

Village Culture and Environmental Discourses:

Matrix of Language in the Work of Morisaki Kazue and Ishimure Michiko

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One of the major differences between Japanese and American environmental literature is found in the degree of interest in village culture, a system of values which has survived modernization and remains operating in places which are usually marginalized and neglected by mainstream society. American environmental literature characteristically has a framework within which an individual “I” encounters a physical environment, forming and developing an ecological identity through his/her interaction with the environment. On the other hand, the formation of an ecological identity in Japanese environmental literature implies the significance of village culture which mediates between different beings—human as well as nonhuman. In this preliminary study, I wish to examine the work of Morisaki Kazue and Ishimure Michiko, two representative Japanese environmental writers, to discuss how village culture helps nurture an ecological identity. Hopefully this will in turn suggest a comparative stance from which to develop an environmental discourse in a multicultural manner.

Village Cosmos

Village culture is on the verge of extinction; it is barely surviving in the fringes of modern society. Morisaki defines it as “a way of living irrelevant to power on the ground,” a lifestyle which she perceives in secluded far-flung communities, far away from the centers of power (Morisaki, *Kitagami* 43). Similarly, Ishimure identifies village culture in the lives of people who “appear to be ignorant . . . yet have accumulated knowledge in the way of the universe, as well as a strong sense of what it means to be a human, from their everyday experience rather than books; these seemingly ignorant people are learning from the sun, the moon, the tide and the earth” (Ishimure, “Chichi” 342; my translation). Simply put, both Morisaki and Ishimure find in village culture the possibility of getting over societies’ modern anthropocentric self and moving towards a more inclusive and interrelated sense of self. However, such culture is either sealed off by modernization as is realistically true for a small cluster of fishing villages in Minamata Bay which are now buried under concrete, or at most barely survive in the forgotten coastal and coal mining villages that Morisaki has repeatedly visited.

It is important to notice that village culture does not fall under the premodern. Iwaoka Nakamasa points out, in his study of Ishimure’s work and its implication in the history of the modern,

that Ishimure's description of a sense of community among village people assumes self-reliance instead of premodern communal dependence (Iwaoka 179). What Ishimure and Morisaki finds in village culture is an independent self which nurtures communal interrelationships. It is a nonmodern, rather than premodern, way of knowledge; the writers' course of action is not backward but forward.

What would it be like for an independent self to nurture communal interrelationships? How could different independent selves be in harmony? One specific example that shows such possibility is found in the practice of teasing, which seems to be less embraced in contemporary Japan. In both Morisaki and Ishimure's works, there are quite a few scenes of teasing, such as between the residence of neighboring villages, or that of the people of Minamata's fishing communities teasing the scholars from Tokyo. It seems that the logic of teasing supports an intimate sphere in which differences are accepted; Ishimure observes that "people in fishing villages often tease city folks; in this way, the threshold between them and the other is being lowered" (Enokida 184; my translation).

As exemplified in their interest in the logic of teasing, both Morisaki and Ishimure aim to describe village culture from inside, not examining it as an object of study. Yet, they take completely opposite approaches. Ishimure is a native of Minamata, who knows the place thoroughly. In fact, she is recognized as the writer who revealed experiential dimensions of village life for the first time in Japanese literary history. Unlike the common literary practice of representing village life as an observed "world," Ishimure's literary altruism succeeded in presenting it as a lived "cosmos" (Watanabe 181). This does not mean that Ishimure situates herself completely within the circle of her Minamata community; if she had, she would not have been aware of either the violence of modern systems of knowledge which marginalize village culture or the ideological problems of romanticizing a lost sphere of intimacy. With one foot inside a village community and the other outside it, Ishimure maintains the necessary creative distance to literally represent a village cosmos. The fact that Ishimure writes fiction more so than nonfiction indicates that the village cosmos can be experientially described only when it is completely liberated from the current system of thought—it is in a sense a product of the writers' imagination.

In stark contrast to Ishimure, whom we can aptly call a writer of place, is Morisaki who was born and brought up for the first eighteen years of her life in Japanese occupied Korea. Even after moving to Kyushu, Morisaki did not have a home. More precisely, she decided not to have what is usually called home, saying "I will make it a principle not to have a so-called home and try to explore home-place here" (Morisaki, "Ankoku" 61). Recognizing that sentimental feelings of an idea of home simply conceal its political and ideological implications, Morisaki tries to explore in the culture of villages an alternative discourse to a modern system of knowledge. The writer's frequent

employment of oral recollections and nonfiction essays demonstrates her effort to evade romanticizing a forgotten sphere of intimacy; an opposite technique to that of Ishimure who aims to revive a lost cosmos of village in fiction.

Writing as a Homemaker

Though different in approach to village culture, Morisaki and Ishimure have in common their writing stance as a homemaker. A homemaker, or what is more commonly known as housewife, refers to those, women in particular, who are assumed to take care of all activities involving the production, maintenance, and reproduction of life such as childbirth, housework, and childrearing. A homemaker's social status is low and this was especially true after the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. Nobody takes care of life-related matters as well as homemakers, yet they are socially ignored, simply because they are not valued in a capitalistic system. Considered differently, however, the homemakers' point of view will help bring to life a life-centered value system outside of a capitalistic worldview.

Ishimure's stance as a homemaker is embedded in her narrative of everyday meals and seasonal events. It is surprising to notice how frequently she describes food-related scenes, which implies the significance of fundamental activities such as eating in the culture of a village. Also, the frequent descriptions of preparing and eating meals help invite the readers to experience it on their own.

Morisaki, on the other hand, makes conscious efforts to recast homemakers as creative individuals, liberated from the institution and ideology of home. For Morisaki, a homemaker can operate as a framework within which to forge a discourse inclusive enough to encompass the conceptual and the secular, just as her writing and thinking self is fueled in her kitchen as she puts it, "I simply cannot be comfortable in a room called a study and wrote . . . at a large table which also serves as a worktop. The table was often used for meals and discussions with laborers, and every such time the manuscripts spread on the table were put away, being carried here and there in the house" (Afterword of *Haha no kuni*). Morisaki's attempt seemingly betrays the rather feminist principles of her father who helped form her philosophical backbone, yet the writer has carefully chosen an altered position as a homemaker to philosophize issues of life, which are "so natural and ordinary that people yet have no way to explore them in a critical manner" (Morisaki, *Inochi* 32).

Skillfully using the position as a homemaker, Ishimure describes the experiential cosmos of a village, whereas Morisaki launches into the philosophy of everyday life. In both cases, a homemaker's position makes it possible to grasp a comprehensive sphere in which experience and

knowledge are tightly interconnected. Ishimure tries to revive it from a forgotten past, while Morisaki attempts to give birth to it by listening to marginalized voices.

Reconstruction of the Sense of Self

Having discussed Ishimure and Morisaki's interest in the environmental significance of village culture and their literary representations of it, I wish to briefly examine the sense of "I" in their work, how "I" is both independent from and interdependent with others, thereby developing an ecological identity.

Ishimure's work often complicates the narrating voice; there are moments in which the reader is not sure who is talking. Take "What Yuki Had to Say" for instance. You will find it is not easy to distinguish Ishimure's voice from that of Yuki, a fisherwoman who suffered from Minamata Disease. A major reason for this complication of the narrating voice is found in the fact that an individual is not self-completed in Ishimure's "cosmos" of village people. Each individual is like a knot in the community, "self-in-community," interrelated to each other. Therefore, *my* voice is not strictly completed in itself but accompanies that of others. It is a polyphonic world of beings, in which different voices respond and reverberate until it becomes a multi-layered soundscape.

Morisaki's exploration of a new sense of self goes in a different direction. Unlike Ishimure who identifies an ecological self in a "self-in-community," Morisaki seeks an alternative form of first person, redefining a sense of self in a network of different lives. Her perception of the inability and indeterminacy of the present first person in the intricacies of life has led the writer to the life sciences. Referring to a couple of books on life sciences, Morisaki says, "these books are my classics, just like *Kojiki* [Records of Ancient Matters] is a Japanese literary classic. They display my whole being, a world that has been continuously alive with our original forebear, as simple material" (Morisaki, *Inochi* 71; my translation). Because of her fascination in the scientific way of displaying the world as "simple material," Morisaki does not hesitate to use such conceptual words as "earth." Ishimure, on the other hand, would not use a word like "earth" simply because it is too abstract, lacking experiential meanings. Morisaki explores a new sense of self in a place where the marginalized knowledge of forgotten villages and the latest life sciences meet—a place where nonmodern and postmodern may merge into a new knowledge.

Morisaki and Ishimure has many similarities and differences. They were both born in 1927, based in Kyushu, interested in village culture, and leading Japanese literary environmentalism. They are different in their approach to and literary representation of place-based knowledge and a relevant ecological identity. Ishimure writes as a native with her communal self embedded in narrative, while

Morisaki avoids having a particular home in order to be at home nowhere, which implies now/here—here and now—as well. What is significant is that both the native and the stranger find possible the formation of an ecological sense of self in the revival of nonmodern knowledge as it is found in the culture of a village. If such knowledge is open and inclusive enough to welcome natives and non-natives alike, perhaps we can expect further developments in environmental discourses by more thoroughly exploring the forgotten culture of nonmodern lives.

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