

THREE JAPANESE VILLAGES: A FILIPINO'S GLIMPSES OF RURAL JAPAN

LESLIE E. BAUZON

At the outset, I would like to emphasize that this report is highly impressionistic. The observations made here are merely based on what I have seen in the course of nearly three months of stay in Japan in 1977 for purposes of participating in a pioneering research project involving Southeast Asian and Japanese scholars, and making use of the interdisciplinary mode of analysis. The remarks I will be making below are of an impressionistic character, and are therefore subject to validation upon further study and deeper analysis of the empirical data gathered through informal and formal interviews in all the places surveyed. However, in Masuo Kuchiba and Leslie E. Bauzon (eds.), *A Comparative Study of Paddy-Growing Communities in Southeast Asia and Japan* (Kyoto, Ryukoku University, 1979), some of the results of the fieldwork are presented. The general fieldwork data given in the following paragraphs are to a large extent reinforced by impressions as well as observations I have made during my year-long term at Kyoto University in 1979-1980, during which time I had the occasion to visit other rural areas in the country.

Sonai Village. Geographically, the village of Sonai with a little over fifty households is located in a paradise-like island called Iriomote belonging to the archipelagic Okinawa Prefecture. Its flora and fauna, as well as its topographical features, are quite similar to those in Southeast Asia. The climate is humid and subtropical, and is typhoon-prone. (In fact, while we were there, a powerful typhoon with 260-kilometer per hour winds hit the village.)

The main occupation is rice farming, with some vegetables like eggplants and tomatoes grown principally for home consumption. Non-commercial fishing is also engaged in by some of the villagers. There is in fact only one full-time fisherman. A few other people are engaged in non-agricultural occupations, like teaching, governmental work and small-shop ownership.

There is only one doctor. The village has a primary school and a junior high school, as well as a post office. For higher education, the villagers send their children to Ishigaki City in Ishigaki Island or Naha in mainland Okinawa, and in mainland Japan itself. It has adequate running water, electricity, and telecommunication facilities. There is a regular bus service from Sonai to other parts of Iriomote Island, and villagers can go to Ishigaki Island either by motorboat or by hovercraft, although the ports for these sea vessels are not situated in Sonai itself but elsewhere in the island. From Ishigaki City, regular passenger boat and plane services are available for mainland Okinawa, for other places in Japan and elsewhere.

Economically, the people in Sonai are certainly better off than Southeast Asian villagers. Aside from the conveniences already mentioned above, or maybe because of these conveniences, they are able to have color television, although for good or ill they are a captive audience of *Nippon Hoso Kyokai* (NHK), whose programs are the only ones received by Sonai. In addition to color television sets, the villagers own refrigerators, washing machines, telephones, and other electrical appliances. A few own pick-up trucks; most own motorcycles, and of course, bicycles. Some of the farmers have started employing machines for agricultural purposes. These machines increase their farming efficiency and productivity.

However, in relation to mainland Japanese villages, Sonai is economically underprivileged. This is mainly due to Sonai's location in an island which is relatively isolated and remote. Iriomote is nearer Formosa and the Philippines than to the Japanese mainland. Iriomote's paradisiac character has made the Japanese government adopt a policy of natural conservation, thus slowing down its economic development. The inhabitants of the island, Sonai villagers included, of course resent the fact that the preservation of wild cats seem to be more important to the government than the enhancement of the human welfare of the islanders. If the government continues its policy of natural conservation, the Sonai villagers will forever be in a position of being unable to readily obtain sufficient cash income for the improvement of their living standards. In this case, many might be compelled by economic necessity to abandon their homes and fields, as a sizeable number have already done, in favor of greener pastures in Ishigaki City, Naha, or elsewhere in Japan.

On the other hand, if the government decides to undertake the infrastructural development of Iriomote Island in order to provide the basis for implementing stimulatory measures designed to promote economic growth in the island, the government's policy of natural conservation will definitely be compromised. At any rate, the Japanese government, together with the people of Iriomote Island, should undertake mutual consultations in order to find a way out of this difficult predicament. The crucial issue, it seems to me, is whether wild cats should be given priority over human beings or not. The possible short-run and long-run consequences should be weighed carefully before any decision is reached and enforced.

For the moment, I am impressed by the high percentage of owner-cultivatorship among the farmers in Sonai, which is nearly 100%. There is no tradition of landlordism or tenancy. Land reform in the immediate postwar era was superfluous in so far as Sonai was concerned. Moreover, the village has no record of landlord-tenant conflicts. Even today, there are no big landlords. Actually, considering the limited area of flat land in Iriomote, no big landed estates could have emerged, nor will any emerge today or in the future. Tenancy was and is virtually non-existent. Land is available; in fact, as alluded to already, many fields and even houses and the compounds where they are situated are being abandoned. If land is being rented in or rented out today, no fees are paid to, or paid by, the people concerned. Tenancy "contracts" are wholly verbal in nature, and owners of land are in fact happy when someone else is available to till their fields because this will prevent the deterioration of their fields as well as their under-utilization and idleness.

In terms of religion, my strong impression is that the Sonai villagers are animistic. They believe in spirits which they say inhabit every nook and cranny of the village, especially in the hill areas. Their animism, though, may not be regarded as the reason for their backwardness in relation to Japanese mainland villagers, because they have been receptive and are quite receptive to modern innovations, especially in farming. Besides, their animism is not really unusual because the Shinto religion is itself animistic to the extent that its followers across Japan believe in the existence of spirits in such places as under rocks and in trees, and elsewhere and everywhere.

Politically, the village is a part of an administrative unit composed of Sonai and Hoshidate, another village nearby. This administrative unit is headed by a man referred to as a *kucho*, whose power and influence though are surpassed by the real headman of Sonai, the *kominkancho*. Two members of the Taketomi town council are residents of the village. Together with the *kucho* and the *kominkancho*, they are able to exert some political influence which may result in concrete benefits for Sonai and its inhabitants.

The group consciousness of the Sonai villagers is very strong; their own personal views are subordinated to collective interests, for village harmony must not be disrupted. They also practice labor exchange and reciprocal help, which again serve as a positive factor for enhancing unity and solidarity. This unity and solidarity are not based on kinship alone. In fact, neighbors, who are not necessarily relatives, often play a greater role in mutual assistance situations because the relatives are frequently away and therefore not immediately accessible for help.

Fujie Village. The village is located in the town of Adogawa, Takashima county, Shiga Prefecture. It has about 105 households, and is situated in a typical fan-type agricultural area. Geographically, Fujie's location is obviously more favorable than Sonai, not only because it is in the mainland but also because it is only one hour away by train and about two hours by car from Kyoto, Japan's spiritual capital today, and the country's political capital for over a thousand years before the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Fujie village is likewise near Shiga's prefectural capital city of Ohtsu.

While Fujie is located in a relatively large agricultural plain between Lake Biwa and the mountains of western Shiga, farming may not be considered as the main occupation of the Fujie villagers. As a matter of fact, instead of agriculture being the villagers' main occupation, agriculture has become the main *side job* of the people of Fujie. Their principal occupation is the operation of cottage industries like the manufacture of crepes, and threads which are used in tire manufacturing. Therefore, their cash income is many times higher than that of the Sonai villagers. It seems to me that if the villagers have become highly mechanized in their agricultural endeavours, it is not so much for purposes of productive effi-

ciency and scientific farming, as for saving labor and time which they can devote to their enormously profitable cottage industry enterprises. This is a manifestation, to my mind, of their profit-orientedness. Thus, they have bigger and newer houses than the Sonai villagers. They also have more cars and other vehicles, and certainly more appliances like color television sets (for good or ill, they are not a captive audience of NHK), refrigerators, washing machines, drying machines, stereo sets, radios, and air-conditioners. In Fujie, the village are definitely enjoying modern benefits on a large scale. These benefits are yet to a great extent to be enjoyed by Southeast Asian villagers, who are historically the most impoverished and oppressed elements in the national communities of Southeast Asia. Because of the affluence of Fujie villagers, they are not only able to enjoy modern conveniences at home but they are also able to afford better medical, educational, and cultural facilities for the improvement of their human welfare. However, they seem to be spending less time for leisure, now that they have labor-saving machines for farming. Instead, they use the time and energy they save in order to work harder for an even higher cash income for themselves and their families. Even as I admire their hardworking nature, I believe that it is necessary to educate them in relaxation.

The farmers of Fujie are well supported by the government of Japan in terms of greater infrastructural systems like farm-to-market roads and irrigation facilities, although Fujie has had no water problem historically, unlike the other villagers in Adogawa town, especially those at mid-stream areas along the Ado River. Thus it has been spared from the debilitating conflicts over irrigation water that divided other villages in previous decades and even generations.

Like Sonai, despite the relatively large agricultural fan-type plain in which it is situated, Fujie has not had any unfortunate experiences normally associated with big landlordism and tenancy. It is true that there used to be a few "big" landlords in the Adogawa area in general, but these landlords owned no more than ten hectares or so each, and by Southeast Asian standards, they cannot be considered big landlords. (In the Philippines at least, twenty hectares constitute the floor for big landlordism.) The rate of owner-cultivatorship in Fujie was high during the prewar period, and today it is nearly 100%, as in Sonai. If one or two persons do not own land,

it is because they are engaged in non-agricultural occupations which they find more lucrative than farming. Land rent in Fujie today is higher than in Sonai, where the land rent is virtually zero, but the 2.5 *hyo* per *tan* land rent in the former is reasonable. As in Sonai, despite the limited economic opportunities available there, the benefits of owner-cultivatorship are clearly manifested in Fujie. The status of an owner-cultivator in Fujie and Sonai is a source of personal pride and dignity, in stark contrast to the degradation and humiliation of landless tenant farmers in Southeast Asian countries, especially in the Philippines and Thailand. The callousness in the past of Southeast Asian governments toward the problems of the peasantry has aggravated the minority status of the farmers in terms of the articulation of their interests despite their majority status in terms of number.

The group consciousness of Fujie villagers is relatively strong, although some informants in the village stated that on occasions in previous decades, it was difficult to achieve village consensus on the construction of some access roads to the village. However, because of the growing heterogeneity of the Fujie population, it is possible that consensus will become even more difficult to achieve in the future. A clash of interest is bound to occur between those engaged in agriculture and those engaged in non-agricultural occupations ranging from industrial work to professional endeavours. For the moment, though, intra-village groups like the youth club, the housewives' association (*fujin-kai*), and of course the farmers' cooperative, help ensure cooperation. This is not to mention the neighbourhood groupings (*goningumi*). There seems to be some indication, however, that when it comes to conflicts of personal interest, village solidarity easily breaks down. Historically, this breakdown has been demonstrated in individual clashes over water control during drought years.

In terms of village administration, the *kucho* serves as the leader, with the assistance of a vice-*kucho* and some other officials. And as far as religion is concerned, most of the people practice the teachings of Buddhism, even as the influence of Shintoism is strong. In fact the people tend to believe in both Buddhism and Shintoism, giving substance to the statement that in Japan, 80% of the people are Shinto believers and 70% are followers of Buddhism!

It seems to me that the major problem in Fujie is not how to promote economic growth and material advancement, but how to make the people enjoy a better quality life of affluence and prosperity.

Shirone-go. This place in particular and the prefecture of Niigata in northern Japan in general are in a sense similar to Southeast Asian villages, considering the prevalence today of landlessness and big landed estates in Southeast Asia. This statement is based on my strong impression that there was big landlordism in this area before the war. By landlordism, I mean the ownership of vast tracts of land, either in the form of scattered holdings or in the form of contiguous, *hacienda*-type landed estates consisting of at least twenty hectares, and in a number of cases, the hectarage reaching 1000 hectares or more. These vast tracts of land in Niigata were called *senchobu-jinushi* before the war, and were held by a few rich individuals who acquired their lands either by purchase or by taking over the lands used as collateral in mortgage arrangements (e.g., the moneylenders acquired ownership of the lands involved after their original owners failed to redeem their properties). Thus there was concentration, rather than dissipation of ownership through an equitable distribution of land.

Tenant farmers cultivated these vast tracts of land. Some statistical data show that there were owner-cultivators, as well as owner-tenants in the prewar period in Niigata. But the data indicate that there was also a sizeable percentage of landless tenants who paid 50% of the amount of *hyo* of rice they harvested, as rental for the cultivation of one *tan* of the landlord's land. The high land rent-rate, plus other manipulations by the landlords, resulted in conflicts between the two groups. The conflicts actually took the form of legal cases, in most instances, with the tenants generally getting some measure of justice due to their ventilation of their grievances against the landlords.

What I wish to impart here is that if there was any place in Japan after the war which needed land reform the most, it was the Niigata area. Land reform resulted in the break-up of the great landholdings, and the former tenant farmers, who were landless, became owner-cultivators. This land redistribution program was accompanied by infrastructural support: better farm roads, irrigation canals, drainage systems, and

vital support systems like cooperatives to facilitate the marketing and distribution of farm produce. These cooperatives also provided low-interest loans to farmers, thus eliminating usurious mortgage arrangements.

Today, the farmers are enjoying unprecedented prosperity. Of course they deserve to be prosperous, considering the hardships they had to suffer before the war. However, they seem to be too pampered by the Japanese government today, and I can sense that they actually hold power and wealth not commensurate with their size as a group. I am referring to the mainland farmers, and Niigata farmers specifically, who are getting all sorts of governmental subsidy for the construction of barrages along the Nakano-kuchi River which are one too many, or for the construction of an expensive underground pipe irrigation system which is sophisticated but which actually may be superfluous because irrigation water can be obtained through less expensive ways like the present surface canals. The huge outlays for these projects which in the long run may prove unnecessary can perhaps be channeled profitably today to less fortunate farmers in economically deprived and culturally underprivileged areas like Sonai, Hoshidate and Funauki in Iriomote Island, Okinawa, so that they too may reach a level of economic development comparable to the present condition of Niigata farmers.

Of course I am not blaming the Niigata farmers for seemingly monopolizing all the huge expenditures poured by the government into agricultural development. To some extent, the politicians are also to be blamed because they are interested in assuring their own political survival. They need the support of the voters, and the best way to get the votes is to pamper the farmers, who constitute a sizeable and influential voting bloc, receiving subsidies and assistance far out of proportion to their number. I get the impression therefore that some of the improvements being accomplished in Niigata today are politically motivated; it is true that benefits accrue to the people here, but that in the process of improvement, other sections of the country as in Okinawa are neglected. There is therefore a need to achieve a more equitable distribution of government assistance and protection than before to all farmers, especially those in remote areas. Considering the wealth of Japan at the moment, it is hard to believe that some farmers especially

in Okinawa are still suffering from economic deprivation, according to Japanese standards.

The flood control system of Niigata meanwhile has been very successful. Coming from an area in the Philippines where the situation is abnormal if it does not flood during the rainy season, I can deeply appreciate the efforts spent in preventing costly inundations which in the prewar period caused untold human hardships for the people of Niigata. I believe that the Niigata system, although somewhat expensive, can serve as a model for Southeast Asian countries with perennial floods to follow, even if on a lesser scale.

Farmers in Niigata, as well as in many other parts of Japan, are generally enjoying the benefits of modernization now, while farmers in Southeast Asian countries are still the *objects* of modernization. However, even as they have all the modern conveniences, the Niigata farmers seem to be working themselves to death. I therefore believe that some kind of an educational campaign should be launched in order to make the farmers realize that they should also have some leisure activities in order to prolong their stay on earth, instead of hastening their departure through sheer drudgery.

Conclusion. It is clear that Japanese villages are generally better off than Southeast Asian villages in material terms, although within Japan, Sonai village is deprived. At any rate, whether one speaks of economically-deprived Sonai or of the economically affluent Shirone-go villages, the fact that stands out is the high rate of owner-cultivatorship among the farmers. This has played a crucial role in enabling the farmers to develop self-dignity, self-respect, and a considerable degree of economic independence. Compared to a country like the Philippines where peasant landlessness is prevalent even today, this high rate of owner-cultivatorship in Japanese villages is impressive, and it shows the importance of land reform in its widest sense in increasing the farmers' real income and their purchasing power. A sincere and successful implementation of agrarian reform in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, can pave the way for greater industrialization. This will avoid the costly dislocations usually associated with violent social upheavals. The sooner the national development planners and the landed gentry of Southeast Asia realize this, the better for their respective national communities.