

Early Voice Recordings of Japanese Storytelling

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Japan's opening to the West in the late 1850s ushered in the Meiji period (1868-1912), an era of widespread industrial growth and erratic social change. Meiji Japan made great progress in its efforts to increase mass literacy, but during the same period saw the expansion of a thriving form of professional storytelling called *ninjôbanashi* ("tales of human sentiment").¹ This oral epic genre enjoyed a period of intense popularity beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, but in a surprising turn of events came to an abrupt end by the mid-1910s. The short-lived glory days of *ninjôbanashi* gave rise to a number of derivative arts, including comic monologues (*rakugo*) and silent film narration, and even contributed to the colloquial style of modern Japanese literature.² One of the more interesting artifacts to survive the extinction of *ninjôbanashi* is a collection of voice recordings made in 1903, some of which contain short excerpts from the *ninjôbanashi* genre performed by contemporary master storytellers.

This paper will use one of the 1903 recordings to articulate some of the unique characteristics of Japan's professional storytelling tradition as it existed during the Meiji period. First, I will sketch the background leading up to the *ninjôbanashi* boom of the 1880s and 1890s. Then, after describing the quirks of fate whereby the rare recordings were made, I will present a transcription and analysis of one *ninjôbanashi* from the series, illustrating some of the oral components typical of the genre. In the process I hope to give readers unfamiliar with the Japanese oral tradition a taste of the art form as it existed during its Golden Age approximately a century ago.

¹ In romanizing Japanese the diacritic ^ is used to represent double vowel sounds; hence, ô = oo.

² On *rakugo*, see Morioka and Sasaki 1989; on silent movie narration, see Ritchie 1990:3-5; and for a brief overview of the connections between storytelling and the birth of Japanese colloquial narrative, see Nobuhiro 1978.

Storytelling in Japan

Japan had no written language before it adopted the Chinese writing system in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. At first, dependence on the Chinese script meant using the Chinese language as well, but soon Chinese writing was altered to fit the unique needs of the very different Japanese language, and in this process literary compositions from preliterate Japan found their way into the permanent written record. The richness and the sheer volume of early Japanese writings with preliterate origins (including works such as the *Kojiki* ["Record of Ancient Matters," a cosmology, 712] and the *Man'yôshû* ["Collection of Myriad Leaves," a poetic anthology, 759]) suggest the existence of a rich oral tradition prior to the introduction of Chinese script.

Subsequent Japanese literary works maintained strong ties with the oral tradition throughout the Heian (749-1192) and medieval (1192-1600) periods; many classical Japanese literary masterpieces, including *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1006), contain a great deal of orality (Miyoshi 1989). While these written works of literature possess something akin to Walter Ong's "residual orality" (Ong 1986), a vibrant oral tradition appears to have coexisted among all levels of society. Between the tenth and fourteenth centuries itinerant Buddhist preachers often used oral fables (*setsuwa*) in their efforts to enlighten both the illiterate masses and the literate elite (Matisoff 1992). Some of these parables found their way into written collections, and are preserved today in works such as the *Konjaku monogatari* ("Tales of Times Now Past," 1108; translated in Ury 1979). More secular, *märchen*-like narratives called *otogi-zôshi* also found their way into written collections during the medieval period (Skord 1991).

Widespread civil war led to chaotic conditions in Japan during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, a situation that gave rise to another type of oral narrative. Some eyewitnesses to the more famous battles, along with now-masterless samurai, wandered the countryside telling battle stories in exchange for food and lodging. For most this was a temporary means of survival, but for a small number it turned into a profession. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, when political control in Japan was consolidated by the Tokugawa family, some of these itinerant storytellers began to settle down, affiliating themselves with popular temples or plying their trade at the intersections of major thoroughfares in the growing cities.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the art of professional storytelling divided into pre-existing oral and written camps, one relying upon colloquial dexterity and the other upon exposition in written texts (Orsi 1976). The former, whose performers were given the name *hanashika* ("raconteur"), consisted of oral narratives performed from

memory by storytellers who faced their audiences directly and employed minimal props (such as a hand towel and a fan) to serve as visual additions to the story (Morioka and Sasaki 1989:III). The latter, whose performers were labeled *kôdanshi* (“expositor”), consisted of written texts (usually drawn from the Japanese classics or military annals) that were placed upon a lectern, quoted or paraphrased, and then explicated by the storyteller. These *kôdan* offered a mixture of chanted rhythmical reading, punctuating beats on the lectern, and personal commentary (Sano 1943:I). Both types of storytelling involved mimetic dramatization of dialogue and a certain amount of acting on the part of the storyteller.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the urban centers of Osaka and Edo (now Tokyo) witnessed the establishment of professional storytelling theaters called *yose*, where both types of oral epic narratives would unfold nightly to a diverse audience of samurai, merchants, tradesmen, and their families. As Japan opened its doors to the West in the mid-1860s, the previously immobile masses began to converge upon the urban centers, and professional storytelling witnessed unprecedented growth. *Yose* multiplied, springing up in nearly every neighborhood, and a continuous flow of storytellers, musicians, impersonators, and magicians entertained an ever more diverse audience.

The world of late nineteenth-century professional storytelling was divided into schools or clans that included both apprentice and veteran performers, primarily men but including some women among their ranks. A typical evening at the *yose* began with several apprentice storytellers performing brief tales interspersed with vaudeville-type variety acts. As the evening progressed, the more experienced storytellers would appear in succession, and the final story would usually be an installment of an ongoing epic recited by a *shin’uchi*, or master storyteller.

Repertoires varied, and a well-trained storyteller was capable of reciting anything from a ten-minute comic monologue to an episodic work of thirty or more forty-minute installments.³ Thematically the tales included both traditional fare (war stories, didactic moral tales, ghost stories, and romances) as well as the avant garde (biographies, current intrigues, and, as Japan continued to import ideas and technology from abroad, “adaptations” of Western novels).

In the 1870s a young Englishman named Henry Black (1858-1923), living in Japan with his journalist father, took to the *yose* stage offering his own Japanese-language renditions of Victorian novels and Western legends (Morioka and Sasaki 1983; 1989:256-58). These early adaptations were

³ Storyteller lore includes accounts of famed raconteurs whose repertoires numbered over a hundred epic-length stories, some of which took several months (or even, in the case of renderings of classical *kôdan* tales, a year or more) to complete (Orsi 1990, Sano 1943, Barth 1928, Meissner 1913).

called *hon'anmono* (“adaptations” or “transmutations”) and became widely popular among audiences in Tokyo. As Black rose in prominence as a storyteller, he supplied both materials and inspiration for other premier performers, who created new adaptations based upon Western literature. Both *kôdanshi* and *hanashika* created tales patterned after Western novels. Victorian Charles Reade’s *Hard Cash* was re-set in Japan, complete with Japanese protagonists, as *hanashika* San’yûtei Enchô’s (1839-1900) *Eikoku kôshi Jôji Sumisu no den* (“Tale of George Smith, A Filial English Son,” transcribed 1885), while *kôdanshi* Shôrin Hakuen (1832-1905) used a German tale as the basis for his *kôdan* entitled *Ochiriya zôshi: Doitsu kenjô* (“A Wise German Daughter,” transcribed 1891). These adaptations were very popular in the *yose*, and corresponded to the exotic written translations of Western novels popular during the first decades of Meiji.

Another Western import that influenced the storytelling profession during the early Meiji period was stenography. In the early 1880s Takusari Kôki invented a Japanese version of shorthand (Fukuoka 1978). Up to that time no stenographic system had existed in Japan; its centuries-long absence had allowed a broad diglossia to emerge between written and spoken Japanese.

While the Japanese vernacular underwent a number of changes in the millennium separating Heian and Meiji Japan, the written language did not evolve in line with speech but along more conservative, tradition-bound lines. Hence, the situation in Meiji Japan would be comparable to a modern England where everyone spoke contemporary English but for all written tasks would employ the language of Chaucer. This discrepancy, and the labor required to master the classical written dialect, meant that literacy was reserved for a small, highly educated percentage of the populace.

The arrival of shorthand in Japan in 1883 not only added a new sense of objectivity to printed discourse but, through the promotional efforts of Tokyo publishers, became the means whereby oral stories also began to appear in print.⁴ These widely popular stories, called *sokkibon* (“shorthand-books”), represented verbatim transcriptions of traditional oral epics, written down as they were recited by professional storytellers in the *yose* (Miller 1994).

The new *sokkibon* caught on quickly among all levels of society, both as books and (in imitation of the *yose* performances) as serialized stories in the daily press. Oral stories made for successful printed texts for several reasons. First, the style of *sokkibon* language was much more immediate for the average Japanese reader of the Meiji period, since it

⁴ Shorthand, first employed to transcribe court hearings and political debates, was soon used to transcribe a twenty-two episode ghost story, *Kaidan Botandôrô* (“The Peony Lantern,” 1884), by master *hanashika* San’yûtei Enchô. Shortly after the work appeared in print it became a bestseller.

came from the oral rather than the literate milieu. Second, a majority of *sokkibon* readers also attended the *yose*, and therefore possessed a solid familiarity with the stories, narrative strategies, and idioms of the storytelling world that appeared in *sokkibon*. Finally, in the 1880s Japanese written narrative itself was undergoing a kind of gangly adolescence as it sought a new, colloquial idiom to suit a growing readership among the newly educated masses.

The success of *sokkibon* produced a twofold reaction: writers experimenting with vernacular narrative borrowed from the storytellers' style, and storytellers became famous throughout Japan as their tales were distributed in book form well beyond the traditional *yose* networks. Riding the crest of a new national awareness, premier storytellers—and storytelling as an art form—blossomed during the late 1880s and 1890s. A survey of the Japanese Diet Library collection of *sokkibon* (estimated to contain only a third of the *sokkibon* titles that appeared during the Meiji period) lists over seven hundred new titles published between 1884 and 1912. The rapid proliferation of hundreds, even thousands, of volumes of epic stories attests to the depth and breadth of the Japanese oral tradition during the late nineteenth century.

The phonograph goes East

At this same time, halfway around the world in Washington, D.C., Emil Berliner was perfecting the disk phonograph to compete with Edison's wax cylinder technology. During the late 1890s one of Berliner's friends, an enthusiastic, entrepreneurial American named Fred Gaisberg, set up the Gramophone and Typewriter Company in London and entered the world of commercial record publishing with a vengeance. At this early stage there were many competing startup companies, and Gaisberg, eager to seek out new recording possibilities, included ethnic music recordings among some of the company's first offerings.⁵ These had enough success to warrant a subsequent, major collecting effort.

In 1902 Gaisberg set sail from London in a specially designed ship filled with wax disks and recording equipment. He traveled to India, and thence onwards to Japan, where he planned to collect ethnic music recordings as he worked his way back through Southeast Asia to Europe.⁶ When Gaisberg landed in Yokohama he made the acquaintance of Henry

⁵ A Gramophone catalog from 1902 includes not only English, German, French, and Italian titles, but also recordings made in Persian, Arabic, and Japanese (Gramophone 1902).

⁶ For an account of the voyage, see Gaisberg 1948:ch. 3.

Black, who by that time was well-placed in the entertainment world. Using Black as an interpreter and agent, Gaisberg moved to Tokyo, set up his equipment in a Ginza hotel room, and proceeded to record over 260 disks of Japanese music. During this process Black suggested that Gaisberg record some of the more popular professional storytellers, and Gaisberg, recognizing a new potential market, agreed. Seventeen storytellers and entertainers (including several *shin'uchi*) made over sixty master disks that joined Gaisberg's growing collection.

Gaisberg arrived back in London at the end of the summer, and his exotic collection of recordings soon became commercially available in Europe.⁷ Plans were made to market the ethnic recordings in their respective countries, but by the time the Japanese disks had been pressed in Germany, sent to England, and then shipped all the way to Japan, the Japanese market for records was no longer unspoiled territory. By early 1904 Columbia Records, taking its cue from the Gramophone expedition, was already marketing very aggressively in Japan and making domestic recordings. Columbia, and later that year the German record company Beka, followed Gaisberg's lead in recording storytellers as well, although they apparently did not employ Black.

Despite the fact that Gaisberg, on behalf of Gramophone, took another trip to Japan in 1906, he lost interest in the Japanese market and sold the territorial rights to Gramophone's American counterpart, Victor, the following year. Shortly thereafter domestic production facilities were set up in Japan, and Japan's recording industry was soon isolated from European production.

Therefore, as early as 1904 commercial recordings of storytellers joined *sokkibon* as alternatives to the *yose* oral narrative experience. The combination of printed editions of popular tales and the new records proved to be stiff competition for *yose*-style storytelling. In addition, a new style of written narrative increasingly patterned upon colloquial Japanese (and on the storyteller's *patois*) came into widespread use among many of Japan's new writers. As mass literacy increased, more and more people forsook the *yose* for the bookstore, the record player, and soon the cinema. By the beginning of World War I storytelling as an art form had dwindled in popularity, and the remaining performers found audiences who were most interested in comic monologues.⁸

⁷ The earliest catalog listing these recordings (Gramophone n.d.) appears to have been printed around 1905.

⁸ Although there were attempts during World War II to revive storytelling as a "native" art form, these attempts failed and today the vestige of Japan's vibrant oral storytelling tradition is limited to the narrow range of comic monologues (*rakugo*). For a monograph on the Japanese *rakugo* tradition, see Morioka and Sasaki 1989.

Meanwhile, in London, Gramophone continued to grow and soon became one of the dominant leaders in the European recording industry. When Gramophone became EMI prior to World War II, the original Gramophone archives, containing a complete set of copies from the first Gaisberg recordings, were incorporated into a larger EMI library. Unfortunately, since the labels of the Gaisberg records were printed in Japanese, and the catalog consisted of a photo reproduction of the labels, the records garnered little or no attention over the intervening decades.

In Japan, Gramophone (and later Victor) attempted to market the Gaisberg records before 1911, but the paucity of records surviving today in Japan suggests that they were not widely distributed. The records that did find their way into Japanese collections suffered greatly in the intervening years of war and natural disaster.⁹ Most, having been played over and over, retain only a shadow of their former quality.

Several years ago, after a bit of detective work in the National Sound Archive of the British Museum, I confirmed the existence of the EMI set of Gaisberg recordings. To my great joy I discovered that the Japanese collection is nearly complete, with only a few damaged records and most of the records still in mint condition, allowing us the rare chance to hear the voices of Meiji storytellers with great clarity.

Shiobara Tasuke no den

The Gaisberg recordings contain an assortment of voices that includes some of the star raconteurs of the Meiji period. The stories represent the major storyteller clans and a wide range of story types: epics, comic monologues, accompanied ballads, classical tales, romances, and even performances by impressionists.

Among the Gaisberg recordings are works by Black himself, which are particularly interesting since Black was a non-native speaker performing a traditional narrative art.¹⁰ All of the storytellers recorded by Gaisberg had been trained during the nineteenth century, and had learned their art by memory, studying under the guidance of a senior storyteller until they finally developed their own style and repertoire. One of the prominent storytellers in 1903 was Asanebô Muraku VI

⁹ Two Japanese record collectors in particular, Miyakoya Utaroku and Okada Nobuo, have taken great pains to locate existing Gaisberg records in Japan. Utaroku has been particularly ambitious, and has published a discography and biography of the Gaisberg storytellers (Miyakoya 1987).

¹⁰ While the Black recordings have some value as novelties, their idiosyncratic style disqualifies them as examples of traditional Japanese oral narrative.

(c.1858-1907).¹¹ Muraku was in his forties when he performed five tales for Gaisberg's recording equipment.¹² Among these works Muraku included a brief episode from a tale called *Shiobara Tasuke ichidaiki* ("The Life of Shiobara Tasuke"), a popular, lengthy biographical narrative created by the most famous of Meiji *hanashika*, San'yûtei Enchô, who had passed away three years prior to Gaisberg's arrival in Japan.

Enchô created his tale during the 1870s from the rags-to-riches story of a successful charcoal merchant who moved to Edo during the eighteenth century. As with most original tales (as opposed to tales handed down from mentors), the storyteller would develop the story over a period of years, taking cues from audience reactions (Yamamoto 1962). In order to add realistic detail to his narrative, Enchô went so far as to travel to the Shiobara homeland, northwest of Tokyo. These details and Enchô's sense of timing paid off. The original Shiobara Tasuke had moved to Edo from the provinces to seek his fortune. During the 1870s and 1880s people were moving to Tokyo in droves from all across Japan for the same reason, and Enchô, keenly aware of his audiences, tailored the narrative to suit their circumstances and their interests. The tale, immediately successful, was so popular that, when it was transcribed using shorthand and published as a *sokkibon* in 1885, it quickly sold over 200,000 copies and became popular throughout Japan. By the 1890s it was such a well known tale that variations of *Shiobara* were even incorporated into the first textbooks for moral education in Japan (Aoki 1966).

The story begins by describing the desperate circumstances of the Shiobara family in their provincial home. Reduced from the relative luxury of samurai status to scratching out a living by farming in the bleak mountains, one of the Shiobara heirs, Tasuke, moves to Edo, where through perseverance, affability, and a penchant for thrift he eventually becomes a prominent and wealthy charcoal merchant. Enchô's biographical tale highlights Tasuke's rise to glory in a way that naturally intrigued and captivated provincial fortune seekers, themselves newly arrived in Tokyo.

After the 1885 *sokkibon* publication of *Shiobara Tasuke ichidaiki*, other storytellers besides Enchô, even those outside of his clan, began to perform episodes from this Enchô signature tale that had been an important part of the contemporary oral canon. It comes as little surprise, then, that in 1903 Muraku chose to perform one episode from *Shiobara* in Gaisberg's

¹¹ It was a common practice for storytellers to adopt the stage names of their mentors; thus, Muraku was the sixth in his school (clan) line Asanebô to take the name Muraku.

¹² The recordings suggest that Muraku recorded only brief segments from what would normally have been twenty-minute episodes.

recording studio. Muraku's episode, entitled *Shiobara Tasuke no den* ("Tale of Shiobara Tasuke"), takes place after Tasuke arrives in Edo and enters an apprenticeship with a charcoal merchant. Tasuke's good looks and honest character have endeared him to the daughter of a wealthy family, and his future is about to take a turn for the better. A transcription of Muraku's tale, with a rough translation, follows:¹³

Shiobara Tasuke no den

*Toki ni isseki ohanashi o
môshigemashuru no wa, Enchô tokui no
Shiobara to môsu ohanashi o itashimasu ga,
mazu Shiobara no ohanashi to môshimasu to
kazu ga gozaimasu ga, Fujinoya no musume
Hana to môsu no ga, ê Tasuke to môsu sumiya
ni kokoro o minukimashite horemashita no o
chichi ni akashimashita kara, ano sumiya wa
mikomi ga aru to itte, hajimete niwaguchi
kara sumiya o yobiireru koto ni ê narimashita
ga, saisho kara sôdan o itashimasuru to, taike
ga endan no koto de kotowarareru to ikan to
iu node, akidarukai no Kyûhachi to iu Tasuke
no tomodachi o yobimashita.*

"Saa saa saa, kotchi zûtto taruya-san
ohairi."

"Hê hê, dômo arigatô gozaimasu.
Makoto ni kekkô na oniwa de gozaimasu.
Ehhe dômo hajimete oniwa ni agarimashita
mon de gozaimasu kara, menkuraimashite."

*Iya iya, toki ni nô, omae-san ni
sukoshi okiki môshitai koto ga aru."*

"Hê hê, ê dô iu koto de gozaimasu?"

The Tale of Shiobara Tasuke

The story I will relate is from Enchô's masterpiece, *Shiobara*. There are any number of *Shiobara* variations; this one takes place after Hana, daughter of the Fujino family, has fallen head-over-heels in love with Tasuke, the charcoal vendor. When she divulges her feelings to her father, he sees promise in the youth and hires him to deliver charcoal through the family garden. For the marriage arrangements to proceed smoothly the wealthy Fujino family cannot be turned down outright, so Hana's father solicits the aid of Tasuke's friend, a trader of used barrels named Kyûhachi.

"Hey, hey! Keep coming, right along there—that's it, barrelman. Come on in."

"Why, thank ye, sir. What an outstandin' garden. Er, never been asked into a garden before, sir, so's I'm a bit flustered, ye might say."

"Never mind that. There is something I would like to ask you."

"Yessir, what exactly would that be, sir?"

¹³ Romanization (and the Japanese text below) is based upon a transcript made by storyteller Miyakoya Utaroku (Miyakoya 1987:II, 19-21), which I have emended to conform with the clearer archive recording. The bracketed phrase is inaudible on the London recording; most likely it is a skip, since it is found on the Japanese record transcribed by the storyteller.

“Iya, hoka no koto de mo nai ga, shijû omae-san ga hiru jibun ni naru to monomi no shita no kakejaya de, issho ni gozen o tabete oide no ano sumiya-san nô.”

“Hê hê.”

“Ano sumiya-san wa, arya nani kai, doko no okata dai?”

“He, he, atashi no uchi no aryâ tonari de gozansu.”

“Ohoho, omae-san no uchi o atashyâ shiranai yo.”

“Naruhodo sô de gozansu. Hê, Honjô Aioi-chô de gozansu.”

“Oo, sô ka nô, ano okata ni gokanai wa aru ka nô?”

“Hê? Nan de gozansui?”

“Iie sa, gokanai wa aru ka nô?”

“He he, makoto ni kekkô degasu.”

“Iya, omae wa owakari wa nai no ka?”

“He he, owakari ga nai n degasu.”

“Iie sa, nyôbô-san wa aru ka ten da.”

“Ahahaha, naruhodo, yama no kami degasu.”

“Yama no kami to wa okashii nô.”

“Hitorimono de gozansu. He he, asshi mo hitorimono degasu.”

“Omae-san no koto o kikiyasen, toki ni ano okata nô, ê okonai wa dô iu okonai da nô?”

“[Sô de gozansu] nê Danna, ma o-sonae wa tsuitachi to jûgonichi degasu.”

“Well, let me see . . . how can I put this? You know that charcoal vendor, the one you take lunch with everyday at noon by the tea stall beneath the tower . . . ?”

“Yessir!”

“He—that is to say, that charcoal vendor—lives . . . ?”

“I see, sir! ‘E lives right next to me, sir!”

“But I haven’t a clue where *you* live.”

“Ahh, I get your point, sir! ‘Live in Honjô, Aioi-chô, sir!”

“Right. I see. Does your friend have someone . . . ?”

“What?! What’s that you say?”

“I said, is there someone he is . . . with?”

“Oh, that’s just fine with me.”

“What, you don’t understand what I’m saying?”

“Reckon I don’t, sir.”

“I’m asking you if he has a wife!”

“Ahh, I see, sir, you mean *’er indoors!*”

“Well, *her indoors*, then.”

“Single as can be, sir. Matter of fact, I’m single too, sir!”

“I’m not asking about you! So, is your friend . . . esteemed?”

“[Well, sir, to tell you the truth,] sir, ‘e offers steamed rice cakes at the shrine on the first and fifteenth of each month, sir”

“Iie sa, o-sonae de wa nai, okonai da?”

“He he, sonna mon wa kuimasen.”

“Ie, asshi, tebemono de wa nai. Ano okata wa nô, asa okiru to dô iu koto o nasaru nô?”

“He he, sayô de gozansu nâ, meshi o kutte, ehhe kao o arau de.”

“Soryâ abekobe da, ê shikashi ano okata wa dôraku wa nasaran ka nô?”

“He he, dôraku nanzo wa itashimasen. Makoto ni aryâ nan de gozansu yo Danna, shôjiki na mon de gozansu.”

“Aa sô ka nô, omae-san ni nô, ê sukoshi watakushi ga oriitte onegai ga aru nô.”

“Hê, hê.”

“Ê ano okata ni nyôbô-san wa nai no danô?”

“Ehhe, sakki itta tôri hitorimono tte iu kara.”

“Ôô, ê anô sumiya-san ni, ê nyôbô-san o sewa shiyô to omou ga moratte okure de nai ka nô?”

“EhheDanna, okanemochi nante mono wa nan de gozansu nê, eh, zeitaku na mon de gozansu nê. Ehhe, ouchi no osandon ga ehhe iro ga kuroi kara, ehhe fûfu ni shitara, taddon no yô na ko ga dekiru darô.”

“Iiya sô de wa nai, musume no Hana ga, ê makato ni hazukashii ga, sumiya-san ni horeta to iu hanashi da ga.”

Ato môshiagemasu, ê jikan ga gozaimasen kara, atoren to sashikawarimasu.

“No, not ‘steamed’! Is he highly *esteemed*?”

“Esteem don’t make for much of an offering, sir!”

“No, no, no! I don’t mean food. . . when your friend gets up in the morning, how does he conduct himself?”

“Well, sir, as I remember now, he eats his breakfast, then washes his face.”

“Don’t you have that backwards? Oh, never mind, does your friend go out for ‘base amusements’?”

“Oh, ’e don’t ever go for ‘amusements,’ sir! ’E’s what you call a right honest fellow, sir!”

“Oh, you don’t say! Well, then, I have quite a delicate question for you.”

“Yessir!”

“Well . . . your friend isn’t married, correct?”

“As I said, he’s single, so yes, he’s not, sir!”

“Well . . . you see, I’d like to provide a wife for that charcoal vendor, but do you think he’d accept one?”

“Oh-ho, sir! So rich you are, sir! And so gen’rous, too! But your maid, she’s so dark, sir, I think as a pair they’d have children that looked like lumps o’ charcoal, sir!”

“No, no, no! My daughter Hana . . . Hana has . . . well . . . fallen in love with the charcoal vendor.”

There is more to the story, but since my time has run out I’ll turn it over to the next act.

Elements of Meiji storytelling

Several elements of Muraku's narrative *Shiobara Tasuke no den* reveal the state of Japanese storytelling by the turn of the century. First, owing to a general decline in audiences, larger epic tales of many nights' duration were rarely recited from beginning to end but were presented as abridged "fortnighters" or chopped into pieces that, with a bit of contextualization by the storyteller, could be performed for nearly any occasion.¹⁴ This type of abridgment worked particularly well with the more popular tales, such as *Shiobara Tasuke ichidaiki*, that had been in circulation as *sokkibon* for nearly two decades.

Another element that stands out in this scene is the comic overtones. Although *Shiobara Tasuke ichidaiki* is a serious *ninjôbanashi*, at times very dramatic and suspenseful, the overtly comic tone of this particular episode suggests that by 1903 storytellers favored humorous over more dramatic episodes. Muraku's selection mirrors the general contemporary tendency for storytelling professionals to eschew the serious and favor the comic in their efforts to attract audiences distracted by *sokkibon* and new written literature.

Despite the fact that *Shiobara Tasuke no den* is only one in a long series of episodes, and a fragment from the episode at that, Muraku nevertheless follows standard storytelling convention by providing context at the beginning and promising more at the end. This structure, typical of the serialized narrative used by professional storytellers in the *yose*, developed as a narrative exigency for epic genres, particularly the complex, interwoven plots of *ninjôbanashi*.

The introductory paragraph (actually one long sentence in Japanese) is characterized by a lengthy chain of honorific verbs (such as *môshimasu*, *môshiagemasu*, and *itashimasu*). Both the run-on sentence and the honorific verbs are common initiatory techniques of Japanese professional storytellers. These devices serve at least two functions. The length added by the use of honorific phrases gives the audience (who usually hear several storytellers perform one after another) a chance to "zero in" on the new raconteur's vocal idiosyncrasies. The run-on sentence structure marks fluent delivery and assures the audience that the storyteller is eager to present the new installment. There is sometimes even a sense of mock impatience as the storyteller rushes through his summary of what has happened before. In this particular case, Muraku uses the introduction to

¹⁴ The more revered storytellers were often hired to perform at private gatherings (Meissner 1913, Sano 1943).

clarify exactly why Fujino, a rich man of high social status, is willing to enter into conversation with a common barrel trader.

Fluency, in the sense of fluid narration, was *de rigueur* for the storyteller. Whereas modern Japanese written narrative tends toward shorter sentences with full stops, oral narrative has no such convention, and contains in its agglutinative structure the grammatical means to combine any number of sentences into one. Even the best storytellers must breathe, however, and listening carefully to the recorded version one notes that Muraku's opening line allows for (at least) five breathing pauses.¹⁵ Thus what appears to be one long run-on sentence in the written text is actually part of the natural fluidity of an oral performance.¹⁶

After completing the initial summarizing narrative, spoken directly to the audience, the storyteller usually launches into a conversation between two or three individual speakers. One of the storyteller's skills is imitation, and in the above example Muraku shows off his skill by acting out both sides of a dialogue between two very different speakers. The dialogue is rich in dialect and linguistic indications of status, and even without visual clues—such as facial expressions or switching the head back and forth—the disparities between the two characters are quite apparent.

Muraku's dialogue between Kyûhachi and Fujino demonstrates a number of traditional devices still in common use among professional storytellers during the Meiji period. These include repetition, mimicry, punning, fluid narrative, and abrupt changes in tempo. Colloquial Japanese contains a large number of repetitive or rhythmical phrases that add richness and color to speech. Muraku's dialogue reflects this feature in several instances where repetition is used to emphasize or describe action. In the dialogue between Kyûhachi and Fujino, sound repetition alternately suggests hesitation (*ê*, "Hmmm") or confusion (*Hê*, "What?!"), or even overeagerness (*He he*, "Right, right!").

The storyteller's expert manipulation of register and his imitation of dialect play very important roles in characterization. Japanese contains varying levels of register that reflect degrees of deference towards the listener. These levels, often divided into honorific-humble and polite

¹⁵ There are lengthy pauses before the words *mazu*, *Fujinoya*, *chichi*, *saisho*, and *akidarukai*. As is the case in spoken Japanese, speakers tend to breathe following particles; in the example above, most of the breathing takes place after the particle *ga*.

¹⁶ An analysis of the clearer archive recording reveals several cases where run-on response utterances (particularly *ehhe* and *ê*) were not included in the Miyakoya (1987) transcription, suggesting both the heavy wear of the Japan records as well as a native tendency to omit overt oral components during transcription.

language markers, can be used to reinforce the speaker's social status vis-à-vis the listener, but can also reveal subtle nuances about the relationship. Kyûhachi's frequent use of the deferential copula *gozansu* (an Edo dialect polite marker) is used in a manner that is stereotypical for Edo tradesmen addressing their social superiors. Fujino, on the other hand, who is a rich landowner, uses the neutral copula *da* (or substitutes the dialect equivalent *nô*) at the end of his sentences. He does, however, use polite markers (*ohairi*, *-san*, etc.) and occasional mid-sentence deferential language (*okikimôshitai*) to indicate his awareness of proper protocol when addressing a stranger for the first time. By including these register differences in his characterization of Kyûhachi and Fujino, Muraku emphasizes the gap between them; in giving Fujino a non-Edo dialect he further widens that gap, setting the stage for the inevitable misunderstanding upon which much of the humor of this episode depends.

Although at the beginning of the exchange Kyûhachi signals the formality of a first-time meeting by employing fully drawn out, deferential ending phrases (*de gozaimasu*), as the conversation proceeds he quickly begins to abbreviate (*gozansu* or *degasu*) or lower the deference level (*darô*). This shift suggests that he is less intimidated by Fujino's status than seems to be the case at the beginning. Likewise, Fujino at first uses some polite forms, but as the interchange begins to breakdown and misunderstanding grows, he also begins to abbreviate, suggesting that he is losing patience and his ability to maintain appearances.¹⁷ Although the ambiguity of the transcription allows for at least two interpretations of Kyûhachi's "ignorance" (he is a fool and we should laugh at his ignorance, or he is playing the fool and we should laugh at Fujino), the recording itself reveals—through Muraku's changes in pitch, speed, and intensity—that Kyûhachi is, indeed, an entertainingly slow-witted tradesman.

As the differences in register between Kyûhachi and Fujino grow less distinct and as confusion grows, Muraku subtly brings the language of the two disparate characters closer together. This mirrors and foreshadows the mediation between Fujino's daughter and Kyûhachi's friend that is the *raison d'être* of the conversation.

Japanese contains many homophones, a situation that has elevated the pun as a primary marking device and established it as a central form in poetry. The Japanese oral tradition draws deeply upon this aspect of the language, and although there is no overt punning in the above story, there is one humorous exchange that turns on a near-pun, one that could be

¹⁷ Interestingly enough, Fujino continues to use highly deferential language when referring to Tasuke.

accounted for by the nervousness, dialect difference, low status, or even hearing impairment of Kyûhachi. In the original, this revolves around the similarity between the words *okonai* (“behavior” or “character”) and *o-sonae* (“food offering”). My translation offers an (admittedly stretched) equivalent near-pun using the words *esteemed* and *steamed*.

Fluid narration has always been an important characteristic of Japanese professional storytelling, and even today many storytellers build reputations on their rapid-fire delivery or ability to imitate accelerated spoken conversation with remarkable verisimilitude. Performing such a conversation is particularly difficult, since the characters often cut one another off, anticipate reactions, or even finish each other’s sentences.¹⁸ To create as realistic an effect as possible storytellers sometimes need to make instantaneous character changes in mid-sentence. In the above story, as Fujino is leading up to his question about Tasuke, Kyûhachi interjects:

“*Iya, hoka no koto de mo nai ga, shijû omae-san ga hiru jibun ni naru to monomi no shita no kakejaya de, issho ni gozen o tabete oide no ano sumiya-san nô?*”

“*Hê hê.*”

“*Ano sumiya-san wa, arya nani kai, doko no okata dai?*”

“Well, let me see . . . how can I put this? You know that charcoal vendor, the one you take lunch with everyday at noon by the tea stall beneath the tower . . . ?”

“Yessir!”

“He—that is to say, that charcoal vendor—lives . . . ?”

Another characteristic of spoken Japanese conversation is the use of *aizuchi*, or confirmation sounds, a kind of back-channel response offered at regular intervals by listeners during a speaker’s remarks. Above, Kyûhachi confirms that he is following Fujino’s description by interjecting the phrase *hê hê* in response to Fujino’s use of the signaling particle *nô*. In Muraku’s performance, there is little or no pause between the two, yet the pronunciation difference is quite clear. This rapid transition back and forth between speakers illustrates the remarkable mimetic skill and fluency of Meiji storytellers.

Short of using some code to denote time passage, speed of delivery is difficult to depict on the printed page. Miyakoya’s Japanese transcription

¹⁸ Storyteller Yanagiya Kosanji, a contemporary of Muraku, remarked that perhaps the most difficult storytelling achievement was to perform a conversation involving the voices of five or six people (Meissner 1913).

of the recording, however, contains a few representations of speech compression that give evidence of variations in tempo. Compression in Japanese is sometimes indicated in writing by the use of the *katakana* syllabary. *Katakana* is an alternative script employed to write onomatopoeia, meaningless sounds, or words of non-Japanese origin. It thus lends itself to representing both condensed phrases (where speed of delivery slurs portions of words into new sounds) and attenuation (where, for example, slow delivery results in lengthened vowels). In Muraku's story, when Fujino reiterates his question, "I said, does he have a wife?" (*Iie sa, nyôbô-san wa aru ka ten da*), his speedy delivery condenses what would normally be pronounced *wa aru ka tte iu no da* into *wa aru ka te n da*, with *n* representing the rapid slurring of *iu* and *no*. In his transcription Miyakoya chooses to highlight the conflation—and thereby offer a written clue to the tempo—by using *katakana* instead of the more traditional *hiragana* alphabet to write the sound *n*. While not a complete temporal marking system, the deployment of *katakana* nevertheless provides readers who lack the voice recording a sense of haste or slurring in dialogue.

Other temporal variations in the performance are not immediately apparent in the transcription alone. For example, Kyûhachi fits the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) archetype of the garrulous, fast-talking Edo-born tradesman. Fujino, on the other hand, reflects the archetype for moneyed, non-Edo landowner: he is much more reserved and deliberate in his speech. Dialect and usage suggest this difference, but the differences in tempo emphasize it even more. Toward the end of the dialogue, as Kyûhachi finally warms up to Fujino, he begins to take liberties of familiarity that include quickened speech.

There is no means, however, aside from listening to the original recording, to discern immediately the tempo used in Kyûhachi's rapid-fire delivery of his last lines. Their length in print (five lines) stands in strong contrast to the relatively terse prior remarks Kyûhachi has offered, and this difference might suggest to a reader that he takes a bit of time making his point in his longest narrative. In Muraku's performance, however, Kyûhachi's last lines (containing eighty-eight syllables) are recited in about eight seconds. This is roughly the same amount of time Muraku uses to recite Fujino's subsequent forty-five syllable line. Thus the voice recording reveals that Kyûhachi speaks twice as rapidly as Fujino. Once again Muraku uses his verbal skill to underscore the differences between the two speaking characters.

Muraku thus uses a number of typical storytelling techniques in his 1903 recording of this brief tale. These techniques are combined with great dramatic and comic effect to contrast Kyûhachi's bumbling eagerness to

please with Fujino's reluctance to admit that his daughter is in love with a mere charcoal vendor.

Conclusion

While this paper only begins to tap their potential for illuminating Meiji storytelling, the 1903 Gaisberg recordings are a priceless resource for expanding our understanding of the aural dimension of *ninjôbanashi* and other Japanese oral narrative arts. Although the visual aspects of epic storytellers' performances from the Meiji period remain veiled by the passage of time, we can listen to an echo of their voices and in so doing gain greater insights into the stories themselves, along with a renewed admiration for the talents and skill of these professional raconteurs. The recordings allow us to reconstruct to a greater degree than heretofore possible the oral, non-textual dynamics at play in Meiji storytelling. For this chance we must thank the entrepreneurial spirit of Gaisberg and the intervention of Black, whose efforts nearly a century ago have preserved these rare aural glimpses of a lost oral tradition and allowed voices long silent to speak to us again.

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