

suze mura

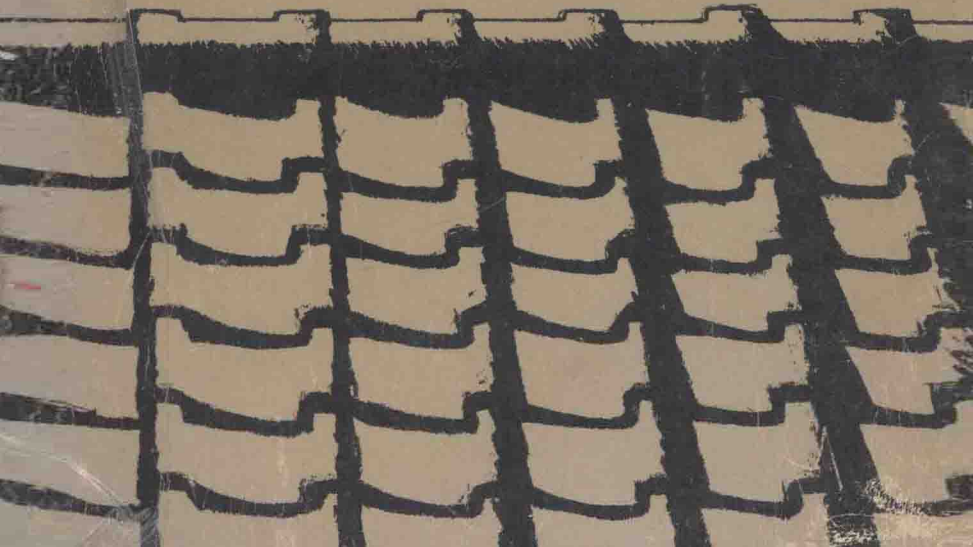
a japanese village

john f. embree

with a new introduction
by **richard beadsley**

this sociological study
of a traditional village
community in rural japan
is notable for its charm
as well as its insights

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SUYE MURA
A JAPANESE VILLAGE

By
JOHN F. EMBREE

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To the memory of Keisuke Aiko—scholar, gentleman,
and good judge of wine—who with tragic fitness was
the first citizen of Suze to die for the machine age.
When returning home one evening in November, 1937,
from Menda Town on his three-wheel motorcycle, he
collided with the Hitoyoshi-Yunomae train. That day
Suze lost her first motor transportation and her most
promising son—and the writer of this book
lost his best friend in Japan.

FOREWORD TO THE 1964 IMPRESSION

AS THE first detailed anthropological study of Japanese life, *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village* had the distinction of igniting strong interest in modern Japan among anthropologists. To be sure, not only anthropologists but all Americans became unforgettably aware of Japan only a couple of years later, when the Second World War enmeshed the United States in a no-quarter struggle with this little-known nation. In the general dearth of information on Japan, John F. Embree's lone monograph was closely studied during the war as a desperately rare and important source of insight into ordinary Japanese life. When peace again settled over the Pacific and anthropologists in considerable numbers resumed study of Japanese life and institutions, they found Japan greatly transformed, first by the Occupation's program of massive reform and second by her own remarkable feats of economic recovery and development. Now Embree's work gained new importance as a prewar point against which to measure the impact of subsequent events on rural Japan. Thus history conspired to give this unpretentious but valuable monograph its landmark status that thoroughly justifies its reprinting less than a generation after its first publication.

Suye Mura, however, has merits of its own. This account of farm life in a remote mountain village in southern Japan stands out for its sensitivity and its gracefully cadenced style of writing. It is a meticulous and unsentimental scientific report. But it is far from dull. Thanks perhaps

to his early experience in creative writing, John Embree conveyed his insights and findings with rare warmth, sympathy, and quiet elegance, whether dealing with the details of household organization or with a more dramatic subject such as the village response to the death of a member.

The methods he used were ones developed and tested for more than half a century in ethnographic research among tribal societies. Embree transferred them to the study of a diversified, literate, advanced civilization by the device of selecting a farm community as a natural segment of the whole. By now we are familiar with community studies from every continent, but in 1935 few persons were venturing in this direction. Embree, then a doctoral candidate at Chicago, was touched by the enthusiasm at that institution for this new departure, which inspired Redfield, Miner, Tax, and others as well to undertake community studies in Mexico, Canada, and elsewhere. No doubt a partial explanation is the close, almost symbiotic, relation between the fields of sociology and anthropology that then existed at the University of Chicago. Embree's work was stamped also by his training under A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who was then on the Chicago staff; *Suye Mura*, the first-born American offspring of such parentage, is markedly Radcliffe-Brownian in its emphasis and organization, for better and for worse.

Few people in this rapidly changing world have had their lives so shaken up as the Japanese in less than one generation. The school children of *Suye Mura* who trooped down the village roads on the heels of the foreign anthropologist in 1935 are still young parents with mere toddlers of their own. When John Embree visited them, *Suye* was

a rather old-fashioned, folkish village. Homemade clothing, equipment, and food—especially the sweet-potato liquor, *shochu*—were familiar to everyone. Imported bourgeois morality had not yet sterilized the bawdy peasant humor characterizing adult parties. The villagers still wholeheartedly shared their work, ceremony, and social or financial obligations collectively, each hamlet behaving as a corporate unit, as Embree clearly noted. Yet we can now see, aided by the hindsight of three decades, how close this tardy village was to the brink of a new era.

For all its remoteness in the mountains of Kyushu, Suye was about as well prepared for change as more advanced villages of the time nearer the urban centers and routes of commerce. As Embree noted, Suye villagers had access to national markets and could buy factory goods. They were no strangers to telephones and radios, to busses and trains, albeit they did not use these communications abundantly. The school children studied a modern curriculum cut to the same pattern all over the nation, and the boys among them who served as army conscripts reinforced their textbook learning with personal experience in the eye-opening outside world. Thus, when the war and postwar events struck hammer blows at the traditional system, the Suye people were ready to make the most of opportunities for transformation.

Postwar visitors have noted substantial changes. Most people now have both newspapers and radio; television sets also now grace many homes. Closer linkage to the outside world comes also through a variety of organizations for improvement of farm life or for recreation, in addition to a greatly altered agricultural co-operative association. Young people move more freely to wage or salary em-

ployment inside or outside the village, and an increasing number who go outside to work never return. Conversely, less time is spared for the old-time drinking and singing parties, now that people have electronic entertainment, and certain collective activities have become less imperative and matter of course. Collective housebuilding and money-raising have all but disappeared. Living standards have risen remarkably under national policies that have brought new prosperity to Suye along with farm villages everywhere. Whereas Suye's prewar average annual household income was about \$220 (at prewar values), the average in 1962 was closer to the national farm average, which had risen to an equivalent of over \$1,200 (in postwar dollars)—three or four times higher in real buying power.

As momentous as any change is the remodeling of authority patterns within the village, for which Embree's account unfortunately gives inadequate basis for comparison. Embree's Chicago training failed him in working out the nuances of class structure. It did not prepare him to seek historical data which would have shown him, with force too great to ignore, how much carry-over of class feelings from the Tokugawa period still governed affairs in his time. What he perceived as a straightforward system of six class levels, peculiarly identical to the six classes defined in Chicago-inspired studies in the United States, obscured rather than revealed a deep-reaching, hierarchical structure of power based on landholding, wealth, and inherited family status. He understood well the reciprocity and collective sentiment that bound the villagers together as equals; but he was almost blind to the cross-cutting pattern of hierarchical inequality that split the village into

two main divisions: the mass of ordinary farmers and tenant cultivators at the base and, above them, an upper stratum of families with power and influence. Compulsory redistribution of land—the Land Reform of 1947—was the key factor that broke the absolute social and political dominance of the few privileged families and encouraged former tenants to improve their land, welcome new methods, and experiment—often successfully—with new crops. Postwar village prosperity is due in no small degree to the opportunities opened up by the weakening of the local structure of hierarchical dominance and subordination.

All the changes noted here by no means put Embree's ethnography of *Suye Mura* out of date. Undoubtedly, remarkable transformation has affected material aspects of life; social adjustments, also, have been far-reaching, especially with regard to the class structure for which Japanese scholars have most seriously faulted Embree. But perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of rural Japanese is their faculty for maintaining the integrity of their way of life, of reconstructing by drawing on tradition. The basic crops a generation ago remain basic today, at considerably higher yields. Television and running water have appeared in farm homes without disturbing the basic structure of the house and its setting. New occupational, educational, and recreational patterns have altered lives without eradicating basic and pervasive acceptance of collective responsibility among fellow villagers. The children of 1935 are the adults of today, and, while theirs is a much deeper knowledge of the world at large than their parents enjoyed, they still live by a great many of the

values and customs that guided the generation before them, and older generations still farther back. One may still read *Suye Mura* and learn a great deal about the fundamentals of Japanese farm life today.

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INTRODUCTION

THERE is an abundance of books on Japan, treating of Japanese life in various aspects. Dr. Embree's book is of a kind that has not hitherto been attempted; it is a description, based on direct observation, of the life of a Japanese village community. Its chief purpose is to provide material for that comparative study of the forms of human society that is known as social anthropology; but it should have an appeal to a wider audience of general readers, as giving an additional insight from a new angle into Japanese civilization. For, though we may be inclined to judge the civilization of a nation by its literary or artistic production, by the extent of its commerce, or even by its military achievements, if we wish to understand it, we must remember that its roots are in the ordinary life of the common people. Just how the common men and women live together from day to day in a Japanese village is what Dr. Embree has observed and what he has described in this book.

There is a widespread idea that social anthropology is, or should be, concerned only with the simpler societies which we refer to as primitive, savage, or uncivilized, and that the study of the more advanced societies is to be left to historians, economists, and sociologists. It is true that until about fifteen years ago the field researches of social anthropologists were confined to the preliterate peoples of the world. But in recent years, under the leadership of Professor Fay-Cooper Cole, Professor Redfield, and Professor W. Lloyd Warner, social anthropologists of the

University of Chicago and of Harvard University have carried out important field studies of communities in Sicily, Mexico, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Ireland, and Quebec. In 1935 it was decided to extend this kind of investigation to the literate peoples of eastern Asia, and Dr. Embree's study of a Japanese village is the first of what was planned as a series of connected researches in that region.

What is now known as social anthropology began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with writers who sought to use the accounts of uncivilized peoples given by travelers for the purpose of gaining insight into the nature of social institutions. But it did not become an established study until the second half of the nineteenth century, and it acquired its name only some fifty to sixty years ago. Throughout a great part of the nineteenth century the social anthropologists, with a few exceptions, such as Bastian, did not themselves observe the facts with which their theories were concerned but sought them in the accounts of missionaries and travelers. By the beginning of the present century, however, it had come to be recognized that for the progress of the science it was essential that systematic observations of social life should be made by trained observers having in mind the hypotheses to be tested and the problems to be solved. Field research has thus become just as important to social anthropology as laboratory experiments are to physics and chemistry.

Social anthropology has for its aim to discover valid and significant generalizations about human society and its institutions. The only method by which this aim can ever be attained is by the comparison of a sufficient number of sufficiently diverse types of society. The relatively simpler societies of backward peoples are, for several reasons, of

extreme importance to the social anthropologist, but his comparative studies must extend over the whole range of known human societies. Therefore, since the kind of knowledge which he requires about the more advanced societies is not otherwise available, he has to extend his field researches to these.

What is required for social anthropology is a knowledge of how individual men, women, and children live within a given social structure. It is only in the everyday life of individuals and in their behavior in relation to one another that the functioning of social institutions can be directly observed. Hence the kind of research that is most important is the close study for many months of a community which is sufficiently limited in size to permit all the details of its life to be examined.

An assumption, or methodological postulate, that guides those connected researches of which Dr. Embree's is one, is that in social anthropology at the present stage of its development the scientifically most profitable undertaking is the comparative and detailed investigation of forms of social structure. This term—"social structure"—is sometimes used without any clear definition, but is here meant to refer specifically to the network of direct and indirect social relations linking together individual human beings. The method of field anthropology is to investigate the social structure in the concrete observable behavior of individuals, and this necessitates a close study of a community of limited size. The result in the present work is a picture of Japanese social structure in the perspective provided by a single village.

What may be called the basic structure of any society is constituted by personal relations as they are determined by neighborhood, kinship or family ties, and sex and age.

The most important unit in the social structure of rural Japan seems everywhere to be a limited neighborhood group which is exemplified by what Dr. Embree describes under the term *buraku*, which we might translate "hamlet." The internal organization of the hamlet, as it still exists in Suze, with its elected headman, and its households linked together by mutual aid in many economic and social activities and by the social conviviality of parties for the drinking of rice wine, in all probability comes down from very ancient times. The kinship system, which links together households belonging to the same or to different hamlets, has taken on a peculiar form in Japan as the result of the widespread custom of adoption in various forms; this also seems to be an ancient and characteristic feature of Japanese life.

The hamlet is part of a much larger and highly complex structure which is and has for some time been undergoing fairly rapid change. The effects or repercussions of these changes, as they are seen in the hamlet and in the lives of its inhabitants, have been excellently described and analyzed by Dr. Embree and are summarized in his eighth chapter. In abstract structural terms the hamlet is steadily losing its relative independence, and it as a group and its members as individuals are becoming more and more involved in and dependent upon relations with the wider social environment. The immense increase in the facilities for communication, by roads, railways, omnibuses, bicycles; the consolidation of the hamlets into the organized and centrally controlled village (*mura*); the national consolidation which is being effected through the army, nation-wide associations, and official Shinto and emperor worship; the replacement of the local dialect by standard Japanese—all these and many other of the changes that

Dr. Embree has recorded are components of a single process.

This process itself, in the particular form that it has in contemporary Japan, is one example of a general kind that has occurred thousands of times in the course of history and is at the present time observable all over the world. It may reasonably be held that it is the constant and most important constituent of social evolution. The relative isolation, autonomy, and independence of small local communities is the distinguishing feature of the simplest and least-developed societies. The concrescence of these into larger and larger social structures by political, economic, religious, or other organizations is the outstanding feature of human history. One of the major problems of social anthropology is the investigation of processes of this kind in order to determine their general character; this can only be done by the comparative study of a considerable number of concrete instances each of which has been carefully observed and analyzed. The scientific value of Dr. Embree's monograph as providing important material for such a comparative study should commend it to those who have any interest in the fundamental problems of a science of society.

I have drawn attention to this aspect of Dr. Embree's work because its importance may easily be overlooked. But there is much else in his book that is both of general scientific value and of interest to those who wish to know something of the civilizations of eastern Asia. It gives, to my mind very effectively, a synoptic picture of life in a rural community of a country which it is very desirable that we should all know something about.

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PREFACE

THIS book is an attempt to present an integrated social study of a peasant village in rural Japan. While Suze Mura,¹ the village described, cannot be claimed to represent all rural Japan any more than can any other single village, it is at least representative in many respects. Most Japanese villages depend economically on some single product—the commonest economic bases being rice, fish, and silkworms. In addition are the mountain villages, more or less isolated, dependent on lumber, mushrooms, and other mountain products for a livelihood. Suze is primarily a rice-growing village with silkworms as a secondary source of income and so is representative of a large part of rural Japan. The countryside of Japan is dotted with small towns of five to ten thousand population, surrounded by clusters of villages. The town, being full of shops and on a railroad, supplies the country with manufactured goods and some amusements, the chief of which are *geisha* houses. The country in turn supplies food and customers for the town and girls for the *geisha* houses. Suze is typical of most villages in being one of a cluster around two small towns (Menda and Taragi).

The main forms of rural Japanese society are much the same all over Japan—co-operation, exchange labor, and a religious festival calendar closely correlated with the agricultural seasons—but each region, even each county, has its own peculiar details of language and custom. For instance, obscene songs are typical of rural festivities in general, but the particular words and sex symbols vary from

¹ *Suze* rhymes with *soufflé*; the *y* is scarcely enunciated.

region to region. Thus, while the basic patterns of Suye are typical of much of rural Japan, the lesser details are characteristic only of Kuma County.

A peasant community possesses many of the characteristics of a preliterate society, e.g., an intimate local group, strong kinship ties, and periodic gatherings in honor of some deified aspect of the environment. On the other hand, it presents many important differences from the simpler societies; each little peasant group is part of a larger nation which controls its economic life, enforces a code of law from above, and, more recently, requires education in national schools. The economic basis of life is not conditioned entirely by the local requirements but by the nation, through agricultural advisers. The farmer's crop is adjusted to the needs of the state. In religion and ritual there are many outside influences to complicate the simple correlation of rites and social value, festivals and agricultural seasons. While full of local variations, the rituals and festivals are not indigenous to the community nor is the community spiritually self-sufficient. These characteristics make it impossible to regard Suye Mura as comparable to a purely self-contained preliterate society.²

The present study is part of a larger research on types of society in eastern Asia being made by the Social Science Division of the University of Chicago under the direction of Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. The recent wars in

² The Japanese peasant village is, however, comparable to other folk communities, using the term "folk" in the sense used by Dr. Redfield in *Tepoztlán* or in *Chan Kom*. Speaking of villages in Yucatan, Redfield says: "These villages are small communities of illiterate agriculturalists, carrying on a homogeneous culture transmitted by oral tradition. They differ from the communities of the preliterate tribesman in that they are politically and economically dependent upon the towns and cities of modern literate civilization and that the villagers are well aware of the townsman and city dweller and in part define their position in the world in terms of these. The peasant is a rustic, and he knows it" (Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa, *Chan Kom: A Maya Village* [Washington, 1934], p. 1).