

# Lafcadio Hearn and Yanagita Kunio

Who initiated folklore studies in Japan ?

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Ladies and Gentlemen, the title of my paper is “Lafcadio Hearn and Yanagita Kunio : Who initiated folklore studies in Japan ? ”

As you may know, Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) is called the founder of Japanese Minzokugaku. He conducted extensive research into, and established the methods and framework for folklore studies in Japan.

However, the works of Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) were already widely read when Yanagita started his folklore studies. And, as is often pointed out, one of the main characteristics of the works of Hearn is his deep concern with folklore. He was interested, and recorded the legends, superstitions, and religious customs in New Orleans, Martinique, and in Japan. Folklore was always his means to understand the mentality of the people.

Today I would like to show that although Yanagita established folklore as a new academic field in Japan, he was inspired by Hearn in certain aspects, and that this influence, or perhaps we might say, emanation of imagination from Hearn to Yanagita, played a role which was not insignificant in deciding the character of Japanese folklore studies.

Yanagita was a man who had an extensive career. He was a poet in his younger days, and also worked as a government bureaucrat and diplomat for many years. He then worked as a journalist, traveling all over the

country and publishing numerous books on Japanese folklore and culture. But perhaps for the general public, he is best known as the author of *The Legends of Tono* (1910), a collection of tales and legends of the Tono district in northern Japan.

Lafcadio Hearn wrote 14 books on Japan. The first book, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), which established his name as a writer on Japan, is a collection of travel sketches and essays about his stay in the Izumo district. In these essays, he depicted the legends, traditional customs and popular beliefs of the district. The book shows his unique style of combining travel-writing together with folklore studies, which was effective in giving readers a living image of life and culture in Japan. Hearn then gradually became more involved in retelling ghostly legends, and *Kwaidan* (1904), his last and perhaps most popular book, is a collection of such retold stories.

Yanagita Kunio thought highly of Lafcadio Hearn. His high evaluation of Hearn is to be particularly noted, because most of Yanagita's followers, especially the academic scholars of Minzokugaku, tend to underestimate Hearn's role in folklore studies. For example, one scholar, Maruyama Manabu, acknowledged that Hearn did have an insight into folklore and did write down legends, but considered that he lacked theory, and that his writings were not systematic. From a scholar's standpoint, this was deemed a crucial defect of Hearn as a folklorist.

Yanagita himself was free of such academic rigidity in appreciating Hearn's work. In his *Cultural History of the Meiji-Taisho Period* (1921), he stated that no foreigner would ever be able to observe and understand Japan better than Hearn. Yanagita also remarked in *Seinen to Gakumon* (1928), that Hearn's first work, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, succeeded

in grasping the Japanese mentality much better than *Japan: an attempt at Interpretation* (1904), an assiduous study of ancestor worship in Japan. This indicates that Yanagita approved of Hearn's style of combining folklore with travel writing.

Another interesting fact about Yanagita's references to Hearn is Yanagita's repeated mentioning of Hearn's "Miminashi-Hoichi". "Miminashi-Hoichi", included in *Kwaidan*, is one of Hearn's most well-known tales. (According to the index in the collected works of Yanagita, Hearn's name appears twelve times in his works, more than half of them refer to the tale of "Miminashi-Hoichi".) However, Yanagita does not discuss the work of Hearn; he simply cites the tale as typical in the explanation of a certain folktale type, but we can perceive through his references that the tale had left a strong impression on Yanagita.

Yanagita, in his efforts to establish folklore as an academic science in Japan, is known to have comprehensively studied the works of contemporary English folklorists. (Yanagita left a huge library collection of these works and he had the habit of underlining sentences, and writing in question marks and comments as he read.) It has already been pointed out by several scholars that he had been influenced by the works of, for example, George Lawrence Gomme, who was the president of the English Folklore Society.

But it was mainly the framework, the methods and theories of English folklore studies that Yanagita adopted. There was one point on which he did not agree with Gomme, and that was the idea of "survivals", which, in fact, constitute the central theme of Gomme's folklore studies, as can be seen in his book, *Ethnology in Folklore* (1892). Gomme thought of old customs and folk beliefs as "survivals" and "fragments" of ancient

cultures destroyed long ago. And he considered that the aim of folklore studies should be the research into these “survivals” of ancient times, which remain “isolated,” “meaningless” and “useless” in modern civilized society.<sup>(1)</sup> (The phrases I just quoted in Gomme’s book are the ones that Yanagita underlined, writing in question marks in the margin) Here in Gomme’s idea of folklore there is no continuity between the past and the present culture. However, what Yanagita sought in his folklore studies was , on the contrary, a culture where the past was alive in the present, and where ancient beliefs and images continually have significance in the minds of the people and where old practices are observed by the community. And I believe that it was on this point that Yanagita appreciated and was inspired by the works of Hearn.

From this perspective, I would like to examine *The Legends of Tono* in relation to Hearn’s works. It is one of Yanagita’s earliest publications and it marks the starting point of Yanagita Kunio as a folklorist.

The book, as I referred to earlier, is a collection of tales and legends of the Tono district. The tales are numbered from 1 to 119, with a table of contents classifying them according to type and theme.

The tales range from the ancient myths of the mountain goddesses surrounding the Tono plains, to ghostly stories of encounters with spirits. There are the deities of the house and of the village community, and the supernatural inhabitants of the mountains. We see visions of the other world, we also see tales of communication between the living and the dead, and between humans and animals.

The predominant setting of these narratives is the deep mountains surrounding Tono, and Yanagita himself calls these tales “the legends of the mountains and the mountain people.”

The thematic contents of the legends have already been discussed from many perspectives: sociological, ethnological, historical, psychological and so on. But I find the following two points especially significant:

First, the tales are related as actual living experiences. The legends and beliefs are vividly alive and are not to be ascribed to the vanished past in contrast to the modernized contemporary world.

Secondly, the tales are chosen and retold by Yanagita, representing his basic world view. The legends are not recorded in an academic style merely to be preserved as historical data.

Now, the first point, that the legends are true and living facts, is emphasized by Yanagita himself in the introduction.

He begins by explaining that he had written the stories down, word by word, just as they were told to him by a young man named Sasaki from Tono. Yanagita then goes on to narrate his own visit to Tono, which comprises the main part of the introduction. And finally, Yanagita finishes the introduction by declaring that, unlike “the case of the 900-year-old *Konjaku-monogatari*, whose tales existed in the past and are now old, the legends of Tono reveal facts which exist before our eyes”. He repeats that “the legends are present-day facts. This alone is their *raison d’être*”<sup>(2)</sup>

Most of the tales are related as the experiences of relatives, friends and neighbors of Sasaki. And as if to give a kind of documentary quality to the tales, Yanagita gives information about when and where exactly the things described happened, the names of the persons involved, where the witnesses live now, and so on.

But I believe that there is a hidden device which gives reality to the tales. And that is the framework enveloping the legends, which is established by the description of Yanagita’s visit to Tono.

Yanagita begins by stating that it was late August when he visited Tono. Forty kilometers from the town of Hanamaki, he traveled through “green mountains and open fields”. When he got to Tono, he rented a horse and rode around the nearby villages. He notices the numerous tombstones alongside the road, and from a hilltop he views the ripening rice fields of the valleys. The surrounding mountains are veiled in a thin mist. At the shrine on a hill there is a festival and he watches the traditional ‘dance of the deer’. He listens to the music of the lute, and the strange songs sung so low that he could not understand the words. The sun sets, the wind begins to blow, and Yanagita reminds us that it is the Bon Festival time. In the growing dusk, he notices red and white flags hung outside the houses to welcome back the souls of the dead. And he continues as follows: “a calm settled on the mountains of the souls. The dusk of twilight hovered over them all and then covered them up”<sup>(3)</sup>

This passage, in which Yanagita narrates his visit to Tono, has a striking similarity to the journey that Hearn described, in a chapter titled “Bon-Odori”, in the book *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*. It also was in late August. It was a four-day journey, Hearn says, “over the mountains to Izumo, the land of the Kamiyo, the land of the Ancient Gods,”<sup>(4)</sup> The long route through the valleys, with rice fields ascending the slopes “like enormous green flights of steps”, and the mountains in the distance soft in mist. Hearn describes the simple stone carvings of faith alongside the road, and when he finally reaches the village of Kamiichi, he notices “through the warm dusk, lights, colored lights, the lantern of the Bonku, suspended before each home to welcome the coming of beloved ghosts”, “for this is the first night of the Festival of the Dead”.<sup>(5)</sup> Hearn then hears a distant sound of music and he is led to see the Bon-Odori. He is enchanted by

the ancient dance performed in the divine night, and calls it the Dance of the Souls.

Hearn's "Bon-Odori" is not only the poetic record of his actual journey, but is situated in the book, *Glimpses*, as a prelude to other essays in which he introduces various legends and folklore of the Izumo district. And just as Hearn effectively leads us into "the land of the gods", so does Yanagita with his travel narrative, prepare us to enter the world of Tono. The readers envision in their minds the journey, and thus have the impression that they are actually listening to the tales in the landscape of Tono, although the legends were in fact written down in Yanagita's house in Tokyo.

The two journeys of Yanagita and Hearn both took place in August. And both depicted the countryside and the village scenes at the time of the Bon Festival, when the dead visit the living.

Hearn was in fact traveling in August because he was being transferred to Matsue as a new teacher starting work from September, and he perceived and depicted the magic of the season.

And for Yanagita, who, as I mentioned at the beginning, had appreciated Hearn's travel essays, it also had to be August. He had already finished writing down the stories from Sasaki nearly eight months previously. His collaborator, Mizuno Yosui, who was a novelist and also had listened to Sasaki's tales, had visited Tono in Spring, and also wrote about his journey to Tono. But Yanagita waited until August. He had purposely chosen this season when people move back in place and time and think of the dead, the season when the imagination of the people is directed towards the other world.

Yanagita may have followed in the steps of Hearn by embedding

folklore in the landscape. And thus the basic outer form of the travel narrative, into which the legends of Tono are woven, gives the ghostly legends an intense and live quality, as is also the case in Lafcadio Hearn's *Glimpses*.

The second important point I referred to earlier is that the legends, in a way, reflect Yanagita's own world view.

For example the vivid description of the Yamabito, the enigmatic mountain dwellers, allows us to perceive a touch of the contemporary age of Yanagita.

Yanagita relates, in the first tale of the mountains, how a hunter went deep into the mountains and came across "a beautiful woman seated on a rock combing her long black hair. Her face had a beautiful whiteness about it."<sup>(6)</sup> This vision has elements similar to that in the dream of a Celtic woman that Hearn had when traveling in Izumo. In that dream in "By the Japanese Sea" ( *Glimpses* ), a woman seated on a pedestal loosens her long hair till it falls coiling upon the stones. The Tono mountain woman is always described as being tall and slender, fascinatingly beautiful, with long waves of black hair. Such a figure has the ambience of the females depicted in Art Nouveau. In fact, after *The Legends of Tono* was published, Sasaki wrote to Yanagita that he had the impression of reading something from European literature, rather than what he had originally related to him.

In *The Legends of Tono*, we see apparently native mountain figures portrayed with images that are more akin to fin-de-siècle art. And this echo of the modern age that Yanagita lived in expands our comprehension of Yanagita's basic concept of the ghostly other world. The mountains are the realm where past ages accumulate, from the ancient mythical age of

the gods, to the westernizing contemporary age. It is in these multifold layers of time that all the miscellaneous ghostly tales blend together to form an organic whole of the other world. And here the continuity of time between the past and the present is an essential element.

What, in effect, has happened is that Yanagita had projected in the text of *The Legends of Tono* his own imagination and sensibilities. This point is further illustrated when we examine the tale of “The Old Woman of Samuto”, which is one of the most famous tales in *the Legends of Tono*.

In Japan, as in other countries, women and children playing outside at dusk sometimes disappear in mysterious ways. In a peasant household at Samuto in Matsuzaki village, a young girl disappeared leaving her straw sandals under a pear tree. One day, thirty years later, when relatives and neighbors gathered at the house, she reappeared very old and haggard. When asked why she returned, she replied, “I wanted to see everyone and came back. Now, I am off again. Farewell.”

Again she disappeared without leaving a trace. On that day the wind blew very hard. The people of Tono, even now, on days when the wind roars, say that the old woman of Samuto is likely to return.<sup>(7)</sup>

The interesting fact about this tale, is that the original story that Sasaki narrated is known and is still in print. There are minor differences between the two texts, such as the name of the village, Samuto was originally Noboto, and also, in Yanagita’s version, a tragic tone is added to the girl’s fate. But the most important difference is the way the tale ends. In the original legend narrated by Sasaki, the village people did not welcome

the return of the old woman, because she always brought stormy winds along with her. So the villagers erected a stone pagoda on the village boundaries to ward her off, and after that the woman never came back again.

We can understand the original tale as a village community narrative. Village life is severe, endangered by invisible forces from the outside world, and the legend reflects the will of the community to protect themselves within their boundaries.

However, Yanagita changed the meaning of the legend by rewriting the ending. In his version, the people do not reject the woman's visits, the woman is free to come and go between the mountains and the village, that is, between the other world and this world. The woman thus becomes the wind from the ghostly mountains which occasionally blows into the people's mind fresh visions of the other world.

The way Yanagita modified the legend reminds us of how Hearn retold the story of "Miminashi Hoichi". "Miminashi Hoichi" is, as you know, the story of the strange experience of a blind minstrel biwa player, who chants the tragedy of the Heike clan. I will not go into the details of Hearn's modification, as I have already discussed the matter elsewhere. I would just like to point out here the fact that the change Hearn rendered deals with Hoichi's role in the story. The traditional role of medieval Buddhist minstrels was to appease the spirits of the dead, to help them quietly rest in peace. But Hearn added a dramatic scene in which Hoichi sings in front of the ghostly Heike audience. And here Hoichi, by telling the Heike their stories, awakens the half-asleep spirits instead of appeasing them. He stirs up once forgotten passions, and installs into the spirits of the past, renewed life.

Both Yanagita and Hearn changed the original tale so that the ghostly other world is not to be either rejected or appeased. Both focus on the communication between this world and the other, and between the present and the past. Both tales reflect the will to continually revive and renew the connection with the other world.

Moreover, Hearn is clearly emphasizing the re-telling act of Hoichi and the revitalizing effect of his art on the Heike. “Miminashi Hoichi”, the opening story in *Kwaidan*, is meant to be a sort of manifesto of retold ghostly tales. And this was what Hearn chose as the final goal of his literary career, and of his folklore concerns.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Yanagita repeatedly refers to “Miminashi Hoichi” in his folklore studies. And I believe that he was inspired by the story and had perceived in it the meaning that retold tales bear, in the field of folklore. That is, to re-tell old legends in one’s own words, is to accept the past culture, to re-new it in the present context and to hand it over to the future.

We are able to see here the motivating and imaginative power inspired by Hearn that later developed into the folklore research Yanagita conducted. Where legends are told to “reveal present-day facts” as Yanagita declared in the introduction to *The Legends of Tono*, old beliefs and practices embodied in folklore continue to be alive and venerated in the community. The whole idea will later be developed by Yanagita into the concept of “jo-min”: the concept of the common folks of Japan, which becomes the pivot of Yanagita’s later folklore studies. And this is the point in which Hearn inspired Yanagita. This is also the important feature of Yanagita’s folklore studies that makes it different from that of Gomme. Therefore playing an important role in forming the idea of folklore in

Japan, We may say Hearn inspired the folklore studies of Yanagita.

As is well known, Yanagita dedicated *The Legends of Tono* to “people residing in foreign countries”. For Yanagita, Tono was a symbol of Japan, just as Izumo, “the Province of Gods”, was symbolic for Hearn.

Both Yanagita and Hearn were involved in a search for values antithetical and converse to 19<sup>th</sup> century Western supremacy. Yanagita developed his folklore studies when Japan was undergoing drastic changes and was challenged by the powers of the West. And I am aware how Yanagita is often discussed in relation to a nationalistic cultural movement and the quest for a national identity.

But, today, I have tried to illustrate the intrinsic link between the two men by focusing on the basic ideas comprising their works of folklore and their manner of retelling folktales.

Seeking identity in the connection to the past and the other world; valuing the continuity of time and culture in the present age; reconfirming one’s existence in the retelling of ghostly tales; through these essential phases of their commitment to folklore, I believe, we are able to see the works of both Hearn and Yanagita in a wider and a more profound perspective of human existence, one that transcends the age and specific cultural situation of any one country.

I would like to conclude by introducing a short article written a year before Yanagita started working on *The Legends of Tono*. In this article, titled “Dokusho-yodan” (1907) Yanagita writes about books he has recently read. He states that he was absorbed in reading the tales of the French writer Theophile Gautier, and that he was especially impressed by the piece “Aria Marcella”. And he adds that Lafcadio Hearn, also, had admired this story.

“Aria Marcella” is a fantastic tale about a young man who fell in love with the beautiful ghost of a woman he encountered in the ruins of ancient Rome. Lafcadio Hearn had translated the works of Gautier in his American days, and it was, in fact, his first publication. He had admired this story and discussed its significance in one of his lectures later at Tokyo University titled “The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction”. The woman in “Aria Marcella” is, in effect, an embodiment of the past and of the ghostly other world.

In Yanagita’s article, we see Yanagita, together with Hearn and with Gautier, sharing a fantastic vision of falling in love with a beautiful phantom from the other world. The three figures, with their different careers and different backgrounds here join in the same imaginative sphere. And this, personally, is one of my favourite scenes in which Yanagita and Hearn appear together.

Notes:

This paper was read at the “*International Symposium : Lafcadio Hearn in International Perspectives*”, commemorating the centennial of his death, held on the Komaba campus of Tokyo University on Sept. 25. 2004

- (1) George Lawrence Gomme, *Ethnology in Folklore*, London, Kegan Paul, 1892, p. 7.
- (2) Kunio Yanagita, *The Legends of Tono*, translated, with an introduction, by Ronald A. Morse, The Japan Foundation, 1975, p. 8
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- (4) Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, C. E. Tuttle, 1976, p. 120.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 16.