

# High-Vision Satoyama: Japanese Agrarian Landscape for Home and Abroad

MELI Mark

NHK の里山

マーク・メリ

This essay examines six documentary programs produced by NHK on the theme of Satoyama: the agricultural landscape of Japan which includes rice paddies, rivers and lakes, and maintained forests. It takes a ecocritical approach to these programs, analyzing their claims and the rhetoric used to make them. Special attention is paid to the BBC's English-language adaptations of two of the films, and the manner in which they differ from the Japanese-language originals.

The notion of satoyama as a traditional agrarian environment, full of biodiversity, possessing an important place in Japanese culture, and in some sense uniquely Japanese, has spread beyond the academic world to popular Japanese consciousness, and beyond Japan to environmentally-minded folks in other lands. This installation of the term and its significance into the popular consciousness has mainly been accomplished through the use of visual imagery, photography at first, and then video. Irresistible images of the lovely Japanese countryside, with its terraced rice paddies, lush green hillsides, bubbling waterways and picturesque farm houses bring to mind a simpler, more harmonious past and awaken nostalgic yearnings for a pre-modern, pre-westernized agrarian Japan, the *furuki yoki Nippon* (old, good, Japan) that has been instilled in the cultural memory of the people. For non-Japanese, such images often suggest a holistic, pre-industrial relationship between humans and nature, rooted in Buddhist and Shinto faiths, imbued with the aesthetics of *wabi* and

*sabi*.<sup>1)</sup>

Many of the people in Japan and elsewhere who know the term *satoyama* have learned it from the NHK documentaries that bear it in their titles. Two of these were then re-made as English-language programs in cooperation with the BBC, with the illustrious nature programmer Sir David Attenborough taking over the role of narrator. The stunningly photographed programs are alluring testaments to the beauty of Japanese agrarian living, their imagery rooted in the photography of Imamori Mitsuhiko, native of northern Shiga Prefecture in the region surrounding Lake Biwa, a region whose traditional cultural and material life was deeply tied to the lake. Imamori has forged a life's work out of satoyama landscapes, and it was his photographic images that evolved into NHK's videos.

These videos create not one, but two versions of the Japanese agrarian landscape, often called *genfukei* in Japanese. One version is for native consumption, the other for foreign use, and though the images overlap, the meaning given to these images differs according to their audience. Both, however, create an image of agrarian Japan that begs to be compared to the trope of the pastoral in European and American cultures, the ideal of an unspoiled agrarian landscape existing in diametric opposition to industrial modern society and urban life (Gifford 1999, Garrard 2004). Certainly satoyama is not literally a pastoral landscape—there are no pastures to be seen—but as a trope describing the relation between nature and culture, satoyama in Japan functions much like the pastoral has in the West. In NHK's original Japanese-language documentaries, satoyama is portrayed as an endangered icon of both culture and nature, and is approached with a wistful nostalgia mixed with a fear of impending loss. In the foreign-consumption English version, satoyama functions more as an image of cultural nationalism, an exotic advertisement for an eco-friendly Japan. The endangered status of this landscape is hidden as fully as any feelings of nostalgia, and if the viewer did not know better, he or she might think that most Japanese still lived in these satoyama communities.

In the rest of this essay I want to introduce NHK's *Satoyama* documentary series, and then move on to an ecocritical analysis of what they are saying about the relationship between Japanese culture and the natural environment in Japan, with a focus on the relationship between the Japanese

---

1) Research on this essay was made possible by a half-year sabbatical (*kenshu*) with funding given by Kansai University, as well as a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

and English versions of the first two of these documentaries.

It shall not be a purpose of mine here to examine any of the ecological or historical claims made in these documentaries. That is a task for other essays, where such claims, made by many authors and artists in many different media, might be examined together. My purpose here is an analysis of the rhetoric by which the notion of satoyama is presented in the videos. In doing so, I wish to extend some of the methodology employed in the ecocritical analysis of literature to another cultural medium, namely documentary.

In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” which takes “an earth-centered approach to literary texts” (Glotfelty xviii, see also Garrard 2004). In this vein, ecocritical analysis has mainly been a phenomenon in literature studies; here I will follow the lead of others and apply the theories and techniques developed mainly in literary criticism to other cultural representations, namely television documentaries. First of all, however, we need to look at the man whose photography got the whole project going.

### Roots of the Project: The Photography of Imamori Mitsuhiro

The basis for the *Satoyama* series is the work of the photographer Imamori Mitsuhiro (b.1954). Imamori not only helped construct the concept of satoyama as it is presented in the series, but he also made the jump from still photography to video and served as photographer for the first two Satoyama documentaries. Imamori is a native of the areas in Shiga Prefecture that are presented in the documentaries. He summarizes his work on his web page:

Imamori was born in Shiga Prefecture in 1954. After graduating from university, he learned photographic technique on his own and has done freelance work since 1980. Since then, he has shot photos on the theme of all the relationships between humanity and nature that occur around Lake Biwa. Also, from tropical rain forests to deserts, he has continued to visit the remote regions of the wide world to photograph them. (Imamori World)

In addition to photographing on the theme of humanity’s relation to nature around Lake Biwa, Imamori has also done much to popularize the term “satoyama” as the appropriate label for that theme. Since his *Satoyama Monogatari: In Harmony with Neighboring Nature* (The Tale of

Satoyama: In Harmony with Neighboring Nature) of 1995, Imamori has continued publishing books with the word in their titles—cementing himself as *the* photographer of satoyama in Japan. For example, we have the following works (the following list is nearly complete, though not meant to be comprehensive):

*Satoyama no Shonen*, 1996 (The Youth of Satoyama), *Satoyama no michi*, 2001 (Paths in Satoyama), *Imamori Mitsuhiko to meguru satoya no shiki*, 2002 (Going Around the Satoyama's Four Seasons with Imamori Mitsuhiko), *Satoyama wo arukou\**, 2002 (Let's Walk about the Satoyama), *Imamori Mitsuhiko no firudo nooto satoyama*, 2004 (Imamori Mitsuhiko's Satoyama Field Notes), *Imamori Mitsuhiko no satoyama nisshi*, 2004 (Imamori Mitsuhiko's Satoyama Diary), *Biwako satoyama furusato sanpo*, 2006 (A Walk around Lake Biwa's Hometown Satoyama), *Satoyama no kotoba*, 2006 (The Language of Satoyama), *Satoyama no ichinichi: natsu no hi*, 2007 (One day in Satoyama: A Summer Day) (followed by separate books for Autumn, Winter, and Spring), *Satoyama wo arukou Part 2\**, 2008 (Let's Walk in Satoyama, Part 2), *Satoyama ikimono zukan*, 2008 (Satoyama Living Organism Picture Book), *Satoyama no okurimono\**, 2008 (A Gift Sent from the Satoyama), *Imamori Mitsuhiko neicha foto gyarari: mirai e okuru fuukei, satoyama*, 2009 (Imamori Mitsuhiko Nature Photo Gallery: Satoyama Landscape Sent to the Future), *Imamori Mitsuhiko no suteki na kirigami: satoyama e you koso\**, 2009 (Imamori Mitsuhiko's wonderful Paper Cutouts: Welcome to Satoyama).

It is immediately noticeable that Imamori's work is portrayed as an introduction to satoyama—not just an intellectual, but a visceral introduction. We are invited to visit these very places with him through his photos. We walk there with him, take its paths, meet its children, learn its language, receive gifts from it, and become intimate with its scenes throughout the four seasons. We can then read Imamori's notes and diary, to hear what goes on behind the scenes, and learn how he comes to take the photos that he does. Furthermore, for those entranced with the wonderful landscape portrayed here, Imamori himself gives walking tours of the area, for which fans may reserve spots on his web site, so they can go and see the real satoyama. It is also worth noting that many of these books are aimed at children (these are marked \*). Thus they become a form of education into the traditional agrarian landscape of Japan, and might come to have an even stronger influence than they would have on adults. As might be expected, Imamori's calendars are also popular.

This is not the place for a thorough ecocritical analysis of Imamori's work, although such an analysis would not only be interesting in itself, but would add more light to our understanding of the NHK documentaries. To give a simple introduction, which will enable us to see the links between these works and the NHK videos, I will mention just two of his works, *Satoyama no okurimono* and *Satoyama no kotoba*.

*Satoyama no okurimono* is a picture book for children with simple captions written by Imamori that are meant to introduce himself, his hometown area, and the animals and plants of the satoyama. Most of the photos are brilliantly colorful; about half are panoramas of the all-important and iconic terraced rice paddies, while the other half are close-ups of animals, insects, flowers, or fruits. Also worth mentioning is that the panoramas often include people working in them, and that the book predictably proceeds through the four seasons, including scenes from each.

The text of the captions, to which furigana has been added to help youngsters who cannot yet read the kanji, is direct and personal, like that of an elementary school teacher who is teaching a class but also mixing in his own personal experience. One example will suffice to illustrate this. The first double-page spread is an aerial shot of a satoyama community, with dark green forest surrounding lighter green terraced rice paddies in the foreground, a traditional-looking tile-roofed village in the mid-ground, and higher wooded mountains to the back. Technically speaking, the photo is curiously unexceptional, taken, obviously, on a rather cloudy day, so that its colors are somewhat more muted than typical shots of Japanese terraced paddies. The caption reads:

I saw the place I lived from the sky. There are mountains and rice paddies, deciduous forests and irrigation ponds. Not just people, but lots of other creatures are living here. People and nature are living together in friendship. This kind of place is called satoyama. (Imamori 2008 pp. 2-3)

Two major motifs are employed here that we shall see repeated in the videos. First is the stress upon the diversity of life forms that share the landscape with humans. Throughout the photos in this work, and in the videos as well, the diversity of satoyama life is stressed by concrete images of different animals and plants. There is no difficult ecological jargon about organisms and biodiversity, just nice images of living creatures that live near to people. Next is the concept of the harmony of humans and nature in the satoyama. Here, as the book is written for children, the idea used is the more concrete,

everyday one of friendship (*naka yoku kurashiteiru*), or, literally, getting along well together, rather than the more abstract one of harmony, but in effect the message is the same. In satoyama, nature is our friend.

In *Satoyama no Kotoba*, the first thing that we notice is that the structure of the title is a very common one. There have been thousands of books published in Japanese with an “X no kotoba” (The Words / Language of X) title. Some simply focus on the words of a certain historical figure, like words of the Buddha, Dogen, Laozi, or Jesus. Often times, as is the case here, these books invoke a kind of meditation on the fine points of the Japanese language, whether it be going back in time to explore classical texts, or to teach more sophisticated vocabulary, or, as in this case, to examine words that apply in a certain cultural sphere. Since the focus is usually on the Japanese language, this format becomes particularly useful for work in *Nihonjinron*, the genre which stresses the unique character of the Japanese people and their culture. It is argued that, since only and all Japanese people speak Japanese natively, the language gives particularly good access to their hearts and culture (see Befu, pp. 34-36).

*Satoyama no kotoba* follows the pattern seen in many works of *Nihonjinron*, introducing rarified words that most people would not use today, defining them, giving thoughts upon them and at times their etymologies, and then illustrating each word with a photograph. Some of the words included are simply the names of flowers or insects that live in the satoyama. As might be expected, many of these make their way into the documentaries as well. Others are somewhat archaic usages that speak of age-old tradition. For example, *ume ga ka* (The scent of plums), which is an archaic construction of what would now be *ume no ka*. Another example is *harumeku*, a verb speaking of the coming of Spring, which can be found in classical texts but is rarely used today.

In this way, *Satoyama no kotoba*, while teaching us some new names of the organisms living in that environment, also endeavors to teach us “Beautiful Japanese,” most of which is rather old-sounding. There is in such an endeavor the background assumption that speaking better Japanese language makes one a better Japanese person.

It must also be mentioned that Imamori has published more than a dozen books of insect photography, focused on Japan as well as other places in the world. The number and scope of these works indeed rival those of his satoyama portfolio. His special interest in insects will be clearly projected in the NHK videos as well, where it is these small creatures that get the majority of attention.

It is in his insect photography that Imamori is, in my opinion, at his best. His satoyama landscapes are by no means lacking technically in terms of exposure, theme, or composition, but they are not, to my eye, all that original in Japan. *Genfukei* photography is a long-standing and popular genre in Japan, well-represented in the monthly photography magazines. While Imamori's deserves to be seen as an exemplar of it, it is hard to think that he has really developed an original approach to it (although this will change when he moves to video). His insect photography is up-close and dramatic, though, stressing color, form, and ecology extremely well. In *Satoyama no okurimono* we see molting dragonflies, several kinds of insects sucking nectar from flowers, and frogs: here being devoured by large water insects, there focusing on a grasshopper which we feel will soon be its dinner. This particular skill in photographing insects and small animals will translate very well to video, where these processes of life and death can be seen over time.

### NHK's *Satoyama* Documentaries: An Introduction

As of writing, NHK has produced six different *Satoyama* documentaries. The first two of these were later remade as English versions. It is these four documentaries that will be the focus of the present analysis. Here is a list of all six, including dates of release and a brief synopsis of each:

1a. *Eizoshi: Satoyama—hito to shizen ga tomo ni ikiru*

Visual Poem: Satoyama—Humans and Nature Living Together

First televised 8 November, 1998. Focus is upon the function of terraced rice paddies and the insect and animal life that thrives in and around them.

1b. English Version: *Satoyama: Japan's Secret Garden*

First televised on BBC in 2005. Later televised on the American PBS's *Nova* and around the world.

2a. *Satoyama—inochi meguru mizube*

Satoyama—Life Revolving around Water

First televised 17 April, 2004. Focus on marshes, inlets, and canals around Lake Biwa and the life in them, plus fishing and maintaining waterways within the towns.

2b. English Version: *Satoyama: Japan's Secret Water Garden*

First televised on BBC in 2005. Later televised on the American PBS's *Nova* and around the world.

*Sekai Satoyama Kiko*

World Satoyama Journey. Three episodes, broadcast in August, 2007.

3. *Finrando: mori—yousei to no taiwa*

Finland: The Forest—Dialogue with the Fairies

First televised 19 August, 2007. Maintaining woodlands, hunting, and the relationship between humans, animals, lakes, and forest in south-central Finland.

4. *Poorando: mizube ni hibikiau inochi*

Poland: Life that Reverberates beside the Water

First televised 26 August, 2007. Farming and pasturing by the rivers and wetlands of Biebrza-Narew in north-eastern Poland, an area famous for its huge numbers and variety of migratory birds.

5. *Chuugoku, Unnan: take to tomo ni ikiru*

Yunnan, China: Living together with Bamboo

First televised 27 August, 2007. The Tay minority of western Yunnan, their use of bamboo in nearly all aspects of life, and the great variety of life in their managed bamboo forests.

6. *Eizoshi Satoyama—gekijoban*

Visual Poem Satoyama: Theater Version

Released 22 August 2009. Focused, as the first two programs, on the area near Lake Biwa. This time it focuses on the coppiced forests within the satoyama system. Movie-length and made for theatres, with high quality sound enabling the audience to head the sounds of nature.

It will be worthwhile to briefly comment on the style of photography and the general approach of the first two *Satoyama* videos. Brief analyses of the later documentaries will be included below.

All six of the documentaries take a seasonal approach to their topics. Each starts in late winter or early spring, and moves through one year to the height of the following winter and a glimpse of coming spring. This of course is an ages-old rhetorical technique in Japan as in many other places. We are reminded of the fact that all imperial poetry anthologies also begin in the same manner, with collections of poems on Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, in that order. This format, of encapsulating a year of nature into less than 50 minutes of programming, is open to the



kind of criticism leveled by Karla Armbruster in her essay "Creating the World we Must Save." Long hours of filming and even more of waiting compress natural time into a package that is easily digested by the viewer. Real natural processes are much less exciting (Armbruster p.224).

The nature photography of these videos is technically advanced and painstakingly minute. It has been often noted as one of the reasons for the many awards these programs have garnered both at home and abroad. In fact, much of the programs are taken up with specialty photography. We have numerous time-lapse shots showing the growth of plants, such as the opening of flowers, the maturation of rice, the re-growth of coppiced trees. We also see time lapse photography of humans working: making paddies or cutting reeds. Such photography is a staple of nature programming worldwide. The fact that it functions to create unrealistic images which could not possibly be perceived by the normal viewer has been stressed by Armbruster as well as Garrard (Garrard 2004 p.154-5). Also featured is a plethora of macro photography: close-ups of insects, flowers, fish eggs, etc. This follows Imamori's still photography closely. The two techniques are often combined to reveal the molting processes of insects.

Other techniques used include underwater and aerial photography, both of which are combined and nearly over-used in 2a, as the camera is often lowered from a height of ten or more meters smoothly into the water, entering without a splash to show life both above and below the surface. Much is made of nighttime photography, even under water. We see slow motion, as when the upstream movement of catfish is shown. One rather intriguing technique is underground photography, wherein pits seem to have been dug to partly expose insect or rodent nests. We also see into the nests of birds within trees. These techniques work to create an illusion of unrestricted access to the animals' worlds, one which Armbruster has compared to pornography, where the unobserved viewer is allowed to see things that are naturally off limits (Armbruster p.232).

Deep perspectives combine a close-up of a small animal with broader background scenes, in which humans going about their daily work are often included. These shots, which also have their roots in Imamori's still photography, have two different effects. First is to stress the closeness of animal and human life. Second, they often seem to present the point of view of the animal, acting to almost personify it. This technique is used well with frogs, so that they seem to be watching us, or even enjoying our fireworks displays.

We also hear clearly the sounds of nature, fresh and close. DVD versions of the programs all include the option of turning off the narration, so we can focus on the sounds of nature set to music.

The technical quality of the photography is excellent, as one would expect from NHK. This, combined with both standard and original techniques, makes for entertaining and refreshing nature programming while creating nicely packaged images that are often unavailable to the physical observer. We must also mention that a large portion of the material fits into the category often labeled “animal porn” by critics. There is an overwhelming number of scenes focusing either on creatures hunting and eating other creatures, or on sex acts. Like kill scenes from the African safari that abound on the internet, with captions revealing just how much they gratify viewers’ lust for violence, here we are presented with hunting and killing on a smaller, though no less graphic scale. Noteworthy are scenes in which water insects are seen catching and then devouring minnows or frogs. Animal sex is also featured often, leading then to birth and the flourishing of new life. Certainly these types of “action” scenes, so rarely seen by physical observers, function to add a rarified and exciting yet also prurient aspect to the programs. They have succeeded here in making interesting a landscape from which most people have escaped to go live in urban areas—looking for more action.

### *Nostalgia for Harmony with Nature: The Japanese Satoyama*

The first *Satoyama* documentary opens with a view of luxuriant terraced paddies in summertime, the sounds of cicadas and crickets filling the speakers. The female narrator then speaks in soft, emotional, and accentuated tones:

The strong sunshine sets the summer terraces aglow. This is a gentle, and also somehow a nostalgic landscape. (Natsu no tanada ni tsuyoi hizashi ga teritsukemasu. Yasashii, soshite doko ka ga nasukashii fukei desu.) (NHK 2001 0:05)

At this point the soft, symphonic chimes of music ring in, with gentle female voices singing wordlessly as if in a church choir. We are in a soft, relaxing place, somewhere back in our memories. Throughout the 47 minute episode, the emphasis is very much on the past, a past that is now in danger of being lost entirely.

I find four main ideas stressed in this first documentary and functioning throughout the later Japanese programs as well. First is that satoyama is an environment that has existed continually from a distant past. Next, that it is one which humans have worked together with nature to create. Thirdly, that it is a place where people live closely with many kinds of wild creatures, and lastly, the

notion that this is a landscape which is fading away, but one which still has much to teach us today. We shall examine quotes from 1a which convey each of these ideas.

1. *From a distant past*: One word often uttered by the narrator is '*nagai*' (long), always lengthened and inflected onomatopoeically, as it describes the loooooong period of time that Japanese have lived in these satoyama environments. Terraced rice paddies that we are shown have "a history of over 1,000 years," yet they still continue to be used (ibid. 1:05). This landscape is the basis of Japanese material existence and also culture: "We have, for a long time, lived by receiving various kinds of blessings from the satoyama, and though this, our culture was formed as well" (ibid. 1:49). Related to great age is also the emphasis, stressed in Confucianism as well as Shinto, on ancestors. We find are reminded that "(t)he works of people who are in touch with nature have passed down directly though the generations" (ibid. 36:05). This coincides nicely with the fact that many urban Japanese have only experienced such rural areas during visits back to parents' ancestral homes, especially during the summer Bon holidays, when the spirits of ancestors are believed to visit their surviving families. That the environment depicted here is much older than the urban, industrial one known by most Japanese today, and thus surely more authentic, is implied throughout.

2. *Working with nature to create a landscape*: It is the fact that humans have worked *together with* nature to create satoyama that is stressed here. The point is to contrast with the modern notion that humans have flourished by separating themselves from and overcoming nature. It is stressed that the terraced rice paddies constitute "a landscape that humans together with nature have, over a long period of time, built up" (ibid. 32:05). Furthermore, satoyama can remind us how to get back in touch with nature: "The secret to how we can live and flourish together with nature is hidden in the satoyama" (ibid. 2:50). Both of the Japanese-version *Satoyama* documentaries also stress that the Japanese living in these communities have worked with the natural elements there to create a beautiful landscape that most Japanese view to be just as "natural" as a landscape untouched by human hands. One question this point brings up, however, is what on this earth has been made by humans who were not "working together with nature" in some sense? All human work is, as even Marx knew, work *on* nature.

3. *Living alongside other creatures*: This notion is much appealed to on a visceral level through photography, but are also reminded again and again by the narrator that there are numerous different mammals, insects, fish and birds that share this environment with humans. "In the satoyama," we are told, "the world in which humans live and that within which other creatures live

have, though a long span of time, become one” (ibid. 29:35).

4. *Vanishing, just when we most need to learn from it*: With great strains of nostalgia, we are gently reminded that this is an endangered landscape. We learn that here, farming families who have had to take on other work to survive has become more numerous (ibid. 5:00), that water paths by which catfish move back and forth to spawn are becoming fewer (ibid. 23:40), and that scenes of bitter persimmons being hung out in the autumn sun to dry, once seen all over such villages, are vanishing just like the rice paddies by which the persimmon trees grow (ibid. 43:45).

These claims are made with the world environmental crisis as a background, when issues such as climate change, over-population, depletion of resources, and food scarcity are well-known problems. In Japan, rural population depletion and aging, an increasing reliance upon foreign sources of foodstuffs, the sorry state of sadly neglected planted forests, and increasing encounters with wild mammals in both rural and urban areas are all well-known problems. The over-crowded conditions in Japan’s major metropolises are felt daily by their inhabitants, as is the notion that it is our affluent modern lifestyle that has caused these environmental problems. It is against this background that satoyama has much to teach us. “Now that nature close to us is being lost all over, satoyama is being reconsidered” (ibid. 2:10).

The claims made by these programs can be faulted in two important ways. First is that, even while stressing the fact that these environments are endangered, they do not explain why. Thus they are idealizing satoyama in ways that ignore the harsh economic conditions there, in a manner not unlike how Western pastoral images have done with their rural areas for centuries. In reality, people are leaving these communities because they cannot make enough money through agriculture to survive, because the infrastructure in such areas cannot match that of the cities, because there are no other jobs, and at bottom, because life there is less comfortable and affluent than it is in urban areas. In short, these are beautiful places that many Japanese dream about, but where most would not care to live. These problems are of course all rooted in a politico-economic system that favors urban areas over rural ones; they exist because of policy decisions made by governments that have been overly influenced by industry. They do not exist in a vacuum or occur naturally. They also are allowed to persist because, even though Japanese people might find comfort in images of satoyama landscapes, at bottom they value material affluence and convenience far more than clean, natural living and the preservation of rural traditions.

In avoiding clear discussion of the socio-economic realities of country living today, the

programs not only are somewhat disingenuous, but they also seem to go against their own purpose—which is to educate about and thus promote and protect such areas. It might be argued that all Japanese already know very well the problems that farmers there face, so that to bring it up again would merely be to preach about unpleasant realities. Yet is it then acceptable to let such people who know so well about these problems, but do nothing about them, comfort themselves in the thought that this ideal agrarian landscape still exists somewhere close-by, waiting for their visit and eternally preserving the *genfukei* of Japan? The shows do themselves and their viewers a disservice by not venturing into the political aspects of satoyama.

Secondly, the programs could be cited for their implied *Nihonjinron*. While not explicitly claiming that such living has only existed among the Japanese, the language hides the fact that agricultural communities all over the world have functioned in similar ways over centuries. The focus on the span of Japanese history, the multiple generations maintaining the paddies and coppices, and the frequent use of the subject pronoun “we” might easily lead the viewer to believe that only Japanese have achieved this. Again, while this is never claimed explicitly, the omission of any mention of the universality of such environments is problematic. Though we might add that the shows seem better on this point than their English versions, and that also, in lacking explicit exclusivist claims, they avoid the outright cultural nationalism of so many shows about traditional Japanese culture. We will next look at how this sense of cultural exceptionalism becomes stronger in the English language versions of these documentaries.

### An English-version *Satoyama* for Foreign Consumption

In Spring, 2005, the BBC acquired the rights to the first two *Satoyama* documentaries in order to show them on their *Natural World* television series. Neil Nightingale of the BBC's Natural History Unit explained the reasons behind this decision:

We decided to acquire ‘Satoyama’ because it is a unique and beautiful portrait of rural Japan and the relationship between people and nature. It reveals an aspect of Japan that I am sure will be completely new to British viewers, and does it in a wonderfully lyrical style which I am sure will be popular with our ‘Natural World’ audience. (NHK 2005)

The narration of the two programs was completely redone in English, with the famous *Natural*

*World* narrator, naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough, taking over the work. Garrard has noted that in the UK, Attenborough's is a "familiar voice" which gives to a nature program a "sense of omniscient authority" (Garrard 154). Not only was Attenborough's script entirely re-written for the new audience, but the videos were also edited, with some new footage added, other footage dropped, and the order of scenes somewhat changed. This was no mere act of translation or dubbing, but a re-creation, and the differences between the English and Japanese versions speak much to attitudes towards Japanese culture abroad, as well as to desires within Japan to shape those attitudes.

One of the first differences that we notice when looking at the English versions of these programs is in the titles. Both carry the word 'secret' in them, even though it is included in neither of the original titles. This is a major clue as to the direction of the new versions: cloaked in secrecy, will they not be revealing to us hitherto un-dreamed of mysteries of the Orient? We see a move in an orientalist direction from the very start.

The dramatic difference in tone and message between the Japanese and British versions of the videos is also well illustrated by the opening lines of *Japan's Secret Water Garden* (2b). The Japanese version (2a) opens with a scene of young boys running through a small canal on a sunny day in summer, brandishing fish nets with which they try to catch carp. They are splashing through the water and yelling out in joy. Their narration begins: "Can you remember? The excitement of that day?!" (Oboeteimasu ka? Ano hi no tokimeki) (NHK 2004, 0:10).

Certainly, the answer of most honest Japanese would be "no." The majority of Japanese alive today have never experienced such agrarian life. Certainly a large number have, but even those who have not can "remember" it, for such satoyama country living is deeply embedded in the shared cultural memory of all Japanese—put there through education, commercials and other types of advertisements, and TV shows like this one. It is the height of summer, the sun is blazing, but the water is cool and life is good as we catch our own fish and bring it home for dinner. This is the real Japan, but it is one that must be *remembered*, for it exists now for so very few Japanese.

In contrast, the British version begins with a picture of Sangoro Tanaka fishing in this watery paradise, today, with no separation in time and no need for memory. For the foreign viewers of this show, the only separation is in space, the space between the occident and the orient, between our utilitarian relationship to nature and the harmonious one of the Japanese. The opening lines:

Imagine a realm where the seasons' rhythms rule, where centuries of agriculture and fishing have re-shaped the land, yet where people and nature remain in harmony. Sangoro Tanaka lives in just such a paradise. (BBC 2005b, 0:15)

The prelapsarian world for which we have been searching does exist—just not on our side of the globe! Of course, these are not ideas invented about Japan by Europeans so much as ones invented by Japanese about themselves, in order to compare themselves favorably to Europeans. The two main claims here are stock professions of *Nihonjinron* discourse. First is that Japan has four seasons, and that this fact governs Japanese lives. Second is that Japanese people live in harmony with nature.

Certainly the first claim is uninteresting, as all of Europe and North America also experience four seasons, along with most of Asia, Northern and Southern Africa, much of South America, and Australia. People in these lands too are conditioned, or “ruled,” if you will, by the rhythm of the seasons, though most descendants of European cultures do not focus on the fact nearly as much as Japanese do.

The second claim is a bit harder to analyze, as it is not at all clear what it *means*. If we make a generous interpretation, we can read the claim as being nearly the same as that listed as #2 above, namely, that humans have worked together with nature to make the satoyama environment.

As mentioned previously, this is a nearly meaningless claim, since all human endeavors involve working together with nature. Stated as it is, though, it is a claim with much rhetorical power. For certainly, the Westerners for whom the show was created do not feel that *they themselves* live in harmony with nature. This is very clear today in the face of global climate change. Even if some individuals might personally feel that they are living in harmony with nature, it is those people precisely who are most apt to indict the rest Western civilization for being so disharmonious with nature.

The rhetoric of harmony here, while specifically speaking of the little area north of Lake Biwa where Sangoro lives, comes rather to signify Japan as a whole. This becomes clearer throughout the show, as we hear things like “the Japanese have a word for it...” and “it's used all over Japan.” Throughout the episode, there is a shifting of significations between this one small region of Japan, which all Japanese know is very special and unlike most of the places where they live, and the whole nation, suspended in a timeless, traditional culture.

Here we find a standard and threadbare claim, one that has served nationalistic and occidentalist purposes, namely the claim that “the Japanese” live in harmony with nature while “Westerners” try to only dominate it. Harumi Befu gives an example of this wide-spread *Nihonjinron* claim, this time from Miyagi Otoh:

(I)t is noteworthy that Miyagi contrasts Japan with the West, saying that Japan did not try to “conquer nature” as the West did, which he regards as a manifestation of sadism, but instead merely tried to “adapt to it,” which to him is a manifestation of masochism. (Befu 1999 p.18)

This nationalistic claim is now reversed, taught to Westerners, and working to orientalize Sangoro’s satoyama into the paradise that Europeans lost so long ago. This is of course not terribly surprising. Environmentalists in the West have long been entranced by the harmonious and natural East. Lynn White, the first major thinker to systematically claim that Christianity was greatly to blame for the present environmental crisis, himself claimed that Zen Buddhism was a more eco-friendly religion (White 1967 pp.12-13). The influential eco-philosophy of deep ecology is also heavily grounded in Zen ideas (Devall and Sessions 1985 pp.100-1).

It did not take long for some Western viewers of the documentaries to find Zen within them as well. Dawn Stanton, reviewing the showing of 2a at the 2005 International Wildlife Film Festival in Missoula, Montana, USA for the *Things Asian* website, thinks that “(many) of the images of nature suggest a Zen-like simplicity.” Given as examples are a scene wherein brightly and variously-colored vegetables float in Sangoro’s *kabata* (indoor spring), and one near the end of the program wherein time-lapse photography condenses the work of several villagers cutting reeds and stacking them into cones which, “although manmade, maintain its sense of simple nature” (Stanton). Just as Zen has become nearly synonymous with deep ecological sentiments in the West, many people also have to include it in any discussion of Japanese culture / nature—even though no reference whatsoever is made to Zen or Buddhism in this series.

In what follows, we will look at some other scenes from the documentaries where the English version differs greatly from the Japanese.

*Rural Depopulation*: At one point in 2b, the narrator states that “(t)he old, simple life of satoyama communities is attracting some young Japanese back from the cities” (BBC 2005b 15:58).



While literally true, this statement really is quite misleading, and would even seem to conflict with many of the statements made in video 1a, where we are several times reminded that the landscape portrayed there was one that we are less and less likely actually to see in Japan. The main reason for that, though unstated, is of course that the number of people willing to live in satoyama communities and work in ways which preserve them is dwindling remarkably, a trend that is not even slightly offset by the small numbers of city-dwellers who are deciding to move back to the country for a quiet life. It should also be mentioned that a large number of the Japanese who are moving back from the cities are retirees, and that one popular reason for doing so is that a pension can be made to stretch several times further in a rural community than in Tokyo.

Thus the statement we are considering here is one that acts to reinforce the illusion that satoyama is a vital part of Japan's present, and as we have seen, this is a notion that is clearly absent from videos 1a and 2a, the intended audience of which would immediately notice the problematic nature of such a claim. For foreigners who still are more interested in a mystified Japan than in contemporary social reality, however, such a statement can be made.

*Funazushi*: In videos 2a and 2b, the fisherman Sangoro is shown taking *funa* carp from the lake and then using them to make the local delicacy, *funazushi*. The difference between the Japanese and British versions of this episode is interesting and enlightening in ways different to those we have discussed above.

Considered a delicacy by some, *funazushi* is rarely eaten by urban Japanese nowadays, and it is far from a food that has a universally positive image. Made of fermented carp and rice, it is a pungent, sour dish that a great number of young or urban Japanese do not care to eat. Even in a nation where country living, and especially local country eating have such a healthy, wholesome and also gourmet image, *funazushi* is one dish that is off the menu for many. But for foreign viewers who are recently mad about sushi, and for those in Britain used to watching Japanese cooking shows on TV, such as BBC2's *A Taste of Japan*, the positive foodie aspect of hand-caught, home-prepared traditional sushi is too good to pass up. Sangoro makes the dish himself and puts it aside for several months to ferment. He enjoys the *funazushi* later in the year with his family and neighbors: a classic example of "slow food, slow life," community living, wherein the dish took months to prepare, and they leisurely eat it together. This scene is not included in the Japanese version, though I would guess not because of any inherent characteristics of the *funazushi* itself rather than simply that there were other scenes that were more important. For the foreign audience, however, the most

must be made of the slow food content.

This makes another difference in the episode even more interesting. In the Japanese version, where the details of the finished dish are left out, Sangoro is seen putting the knife to the carp, which are still alive and are flopping about on his cutting board as they meet their deaths. Yet the foreign audience, though it may now be able to stomach eating fish raw, tends to have rather touchy views about cruelty to animals, even fish, views that are not so strongly held in Japan. Cutting up a still-living fish is beyond the pale of humane treatment for many.

*Shinto-based offerings:* Another scene left out of the Japanese version is Sangoro's presentation of offerings to the deity of the paddies. There is nothing exceptional about a Japanese, especially one in a more-or-less traditional farming community, making an offering to the local kami. What is interesting is that this act was included in the English version after being left out of the Japanese one. We can conclude that there was no need to include such an unexceptional, matter-of-course action in the Japanese version. In the English version, however, the visit adds a spiritual element that is certainly effective both in solidifying the other-worldly character of Sangoro's "paradise," and also in stamping this paradise as characteristically and uniquely Japanese. For Shinto, as all educated Westerners know, is a native *Japanese* religion, unlike Buddhism and Confucianism, thought systems influential in Japan but imported from the Asian continent. Sangoro visits no Buddhist temples: it is the native kami which must be propitiated, for his work is being done on native land.

With its Satoyama Initiative and heavy pushing of the concept at the September 2010 UN Conference on Biodiversity in Nagoya, several branches of the Japanese government have gotten into the act of trying to convince the world of the eco credentials of satoyama environments. It seems that the BBC was ahead of them in this endeavor. The English script for 2b is credited to Jeremy Evans, a BBC producer, and Satoko Nakahara. I have been unable to uncover any evidence that NHK was involved in its production. The modifications made to these English versions should rather be viewed as one part of the long history of Western visual representations of Japan, such as began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with Japonismé in art and opera (exemplified by Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*), and carried on by a long line of films dealing with Japanese themes during and after the Second World War.

Western television has also been linked to the representation of Japanese culture, especially

since the hit American mini-series *Shogun* (1980). BBC has also been a constant player in the production of television images of Japan. Coming five years before the English *Satoyama* series, one attention-grabbing multi-part documentary was *Sex in Japan* (2000). The show goes far outside of the realm of responsible journalism in order to depict Japan as a sexual fantasy world in which love and sex do not go together, high school girls gladly sell their bodies to older men, wives work as prostitutes during the daytime, and women find relaxation in being tied up. The simplistic voyeurism and fantastic depictions of Japanese sexual liberation are downright offensive, nearly racist, and far below the level of journalism one would normally expect from BBC (BBC 2000).

The mysterious fascination with Japan continues. For example, March 2009 was “Hidden Japan” Season on BBC Four. It was advertised as “a unique collection of programmes dedicated to discovering the hidden soul of Japan” (BBC Four). Here, the term “hidden” functions in the same way as “secret” in the *Satoyama* documentaries. Some simply cannot outgrow the insinuation that Japan is a mysterious, secret, hidden world beckoning us to uncover it. “Hidden Japan” featured several Japanese films new and old, plus re-showings of *Satoyama* documentaries, and several new BBC programs, many of them predictably focusing upon mysterious aspects of Japanese aesthetics and culture. Examples are the self-explanatory *In Search of Wabi Sabi with Marcel Theroux*, and *Fish! A Japanese Obsession*, a pejoratively titled documentary wherein author and actor Charles Rangeley Wilson is “(t)rying to comprehend this ‘alien’ culture” (Ibid.).

Thus the orientalism encountered in the English *Satoyama* documentaries is something that should not surprise us. In order to continue the representation of an alluring and exotic Japan that will draw in Western viewers, the BBC regularly sacrifices journalistic integrity and creates misleading images of Japan. One doubts if NHK itself could do better in manufacturing an eco-centric, nature-loving Japan. *Nihonjinron* and Japanese cultural nationalism are by no means purely the domain of Japanese purveyors.

### Later Satoyama Documentaries

Though not the main focus of the present analysis, a word should be included regarding the four NHK *Satoyama* documentaries made after those which we have been discussing.

With *World Satoyama Journey*, NHK made a bold cultural statement in the explicit claim that satoyama environments were not a uniquely Japanese phenomenon. Not only did they visit three foreign satoyama communities, but two of these were, shockingly, in Europe itself, the home (in

Japanese discourse) of pastoral landscapes and meat-eating. The choice of Finland and Poland is much less surprising than England or France would have been, but the basic recognition that European civilization also displays landscapes where humans and nature live in harmony is in fundamental contrast to *Nihonjinron* discourse on the subject. That the somewhat “primitive” Tay ethnic minority of Yunnan, China, is also included is much more to be expected, since the satoyama concept in Japan also pivots on the widespread belief that the Japanese are, at heart, still a pre-modern people.

Filmed as they were on location abroad, these programs show a much less dramatic level of photographic techniques in comparison to 1 and 2. In a sense, this makes their verbal messages stand out all the more. The information, however, seems to be much less confidently transmitted than when NHK is discussing its own country. There are at times interpretations which seem shaky, and characters who seem to be hamming it up for the Japanese camera, as when a Finnish diviner kisses the fish he has just caught, and a woodsman hugs his trees a bit too passionately. Nevertheless, in terms of cultural message, these three documentaries deserve the highest approval of all the *Satoyama* programs. They dispense with *Nihonjinron* in order to promote the idea of human environments that exist across cultures.

Unfortunately, whatever ground was gained in the *World Satoyama Journey* programs was lost in the *Satoyama Theater Version* of 2009. In this new movie, which goes back to Lake Biwa to focus on the forests of satoyama, special photographic techniques have multiplied, and to these have been added computer graphics, super-high-quality audio, and a speaking tree that brings one securely into the world of Miyazaki Hayao animation. The special-effects photography here becomes distracting, the anime-like presentation is childish, and the sound effects often sound fake. Furthermore, this is the most culturally nationalistic of all the NHK documentaries. On at least three occasions, practices or situations are described as being “uniquely Japanese” or occurring “Only in Japan.” In each case, the claim is dubious at best. We are shown the careful methods by which shiitake mushrooms are cultivated, in a manner that is “uniquely Japanese.” Of course, not only have other people been cultivating the mushrooms native to their environments all over the world for centuries, if not millennia, but shiitake cultivation itself now occurs in many places over the world. Hardly unique, even if the specific practices differ from place to place. Next, it is claimed that only Japanese children care to collect insects and play with them. As I remember catching fireflies as a child, even my own experience refutes this claim. Lastly, as we see foxes, birds, raccoon dogs, and

deer coming to eat fallen persimmons just a few meters from a house, it is pondered that only in Japan are there so many wild species living so close to people's homes. It is sad to see NHK retreating to such silly claims of Japanese exceptionalism.

### Conclusion

The NHK's series of *Satoyama* documentaries are well-filmed, lovely statements concerning the relationship of agrarian people to their environments. They are especially moving in an age of climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental crises. These programs have done much to inform Japanese of the traditional environments in their country that are being lost to contemporary consumerist society. Certainly, they are highly educational programs that young Japanese should see. Hopefully they will help raise the ecological consciousness of viewers young and old.

They are, however, also quite problematic. The Japanese versions which deal with satoyama in Japan fail to deal honestly with the problem of the loss of satoyama environments and the reasons behind such loss. They thus seem to perpetuate the problem rather than help to alleviate it. Except in the case of *World Satoyama Journey*, the documentaries also give the false impression that sustainable agrarian living is uniquely Japanese, and the most recent program is the guiltiest in this regard. Satoyama environments all over the world are now endangered, from climate change as well as urbanization and industrial agriculture. It is imperative that people examine the function of such environments in a cross-cultural and scientific manner in order to find ways to preserve them and the life they make possible. In order for this to happen, a slightly more serious approach will be necessary, one that has shed both cultural nationalism and mystifying orientalism, and that does not engage in self-deception about the true status of such landscapes and the "green" qualifications of a nation or race. Hopefully, the success of these NHK *Satoyama* programs will lead to more serious, objective, cross-cultural, and scientifically-grounded programming in the near future.

#### Bibliography

- Armbruster, Karla (1998) "Creating the World we Must Save: The Paradox of Television Nature Documentaries," in R. Kerridge and N. Sammells (eds.) *Writing the Environment*, London: Zed Books.
- BBC (2000) *Sex in Japan*.
- (2005a), *Satoyama: Japan's Secret Garden*.
- (2005b), *Satoyama: Japan's Secret Water Garden*.
- BBC Four (2009) *Hidden Japan*, Website. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/japan/>

- Befu, Harumi (2001) *Hegemony of Homogeneity*, Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
- Devall, Bill and Sessions, George (1985) *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Salt Lake City: Gibbs and Smith.
- Eiga "Satoyama" Koushiki Homepage (2009), <http://satoyama.gaga.ne.jp/>, NHK Enterprises.
- Garrard, Greg (2004), *Ecocriticism*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gifford, Terry (1999), *Pastoral*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl and Fromm, Harold (1996), *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
- Imamori Mitsuhiro, Personal Website: *Imamori World*. <http://www.imamori-world.jp/>
- (2006), *Satoyama no kotoba* 里山のことば (The Language of Satoyama), Tokyo: Sekai Bunkasha.
- (2008), *Satoyama no okurimono* 里山のおくりもの (A Gift Sent from the Satoyama), Tokyo: Sekai Bunkasha.
- NHK (2001), *Eizooshi Satoyama: hito to shizen ga tomo ni ikiru* 映像詩 里山 人と自然がともに生きる (Visual Poem Satoyama: Humans and Nature Living Together), Tokyo: NHK Software DVD.
- (2004), *Eizoshi Satoyama II: inochi meguru mizube* 映像詩 里山 II 命めぐる水辺 (Visual Poem Satoyama II: Life Revolving around the Water), Tokyo: NHK Software DVD.
- (2005) "NHK's 'Satoyama' to Air in BBC's 'Natural World', NHK Press Release, <http://www.nhk.or.jp/pr/english/press/pdf/20050412.pdf>.
- (2007)a, *Sekai satoyama kiko—Finrando: mori, yoosei to no taiwa* 世界里山紀行 フィンランド 森・妖精との対話 (World Satoyama Journey—Finland: The Forest, Dialogue with the Fairies), Tokyo: NHK Enterprises DVD.
- (2007)b, *Sekai satoyama kiko—Pooorando: mizube ni hibikiau inochi* 世界里山紀行 ポーランド 水辺に響きあういのち (World Satoyama Journey—Poland: Life Echoing around the Waters), Tokyo: NHK Enterprises DVD.
- (2007)c, *Sekai satoyama kiko—Chuugoku, unnan: take to tomo ni ikiru* 世界里山紀行 中国・雲南 竹とともに生きる (World Satoyama Journey—Yunnan, China: Living together with Bamboo), Tokyo: NHK Enterprises DVD.
- (2009) *Eizoshi Satoyama: Gekijoban* 映像詩 里山—劇場版 (Visual Poem Satoyama: Theater Version), Tokyo: NHK Enterprises DVD.
- Stanton, Dawn (2005) "Film Review: Satoyama: Japan's Secret Watergarden," on *Things Asian* website, <http://www.thingsasian.com/stories-photos/3315>
- White Jr., Lynn "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," in Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), pp. 3-14.