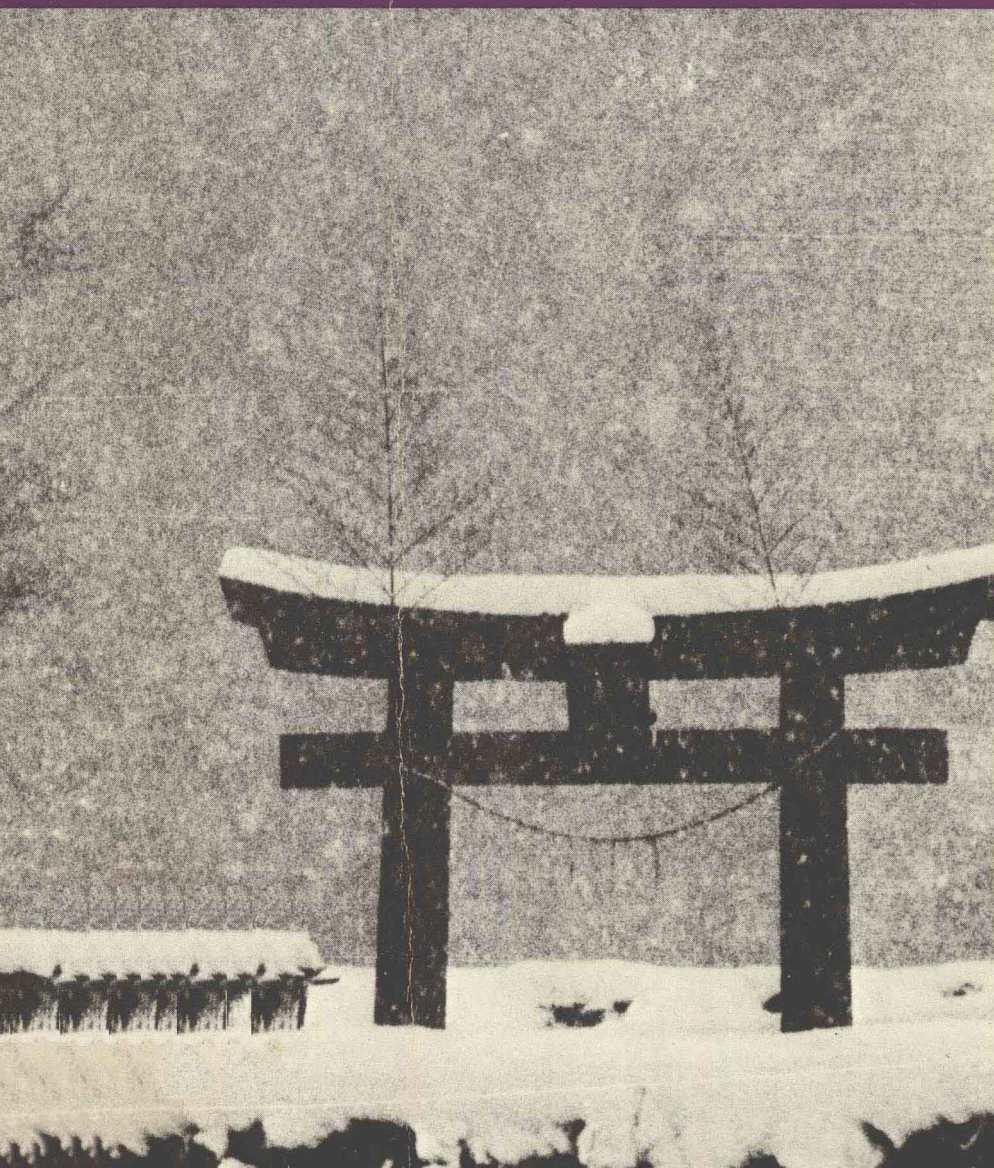


Brian Moeran

ŌKUBO DIARY

Portrait of a Japanese Valley



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Preface

This book is a fictionalized account of a four-year stay in a Japanese country valley. I first visited the Oni valley in April 1977, and stayed there for two years while I conducted fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in social anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London (now published as *Lost Innocence: Folk Craft Potters of Onta, Japan*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984). After a year and a half back in England, we returned to the valley for a further two years. During part of this time, I was doing post-doctoral research on the production, marketing, and aesthetics of art pottery in Japan.

I would like to thank the Japan Foundation, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain for helping fund various parts of these two fieldwork periods. Although I doubt whether the contents of the work presented here are quite what the relevant committees of these institutions anticipated when they decided to grant me financial aid, I hope that they will not be too disappointed by the tale I have to tell.

I owe also a great deal to a number of my colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies. In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to Adrian Mayer and David Parkin for their sympathy and understanding during the second period of fieldwork.

My greatest debt, however, is to a large number of Japanese friends and acquaintances who went out of their way to help me during the course of our long stay in Japan. Without their continued encouragement and support at a time of extreme stress, neither my wife, Kyōko, nor I could have managed as we did. At this stage, I think it wiser not to mention any names, but I would like to thank them all the same, secure in the knowledge that they know to whom I address these words.

viii Preface

My reader may well be wondering what can have occasioned all this talk of debt and gratitude, of sympathy and understanding, of encouragement, support, and stress. A brief word of explanation and some comments are in order here. On June 1, 1981, my elder son, Alyosha, dived into, and hit his head on the bottom of, the swimming pool at his primary school in the valley in which we lived. As a result, he suffered a compressed fracture of the third and fourth bones in his neck, as well as further damage to the first and second bones. Although the accident occurred during the hours of compulsory school education, and although Alyosha did as instructed by his swimming teacher, neither the school nor the local Education Authority was prepared to take responsibility for it. Consequently, I was forced to file a suit for damages in a Japanese court of law, which on February 20, 1985, eventually found in our favor. The case, however, has been appealed to a higher court and is still *sub judice*.

What I wish to make clear here is that I do not blame *Japanese* bureaucracy for all that happened to us. Rather, I blame bureaucracy as such. The mixture of half-truths and downright deceit, the social and psychological pressures that we were made to endure for more than a year, these I now realize are the tactics employed by bureaucrats all over the world. Although, in my more uncharitable moments, I suspect that the Japanese have mastered rather better than others the art of bureaucracy, and although I may sound somewhat embittered in the later stages of this book, I wish my reader to realize that it is with the system as a whole, rather than with the particular instance of my son's accident, that I am so dissatisfied. One of the more unpleasant aspects of so-called civilization and progress is that we seem less and less prepared to take responsibility for our words and deeds. There is something to be said perhaps for "commitment" in anthropology.

This book is dedicated to my family. I hope that one day Alyosha and Maya will read it and understand why their parents acted as they did, and why they chose ultimately not to "go native" and live forever in the Oni valley, for theirs was a children's world of almost total happiness. The "lost innocence" this time is mine alone.

Brian Moeran

Ōkubo Diary

The old pond—
A frog jumps in—
Sound of water.

—*Bashō*

Contents

Introduction	I
<i>I The River's Flow</i>	7
<i>II Scattered Blossoms</i>	99
<i>III Voice of the Cicada</i>	205
Sources of Quotations and Allusions	253

Introduction

Modern anthropology has been founded on the idea that its practitioners should experience another culture “in the raw.” Fieldwork has become a sacred rite by which graduate students are initiated into the academic fraternity of those who have themselves experienced what it means to struggle toward an understanding of how other peoples think and behave. Like most students of anthropology, I kept a personal journal during my stay in the Oni valley, and it is the three diaries completed there that provide the material for this book.

Just over six and a half centuries ago the Buddhist priest Yoshida Kenkō wrote in his *Tsurezuregusa*: “Is it because the truth is so boring that most stories one hears are false? People tend to exaggerate even when relating things they have actually witnessed, but when months or years have intervened, and the place is remote, they are all the more prone to invent whatever tales suit their fancies, and, when they have been written down, fictions are accepted as fact.”*

Somewhat more recently, it has been suggested that fieldwork is misrepresented by memory and that “soon nothing but the good times of fieldwork remain with at most awkward islands of unreduced misery that cannot be forgotten or submerged in the general euphoria.”† I would like to assure my readers (I use the plural optimistically) that what is related here is neither false nor misrepresented by memory. I have, however, chosen to make this work fictional for two reasons. First, I wish to protect some of the people living in the Oni valley with whom I have had the pleasure of shar-

**Essays in Idleness*, tr. Donald Keene (New York, 1967), p. 64.

†Nigel Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut* (London, 1983), p. 8.

ing four years of my life. Second, and perhaps more important, I wish to protect myself, for the objective "truth" of some of the events described here is being contended in a Japanese court of law. What I wish to emphasize, however, is that everything related in this book actually happened. All I have chosen to do is to amalgamate two or three living people into single characters and to play such havoc with local geography that, in the end, I was forced to draw up a chart on the wall to remind myself of who was who and what was where.

In spite of the nature of certain events discussed here, my experiences of fieldwork in Japan have not differed that much from those of other anthropologists working elsewhere. I am by no means the only person to have been accused by his informants of being a spy, to have struggled with the problem of "principles," or to have learned that there are no neutral, dispassionate roles for an anthropologist living in a small country village. It was with a smile that I discovered how the cultivation of lettuce is to the Dowayo what the baking of bread is to the people of the Oni valley.* My own craving for toasted crumpets during fieldwork has been paralleled by other ethnographers' yearning for ginger beer and cream cakes.†

Different people have emerged from fieldwork with different feelings about their experiences, ranging from a sense of dread, through intense boredom, to a feeling of inadequacy and cowardice, and the suspicion that the anthropologist is no more than a trickster.‡ It is with the last emotion that I myself most sympathize. At the same time, there is something else that I experienced during fieldwork—something that I have not as yet come across in anthropological writings—the fieldworker's slight sense of what the Japanese would call *iyarashisa* (distaste). I came back to London from the Oni valley feeling tainted, somehow sullied by my having had to learn to adapt, to be seen to be friendly with people whom I did not always like, to discuss subjects in which I was not always interested, and to plot and to scheme on behalf of an abstract academic cause in which eventually I lost almost all faith.

*Barley, p. 169.

†Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (London, 1967), p. 171; Barley, p. 169.

‡Manda Cesara, *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist: No Hiding Place* (New York, 1982), p. 66; Barley, p. 180; Elenore Smith Bowen, *Return to Laughter* (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), pp. 289–90.

Precisely because fieldwork has been so important in the development of their discipline, anthropologists have in recent years been examining their motivations and justifications for doing it. There has been a spate of books—part fact, part fiction—discussing what has been seen primarily as a dialogue between self and other. Ethnographers have perceived this relationship in different ways. One, for example, regarded the people with whom he lived as commodities. “It is I who will describe them or create them,” he wrote in a diary that was never meant for publication. Others have been more circumspect. Fieldwork is said to be “the comprehension of the self by the detour of the comprehension of the other,” academic research “the perfection of one’s own soul.”*

This—often uneasy—dialogue between self and other parallels the not inconsiderable discussion of the idea of participant observation, first expounded by Malinowski.† Participant observation is closely connected with the once fashionable notion that anthropology is a social science, and that societies are subject to certain laws of behavior deducible by the anthropologist. Nowadays, perhaps, the idea of the existence of such laws is dismissed, but we still find anthropologists clinging to the idea that their subject is an “interpretative science.”‡

And it is with the link between anthropology and science (whether it be “social” or “interpretative”) that I wish to concern myself for the rest of this Introduction. Precisely because anthropology studies people, and not objects, it cannot arrive at any laws. There are too many variables involved to make the so-called scientific processes of either induction or deduction meaningful. Anthropology is not, nor has ever been, a “science.” It is a humanity. It is also possible that, in the hands of very able and sensitive practitioners, it may become an art.

Some might think my attitude extreme. The strange thing, though, is that when anthropologists discuss their fieldwork experience, they sound at times as if they actually do regard themselves as artists, rather than social scientists. By bandying around such

*Malinowski, *Diary*, p. 140; Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley, Calif., 1977), p. ix; Barley, p. 10.

†Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London, 1922), pp. 1–25.

‡Rabinow, p. 151.

words as commitment, choice, alienation, freedom, and authenticity, they suggest an image of themselves as “marginal characters,” as “outsiders” who reach an understanding of themselves through “raw experience” and “suffering.” Consider, for example, the following passage: “I drove on and murmured to myself a rhythmic incantation, ‘oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.’ And the pain spread across the landscape and the heat waves carried it along. The land looked desolate and I heard their wailing.”* Fieldwork is metamorphosing anthropology into an art form. Like some spiritual revelation, it unconsciously changes the ethnographer from an ordinary member of his or her own society to individual artist, marked out by suffering and trying to save those damned by their own ignorance. In our more reflexive works, we paint a portrait of a way of life that might have been, that might still be, our own.

To say this, however, is to raise a further problem: to what extent is it actually possible to translate from one culture to another? I cannot pretend to know the answer to this question. I am becoming steadily more convinced, however, that the only way to write sensitive interpretations of other cultures is to write in the style of the people we study. If the present structure of our education system should continue to demand that we produce “scientific” works of academic scholarship, then so be it. But a sense of honesty to one’s self demands that we also produce “artistic” works to accompany them. Only thus can we give the “cooked” a “raw,” full-bodied taste.

In the case of a literate culture like that of Japan, the chosen artistic style should perhaps be influenced by an accepted literary genre. This is why I have given this account of people living in a remote country valley its present form. Ethnography should always be allowed to speak for itself. There is nothing worse than having to impose one’s will on events, in order to mold them into the strait-jacket of Western rationality. Hence my decision to write a work whose style and format are closer to the *zuihitsu* essays of such classical writers as Sei Shōnagon and Yoshida Kenkō than to anything found in Western literature. For them, as for the modern Japanese, the essence of communication rests not so much in what is said as in what is left unsaid.

*Cesara, p. 45.

I cannot claim, of course, to have been entirely successful in my venture, but at least I have tried. It is at this point that the author's creativity ends and the reader's begins. This discourse that you read is no longer one between the people of the Oni valley and myself. It is a discourse between them and you, and between myself and you. In these creative interstices between the words, perhaps, lies the meaning of anthropology.

I The River's Flow

The flow of the river is ceaseless; its
water is never the same.

—*Kamo no Chōmei*

I Whole days spent before this diary, with nothing better to do than jot down at random whatever comes into my mind. Tonight is the full moon of the year—August 15 by the lunar calendar. Would that I, too, could write such lyrical prose in celebration of the people of this valley.

In the meantime, I have the moon before my eyes, the sweet scent of the mock orange flowers (*mokusei*) in my nostrils, and the sharp taste of *sake* on my tongue. What more can one want of this bridge of dreams?

2 The charm of this dialect that I am finally learning to understand. Its verb forms are old, echoes of classical Japanese. “It won’t sting” comes out, not as *sashimasen*, but as *sasu wa sen*; “she’s doing it” is *shi oru* rather than *shite iru*; “eat!” is a gentle *tabennai*, instead of standard *tabenasai*. Then there is a whole range of unaccustomed vocabulary. Some of it makes sense—like *sukan*, which replaces the more usual *kirai*, for “dislike” and which turns out to be no more than the negative of the standard word for “like” (*suki*). But a lot of words and phrases make less sense. *Dogē shioru* is a question that had me pondering for days—and worried, too, since it is frequently used as a form of greeting, and greetings are not to be questioned in any society, unless you are out to create confusion and upset the status quo of social interaction. I have now realized that the phrase merely stands for *nani o shiteru*, “what are you up to?” *Horuki* is another word that took me time to work out as *sore kara*, “and then.”

Other words I begin to understand through context. A child who falls over and grazes his knees is *muginē*, “poor thing” (*kawaisō* in standard Japanese); an unusual event is *myō na kotsu* (*hen na koto*); and a woman expressing a sense of shame says *ha ga ii* (*hazukashii*). Some of the phrases are more expressive. For example, when people exclaim how surprised they are, they say that their