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## Narratives of Peasant Uprisings in Japan

ANNE WALTHALL

Uprisings and riots were uncommon but memorable experiences in the lives of Japanese peasants, events succeeding generations tried to remember. Therefore, they recounted their version of these disturbances in oral legends and written narratives. They told of the richness of their land, the appearance of villainy, the rectification of evil, and the return of peaceful conditions. These records of past community experiences drew on the power of fiction to recall more than the actual happening for their audience. In the eyes and ears of listeners and readers, they represented the shared memory of a historical reality recaptured through extraordinary prose.

During the last centuries of Tokugawa rule, peasants suffered from misgovernment and challenged perceived wrongdoing through petitions to their rulers and riots against wealthy commoners. Their protests followed a ritualized pattern: the crisis was discovered; action was taken to resolve it; and equilibrium was restored. For weeks or even months, signs and portents of unrest filled the air. Meetings were held, and complaints were voiced opposing high taxes, refusal to grant tax exemptions during famines, innovative mercantile policies, the hoarding of rice, or any other activity that threatened the people's ability to survive as they were.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the protest action was nonviolent, as in the *gōso*, the march of peasants en masse to present their petitions to the authorities, and sometimes violent, as in the *uchikowashi*, the destructive riots where commoners vented their rage and punished the unjust by smashing furniture and trampling food in the mud. In either case, it was collective; the participants joined not as individuals, but as members of a community. Protest action never passed unpunished. After the riot, government officials retaliated for disorder by taking action against those involved; leaders were invariably executed.

But uprisings were not simply forgotten. They needed to be explained, and the explanation had to be valid. According to Victor Turner, the framework of human relations known as society is constantly being renewed through a continual process of destruction and rebuilding. An important part of this process is the interaction among people as they collectively reach rational explanations for their action. Even though their interpretations may not be logical to outsiders, they make social life a coherent and comprehensible reality for members of the group. Thus, myths and folktales are "convenient means of ordering collective experience" in the process of cultural becoming (Turner 1977:65). Peasant uprising narratives also evoked the recent past in a way that gave it coherence to its audience. Yet, using the narratives as

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<sup>1</sup> Vlastos (forthcoming) uses the phrase *Hyakushō aitsuzuki* as a metaphor for how the peasants endowed their demands with legitimacy.

historical documents raises certain questions: What is the relationship between event and narrative? What is the significance of the gaps between fact and fancy? What is the role of rabble-rousers and heroes?

Narratives of peasant uprisings are not simple recitals of historical events. They tell of protest, but in a manner that reflects the ideological stance of their audience. Peasants are placed at the center of the story; they take on the noble attributes of the ruling warrior class to rectify wrongdoing by their betters. They become actors in a system that had defined them as the passive objects of authority. The implications for a radically new vision of the world remained limited, however, because by the end of the Tokugawa period the paradigm for behavior delineated in the narratives found few echoes in action.

The purpose of this article is to place uprising narratives as an element in the peasant culture of Tokugawa Japan and as a genre in Japanese literature. The evolution of stories about Japan's most famous peasant martyr, Sakura Sōgorō, provides an example of the fit and lack thereof between the narratives and the events they describe. Precisely in that disjunction is where their significance is to be found. Using these narratives, one can, as Turner says, "develop strategies for ascertaining how actors deal with discrepant norms" (1977:64). One can discover the peasants' standards of right and wrong, assess how they weigh bakufu laws against community survival, and in short, uncover the meanings they assign to their confrontations with authority.

### The Genre in Japanese Literature

Narratives of peasant uprisings constitute one part of the body of documents produced in the course of protest actions. They have a specific connection with the Japanese literary tradition and also exhibit several characteristics of folklore. Because they claim to be historically accurate accounts of actual events, one can argue that they are neither literature nor folklore. Yet, because they exaggerate descriptions of behavior, they may be termed rhetoric rather than history. This apparent historicity but underlying fictitiousness enhances the difficulty of defining the genre.

Most documents on peasant protest are relatively easy to categorize. They are either petitions presented to governmental officials by peasant leaders or reports by administrators on where the uprising began, who led it, and what measures were taken to pacify the crowd. Such records describe the course of events and the grievances of the participants, but they are fragmentary and show little of how the peasants perceived the meaning of their action. Other records are more difficult to define. They were written or compiled at some point after the event and present its history as a coherent whole. They range from collections of documents tied together with explanatory narratives to poems and songs that capture an outline of the action in allusive and abbreviated form. It is among the latter that the peasant uprising narratives are to be found.

Comprehensive descriptions of peasant uprisings, which purport to relate a history of the event from its inception to its close, had a variety of authors. Some, written by warriors, reflect their origin in domanial records and the biases of the ruling class. Others, written by village headmen, contain sober accounts of the hardships wrought by disorder. They were usually written soon, if not immediately after, the event while its memory was still fresh in the minds of the observers, but they are based only on documents and personal recollections by the participants. They were carefully pre-

served in private family archives, but they were not shown to others. Although they are chronicles of peasant uprisings, they are not true narratives.

Narratives of peasant uprisings were holistic accounts of protest action from the peasants' point of view. They were often written as long as thirty to forty years after the event, sometimes even longer. For example, "Mankoku sōdō nichiroku," based on the 1711 uprising in Chiba prefecture, was not composed until after 1783. "Nijihama Rōshu hiroku," based on the 1771 uprising in Karatsu domain, was compiled in 1853 (Aoki, K., et al. 1968: 18, 254). Like the songs and poems written at some point after the actual event, they exist in multiple manuscript copies with numerous variations. Yokoyama Toshio has found over twenty narratives about the Ueda domain uprising of 1761. Stories about the peasant martyr, Sakura Sōgorō, appear in many more versions, from Nagano prefecture to Ibaraki to Aizu-Wakamatsu.<sup>2</sup> Although they may contain documentary evidence in appendixes, the narratives themselves purport to derive from stories told to the writer, often in dreams or by an old man. The writer of such narratives is always anonymous, sometimes called simply "the drunk hermit Rifu" (Aoki, K., et al. 1968:273) or "Old Shinpū Kenchiku of Takata" (Nagamitsu 1978:137).

Japanese historians have speculated much on the social background of the men who wrote these narratives. Yasumaru Yoshio argues that pen names denote the authorship of local intellectuals, men who lived and worked to some extent outside the established status order, a doctor, perhaps in disgrace with the domanical government, a declassed warrior, or a priest like Watanabe Masaka.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars suggested as authors low-ranking village officials, wandering monks, or the nameless playwrights who traveled with provincial troupes (Yasumaru 1976:332; Fukaya 1974:31; Kishino 1981:75–80). However, the identity of the writer is in any case unimportant. He was little more than an amanuensis for the peasant bearers of oral tradition. These narratives include laudatory descriptions of peasant action unlikely to have been invented by someone not of peasant status. In contrast to official records or even the private records preserved in family collections, they describe fictitious incidents as though they had actually happened.

Narratives of peasant uprisings belong to a specific literary tradition, that of the *monogatari*. *Monogatari* include a variety of documents: *Konjaku monogatari* (Tales of the past and present), a collection of short folktales and anecdotes of court life, etc: *Genji monogatari* (The tale of Genji), said to be Japan's first novel; *Heike monogatari* (The tale of the Heike), a tale of military adventures; and *Ugetsu monogatari* (Tales of moonlight and rain), stories of the supernatural.<sup>4</sup> Out of this bewildering array,

<sup>2</sup> All of the narratives mentioned in the text and many more of these published in *Minshū undō no shisō* and *Nihon Shōmin seikatsu shiryō shūsei* have been found in multiple copies in the areas where the riots they describe took place. See especially Aoki, K., et al. 1968:172.

<sup>3</sup> Watanabe Masaka (1776–1840) succeeded to his family's hereditary position as head of Terazu Hachimangu at the age of 24. He had a refined circle of friends who practiced Chinese and Japanese poetry, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and *go*. He studied *waka* with a priest from the Ise shrine, talked with Hirata Atsutane, and expressed an interest in Western learning to Shiba Kōkan. His "Kamo no sawadachi," copied from a record written by an

anonymous playwright, is a well-known account of the 1836 riot in Mikawa. In addition, he collected and recorded reports on the Gunnai riot of 1836 in Kai and the Oshio Heihachirō incident. (See Tsukamoto 1977:165–67; Kishino 1981:75–80; Kishino and Itō 1982:66–68.)

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Kokugo daijiten* (Dictionary of the Japanese Language) definition, *monogatari* may be based on the author's experience or imagination as long as they are prose literary creations narrated as though the author were telling someone about people and events. In the broadest sense of the term, they include *rekishi monogatari* (historical narratives), *setsuwa monogatari* (collections of tales), *gunki monogatari* (military tales), and fiction.

however, it is possible to identify peasant uprising narratives with two types: the *gunki monogatari* (military tale) and the *setsuwa monogatari* (collections of tales).

The *gunki monogatari*, military tales originally written in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries as the fictionalized accounts of actual events, constitute one prototype for the narratives of peasant uprisings. Like the *Heike monogatari*, for example, many peasant narratives begin with a preface or a prologue. They set the theme of the narrative to follow: "Desires are evil; charity is the root of good. Prosperity brings peace. When people starve, they naturally create disorder" ("Doheiji sōdōki"). Then the narratives describe the villain, in this case a government official instead of Taira no Kiyomori. The plot itself develops episodically. In "Abenodōjimon" (Questions of the child of Abeno), written about the peasant uprising of 1786 in Fukuyama domain, many individuals and villages appear only once. Like the *Heike monogatari* or the *Taiheiki* (Record of the Great Peace), the episodes are arranged in a temporal sequence, but each incident is complete in itself. Each is dramatic and stylized in a way that soon becomes familiar to the reader.<sup>5</sup> The language is simple and direct, sometimes in dialect, interspersed occasionally with satiric poems. The text of "Mikoku shimin ranbō ki" (Record of the people's riot in Mimasaka), about the 1726 uprising in Tsuyama domain, contains red marks, perhaps put there for the purpose of oral recitation at a memorial service or by a storyteller.<sup>6</sup> These marks recall the rhythmic style of the *Heike monogatari*, meant to be heard as well as read.

Like the military tales, the narratives of peasant uprisings deal with historical events and personages. Great importance is attached to gods, demons, curses, and omens. Militaristic flourishes embellish exaggerated scenes of battles, the clash of arms, and the march of myriad hosts. When peasants attacked Ueda castle in 1761, "their roaring voices shouting 'eiya eiya' sounded like a thunderstorm and the scene made a picture with which even the sight of the Genji Heike battles could not compare" (Bix 1981:234). Small groups become mighty armies, as the following passage illustrates:

Over five thousand men have already gathered at the river bank. 3,000 men are coming from the mountain and 3,500 are coming from Ōniwa district. 3,200 are coming from the Western districts. Five thousand will come from Yono and Kashimura, a total of thirty or forty thousand from Toi. Hurry, hurry to Kumi. The advancing forces will be enormous. (Nagamitsu 1978:130)

Furthermore, in a way typical of the literature of the oppressed, the peasants' romanticizing of their actions and their heroes and their sympathy for themselves as underdogs resemble the sympathy and romanticism bestowed by the *Heike monogatari* or the *Taiheiki* on the losing side.

The similarities between the two types of *monogatari* are too great to be coincidental. Peasant uprising narratives, moreover, often refer specifically to military tales. Both narratives about a sake riot in 1787 and "Mikoku shimin ranbō ki" cite the *Heike monogatari* and the *Taiheiki*. Peasant heroes include noble fighters like Kusunoki Masashige, Amakusa Shirō, Yui Shōsetsu, Yamagata Daini, and the forty-

<sup>5</sup> According to McCullough: "Two-thirds of the *Taiheiki* are devoted to episodic, disorganized accounts of fighting in local areas. . . . These episodes are not subordinated to a central unifying theme and may in fact be similar to one another to the point of dullness" (1959:xvi). The *Heike monogatari* is also notorious for its self-contained pas-

sages strung together in what appears to be a strict chronology (Seidensticker 1975:xix).

<sup>6</sup> Nagamitsu 1978:58. The frequent use of *ateji* in "Doheiji sōdōki" may be evidence for its having been read aloud. What is important is the sound, not the character.

seven loyal retainers (Sugiura 1977:18; Hosaka and Asami 1981:234). The military tales and their protagonists thus constitute one source drawn on by peasants when they describe their own action.

Chinese and Japanese literary classics also form part of the cultural baggage available for incorporation in narratives about peasant uprisings.<sup>7</sup> A story about the peasant martyr Sakura Sōgorō, for example, includes a tenth-century poem: "The waves break in the Inba bay of Shimoosa / the boatman makes haste to push his long boat" (Ono 1978:46). Yet, none of the allusions evoke the literature of the townspeople written by men like Ibara Saikaku or Hiraga Gennai.<sup>8</sup>

In breadth and scope, peasant uprising narratives are much narrower than the epics of warriors or the Chinese classics. There are also important differences of emphasis. The war tales of the medieval period affirm the impermanence of things, the Buddhist belief in the evanescence of life. In contrast, the peasant uprising narratives concentrate on problems of morality. The issues they raise are this-worldly. In them those punished are not the haughty but the corrupt and unjust. Retribution may be visited on men by the gods and buddhas, but it is for specific crimes committed against humanity. In "Mikoku shimin ranbō ki," for example, crowds attacking the houses of greedy local warriors are called *tenbatsu* (divine retribution) (Nagamitsu 1978:124).

Another type of *monogatari* to which the peasant uprising narratives may be compared is the *setsuwa* or collections of tales, the most famous of which is *Konjaku monogatari*. Here the similarity is more tenuous and lies not so much in the content of the tales as in their mode of creation and transmission. According to Shimazu Hisamoto:

Tale literature consists of works in which a certain degree of literary consciousness has been brought to bear on tales of the kind studied by folklorists and which have come to possess a simple primitive literary form and content—that is, books in the realm of folk literature, books which have not yet reached the realm of pure literature (where the creative consciousness of the author is at work). . . . The writer uses some design in the collection and choice of tales and expends some effort in shaping the works, but he usually has no individual responsibility, as an individual author, for the tales themselves. (Trans. in Mills 1970:2)

The oral tradition transmits fairy tales, ghost stories, Buddhist wonder stories, and recollections of extraordinary events, earthquakes, fires, and riots. Out of this canon, the writer then selects certain elements to construct a picture of the uprising as a total event. In other words, just as the author or authors of *Konjaku monogatari* compiled it with a minimum of literary artifice out of folktales and episodes from Chinese history, the authors of peasant uprising narratives describe actual events and incorporate in their accounts explanatory allusions to the classics.

Peasant uprising narratives also occasionally contain short legends that give them a specifically local flavor. A story about the Takaku riot of 1622 begins with an account of how the Tango swamp got its name. Numerous attempts by officials to build a dike across the swamp failed until a shaman told them to make a human sacrifice to a huge

<sup>7</sup> "Abenodōjimon" begins its prologue with a quotation from the Chinese classic, "The Great Learning" (Aoki, K., et al. 1968:343); "Kitsun-zaka senbon yari" includes a poem by Sugawara no Michizane (Morita 1970:224). In "Doheiji sōdōki," the episode where the villain hides in a storehouse is too close to a similar incident in "Chushin-

gura" to be coincidental (conversation with Kawanabe Sadao, July 8, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> According to Kawanabe, books found in peasant houses are usually Edo period reprints of Japanese classics and Chinese philosophers. They are seldom the townspeople's literature of the Edo period itself (conversation, July 10, 1979).

snapping turtle whose movements were responsible for the damage. A ninety-five year-old man called Tango agreed to be buried alive if the swamp was named after him and his grandson Yazō made an official. Yazō's misdeeds later caused the riot.<sup>9</sup> "Onnabake hara yume monogatari" (A tale of a dream about the Onnabake plain), about a riot near Mito in 1804, gives a history of the plain where the peasants met to plan the protest action. It describes the Inari shrine nearby; a man who saves a fox from hunters; a strange woman who then insists on marrying him despite his poverty; her fecundity and their happy life together until one of the children discovers that his mother has a tail. At that point she changes back into a fox and disappears on the plain.<sup>10</sup>

Anecdotes that relate the origin of place names have been a part of the Japanese tradition since the earliest collections of provincial lore in the *Fudoki*. Yanagita Kuno argues that these and other local legends (*densetsu*) represent the heart of the Japanese oral narrative tradition and manifest the underlying belief system of peasant culture. The history contained in them was very real to the peasants, and from it they could extract elements to be applied repeatedly in a variety of ways (Yanagita 1975:xvi-xxii). In the examples given above, this history ties narratives of protest to the folk beliefs of a single region.

According to Shimazu's definition, the narratives are folk literature (1950:317). They are most probably based on orally transmitted anecdotes, but we cannot know for certain what part oral legend, as opposed to literary convention, played in their compilation. Like many collections of local legends, they constitute the written summation of the oral tradition. Nevertheless, their structural characteristics place them closer to folktales than to creative writing. Like folklore, they use "conventional themes and stylistic devices and make no effort to disguise their conventional quality" (Taylor 1965:40). Moreover, their intrinsic value for the peasants is demonstrated by their location in the documentary collections accumulated by rural households. Even the literary allusions had meaning for a wide audience. Otherwise, they would have been discarded just as many folktales "were rejected because they either did not fill a recognized or subconscious need, or because they were incompatible with the accepted patterns and traditions of folklore or of culture as a whole" (Bascom 1965a:29). Instead, they were valued for what they said.

### Stories of Righteous Men: Sakura Sōgorō

More has been written about Sakura Sōgorō than about any other peasant hero, but the evidence of his existence is extremely circumstantial. Written accounts of him remain fragmentary until the 1770s (or the 1750s, when the first copies of "Jizōdō tsuya monogatari" [A tale of the vigil at the Jizō hall] appeared). In the early 1800s, this story, with a variety of names, was further elaborated, divided into chapters, and graced with a prologue. In 1776 a Confucian scholar, Yuasa Gensen, compiled "Sōgo tekishū monogatari" (A tale of Sōgo and his enemy), the only version whose authorship has been confirmed. In 1851, the Sōgorō legend became the subject of a Kabuki play, "Higashiyama Sakura Sōshi" (Sakura Sōshi from Higashiyama), set in the

<sup>9</sup> Aoki, K., 1979:125-26. Foundation sacrifice is a standard motif in Japanese folk literature (see Ikeda 1971:212-13, Type no. 948). Dorson also gives an example of this kind of tale (1962:218-20).

<sup>10</sup> Suzuki (n.d.). The manuscript, copied in 1863, concerns a riot in 1804. Ikeda lists "Fox wife" as type number 413D (1971:107-108). See also Dorson (1962:132-34).

Higashiyama period to evade bakufu censors. It was performed frequently under various titles throughout the Meiji period.

Many scholarly articles and monographs have been written on Sōgorō in the modern period, but they were preceded by numerous popular accounts. During the Popular Rights movement, for example, Komuro Shinsuke called him Japan's most important *gimin* (righteous man) and archetypical defender of the people's rights (*minkenka*).<sup>11</sup> With the promotion of nationalism in the countryside during the 1930s, a book entitled *Jitsuroku gimin Sōgorō* (The true account of Sōgorō, a righteous man) appeared. After the war, Sōgorō became the subject of a 1959 television drama. In 1974 a play about him again appeared on the Tokyo stage (Yokoyama 1977: 203–205). Although the dates of the compilation of the above works and the variations in their content are historically significant, I will analyze only the origin and development of the narratives about Sōgorō in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In most stories about Sōgorō, he is portrayed as a wise and virtuous village headman. When domanial officials raise taxes and increase their demands for corvée labor, he and six other headmen appeal for mercy on behalf of the villagers. The rejection of their first petitions forces them to go over the heads of local authorities and appeal directly to a lord high in bakufu councils. He refuses to become involved in affairs concerning another domain and orders the peasants to leave Edo before they find themselves in serious trouble. Sōgorō persuades his confederates to go home, and then he alone presents a petition to the shogun. For this act of lese majesty, he, his wife and their four children are executed. Afterward his angry spirit returns to take vengeance on the lord of Sakura.

The first mention of the Sōgorō legend appears in *Sakura fudoki* (A record of provincial lore on Sakura), compiled by a Sakura domain bureaucrat, Isobe Shōgen, in the early eighteenth century. He recounts how an old man had told him that Sōgorō's vengeful spirit caused the downfall of a seventeenth-century lord (Yokoyama 1977: 215). This emphasis on revenge after death is common to many Japanese folktales. Its constant recurrence as a theme in Japanese history reflects a widely held belief in the power of strong emotions to wreak havoc after a person has died.<sup>12</sup> At this point Sōgorō was hardly a martyr for the peasants—they remembered not his own deeds, if any, but what had happened to the lord (Yokoyama 1973:192).

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the story gains more detail. After the death of the just lord, Hotta Masamori, his retainers take control of domanial administration, treat the peasants unjustly, and increase the land tax. To save the people, Sōgorō makes a direct appeal to the shogun. (The remainder of the story about Sōgorō's execution and the punishment his ghost visited on the lord resembles *Sakura fudoki* [Yokoyama 1977:205, 211].) In this version of the story, Sōgorō takes steps to save his people in his capacity as the village headman—the embodiment and representative of the community. He has become an exemplar of righteous action, a man who placed community welfare above individual self-interest. During the first peak of large-scale uprisings in the 1750s, village headmen revitalized and elaborated

<sup>11</sup> As a designation for peasant uprising leaders who sacrificed their lives for their communities, the term *gimin* first gained currency at the hands of popular rights activists. Contemporary scholars prefer to restrict its meaning to men who were worshipped as gods, but this distinction is not

always followed in practice.

<sup>12</sup> The earliest example of revenge after death (*goryō shinkō*) is the famous case of Sugawara no Michizane. See Hori for a history of this belief (1968:111–21).



earlier legends of peasant martyrs like Sōgorō to enhance their own authority with the peasants and present a model of nonviolent protest. However, because at the same time headmen became increasingly unwilling to sacrifice themselves for their neighbors, the Sōgorō legend also constituted an ironic contrast to their own behavior.

In narratives from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the plot becomes still more elaborate. Sōgorō is described as a man of scholarship, deeply religious, respectful of his superiors, mindful of his subordinates, esteemed by his neighbors. "He was intelligent, tactful, and did not look like he was peasant born. Everyone said he must be the descendent of a warrior" (Ono 1978:54). As a stereotype of the heroic personality, the righteous man, he acts the way a village headman ought to act to prevent his villagers from committing the terrible crime of marching en masse to Edo to protest an outrageous tax increase (an action more typical of the late eighteenth than the seventeenth century). His words and deeds disclose a self-conscious resolve to become a martyr for his community. As he tells the council of headmen at the outset: "Once I make an appeal to the shogun, I will not return home again" ("Sakura Sōgorō monogatari"). His death is thus implicit in his determination to act. His spirit takes vengeance not for his own crucifixion, but for the cruel and unusual punishment of beheading visited on his four children. From the cross he curses: "Stupid warriors, my last earnest desire is to entice you to the battlefields of the netherworld within three years and destroy your family name for generations" (Ono 1978:88). What makes Sōgorō memorable, then, was what was done to him as much as what he did. He acted both as a man and as a supernatural being to expel the manifestations of evil from this world. As the savior of his village, he represented the peasants' aspirations; as an angry spirit, he reflected their resentment of those in authority.

The most modern version of the legend omits all reference to revenge by angry spirits (Nagata 1971). Now the story depicts the courage of Sōgorō and his supporters among the peasants and his heartrending renunciation of his family when he resolves to sacrifice himself for the community. He still puts his appeal directly in the hands of the shogun, even though modern historians have long argued that a meeting with the shogun was impossible for a peasant. In contrast to the "good king," (the shogun Ietsuna), the villain, Hotta Masanobu, executes not merely Sōgorō, but his four children. Even the cruelty of this command has become further elaborated. To evade the bakufu prohibition of the execution of women, officials pretend that Sōgorō's three daughters are actually sons and cut off their heads (Nagata 1971:12). In short, today people know only a lachrymose tale of tyranny and heroism.

Sakura Sōgorō's story is typical of those about the many righteous men who, faced with a threat to the survival of their village by evil officials, resolve to sacrifice themselves to save their people. Their success means their death, but, for one reason or another, public recognition of the justice of their cause often fails to satisfy them. Instead their angry spirits return to wreak vengeance on their persecutors or on those who have forgotten to thank them for their labors. Their legends end only with the prayerful propitiation of their souls, already transformed into gods (*kami*). Such heroes lack historicity. Even if these individuals are historical personages, it should be clear that their biographies are not. They have all been molded to fit a stereotyped life cycle pattern.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Dundes (1965:152-53) discusses the conventionality of the heroic life cycle pattern.

In the late Tokugawa period, the story of Sakura Sōgorō and other tales of protest played a number of roles in peasant culture. Like the local legends (*densetsu*) and other forms of folklore, they amused the audience in order to teach it history and a way of behavior. Their entertainment value remains down to the present—theatrical producers continue to recognize their inherent drama. Peasant martyrs have also become the heroes of modern novels, for example, Minakami Tsutomu's *Shiro* (1975). At the same time, the narratives were educational. They taught their hearers the moral values of the peasantry, especially the ideal of unity in the face of adversity and the primacy of community welfare over individual interests. Insofar as they were both true and imaginary, didactic and entertaining, they bridged the gap between what we see as truth and fiction for their audience. Therefore, as elements of folklore, they validated culture, justified rituals and institutions to those who performed and observed them, and promoted a group's feeling of solidarity. They described the process of cleansing local society of evil and alien influences to make it whole again. They reminded the peasants of their collective identity and recreated the corporate village community in all its symbolic meaning for its members' well-being. In their emphasis on the past events of a specific region, they constituted part of an attempt to give historical content to the local story.<sup>14</sup>

Japanese historians have emphasized the importance of righteous men (*gimin*) in the transmission of legends about protest. According to Yasumaru Yoshio, Tokugawa period commoners had so completely internalized the bakufu prohibitions of collective action that they found it almost impossible to understand what made uprisings possible. Their difficulty was further exacerbated by the rarity of large-scale uprisings in the span of the average person's lifetime and by the disjunction between riots and the abhorrence of violence felt by most peasants. For this reason, they tried to forget the power experienced during protest and the legitimacy of their demands and actions. Only stories about heroic individuals allowed their temporary usurpation of moral righteousness to reappear in fragmentary and allusive form. The deeds of vengeful spirits revealed that the members of local society considered their demands to be legitimate and their protest to be justified (Yasumaru 1976). In other words, stories about martyrs made it possible for peasants to minimize what had really happened but still assert the moral imperative of their own protection and preservation.

Yasumaru disregards the stories that ordinary peasants created about collective action. Their recital of past events was the basis of written texts. The motifs found in the Sakura Sōgorō legend—the role of the villain, the creation of the heroic personality, and the rectification of injustice—reappear in the narratives of large-scale peasant uprisings. The many parallels between the two types of narratives demonstrate that they belong to a single genre and, furthermore, that the peasants recalled collective deeds, as well as those of extraordinary individuals.

### Fact Versus Fiction: The Form and Content of Narratives

Narratives of peasant uprisings appeared only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were written for peasants, not warriors or townspeople. A survey of their content discloses conventions of plot structurally typical of folklore and

<sup>14</sup> The preceding discussion is based on Dundes (1965:277,308) and Bascom (1965b:290–97).

contextually specific in time and place. An analysis of these conventions explains the form of the narratives and their reflection of peasant culture.

The uprising narratives, like the legends of righteous men, do not open abruptly. Even in those lacking a prologue, a short history of the domain or a description of the locality sets the stage. In "Doheiji sōdōki," for example, we learn that "Sagami was flat, its people prosperous, they sold quantities of grain to other areas." This statement does not accord with reality. The area where the riot took place is mountainous, the peasants had to toil for survival, and they grew almost no rice. Yet for the narrative to begin with scenes of plenty was a convention. "Abenodōjimon" opens with a description of Fukuyama and dwells on the many fine products of the domain, the intelligence and ability of the people, and the convenience of its ports (equal to those of the three capitals): "Truly it was the most prosperous of the western provinces" (Aoki, K., et al. 1968:344). These descriptions serve a multiple purpose. They present the listeners with an idealized image of a beloved land, they explain why evil men were attracted to the region, and they provide an essential point of departure. As anthropologists from Axel Olrik to Victor Turner have noted, myths, songs, heroic sagas, local legends, and rituals begin with the peace and calm of ordinary existence, then move from there to the excitement and disorder of extraordinary times.

By looking at the structure and meaning of myths and rituals, it is possible to understand more sophisticated cultural forms. For Turner, rituals constitute a central element of primitive societies. Obligatory rituals and ritualized bonds (fictitious parent-child relationships) characterize even complex, rurally based civilizations. In modern societies, on the other hand, ritual has lost much of its former importance; it has been "dismembered" into the theater of the high culture and the carnival at the folk level. In short, the aesthetic media are descended from traditional ritual (Turner 1977:73). Tokugawa Japan, an agrarian society, displays both obligatory rituals like yearly ceremonies (*nenjū gyōji*) and performances that originate in their dismemberment—everything from Kagura to Noh to Kabuki to farces and plays acted by peasants (*Jikyōgen*; *Jige shibai*). Although the patterns of behavior followed in peasant uprisings closely resemble festivals (*matsuri*), the narratives of these events are a form of theater. Both have a common distant origin in ritual, but they are different alternatives to a system and different reflections of society. The narratives are not simply action transferred to paper.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the descriptions of the villains. Yasumaru has emphasized how the creation of a villain provided peasants with the temporary authority to act for themselves. In their eyes, official proposals or behavior that endangered the greater good of the village community constituted an evil. The originator of exploitative politics became the enemy, "the other," a creature totally alien to human society. Signified in animal names such as fox, badger, or monkey, his establishment (*setzen*) as the personification of absolute evil made imperative his expulsion from the wholeness of corporate existence. By polarizing the manifestations of good and evil in the real world, the creation of a villain allowed his victims to elect one of themselves as a hero with all the attributes of virtue. Thus, in uprisings against unjust officials, commoners embodied the righteousness of society and took responsibility for the authority and power that represented the world of benevolent government (Yasumaru 1975:159-214). Yasumaru applies this theory directly to events of protest, but it more closely fits the interpretation of action found in narratives.

Opposed to the beneficence of nature described in the introduction, the evil done

by the villain was beyond human comprehension. "Abenodōjimon" and other narratives about the 1786 Fukuyama insurrection asserted that Endō Benzō wantonly tortured village headman until their villages paid his exorbitant demands. Then he deceived the lord with false reports of the peasants' lives of luxury: "Unlike nearby provinces, your domain has experienced successive years of plenty and the peasants and townspeople live well. Religious ceremonies too have been livelier than usual. This year you will receive an offering of six hundred *kanme* [1 *kan* = 3.75 kg] in silver" (Aoki, K., et al. 1968:347).

The various versions of "Doheiji sōdōki" accused sake brewers in Tsukui district of having bought and burned everything edible, including straw and dried leaves, to destroy the last possible food source for the poor. According to "Mikoku shimin ranbō ki," local warriors (*gōshi*) allied themselves with Tsuyama domainial administrators to force peasants to register even their harrows and rakes. People who were late with their taxes "were threatened with handcuffs and indescribable tortures" (Nagamitsu 1978:125). In contrast to the brief portrayals of heroes in these narratives, the actions and thoughts of evil men received lengthy attention. Villainy had to be painted in the blackest hues to enhance the criticisms of official policy, the officials themselves, or wealthy commoners with a moral dimension essential to the explanation of commoner action.

The evil done by men had a social context, one that defined their crime through exaggeration. The depths of villainy justified action to expel it from the world of men, but it also spoke of the peasants' deepest fears. What if an evil sake brewer destroyed all edible plants for his own profit? What if government officials squeezed every last particle of rice out of the peasants for taxes? A society that rested not only on laws and morality but on the uncomfortable contradictions between the two left all too much space for arbitrary injustice. For this reason, the peasants' righteous punishment of evil was necessary to warn others who might be tempted to follow only their own self-interest in the future. It incidentally made them actors in a system where only warrior-administrators were apparently possessed of moral virtue. This was one way that peasants "scrutinized, criticized, subverted, upheld, and attempted to modify behavior, values, activities and relationships" operative in late Tokugawa society (Turner 1977:73).

The evil wrought by the villain forces the hero or heroes to act. Their deeds also appear larger than life. In "Mikoku shimin ranbō ki," the leader is given a noble name, Ama no Shirō no Saemonnosuke Fujiwara Tokisada, implying his descent both from the Fujiwara family and the leader of the Shimabara Christian rebellion, Amakusa Shirō. He acts boldly, fights with long and short swords, and commands his troops like a general: "First fire the guns hidden in the bamboo grass and the shadows of the rocks to kill the magistrates. Then the troops must attack the enemy using the 'birds and clouds' strategy [a classical Chinese battle tactic]. Be forward in engaging the warriors. Everyone must attach a square of white paper to their sleeves as an insignia" (Nagamitsu 1978:131).

Doheiji takes his confederates on a pilgrimage to Ōyama where he swears to sacrifice his life to save the people ("Doheiji sōdōki"). On his way home he meets two burly strangers, "six feet tall at least," who block his path and demand money. Doheiji refuses, draws his weapon, and defeats them in a fierce swordfight. The two men then ask Doheiji to be their leader for "in all our travels around Japan we have never met another man like you." They even promise to help him in his struggle

against the evil sake brewers.<sup>15</sup> This scene closely resembles the famous meeting between Yoshitsune and Benkei at Gojō bridge in Kyoto. Doheiji, Amano Tokisada, and other heroes consistently act in ways foreign to the conduct of ordinary peasants. Instead, they conform to heroic stereotypes. As Peter Burke has pointed out, "It is easier to adapt verbal . . . formulae to a new hero than to create new formulae" (1978:170).

The creation of heroes resolved to sacrifice themselves for their community expressed the peasants' dearest wish—to be protected and cared for in a consensual society. Often these legends were based on an idealization of seventeenth-century models of behavior, but the emphasis on the self-sacrificing individual and the spread of legends about Sakura Sōgorō are specific to the last half of the Tokugawa period, when communities no longer constituted harmonious wholes and village headmen took the government's side as often as the peasants'.

The hero's action reflected the peasants' desire to be passive, to let others lead them. Herein lay an ambiguity. The audience also identified with the hero and received vicarious courage from his deeds. The peasants liked to see themselves as brave, powerful fighters, equal to the best of the warriors. At a confrontation between peasants and officials in Ueda: "The four officials got angry, uncovered their spears, and brandished them in the air. The courageous peasants bared their chests and gestured to them to go ahead and strike" (Bix 1981:234). Born in a society where, as Robert Bellah said, the military emphasis was crucial to the central value system (1957:97), in fantasy they appropriated for themselves the noble attributes of the ruling class. They assumed not only the values cherished by the warriors, loyalty and a commitment to die, but also the warriors' deeds. At this point, it is apparent just how far the narratives are from reality. A commitment to die was the antithesis of the peasants' normal values. By the late eighteenth century, anything that threatened the continuity of the family was to be avoided at all costs. For this reason, stories of self-sacrifice for the community were models neither for everyday life nor for times of crisis. Sōgorō, Doheiji, and Amano Tokisada were admired but not imitated.

According to Turner, the "root paradigms based on generally accepted narratives of climaxes in the careers of religious or political leaders" are "rules that generate social action and cultural models . . . so as to give form to action in publicly critical circumstances" (1977:74). But for Tokugawa peasants, these narratives were not a direct reflection of real protest action. As individuals became less willing to sacrifice themselves for their community, narratives emphasizing the primacy of social welfare over individual interests became more important. The root paradigm exposed here was what ought to be, what perhaps had been, but not necessarily what *was*. In other words, the determinants of the paradigm lagged behind, conflicted with, and had increasingly less effect on actual behavior. In the turmoil of the last days of the bakufu, Sōgorō became a symbol of resistance to authority, but no new Sōgorō arose to unite the peasants in their search for a better world.

With the appearance of a hero, the peasants mobilize to take action. Descriptions of how an uprising is organized are not completely fictitious. Both "Abenodōjimon" and "Doheiji sōdōki" describe how circulars were sent around villages to summon their representatives to meetings. Details of the format of the meetings, the process of

<sup>15</sup> Kawanabe points out that the way in which Doheiji assembled a band of braves to attack sake brewers and rural merchants closely resembles how Momotarō (the little peach boy) collected a dog,

monkey, and pheasant to aid him in his attack on the demons of Onigashima. Both heroes represent the positive pole in a two-dimensional world of good and evil (1978:12).

decision making, and the instructions given to the crowd are also realistic. Even the scenes of riot and destruction have a certain basis in fact: "A force of over one thousand advances on the local warrior of Megi, Fukushima Zenbei. With mallets and broad-axes they smash the main gate to bits, take out his coffers, chests, tools, bowls, furniture, armour, harnesses, and chop them up. One man says, 'Isn't it something to smash a helmet,' and they all laugh" (Nagamitsu 1978:124). It should not be forgotten that these narratives describe events that actually happened. Nevertheless, in describing the course of the uprising, they had to use elements of fantasy to represent the totality of the event.

In "Doheiji sōdōki," for example, a last battle between Doheiji and bakufu troops climaxed the narrative. Fewer than one hundred peasants joined by masterless warriors and other outsiders fought long and bravely against six thousand warriors:

The ninety some men lined up their guns and fired. Over thirty of the enemy fell dead and many more were wounded. After that the bakufu troops stormed the stronghold and engaged furiously in hand to hand combat. . . . Thinking it dishonorable to grudge dying, Sugiura Hyōgo grappled with the warriors and sought death in battle. Just as he was crossing to meet Harada Rokurō, an arrow struck him full in the chest, and he fell off his horse. Rokurō rode up to take his head, but with his last strength, Hyōgo lunged upward and struck the other. At the same instant the two men took their last breath.

In reality this incident did not occur, nor did Tokugawa peasants ever do more than throw stones and shout insults at warriors sent to pacify them. Here again the action resembles the attacks on mountain fortresses described in the *Taibeiki* rather than a destructive riot. In "Mikoku shimin ranbō ki," Amano Tokisada made his final preparation for combat "gallantly, like Kusunoki before the battle of Minatogawa" (Nagamitsu 1978:129). Other narratives also compressed the action of disparate groups into that of a single unit and incorporated warrior-like exploits into collective protest. Added in the course of time, the martial flourishes had their own importance. In a society where warriors reigned supreme, the most appropriate symbol of righteousness, even for a peasant, was military valor.

The relationship between action and narrative—fact and fiction—in these narratives can be explained through Turner's use of grammatical concepts. He calls ordinary quotidian life indicative, the "is" of existence. In contrast, the alternatives to positive systems of economic, legal, and political action operating in everyday life are subjunctive or optative, the "may be" of fantasies. Subjunctive possibilities come from the dismemberment of ritual action, particularly its central phase. Rituals move from equilibrium to liminality to equilibrium, a pattern repeated in all forms of conventional tale literature (including narratives of peasant uprisings). "The essence of liminality," Turner says, "is to be found in its release from normal constraints making possible the deconstruction of the 'uninteresting' constructions of common sense, the 'meaningfulness of ordinary life' into cultural units which may then be reconstituted in novel ways" (1977: 68). Liminality is not simply the mirror inversion of ordinary life; it makes possible the generation of many alternative models. Likewise the subjunctive pervades modern novels, detective stories, and even science fiction. Just as the liminality of ritual must bear some traces of its antecedent and subsequent stages, however, even the most fantastic science fiction must have some connection with mundane existence to make it believable (Turner 1977:71). The subjunctive in narratives bears traces of its basis in historical reality, is limited by the conventional

expectations of the hearers, and has a specific connection with Japan's literary tradition.

The way the subjunctive determined the content of peasant uprising narratives was specific to the historical context. The fictionalized elements represented what the peasants in the late Tokugawa period wanted to see in terms of their community organization, the government, and their own action, not what "was." The alternatives proposed to the way things were arose not only in the patterns of protest so different from the usual passivity of the peasant, but in these overstated descriptions of behavior.

At the end, the narratives of peasant uprisings, like other forms of folktales, move abruptly from excitement to tranquility (Orik 1965:132). This terminal calm should not be mistaken for a mere repetition of the quiescence at the beginning. After the unusual and somehow unworldly interval of riot and destruction, a liminal phase in which people are lifted out of quotidian existence, the restored equilibrium finds the participants on a higher plane. As in real life, the leaders of the uprising are executed as the saviors of their people. But it is their death, not the reassertion of governmental authority, that brings peace to heaven and earth, security to the state: "Consider this, you who read this tale. . . . Lord Okubo Aki no kami was far worse than a dog or a fox who appears as a woman. Therefore, people should praise one who dies in saving the people out of a sense of humanity and justice. He is definitely superior to birds and animals."<sup>16</sup> In conventional terms, the leaders do not change the system. Nevertheless, they have replaced the warriors as its central actors. They have gone beyond the peasants' formerly passive existence as the objects of governmental directives to become the self-defined subjects of morally righteous endeavor.

Peasants in late Tokugawa society were faced with the discrepant norms: one appropriate for everyday existence, the other valid in time of crisis. Bakufu rules and regulations or the interests of the family might determine action under normal circumstances, but they were inadequate to deal with an emergency. Yet people who actually followed the code of conduct appropriate for leaders of social protest appeared less and less frequently. Therefore, the values inculcated by the system or those actually acted on in extreme circumstances were not the ones peasants used to assign meanings to the actions they wanted to see. Instead, they looked back to an idealized past and inward to the world of fantasy. They dealt with a change in values through the reaffirmation of long-gone heroics and the creation of dramatic confrontations with authority. In so doing, they made themselves into actors. By the end of the Tokugawa period, peasant followers of the world-renewal god sought their own world, one without leaders or governmental authority.

From another perspective, the narratives might be read for their appeal to the peasants' social consciousness. In this sense, they revealed their audience's subconscious frustrations in a politically repressive social system. In addition, they might become a compensatory escape mechanism allowing their listeners to flee in fantasy from their own limitations and do things—confront the warriors, for example—that they never did in real life. They might also serve as a vehicle for social protest at the same time that they ironically maintained cultural and social stability. Through these exaggerated recollections of injustice, the anger of the people would be vented against

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<sup>16</sup> Ami-chō shi hensan iinkai (1978:80). This version of "Onnabake sōdō yume monogatari" was copied in 1857.

unassailable individuals, while the system itself was taken for granted and indeed was ultimately reaffirmed.

On the other hand, perhaps their significance ought not to be reduced to system maintenance. Later events might recall earlier ones. Records of the Ueda riots in 1869 relate that peasants had learned to destroy the houses of the rich from accounts of the 1761 uprising. Prior to the 1859 riot in Ina valley, the leader Ogiso Ihei built a shrine to Sakura Sōgorō in the precinct of a local temple and then traveled through the district using the legend of the martyr to rally peasants. As late as 1870, a peasant from the Shimoosa Karasuyama domain took the story of Sōgorō to Tokyo in his protest of new taxes (Yokoyama 1973:249, 1977:222; Aoki, M., 1981:225). The bakufu was powerless against folklorist protest; blame for its composition could not be affixed to any one person.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, narratives could multiply in local society and create visions of alternative worlds.

### Epilogue

The Meiji period saw the end of peasant uprising narratives as a genre. First, it removed many of the repressive restrictions imposed by the bakufu on peasant activities and destroyed what remained of community cohesion through new tax laws, universal education, and conscription. The values and deeds praised in the narratives thus became anachronistic. The vivid descriptions of self-confident crowds in riots and confrontations with officials disappeared from modern literature. Second, the creation of new communication media—newspapers and, in the twentieth century, radio—submerged local culture in the mass culture of the urban center.<sup>18</sup> The process has been long, and in its course only fragments of local legends have been incorporated in the literature of the center. Even the saga of Sakura Sōgorō has lost its original meaning to become just another example of heroism and pathos under feudalism. The elimination of his vengeful spirit from the most recent accounts of his life is not merely the reflection of a less superstitious world. It also signifies that people no longer find it possible to symbolize the righteousness of their opposition to the government in the angry ghosts of martyrs.

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<sup>17</sup> That the bakufu would indeed censure talk of peasant uprisings can be seen in what happened to Baba Bunko, a professional storyteller. In 1757 he was forbidden to recite "Dai Nihon Chiranki," and the next year he was executed by the Osaka authorities for having performed "Kanamori sōdō: Mori no dan" about a peasant uprising in Mino (Sugiura

1977:4–5).

<sup>18</sup> Both Sugiura (1977:7–9) and Tsukamoto (1977:195) lament this trend. According to Tsukamoto, from the early nineteenth century and especially after the 1870s, culture flowed from the top down, from the center out, from Tokyo to the provinces (1977:199).



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