Traditional and Non-traditional Storytellers in Modern Japanese Societies

Yoko Takashima[+] (Japan)

Abstract

In Japan, the tradition of storytelling no longer exists in rural communities; thus, it is increasingly difficult to find traditional storytellers who have heard folktales passed down over generations. However, new storytelling is activated by both traditional and contemporary (non-traditional) storytellers who tell stories learned through reading books. In rural areas, a small number of traditional storytellers tell folktales to tourists at tourism facilities, while in urban cities, contemporary storytellers tell stories and folktales to children in libraries, schools and other community facilities. Their activities greatly contribute to the vitalization of folktales; nonetheless, there are some challenges. Both types of storytellers attempt to solve problems that they face. These attempts represent the possibilities of new storytelling in modern Japan.

Keywords: *Urban Storytellers, Contemporary Storytellers, Traditional Storyteller, Folktales, Urban Society.*

[+] Dr. Yoko Takashima, Associate Professor, Osaka City University, 3-138, Sugimoto 3 chome, Sumiyoshi-ku, Osaka city, 558-8585, Japan. email address: takashim@lit.osaka-cu.ac.jp.

Introduction

Long ago, we could see and hear elderly people narrating folktales at firesides in villages in every part of Japan. After World War II, folklore researchers collected and recorded stories that had been orally passed down over generations. Traditional storytellers who had grown up with the custom of oral folktales existed until around the 1980s. However, in the latter half of the 20th Century, traditional storytelling declined rapidly, and now it has virtually disappeared in both rural and urban areas. The number of storytellers who can narrate the tales heard from their parents and grandparents is dwindling.

In spite of this, the art of storytelling is surviving because of the efforts of people who know the value of folktales and oral storytelling and who are eager to pass them down to younger generations. Currently, in Japan, there are innovative storytelling activities in rural and urban regions. Critics divide the storytellers who conduct these activities in modern Japan into two groups: traditional storytellers, who have heard folktales passed down over generations, and non-traditional storytellers, who tell stories learned (memorized) from books. The latter are called "urban storytellers" or "contemporary storytellers." They use this method of storytelling to cater to children at libraries, which is an idea that was introduced by librarians from the US in the 1950s. Currently the number of urban storytellers is much larger than that of traditional ones.

Both types of storytellers have been attempting to preserve and revive the tradition. Traditional storytellers tell folktales at municipal events or sightseeing attractions instead of narrating the stories to their own grandchildren at home. This trend has caused some changes in their narrative manner and repertoire. Urban or contemporary tellers, who work as librarians and volunteers in urban areas, tell folktales to children at libraries, schools, and other community facilities. In addition, some of them tell their local stories in their own dialects, following the model of traditional storytellers. Both types make these attempts to rise to the challenges facing them.

This article presents the problem-solving attempts of both types of storytellers. First, it focuses on the attempts of a traditional storyteller and then on those of an urban or contemporary storyteller. Finally, it closes with a discussion of the possibilities related to the new ways of storytelling in urban Japanese societies.

A Traditional Storyteller in Tõno

As an example of traditional storytellers, we have Satsu Suzuki (1911–1996) from Tõno city. Although she died in 1996, we have chosen her because she was certainly one of the most innovative traditional storytellers in Japan. She contributed significantly to the preservation and spread of Tõno folktales. She narrated in Tõno city and other regions across Japan; sometimes, her storytelling was played on the radio or television. In addition, she was involved in publishing her stories and recording her narrations on tapes, videos, and CDs.

1. Tõno city

Before describing Suzuki's works, we will provide a brief description of Tõno city. Tõno is located on the inland of Iwate Prefecture in the Tohoku district of northern Japan (Figure 1 and Figure 2). It is a small city of about 27,000 people. Like other provincial areas, the city has an aging population and boasts of traditional storytellers exceeding those of big cities in the Kanto and Kansai districts: Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe, and Kyoto cities. The city is famous for *Tõno Monogatari* (Legends of Tõno), written by Kunio Yanagita, a pioneer Japanese folklorist, in 1910. Thus, Tõno is a tourist destination and known as "The hometown of folktale." Traditional storytellers began to tell folktales and legends to tourists in a space called *Kataribe Hall* (the Hall of Storytellers) in a tourist facility known as *Tõno Mukashibanashi Mura* (Tõno Old Tale Village) in 1993.[1] Satsu Suzuki was one of the storytellers narrating folktales to tourists at the facility.

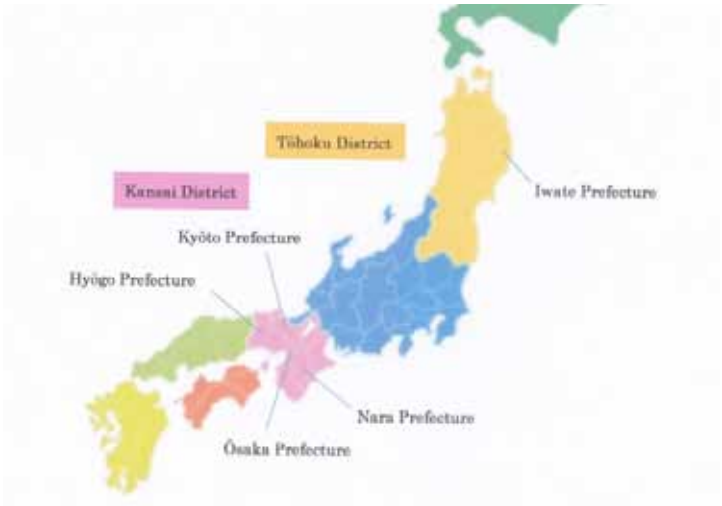

Figure 1. Districts and Prefectures in Japan.

Figure 2. Cities in Japan.

2. Problems Satsu Suzuki Faced

Suzuki was one of the greatest storytellers in Tõno and covered a large repertoire of over 100 stories. Therefore, some researchers interviewed her to learn about her method of storytelling and her life history. Their recorded documents[2] reveal the problems she faced as well as how she dealt with them.

The problems that she experienced were due to certain modern conditions that differed from traditional ones. Previously, storytellers told stories learned from their parents and grandparents to their children, grandchildren, or community children. As a child, Suzuki also listened to folktales told by her father. However, after finishing school, she did not remember or tell folktales for 50 years. This was primarily because, with the growing popularity of radio and television, children were much less interested in folktales. In the 1970s, however, many people in urban areas began to feel nostalgic about old Japanese traditions. Tõno began to attract tourists as a place where traditional culture and rural nature remained intact because Tõno Monogatari had been widely publicized with Yanagita's re-evaluation (Kawamori 2000:183). The local government decided to use Tõno Monogatari as a tourist resource to enliven the town, using the catch phrase "The hometown of folktale" (Kawamori 2000:185–87). They asked storytellers to tell folktales passed down in Tõno over generations, particularly those featured in Tõno Monogatari. Suzuki was one of them. In 1971, when she was 60 years old, she started telling folktales in various places, including tourist facilities (Kawamori 2000:190–91; Ishii 2002:200). By that time, however, things had changed since her childhood, which caused difficulties for her. First, she had forgotten the old Tõno dialect, which her father had used, although her listeners wanted to hear the folktales in that dialect. Second, she had forgotten some of the tales she had learned from her father (Ozawa, Arakida, and Endo 1999:331–33). Moreover, she had to tell stories that she had not learned from her father. Listeners, particularly visitors from urban areas, wanted to hear the stories in Yanagita's Tõno Monogatari, and people in Tõno thought she should tell as many stories from the book as possible. However, they were different from the tales that she had heard from her father (Ozawa, Arakida, and Endo 1999:326–27).

3. Attempts Made by Suzuki

Suzuki made several efforts to beat the challenges she faced. First, she recalled the old Tõno dialect. She said, "I managed to recall it only to tell folktales" (Ozawa, Arakida, and Endo 1999:333). Then, she reconstructed tales that she could not completely recall, with the help of books or people (Ozawa, Arakida, and Endo 1999:331). Thirdly, she learned the tales in Tõno monogatari that she did not know, by asking people about them. However, that was insufficient. Tõno Monogatari is not a collection of folktales but that of legends—moderately short narratives and experiences, written in literary language, instead of the Tõno dialect. Further, those who taught her the tales told them in standard Japanese or provided only the plots. Thus, she had to rework them into standard-styled folktales in the Tõno dialect (Ozawa, Arakida, and Endo 1999:333). For comparison, "Kappa-buchi (Water-imp River)" is given as an example.

Text 1: "Kappa Buchi " from Tõno Monogatari
58. Near the Obako deepwater pool of the Kogarase River there is a home called the New House. One day a child took a horse to cool off in the deep pool and then went off to play. A *kappa* appeared and tried to pull the horse deeper into the water, but instead the kappa was pulled out of the water by the horse and dragged off to the stable. The *kappa* hid under the horse's feed bucket.

Someone thought it strange that the feed bucket was upside down, and when they tilted it back a *kappa's* hand came out. All of the villagers gathered to discuss whether to kill the *kappa* or release it. They decided to let it go with a firm promise from the *kappa* that henceforth it would not make mischief with the village horses. This *kappa* has now left the village and is said to be living in a deep pool at Aizawa Falls.3 (Morse 2008:58-9)

Text 2: "Kappa Buchi" as Told by Satsu Suzuki
Once upon a time…
In the old days, behind a home called New House in Tsuchibuchi, there was a bottomless large deep water. One day, a boy took a horse from the stable to the river to cool off its hot legs. He splashed water on its belly and rubbed its back, and soon he hung the halter around its neck, went back on the shore, and walked away, leaving the horse in the water. Then, something began pulling the horse deeper into the water *zuru zuru* [sounds of pulling].

Surprised by this, the horse trotted onto the shore and back to the stable. Wondering why the horse returned, the boy's family went to the stable and were astonished to see it pawing at the air wildly.

One of them thought, "It is odd. Why is it so mad?' So, he looked into the stable and found a manger shaped like a boat.[4]

Then, he noticed a small hand, like a child's, showing from under the manger. The family said, "Turn it back in haste. Something is in it." When someone tilted it back, a kappa that looked like a seven or eight-year-old girl, folding its hands, came out.

… And they lived happily ever after.[5] (Ozawa, Arakida, and Endo 1999:63–65. Translation by the author.)

The underlined parts of Text 1 correspond with Text 2. There are some differences between the two. Text 2 is longer and more detailed; it describes concretely and vividly how people and creatures acted. It has also style that is characteristic of traditional folktales. The phrases underscored by dotted-lines are standard lines used in the beginning and ending of a folktale. Text 2 is a folktale version of a legend in *Tõno Monogatari*. Suzuki adapted this folktale from a legend.

In short, she was a novel traditional storyteller who undertook innovative attempts and trials.

Urban or Contemporary Storytellers in Nara Prefecture

Regarding contemporary storytellers, an example is presented from Nara Prefecture, where I have conducted research. Nara Prefecture is located in the Kansai district on the western half of Honsho (the main island of Japan) (Figure 1). It is bordered on the north by Kyoto Prefecture and on the west by Osaka Prefecture (Figure 1). Thus, its northwestern part is urbanized.

We will present a volunteer storyteller who lives in Katsuragi city, the mid-western part of Nara Prefecture (Figure 2). Her method is similar, in some ways, to those of traditional storytellers; in other words, she tries to model herself after traditional storytellers.

1. Yayo Yoshikawa's Background

The name of the storyteller is Sayo Yoshikawa, who is a Gon-Negi (a type of Shinto priest) at the Nagao Shrine in Katsuragi city. She tells folktales to people in her neighborhood. First, her brief life history will be described. She was born and brought up in Itami city, Hyogo Prefecture (Figure 1 and Figure 2). She had her first exposure to storytelling in a class when she was a university student in Kobe city (Figure 1). In this class, she was deeply impressed by her class-mates' storytelling, which interested her in folktales and their narration, and made her realize that telling stories is more powerful and moving than reading them aloud. After marrying into the Nagao Shrine family, she moved to Katsuragi city. In 1987, the Katsuragi city library was founded, which offered a course in storytelling. She attended the course, and after finishing it, she told stories and read picture books to children as a volunteer at the library and local schools. She has now been a volunteer storyteller for over 25 years (Yoshikawa 2014:40).

At the beginning of her career, she was a typical contemporary storyteller. However, several years later, she turned to traditional storytelling. She visited elders and listened to them tell folktales, which she recorded, transcribed, and retold. Now she tells folktales in the Nara dialect to local people.

2. Attempts Yoshikawa Made to Solve Problems

The focus will now shift to the problems she experienced and her attempts to solve them. Her turning point came in 1995. At that time, she began to attend courses at "*Mukashi Banashi Daigaku* (Folktale University)," a university for citizens founded by Toshio Ozawa[6] in 1992. The courses taught her the ways of traditional storytelling, Max Lüthi's theory on the style of folktales, and the techniques for retelling folktales based on this theory. Around 2000, dissatisfied with learning and telling stories from books, she began to tell traditional folktales in Nara Prefecture (Yoshikawa 2014:40). This exposed her to challenging jobs.

First, she looked for Nara's folktales in *Nihon Mukashi Banshi Tsukan (General Survey and Analysis of Japanese Folktales)*, the largest Japanese folktales collection that includes stories. However, the collection has few tales from Nara, most of which did not fulfill her objectives because some of their parts were omitted, others were incomprehensible, or sometimes only brief outlines were written in standard Japa-

nese. Consequently, she decided to visit the relevant storytellers and collectors to reconstruct the tales. Often, she visited the elders to hear and record folktales. As some of the tellers and collectors were dead, their children or relatives narrated the tales. To add suitable words, phrases, episodes, or detailed expressions to an incomplete tale, she referred to its transcriptions and to similar tales (Yoshikawa 2014:44-46).

To make it clear how she reworked the tales, we will use a tale called "Ane to imõto (Sisters)" as an example.

Text 3: "Ane to imõto" from Nihon mukashi banashi tsokan, volume 15
In the old days, there were sisters.

The elder sister married a rich man, as she was beautiful, while the younger married a poor charcoal burner, as she was not beautiful. As the younger sister had no money at the beginning of the New Year, she cut branches from pine trees[7] and visited the elder sister to ask her to buy them. However, the elder sister refused, saying, "Don't bother me." With tears, the younger sister unwillingly carried the pine branches to the river and threw them into it. Then, a turtle came out of the river. [words are omitted] …gave her a cat to thank her for the pine branches. The cat's feces were gold, so she became rich.

Hearing about this, the elder sister compelled the younger sister to lend her the cat. Though the younger sister advised her against giving the cat too much food, the elder sister overfed it to get more gold from it. Then, the cat died. The younger sister buried it with all due respect and with tears in her eyes. After a while, a tree grew over the grave of the cat and bore gold fruit. Thus, you must not be too greedy.[8] (Inada and Ozawa 1977:161)

Text 4: "Ane to imõto" as Told by Sayo Yoshikawa
Once upon a time, there were sisters who were on good term with one another.

The elder sister married a rich man and lived in comfort. In contrast, the younger sister lived with a poor charcoal burner. As she could not afford to prepare for the New Year, she cut branches from pine trees and visited her elder sister to ask her to buy them. However, the elder sister rejected her offer flatly, saying, "We have some, so we need no more." On the way home, the younger sister, with no other choice, threw them into the river, saying, "These are for the river god."

A turtle came out of the river. "I'm a messenger from the river god. The god asked me to give you a cat in return for the pine branches that you offered. You must give it only a cup of food a day," said the turtle and it gave her a cat.

The younger sister took the cat to her home. Every day she gave it a cup of food, as the turtle told her. Then, the cat discharged an oval gold coin every day. Therefore, she had a happy New Year.

Hearing about this, the elder sister came to her and said, "Please lend me the cat, please!" The younger sister refused, but the elder sister took it away from her by force.

Although the younger sister said she had to give the cat only a cup of food, the elder sister gave the cat a lot of food, expecting that it would produce more gold coins. Thus it died. She said, "Though I gave the cat a lot of food, it died, producing no gold coins," and she threw it out. The younger sister waited and waited, but her sister did not return the cat to her. The younger sister then went to her sister's house and found the cat dead outside. She carried it back in her arms with tears in her eyes and buried it on a hill at the back of her home. Every day she visited the grave. A tree grew there and bore gold coin blossoms. And she lived happily ever after. That's all.[9] (Translation by the author.)

The underlined portions of Text 3 and Text 4 correspond. Comparing them, we can find that Text 3 gives only the outline of the story. Text 4 has more detailed and concrete expressions, including conversations. Test 3 has an omission, but Text 4 is complete. Additionally, Text 4 used conventional phrases from traditional folktales. In this way, she succeeded in reconstructing some folktales complete with the characteristic expressions and styles. Her way of reconstructing folktales is similar to the manner in which Suzuki adapted legends to folktales; she used conventional phrases and styles, and she added concrete expressions and conversations. It is likely that Suzuki's childhood experience of hearing tales was very helpful. In contrast, Yoshikawa had no such experience. Instead, some knowledge of Lüthi's theory and the help of traditional storytellers led her to rework tales successfully.

3. Storytelling to Local Children

Currently, she tells the folktales that she reconstructed in the colloquial Nara dialect to the locals. She owes her technique of telling folktales to the traditional storytellers. She told me that she had listened to the elders' recorded narrations multiple times to learn their rhythm and nuances and thus to tell tales in a more natural manner. She said that children were more delighted with her storytelling when she told the folktales learned from traditional storytellers in their style than otherwise.

What is more noteworthy about her efforts is that she tells tales to children in a small-scale *jyuku* (a special private school for elementary school students) where she teaches English. Thus, her listeners are her students. Moreover, as the school has fewer than 30 students, she and her students know one another well. As a result, her storytelling is quite similar to the traditional type practiced at homes or in communities, which allows both tellers and listeners to be relaxed. Further, such storytelling leaves room for improvised alterations – shortening or lengthening stories, or simplifying words – according to the listeners' reactions, and it allows a teller to use his or her daily spoken language. In addition, after each storytelling session, the children write short reports about the impression the stories had on them. She said they gave honest responses that were very helpful. Gener-

ally, urban storytellers at libraries or schools avoid asking children for comments or opinions regarding their storytelling because they worry that it would place pressure on the children. However, in the small school where she is familiar with her students, the children feel relaxed enough to be free and honest. She said that this was why she preferred telling folktales at the school rather than to strange children at libraries or tourists at sightseeing attractions. We can consider her storytelling similar to traditional storytelling.

As previously mentioned, Yoshikawa contributes to the preservation of folktales in Nara Prefecture. Her repertoire includes the folktales passed down over generations of people who lived in the mountainous regions there. Nara Prefecture has far fewer recorded folktales or traditional tellers than does Tohoku District. Therefore, her attempts are very valuable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we will make some points about the possibilities related to the tradition of storytelling in modern urbanized Japan.

Today, in Tōno, there are a number of successors to Satsu Suzuki. They are learning her stories and her storytelling technique in order to follow her example. Like other regions in Japan, Tōno is experiencing a decline in the number of traditional tellers, but more storytellers that are non-traditional are undergoing training in storytelling courses. Additionally, in many urban areas in Japan, non-traditional storytellers are learning Suzuki's storytelling technique through the collection and CD of her stories. It is very encouraging as well as useful for urban storytellers to learn of her attempts and trials, because her difficulties, described above, are similar to their own in some respects.

Sayo Yoshikawa can be a new role for non-traditional storytellers. She is a skillful non-traditional urban storyteller with robust knowledge of traditional storytelling. She gives lectures at storytelling courses in Nara city. Her lectures are very useful and encouraging for people who want to learn how to preserve and tell local folktales that have been passed down through generations. More importantly, she tells stories to familiar children as traditional tellers did long ago. This gives us hope that we can revive the tradition of storytelling in communities.
The number of such skilled non-traditional storytellers in urban and rural areas is steadily increasing. Their activities and cooperation can create a new tradition of storytelling in Japan.

Endnotes

1 The facility reopened as Tōno monogatari no yakata (House of Tōno Tales) in 2013. Today, in a theater complex referred to as Tōno za (Tōno Seat) in the house, the storytellers of Tōno perform using the Tōno dialect.

2 See Ishii 2002; Ozawa, Arakida, and Endo 1999; and Kawamori 2000.

3 Kunio Yanagita, Yanagita Kunio zen shu, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1989), 36-7.

4 In the past, they used a long open container, like a boat, to feed horses.

5 The original text is written in the Tõno dialect; it has been translated into standard English.

6 Ozawa is a scholar of German Literature, including Grimms Mächen, and a professor emeritus of Tsukuba University.

7 In Japan, people use pine branches to decorate entrances for the New Year.

8 The original text is written in the Nara dialect; it has been translated into standard English.

9 The original is told in the Nara dialect; it has been translated into standard English.

References

Ishii, Masami. *Tõno no minwa to kataribe.* Tokyo: Miyai shoten, 2002.

Inada, Koji and Toshio Ozawa. eds. *Nihon mukashi banashi tsokan,* vol.15. Tokyo: Dohosha, 1977.

Ozawa, Toshio, Takako Arakida and Atsushi Endo, eds. *Suzuki Satsu zen mukashi banashi sho.* Tokyo: Hukuinkan shoten, 1999.

Kawamori, Hiroshi. *Nihon mukashi banashi no kozo to katarite.* Osaka Suita: UP of Osaka, 2000.

Yanagita, Kunio. Trans. Roland A. Morse. *The Legends of Tono.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008.

Yanagita, Kunio. "Tõno monogatari" (1910) Yamagita Kunio Zenshu, vol. 4. Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1989. 7-76.

Yoshikawa, Sayo. "Densho no katarite ni manabu mukashi banashi no keisho (Learning Transmission of Folk Tales from Traditional Storytellers)" *Mukashi banshi – Kenkyo to Shiryo (Folktales: Studies and Materials)*. 42 (2014): 40-59.