them were assimilated, and some remained as they were. Yanagita based his conclusions on evil spirits from the mountains mentioned in folklore tales he was collecting and studying. While describing and researching (mostly imagining) the life of Japanese highlanders, Yanagita compared himself to Rome’s Tacitus who gave a description of barbarian Germans. No doubt, the statement manifested the scope of his ambition.

Yanagita also indicated in his works that the tiny Shinto shrines scattered around the country where locals worshiped ancestral deities were the foundation of the Japanese lifestyle. They were actually the deity's descendants (children – *ujiko*). Village rituals changed a great deal under the influence of Buddhism and *shugendo*, the ancient belief in the tutelary deity – the patron of a family and a region, which survived until modern days. This belief is the force that bonds all Japanese together. It requires connection to the land, which only owners of this land can have. Thus, the demand that tenantry be renounced and land be given to those who cultivate it acquired socio-ethnic (elimination of poverty) and highly symbolic grounds: he saw the diverse Shinto cults as a factor bonding the nation.

The government also deemed Shinto to be a unifying factor, but advocated 'state' Shinto, its own creation. This cult centered on the emperor, who was also the supreme priest. For convenience purposes, the government merged sanctuaries and reduced their number. Sanctuaries were ranked by their importance and supervised by the Interior Ministry. Principal sanctuaries were given the state status and received funding from the budget. Yanagita described that situation as 'unnatural' and said it breached the centuries-old order. In turn, the authorities viewed state-owned sanctuaries as key links of the magic chain, which would protect great Japan and assist in its imperial undertakings.

Yanagita was not quite right about the centuries-old order: the 20th-century Japanese state was not the first one trying to take control of Shinto: the ancient centralized state acted in precisely the same manner [Meshcheryakov 2014]. Anyway, the "bona fide" Shinto was the subject matter of the dispute. Yanagita was an insistent, stubborn, and optimistic person and believed time would come and the ideas of people advocating state Shinto "will dissipate like clouds and vanish like smoke." [Kawada 1997, p. 30].

An altercation with the chairman of the parliament's upper house, Tokugawa Iesato (1863–1940), led to Yanagita's resignation from his position in parliament in 1919. He became a correspondent of the major newspaper *Asahi* and was tasked with sending reports from the ground and sharing travel impressions. The trip to Okinawa was special. From the economist's point of view, it was a backward and depressive region, but the ethnographer saw it as a treasure trove of old customs and beliefs. Yanagita thought that the Okinawa population was kin to the Japanese but his idea was not popular: Okinawa became a part of Japan shortly before that, and many "authentic" Japanese called Okinawa residents "strangers."

The patronage of Nitobe Inazo enabled Yanagita to go to Geneva in 1921 for working in the League of Nation's commission on mandated territories. Germany lost lands overseas as a result of WWI, and the Marshall Islands, the Marianas and the Caroline Islands became Japan's mandated territories. Yanagita used the occasion to attend lectures at the Geneva University, travel around Europe, and study works by leading European ethnologists and

anthropologists. These studies strengthened his determination to dedicate the rest of his life to science.

The life in Europe put a strong imprint on Kunio Yanagita. He clearly realized that he did not belong to the Western World, and suffered from the poor knowledge of colloquial language, uneasiness, loneliness, and racial abjection. The League of Nations' working languages were English, French, and Spanish, and Yanagita thought it was total injustice. After Yanagita got acquainted with an Esperantist at the Translation Bureau, he spoke with Nitobe Inazo, and they drafted a resolution establishing Esperanto as a working language of the League of Nations. Ten countries supported the proposal, but it was voted down by France. A resolution, which called for studying Esperanto in public schools all over the world, was adopted later. The decision had no practical results for anyone but Yanagita, who became a board member of the Japanese Esperanto Society in 1926.

The atmosphere of daily European life looked aggressive to Yanagita. In Geneva, he felt like a tiny islander surrounded by huge and arrogant people of the mainland. The issues addressed by the commission gave rise to sad thoughts about the fate of any islands. Looking back at the horrid flu (Spanish flu) epidemics of 1919, he insisted that while Europeans are staring at natives portrayed by Gauguin's canvasses, Samoa and Tahiti islanders are literally dying out. The Europeans live on a continent and view any islanders as provincials. They "observe" them but do not sympathize with them. The Japanese are no exception. The diplomats working at the League of Nations seemed cultured but their soft touch disappeared as soon as serious questions were on the table: the Japanese delegation's proposal to add a racial equality provision to the Charter of the League of Nations was voted down.

Having learned about the catastrophic earthquake which hit Tokyo and Yokohama on September 1, 1923, Yanagita returned home and started writing analytical articles for *Asahi* dedicated to social and, partially, political problems. The articles criticized the fascist regime of Mussolini, called for appointing civilians as the Japanese army and navy ministers, and condemned the ban on the Workers' and Peasants' Party. [Yanagita Kunio Zenshu, 1990. Vol 1, pp. 103, 120–122; Vol. 2, pp. 325–327]. His ideas contravened the increasingly militarist sentiment of the establishment. He also gave lectures on folklore and village history at Keio and Waseda universities.

In 1925, Yanagita and ethnologist Oka Masao (1898–1982), who is believed by many to be the founding father of the "real" ethnology ("academic" ethnology the way it is understood by the West) [Ishikawa, Kreiner (ed.) 2017], started to publish the magazine *Ethnology* (*Minzoku*), the first specialized magazine dedicated to this field of knowledge. Cooperation between the two scientists did not last – Yanagita quarreled with Oka, and the magazine publishing stopped in 1929. They quarreled because Oka wanted to publish a theoretical magazine containing translated works of foreign scientists, while

Yanagita preferred an exclusively Japanese ‘informative’ outlet and argued that the publishing of original materials should be the primary task. He had his reasons: material was required for starting a discourse, and the material had yet to be collected. It was an important task which needed to be tackled without delay. Japan took the path of modernization later than Western countries, it still had some folklore life left, but its days were numbered.

Yanagita was aware of works of the world’s leading ethnologists. Those scholars were mostly dealing with material collected in regions, which looked “exotic” to them and were still at the “primitive” stage of development. Yanagita was using exclusively Japanese material. He put emphasis on the importance of field work throughout his entire life, described his studies as “science of collection,” and contemptuously referred to the studies of his opponents as “science of reading.” [Oto 1990, p. 61]. Seeking to clearly define the area of his scientific and emotional interests, Yanagita called his studies “mono-ethnic ethnology” (*ikkoku minzokugaku*) addressed to the Japanese only. Ethnology is a “national science,” Japanese realities should be described in the Japanese language, and their description in a foreign (English) language would look like the British Museum’s exposition dedicated to the Ainu. [Maeda 2013, p. 152].

In 1928, Yanagita published a major book titled *Seinen to Gakumon (The Young and Science)*. This book is an attempt to understand the place of traditional culture amid the increasing spread of modernization (Westernization) in Japan. No doubt, the implementation of Western institutions and technologies increased competitive edge of Japan on the global arena, but it was also an extremely painful and contradictory process accompanied by the merciless destruction of the natural and social habitat. Yanagita noted that Western ethnology was a byproduct of colonialism and missionary work, because of which Western ethnologists were incapable of understanding Japanese realities. This can be done only by the Japanese, who should show correct ways and approaches to Western specialists. This is their historical mission. [Yanagita Kunio Zenshu, 1990. Vol. 27, pp. 345–346]. Notably, the book was addressed to the young. Yanagita was in his late 60s and believed that life experience enabled him to think categories of the future. He wanted not just to teach but also to lecture. Not just young Japanese but also mature Europeans.

Yanagita resigned as a member of the *Asahi* staff in 1930, and stopped cooperating with the newspaper the year after. A probable reason for his decision was the course taken by the newspaper, which backed Japan’s expansionist aspirations rejected by Yanagita. He always wanted the government to focus on domestic, rather than foreign problems. He also chose the future of the Japanese over the future of the country.

In 1929, old acquaintances of Yanagita (Orikuchi Shinobu, Oka Masao, Kindaichi Kyosuke (1882–1971), and some others) established the society

Minzoku Gakkai and the magazine *Minzokugaku*, but Yanagita refused to participate. He realized his academic interest and leadership ambition at home. Kunio left the ancestral home of the Yanagita family and built himself a residence customized for the needs of desk work and seminars in a Tokyo suburb. The home of British ethnologist Frazer was the prototype of his spacious house. It was more convenient to study ethnology in a house built in the European style. In contrast to the years of public service, Yanagita entered the new period of his life wearing mostly Japanese clothes. Ethnology was a new discipline, and the house had a wonderful library, including foreign books which one could not find even in the library of the Tokyo University.

The Yanagita residence started hosting weekly “Thursday meetings” in September 1933. At first, those meetings were not customary scientific seminars where participants would deliver reports by turn. In fact, those were solo speeches of Yanagita: he gave lectures taken down in shorthand by a listener (the lectures were printed later). The audience consisted of young scientists and persons showing interest in the subject who chose the academic occupation at some point in the future. The seminars had some female participants, which was quite unusual for Japanese science of those days. Even former Marxists, whom the totalitarian machinery forced to publicly renounce their convictions, were not barred from visiting Yanagita’s home.

All guests were younger than their host. As it frequently happens to charismatic persons, Yanagita was getting along with the young better than with people of his same age with a formed outlook. Yet it was not just about the nature of Yanagita, but also about the form of relationships in the Japanese academic community: it was divided into factions led by a sole person, who had an unlimited authority in the eyes of his pupils and wards. Those relations strongly resembled medieval guilds, and Yanagita deemed himself to be a man of the old world. The co-existence of two equal authorities in such institutions was absolutely impossible. Relations between institutions often left much to be desired because of such structure of intellectual space.

Today it may seem that Yanagita Kunio and Yanagi Muneyoshi were doing the same thing – they studied “folk culture” and integrated it into urban life. Still they were convinced they took different roads. Yanagita and Yanagi discussed the subject of their studies in public just once and were clearly displeased with one another. This is proven by the minutes of their conversation published by the magazine *Ethnology Monthly (Gekkan Mingei)* in March 1940. Yanagita said he was studying people’s life, and Yanagi said he focused on the way people’s life should be. Despite his charisma, Yanagita was an observer, and Yanagi acted like a priest. [Maeda 2013, pp. 120–133].

People who quarreled with Yanagita often called his style of communication dictatorial and criticized him for treating numerous village correspondents supplying materials as “anonymous soldiers” (the description given by Oka Masao), while “general” Kunio Yanagita got the fame. To some extent,

this critique demonstrates the nature of Yanagita; it also reveals contradictions characteristic of the field method, in which many people collect primary data but do not analyze it. The same problem occurs in archeology, which causes endless debates on who was the first to find an artifact.²

Yanagita was extremely productive: he published three books per year on the average. There were also lectures given by Yanagita everywhere to the general public and the university community. Truth be told, his energetic activity affected quality of his texts. They are full of repetitions and unfinished thoughts and statements. Yanagita was right when he described himself as the last man who received traditional education: there is a touch of essayism to his style, which is lacking integrity and modern subject-matter. The way some of his texts were created added confusion – those were Yanagita’s lectures taken down in shorthand by his pupils. Perhaps, Yanagita was aware of that, as at the end of his life he turned down the flattering offer to publish his collected works in full. He honestly admitted that his view on particular subjects changed several times during his life, which might mislead an unprepared reader. [Oto 1990 p. 183].

Yanagita’s “Thursday meetings” were highly significant for the establishment and institutionalization of Japanese ethnology and personnel training. A large-scale survey was conducted in 53 mountain villages in the period between 1934 and 1937. The work was done mostly by participants in the Thursday seminars, but the government provided the funding (the *Nihon Gakujutsu Shinkokai* fund was established in 1932) and Yanagita had to rename his seminar “The Research Institute for Studying Life of the Native Land”.

“Civilization” was spreading more slowly in the mountains than on the plains, which made the highlands a perfect source of ethnological information. The government was the driver of modernization crushing the traditional lifestyle, yet sponsored the recording of its remnants. Actually, the funding of destruction was way larger than the allocations for studying the disappearing reality. Importantly, traditional written Japanese culture mostly reflected realities of the land cultivating community; highlanders were deemed “backward” and despised. This is why the public appearance of highlanders had a high social significance. The same happened to fishermen studied after the survey of highland villages was finalized.

At the beginning of his study of highland villages, Yanagita was hoping to discover ancient culture to prove his old theory designating the population of remote mountainous regions as a different people. He did not manage to prove that. Demonstrating the truly Japanese politeness towards his teacher, Oto Hirohiko (1902–1990) wrote, “Regretfully, our study of highland villages failed to provide the teacher with important information [to prove that

² After giving a lecture in Kyoto in 2000, the author was asked why nobody knew about the worker who made the wonderful discovery, and the supervisor of excavations was in the news.

Yanagita's theory was correct]. Crucial differences between highland and farming villages were not proven either." [Oto 1990, pp. 66–67]. Whether he liked it or not, Yanagita focused on the idea of Japanese mono-ethnicity.

Yanagita turned 60 in 1935. For people living in the Far East, this is a pivotal date, which means that the person has completed the 60-year cycle. Yanagita widely celebrated his jubilee: lectures on ethnology and speeches by representatives of almost every prefecture lasted for a whole week. The event was so successful that its participants decided to establish a nationwide folklore society. The organization had 120 members and monthly published an eight-page bulletin with a circulation of 300 copies. The bulletin did not contain academic articles per se; it mostly presented brief primary materials collected by members of the Folklore Society. Sharp-tongued Oka Masao did not fail to note that the bulletin reminded him of a tailless dragonfly [Tsurumi 2004, p. 40].

We still have to admit that Folklore Society members did a lot to collect their material. They also gathered and classified regional vocabulary describing marriage, burial rites, etc. People clustering around Yanagita were not theoreticians, but rather down-to-earth ethnologists and local history experts.

There was a great deal of scientific work, but what else can we say about the public acknowledgement of Yanagita personally and the discipline called ethnology?

Of course, Yanagita was not an irreconcilable dissident: he had warm feelings for the Imperial Family and did not call for toppling the regime, but Japan was a totalitarian country, and the ethnological discourse of Yanagita was absolutely anti-totalitarian³. His focal point was "the people," and he assessed the current situation from the angle of interests of "average persons," primarily villagers. The official definition of Japanese subjects was "the emperor's people" (*komin*) or "faithful people" (*shinmin*). For his part, Yanagita called the Japanese *jomin*, the term he coined for everyone who cherished traditions (both villagers and townies). The emperor, who officiated at ancient Shinto rituals, played exactly the same role. This put the people on a par with the emperor [Tsurumi 2004, p. 67].

The idea contravened the official policy. In 1936, Japan was shaken by the high-profile case of Minobe Tatsukichi (1873–1948), a lawyer who invented the "organ theory" (*kikansetsu*). The theory declared the emperor the supreme "organ" of the Japanese state, an organism. He was supreme but still an organ with vast powers limited by the law. Minobe put the state above the emperor. His theory was formally recognized for a long time. Yet hysteria and a discussion launched in 1934 resulted in Minobe's "voluntary" resignation from the parliament and a ban on his works, because the emperor was not supposed to fall under any category. Historian Tsuda Sokichi (1873–1961) was banished from the university and briefly put in prison in 1940 for

³ Re description of Japanese militarism, see: [Meshcheryakov 2009].

his “erroneous” research of ancient sources and the history of the Imperial Family. In turn, Yanagita was attacked by adherents of the empire during the war, but spared real persecution. The main reason was that he never occupied any official positions and was too insignificant.

The subject of Yanagita’s studies compelled him to underline local specifics of beliefs, customs, and dialects, while official ideology put emphasis on the cultural and political homogeneity of the Japanese. Besides, Yanagita was rather critical of the existent land system and official Shinto. His remarks were absolutely impermissible sometimes. For instance, he said in a public lecture in 1935 that the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 did not show love for villagers⁴. Yet the Rescript, which proclaimed loyalty to the emperor as the main virtue of all Japanese, was a key text of Japanese totalitarianism studied by schoolchildren by heart.

Yanagita’s failure to blend into the official discourse was demonstrated by his attitude to history, a science solidly built into the totalitarian system. Yanagita acknowledged the importance of history by words, yet his deeds exhibit the undying inner need for swimming upstream. He agreed that studied objects were prone to temporal change, but was not satisfied with the universal principle of studying the object from the past to the present. Yanagita preferred moving from “the top to the bottom,” rather than the other way: he wanted to understand the present before looking into the past. The present was the focus of his ethnology. Yanagita borrowed the “reverse approach” from Yoshida Togo (1864–1918), a man of many talents interested in history, historical geography, and theater [Oto 1990, p. 15]. The “reserve approach” Yoshida used to write the history of Japan was not very popular, but Yanagita could not care less.

Yanagita criticized the official science of history from systemic positions. He claimed that historians based their research exclusively on written sources and were unable *in principle* to reflect the actual situation, considering that written documents refer to a violation of the norm, instead of the norm itself. This is not just about events happening in the country as a whole. The same approach is manifested by documents stored in village archives. In 1935 Yanagita wrote, “Most of those documents register natural calamities and plead for cutting taxes and giving financial support; there are also documents pertaining to legal disputes inside the village or between villages. In short, the documents reflect unusual events.” This creates an impression that the history of the Tokugawa epoch was a series of revolts and natural calamities, which was not true.” [Maeda 2013, pp. 57–58].

Justly indicating the limited nature of historical sources, Yanagita preferred not think about limits of ethnological material. As known, a major

⁴ In an interview given in 1950 he explained the 1935 criticism of the Rescript on Education: There is love for the home country, but there is no love for the home village, prefecture, and region. [Tsurumi 2004, p. 4].

methodological problem of ethnology and folklore studies is the time to which customs of “people” recorded by the observer belong.

Yanagita believed that the best evidence of the past was not annual records of deviations from the norm, but descriptions of the regular routine given, amongst others, by Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), a leading member of the “native studies” (*kokugaku*) movement. A key goal of Motoori’s life was to fight any Chinese manifestations, which made him highly suspicious of the chronological (annual) presentation of material customary for Japan as a harmful Chinese invention. In the opinion of Yanagita, the real science about the past is a “new *kokugaku*” based on ethnology, i.e. studies of the past to the fullest extent. His ethnology covers not so much rare “historical” events as daily realities, which were overlooked (or insufficiently indicated) by written sources but revealed the “soul” of people. The “time” encapsulated in this soul is not linear but cyclic, and historic events disrupt and hinder this cycle. A person is actually an exception from the general rule and the order. This is why Yanagita’s encyclopedic work of 1931 titled *Meiji-Taisho shisesohen (The History of Meiji and Taisho Epochs. Appearances)* observes the recent evolution, which is sometimes very fast, in various aspects of the daily life; the evolution does not involve or need concrete people to happen. The preface says, “This book is the result of my long-standing dissatisfaction with the biographic principle of the narration of history, so I intentionally avoid giving a single anthroponym. This book is not about emotions of its characters.” [Yanagita Kunio Zenshu, 1990. Vol. 26, pp. 12–13].

For the purpose of understanding Yanagita’s intentions better, you should remember that the work was written in the epoch of strengthening global totalitarianism seeking to create a cult of heroes in every regional inference. The government builds a pantheon of politicians (the emperor in the case of Japan), the military, and civilians: poets, writers, artists, scientists, etc. Pre-war/war culture was overexcited: poets and writers generated metaphors and hyperbolas for mobilizing people’s spirit and distracting from the reality which resulted in erosion of people’s mental resilience. It was the only way to gain the universal approval of the government, which declared an all-out war on China in 1937 and the U.S. and the UK in 1941 to free Asia from colonialism. There was no agitation characteristic of that period in Yanagita’s discourse. He focused on specifics, openly declared that existent books gave too much attention to “impressions” and “feelings”, and advocated a more detached approach, which would make contemporary books “classic literature” in the eyes of next generations. [Tsurumi 2008, pp. 96-99].

The aforesaid features of Yanagita’s discourse explain why he was denied any tangible official support before the war. He won the 1940 award of the newspaper *Asahi* for making a contribution to culture (it was the first award bestowed on an ethnologist), yet the award was private and came from the newspaper with which Yanagita was cooperating for a long time. The government bestowed the Order of Culture (founded in 1937) on other

people, such as Sasaki Nobutsuna (1872–1963), a literary critic and researcher of Manyōshū (the poetry anthology designated to express Japanese masculinity) in 1937, historian and policy expert Tokutomi Soho (1863–1957) (in 1943), and passionate publicist and opponent of the West Miyake Setsurei (1860–1945) (in 1943). The government established the Institute of Ethnography in 1943, but there was no place for Yanagita there. Of course, his age was advanced, but that was not the sole reason. The Institute of Ethnography was a branch of the colonial empire studying population of Japanese colonies. Back then, official ideology designated Japan as a multinational country, and Yanagita was opposed to colonial expansion, studied customs of the Japanese, and kept saying that Japan was a mono-ethnic nation. Yanagita's Folklore Society suspended its activity in 1943, when the Institute of Ethnography was established, until the end of war. They stopped publishing the bulletin the year after. No doubt, the severe wartime conditions were a factor, but it is a fact that the government chose to spend "ethnography money" on another project. The Imperial Rule Assistance Association (*Taisei Yokusankai*), a "non-governmental" organization sponsored by and utterly loyal to the authorities, refused to fund preparations for Yanagita's 70th birthday, and the organizers had to seek private assistance. Yanagita's conduct was also illuminative: due to his wish, the organizers excluded from the jubilee collection of works the articles by people who were either older than Yanagita or were not his pupils. [Tsurumi 2004, pp. 86–91]. Under any circumstances ethnologist Yanagita continued to demonstrate the extremes of his human nature.

Yanagita sometimes made 'patriotic' statements during the war; he was also a presidium member of the Society of Patriotic Writers, but all of his remarks were moderate and free from frenzy shown by many of his compatriots. He refused to include poetry written in his teen years in the collected works, but had no scientific works or essays to be renounced for ideological reasons.

U.S. forces occupied Japan after the war. The sociopolitical atmosphere completely changed: it was time of people who never hailed the totalitarian regime or benefited from its favors. Yanagita was in his seventies when he received true recognition, both from the authorities and the general public. In July 1946, he was appointed a counselor of the Privy Council, which, amongst other issues, discussed the new Japanese constitution (the Privy Council was disbanded in May 1947). In July 1947, Yanagita became a member of the Academy of Arts, and joined the Academy of Sciences in December 1948. He was elected a member of the board of the state Institute of the Japanese Language in 1949. Besides, he wrote new textbooks for the new Japan. Yanagita was decorated with the Order of Culture in November 1951. He was the first and only ethnologist to receive this award, and the Order of the Rising Sun (1962). Yanagita's popularity clearly exceeded the

scientific community, and his travel notes and essays were declared a model of literary style and included in modern literary anthologies.

The recognition of Yanagita derived not only from his personality but also from the subject of his experiences and studies. They focused on “people” consistent with trends of the epoch, in which ideas of democracy and “people” as historical subjectivity were widely spread. The new Japanese constitution written at U.S. experts’ dictation proclaimed people as the sovereign. Yanagita’s idea of people was close to Marxist-minded figures, who appealed to the masses and had rather strong positions; under those circumstances a great deal of thinkers and politicians were currying favor with them. The opinion that a group of militarists “deceived” people became common. Only a handful dared to think that people shared the responsibility of politicians. Yanagita did not succumb to time-serving political considerations and did not flatter people. He had the right to do so, because he loved people. He deemed ethnological studies to be a high mission and took a deeper look into the matter. In 1948 he called for using ethnology to understand why the Japanese fell for militarist ideas and believed their “leaders.” He thought that the clarification of those reasons would be a road to happiness and help fix the shortcomings of the Japanese people. [Yanagita Kunio Zenshu, 1990. Vol. 26, p. 582].

The opinion that people shared the responsibility did not win many supporters. Yet everyone liked Yanagita’s idea of Japanese mono-ethnicity, which became a key element of the state ideology. The last work of Yanagita, *Kaizo-no michi* (The Sea Way) (1961), touched upon another sensitive subject. Yanagita believed that ancestors of the Japanese who knew how to grow rice (Yanagita believed that rice was practically a hereditary feature of the Japanese) came to the archipelago from the south, and their ancient culture was best preserved in Okinawa. The idea was little related to historical data but responded to the public sentiment: Okinawa was governed by the United States, but Yanagita’s idea created an impression that the Ryukyu Archipelago was originally populated by the Japanese.

There is no documentary evidence of Yanagita’s “southern theory,” and it was definitively established in the end of his life that the old Japanese came to the land of Japan from the side of the Korean Peninsula. They were bearers of the culture *yayoi* (III century BC – III century AD), grew rice, and produced metal and a special type of ceramics. Archaeologists confirmed that the culture *yayoi* did not reach Okinawa, which made it impossible to say that rice cultivation migrated to the Japanese archipelago from there. Hence, professional scientists did not see Okinawa residents as prehistoric Japanese. Yanagita’s theory was based on his poetic imagination, rather than scientific data, which was actually why it impressed the Japanese so much. The effect was produced by ideas and artistry. The future literature Nobel Prize winner (1994), Oe Kenzaburo, wrote an afterword for the *Kaizo-no michi* in 1978. He praised Yanagita’s literary style and bold “imagination.” The remark of a

scientist could look skeptical, but a writer made it praiseful. Oe believed that the talented poetic discourse broadened the boundaries of Yanagita's ego, which traveled in time, penetrated ancient conscience, went beyond the Japanese archipelago, and made the Japanese and Okinawa a single whole, turning Yanagita into a great elder, a teller of epic stories. The influence of this discourse is so big that academic mistakes of Yanagita look insignificant: the goal he achieved was way more important, as his artistic imagination generated artistic imagination of other people [Yanagita 2011, pp. 362–364].

Long ago, when Yanagita was carried away by his “highland theory,” he used to complain about a lack of understanding on the part of his writer friends. Now a remarkable writer admired his talent.

There is a real historical fact behind the sublime or even slightly pompous language of Oe Kenzaburo: Yanagita contributed to the Japanese feeling of kinship with the people in Okinawa. This sentiment gave rise to a strong anti-American movement, which demanded that Okinawa be returned, and achieved that goal: Okinawa returned to the Japanese jurisdiction in 1972. It was a landmark event in the history of the leftist movement, which rapidly declined after it lost the Okinawa “resource”. Actually, the “success” of the leftist movement was a relative thing: the U.S. military bases which loyally served America during the “valiant” Vietnam War were still in place, and the attempt of Prime Minister Hatoayama Yukio at moving (not closing) the Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in 2009 resulted in an epic failure and resignation. The cabinet was less than one year old by then, which made it one of the shortest government tenures in the Japanese history.

Japan had a real Yanagita boom in the 1970s. He was glorifying unnamed persons his entire life and became a real people's hero. Lots of works and reference books described him as the founder of Japanese ethnology and a remarkable thinker. His works are studied at school history lessons, abstracts from his essays and travel notes are published in literature textbooks, and the Tono area is seen as “the birthplace” of all Japanese.

The Yanagita boom was related not only to his name. It would be right to say that the name of Yanagita became popular because the country was going through an ethnological boom. Many intellectuals were disappointed at socialist ideals and readily hailed the classless forms of people's objectification practiced by Japanese ethnologists. But there were still more important factors. The primary source of the ethnological boom was the nostalgia for the good old Japan, whose habitat was mercilessly destroyed by modernization. It offered nice new refrigerators, television sets, and cars in exchange for ruins. The Japanese were unable to refuse the highly tempting offer but were still suffering from nostalgia. And ethnologists offered psychological assistance and “pills” – academic works which dulled the pain of the loss. The Japanese lifestyle was lapsing, the rural population was rapidly declin-

ing, the Japanese essence was losing its material form and developing into a theoretical category, but this illusory structure was solid.

The ethnological boom was integrated into a broader cultural and ideological trend called *Nihonjinron*. Its primary task was the self-description of the Japanese fearing to lose their identity under the pressure of Western values and ideas. People who called themselves ethnologists were helpful in this area, as well. The public pathos of their research and deliberations aimed to prove their own existence.

Japan raised a huge number of ethnologists. An overwhelming majority of them follow Yanagita's example and make Japanese ethnology their profession. Their books are published in Japanese, and their core audience is Japanese, rather than the community, which proudly calls itself international because it speaks English. From time to time, this community bears a childish grudge against Japanese ethnologies for writing in an obscure language. Here is a particularly defiant passage:

“We believe that Japanese folklorists have a lot to say but the problem is they are unable to convey their relevance to broader audiences. There are a number of interconnected factors, the most obvious of which is the language barrier. Being highly efficient in their native tongue, Japanese folklorists are unwilling to publish their research in English, not to mention other languages. Like it or not, English has become the language of international science. We admit this is not fair and regret that only a few Western scientists speak Japanese and other languages of Asia, but the present-day reality is such that this abnormal situation can hardly be fixed in the near future” [Schnell, Hashimoto 2012, p. 106].

This passage brings to mind the idealist project of Yanagita and Nitobe Inazo, who suggested that Esperanto become a working language of the League of Nations. The regrets of “international” scientists prove their idealistic wish to make Japanese ethnology an “objective” science. Yanagita insisted that an ethnologist should love and sympathize with the object of one's studies, while in this case “objectivity” is synonymic with “indifference”. Like it or not, Japanese ethnology as a sociocultural and ideological institute does not want to join the international community; it is a part of the powerful discourse aiming at self-description and self-construction of the ethnos, and the capricious demand to speak English sounds like the reproof of a Japanese writer who keeps writing in his native tongue. I do not rule out that Japanese ethnologists (folklorists and ethnographers) take the accusations of their “Japanese” essence as a compliment. A Japanese ethnologist should be treated as ethnic Japanese above all. Exceptions only confirm this rule.

I personally understand the criticism of many Japanese ethnologists for being “obsessed” with Japan, which creates an illusion of uniqueness and special nature of Japan and its people. Yet I very much doubt that, no matter what Schnell & Hiroyuki might say, this seclusion and even “narrow-minded-

ness” will be highly unfortunate and result in their “marginalization”. Such threats are unlikely to scare Japanese ethnologists, who cannot be marginalized from their own population of over 120 million people. Just 17 universities of North America teach ethnology, and an ethnology thesis can be defended in only 11 of them. Meanwhile, Japanese universities have 57 post-graduate ethnology programs, and a huge number of local history and ethnology museums operate across the country. The Japanese ethnologic society, *Min-zokugaku Gakkai*, has about 2,300 members. There are dozens of other institutionalized and amateur organization. The question is who is marginalized.

An academic mind seeks to get to the truth and dismiss social myths. However, any academic argument about “imaginary communities” and “invented traditions” is nothing compared to faith in genuine traditions and the primordial existence of the nation. Knowledge cannot defeat faith because it speaks to it in an unclear and unconvincing language. I believe that the belief (conviction) is a necessary element of psychological comfort. Faith gives an integral idea of the world, which science is unable to provide. Faith knows answers to all questions, and all science can do is promise it might answer some of the questions in the future. Is it bad? The belief in one’s uniqueness and chosenness was the source of Japan’s expansionism and aggression, which resulted in a crushing defeat in WWII. Some of modern critics reproach Japan for the idea of Japanese monoethnicity, which they see as a part of that aggressive system. The idea was pushed for most consistently, aggressively and without proof by Osamu Murai [Murai 2004]. Yet they forget that those ideas had little significance before and during the war. The popularity of Yanagita reached its peak *after* the war, and post-war Japan is clearly a model of non-aggressive sentiment both in domestic relations and foreign policy. Can other countries boast that?

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