



PROJECT MUSE®

Performed Narratives and Music in Japan

Alison Tokita

Oral Tradition, Volume 18, Number 1, March 2003, pp. 26-29 (Article)

Published by Center for Studies in Oral Tradition

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ort.2004.0040>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/51610>

Performed Narratives and Music in Japan

Alison Tokita

My field is performed narratives in Japan, especially genres with a strong musical component. In Japan, where literacy has been defined by the use of Chinese characters, writing in the vernacular using the phonetic kana scripts is closer to orality, and captures the sounds of the Japanese spoken language. With modernization much oral culture was lost, but collection of folklore from the early twentieth century was stimulated by the introduction of the Western discipline. Since the 1980s the oral-formulaic theory began to influence literary and other studies. Japanese translations of Lord's *The Singer of Tales* and Ong's *Orality and Literacy* have appeared in the late nineties.

The disjunction of modernity has led to the reification of the pre-modern, now commonly called the traditional. Traditional has become a synonym for Japanese, native, non-Western, and pre-modern. A keyword in the performing arts and literary traditions is "transmission" (*denshoo*), which is congruent with the concept of oral tradition. In the postwar period, this concept has given way in official discourse to the concept of "tradition" (*dentoo*), which smacks of invented traditions.

The report on Japanese studies in oral tradition by Hiroyuki Araki in 1992 is still relevant, positing two pioneer ethnologists, Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu, as the basic point of reference for Japanese researchers. A lot of work continues to be carried out by folklorists, musicologists, and literary scholars in documenting dying genres. Often these are recorded in electronic format and are published commercially with extensive Japanese notes. Orality studies have permeated all these disciplines. Notable output includes the four volumes (with English summaries) of *Kootoo Denshoo no hikaku kenkyuu* (*Studies of Oral Traditions*) (Kawada et al., 1984-88). A volume in English by Tokumaru, *The Oral and the Literate in Music* (1986), also dates from this time. Literary scholar Hyoodoo Hiromi uses a combination of fieldwork and literary and historical sources to reconstruct the formation of traditions such as the *Tale of the Heike* (see 2000a and 2002).

My own work has looked at the relevance of the oral-formulaic theory to musical narratives in which the musical component is complex and varied. There are broadly speaking three modes of delivery: the spoken, the musically simple (syllabic, narrow range), and the musically complex (melismatic, wide range). There is active interpolation of songs and other musical material into the narrative in many genres. The use of written texts as a basis for performance is widespread, but musical notation is minimal and the formulaic music continues to rely on oral transmission.

New directions in oral tradition studies in Japan

Younger scholars are examining folk traditions in the light of cultural studies. For example, Hyoodoo organized a panel in June 2003 for a meeting of the Kooshoo Bungei Gakkai (Society for Folk Narrative Research) on “The topos of the body,” bringing together the most recent local research in a cultural studies framework. This seems to be the most exciting academic society in this area.

Extensive fieldwork is the basis of research for many young scholars. Urban popular culture, such as *manzai* (see Tsurumi 1987) and *naniwa-bushi* (see Hyoodoo 2000b), is being collected and analyzed. A Museum of Laughter has been established in Osaka to document comic urban entertainments of the modern period. Studies of Okinawan traditions are lively, but Ainu studies lag well behind. In mainland Japan, oral traditions of pre-modern origin are dying out because the social structures that supported them have disappeared. Folksong, on the other hand, has managed to adapt from oral transmission to the modern entertainment model of concerts and the commercial recording (see Hughes 1991 and forthcoming).

Monash University

References

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| Araki 1992 | H. Araki. “Current State of Studies in Oral Tradition in Japan.” <i>Oral Tradition</i> , 7:373-82. |
| de Ferranti 2002 | Hugh de Ferranti. “Senzaiteki ni tekusuto ni motozuite iru ooraru konpojishon: aru biwahiki no shoogen yori.” In |

- Tokita and Komoda 2002:63-86. English version forthcoming in the ICTM Yearbook for Traditional Music, 2003.
- Hashimoto 1998 Hiroyuki Hashimoto. "Re-creating and Re-imagining Folk Performing Arts in Contemporary Japan." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 35:35-46.
- Hughes 1991 David W. Hughes. "Japanese 'New Folk Songs,' Old and New." *Asian Music*, 22:1-49.
- Hughes forthcoming _____. *The Heart's Home Town: Traditional Folk Song in Modern Japan*. Hants, England: Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Hyoodoo 2000a Hiromi Hyoodoo. *Heike Monogatari no rekishi to geinoo (The Tale of the Heike: History and Performance)*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Koobundoo.
- Hyoodoo 2000b _____. *Koe no kokumin kokka Nihon (Japan as a Nation of the Voice)*. Tokyo: NHK Books.
- Hyoodoo 2002 _____. *Monogatari, Orality, Kyoodootai: shin katarimono josetsu (Tales, Orality and Community: Introduction to Narrative Studies Revisited)*. Tokyo: Hitsuji Shoboo.
- Kawada et al. 1984-88 J. Kawada et al., eds. *Kootoo Denshoo no hikaku kenkyuu (Studies of Oral Traditions)*. Tokyo: Koobundoo.
- Nakagawa 1997 Hiroshi Nakagawa. *Ainu no monogatari sekai (The World of Ainu Tales)*. Tokyo: Heibonsha Library.
- Tokita 2003 Alison Tokita. "The Reception of the Heike Monogatari as Performed Narrative: The Atsumori Episode in *heikyoku*, *zato biwa* and *satsuma biwa*." *Japanese Studies*, 23:59-85.
- Tokita and Hughes 2004¹ _____ and David W. Hughes, eds. *Japanese Music: History, Performance, Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹ Articles pertaining to oral tradition cover such topics as popular music before the Meiji period (Gerald Groemer), folk music (David W. Hughes), the music of Ryukyu (Robin Thompson), the music of the Ainu (Chiba Nobuhiko), and popular music in modern Japan (Christine Yano and Hosokawa Shuhei).

- Tokita and Komoda 2002 _____ and Haruko Komoda, eds. *Nihon no katarimono: kotosei, kozo, igi (Japanese Musical Narratives: Orality, Structures, Meanings)*. Nichibunken Sosho series, 26.
- Tokumaru 1986 Y. Tokumaru. *The Oral and the Literate in Music*. Tokyo: Academia Musica.
- Tsurumi 1987 Shunsuke Tsurumi. *A Cultural History of Postwar Japan, 1945-1980*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.