

Death of a Valley

In early January I drove north from Nose to Hiyoshi town in Kyoto Prefecture – house hunting. No, I'm not intending to live there but I thought I might move one. It was one of those clear sunny days, the sort we sometimes get in January in Japan when one feels it can't really be winter any more; it must be spring. Of course it's all a delusion as we later discover in early February when the pipes freeze or when we have to fumble frozen-fingered with chains on an unlit snowy road late at night. Anyway in Hiyoshi that day it was spring-like. One ochre-walled thatched farmhouse was a picture. It was set comfortable on the flank of a mountainside with a side southern view looking over neighbouring thatched roofs, small vegetable patches and forested slopes. The main beams of the barn curved out and up like those at a temple though these were clearly not chiselled by design, the wood had naturally grown that way. By glancing along the racks of well-used but carefully cleaned tools – sickles, saws, hoes and other implements, one could imagine the day to day life of this mountain hamlet.

Mrs Hirose, whose house it was, had all the self-assurance and independence of a woman left to run things when the men had moved away to find work in the towns, as is the case in many of these isolated hamlets. Together with the *obaasan*, a nut-shelled faced eighty-going-on-a-hundred-year-old, she took care of the farm and the mountain. Pretty efficiently too I would guess to judge by the immaculate condition of the house and yard. From a neatly hidden cupboard under the floor-boards she took out a bottle of home-made snake wine (*mamushi-zake*). A drop or two is a great pick-me-up when you're a bit down or starting a cold, I was assured. (Recipe for the intrepid below). She also had an assortment of time-tried and tested herbal remedies for various ailments. Years of self-medication didn't seem to have harmed either of them.

The house was comfortably spotless, if it's possible to have that combination. Mrs Hirose was by habit, even that day, running over the wood with a damp cloth and sweeping unnoticeable bits of dust from the parched earth floor. But this was no ordinary day for her. It was the last she would spend in the house carrying out all these automatic little chores. Within a month nothing would remain where the house had been save a pile of ash and blacked earth. A bull-dozer would erase the memories of a lifetime in half day.

She didn't seem all that saddened or rather didn't show it, as she locked the door for the last time. I wondered why she bothered. Habit I suppose. After all she, alongside the other 150 or so households in that valley, had received a huge amount of compensation (average 2 *oku* or 200 million yen) for her lost house and land. She was now installed in a brand-new lavishly-styled traditional house on the outskirts of Sonobe, the sort Japanese build when they get rich overnight, with more emphasis on the entrance or exterior (to impress guests) than anything else.

I still had a picture of her in the old setting so felt she looked out of place in the new when I visited her a week later in Sonobe. Time was clearly beginning to play on her hands and she couldn't get used to buying her vegetables at a supermarket instead of picking them from her field. No doubt she'll adjust in time but I doubt if the *obaasan* will last long in that unfamiliar setting. Mrs Hirose didn't move by choice, nor did any of the others. They were moved to make way for a dam. Victims of development. Money is a great healer but you can't compensate people for loss of life-style, friends, community, culture and memories.

The valley of Hiyoshi is now a shell. The bus trundles intermittently along the road – empty. They are still mending the road, bureaucracy goes on to the bitter-end it seems. In the timbered Meiji kindergarten, coloured paper-chains and large child-drawn figures, remnants of the last school play, flap desolately in the empty auditorium. The children have long gone, integrated into a new life in other schools. Here and there are columns of smoke and the rumble of heavy machinery – the demolition gangs at work. People are still living there but as soon as their new houses are ready they move out. Most of the old furniture, tools and garden trees get left. They would look out of place in a new house and anyway there's no room. Graves and gravestones also have to be relocated. I

wonder how the spirits feel about all these upheavals. Do they take kindly to the thundering juggernauts along Route 9? Do they miss the whistling wind among the mountain pines in the valley?

The threat of the dam hasn't come out of the blue to the valley residents. It's been in the pipeline for over 20 years. But it hasn't made the final wrench any easier and a great deal of bitterness remains. The once friendly community has been split by jealousy, bickering and greed. Money changes people for the worse. What appears to be more money than they've ever dreamed of, turns into a nightmare. One thing most of them never think of is tax. A big house is something one takes for granted in the countryside. Put in a town setting it is taxed far more, especially if it's new. Big houses cost a lot to maintain. Farmers who are accustomed to depend on a kotatsu and small oil heater for warmth are in for a shock when the central heating bills come in. Too late they realise that living in the old place was although simpler, a great deal cheaper.

And the old houses? Well at the time of writing about 30-40 still stand. They are free to anyone. That is to say anyone with the means to move them. Sentimentality is costly though. I'm finally beginning to understand why it is the Japanese prefer to build everything new. It isn't that they don't care about their culture as I once believed, they just can't afford to preserve it.

Anyone who wants more information of the Hiyoshi dam project can contact me % K.T.O or contact Hiyoshi Town Nokyo directly.

Recipe for **mamushi-zake**

First catch your snake, it must be a *mamushi* or *habu* (if you live in Okinawa). If you cheat and opt for a harmless grass snake you'll just end up with pickled snake in alcohol. Dunk the snake in a bucket of water until it regurgitates its last meal, then slide it into a bottle of *shochu*. (Quite tricky this). Replace cork and wait five years.

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