

## Life Before Cars

Walking along a narrow winding track through a bamboo grove one day he nearly put his foot on a *mamushi*. As the snake rose to attack he tried to pin it down with a stick intending to kill it. Struggling the snake let out a cry or at least some sort of noise. Within seconds other *mamushi* appeared as if coming to the aid of their wounded comrade. Mr. Tani dropped everything and ran for his life.

That was many years ago and although the *mamushi* are still around and just as dangerous there are fewer cases of people being bitten and dying from the shock or the poison. This is perhaps because people venture less along narrow grassy paths, they no longer gather piles of dried cut grass (a favourite afternoon napping spot for *mamushi*), indeed they seldom walk about much at all. When they have to go and check their rice field they prefer to drive in a small truck, even if it's well within walking distance. Times have changed.

What were times like when there were no cars? Picture if you can a remote mountain hamlet with terraced rice fields climbing the steep slopes until the forests take over and reach the skyline. Clusters of thatched farmhouses dot the landscape. Put in telegraph poles, telephone lines, television aerials, a few modern farm buildings, a bit more tin and tile, less thatch and you have 1989. Take these away and you have a village a century ago. Tani Tomohiko is 92. Within his lifetime village life which had remained unchanged for centuries, has suddenly, almost dramatically, been transformed. I asked him to recall his memories of those early years. This he did as we sat next to a bamboo grove at the side of his garden. I kept a weather-eye open for *mamushi* as we talked.

Mr. Tani is an alert soft-speaking man with a cherubic face smooth and pink like a baby's, virtually devoid of wrinkles. He wasn't born in Ohara (this hamlet, part of Nose) but came from Miki in Hyogo to be a school teacher in the local primary school at the age of 25. As was common in Japan, he was adopted by the Tani family who had no sons, as a husband for their daughter. He moved to a school in Osaka at the beginning of Showa leaving his wife and young family in Ohara. Teachers being generally exempt from military service, he wasn't called up when war broke out, anyway he was over the age limit. After the war Land Reform wrought many changes in the countryside. Large estates were divided, land taken from the landlords was given to the tenant farmers. Anyone who had land but didn't cultivate it faced losing it. Mr. Tani quit teaching and returned home to become a farmer. He's lived in Ohara ever since. Over the years he's held many honorary positions in the town assembly (Nose didn't expand to its present size and status until 1959) and as village mayor (*soncho*). Today he and his son live a bachelor existence in the rambling farmhouse.

Ohara even today is pretty isolated. There are no shops, no buses. To get anywhere without a car you have to walk about 20 minutes downhill (coming up takes longer) to the bus stop. Then it's 10 minutes to the station. Myoken Guchi, the end of the Nose line. But buses only run once an hour and the last one is around 8 in the evening. Before cars everyone walked, bicycled, or for carrying goods used rickshaws or ox carts. This meant people seldom ventured beyond the bounds of their village, few ever went as far as Ikeda let alone the great metropolis Osaka. Although the War was the turning point in many respects, private transport, mass media and farm mechanisation are very recent.

Before the War the only way to get news was through newspapers. There were no telephones or wireless. People lived and ate by what they could produce which meant rice/wheat and vegetables (fresh or pickled). Once a week a one-man walking-shop did the rounds carrying provisions

on his back: dried sardines, seaweed, salt, small sundry household necessities. Other salesmen plied their wares in the same way. Families made their own *miso* and *shoyu*, nobody made *tofu* it seems. The Tanis kept a couple of goats for milk as well as miscellaneous chicken. The rice/vegetable/pickle diet was unvaried except when supplemented with edible weeds, fungus or fruits they found in the mountains. Children were given white rice in their *bento* boxes to take to school for fear of being teased by other kids. At home rice was mixed with wheat except on special occasions or when guests came. Families tended to be large. Children were expected to help with the chores – mainly tidying up the yard, feeding the fowls – the younger ones supervised by their elders. Education stopped at primary school, it was unknown for kids to go to middle school let alone university.

The year revolved round the seasons. Rice cultivation occupied most of the warm months. Without machines this was laborious work. Each family had an ox, a vital source of power as well as provider of valuable manure. Every member of the family took turns to cut grass and straw for its fodder. The manure was mixed with vegetable matter and grass to make compost which in turn was spread on the fields. In early spring the ox pulled a one shaft iron-tipped wooden plough up and down the field breaking up the soil. This was followed by harrowing using a flat rake device again pulled by the ox. (Revolving harrows made their appearance after the war, but they were still ox-drawn: Mechanised tillers came in the 50th followed by tractors with an assortment of attachments in the 70s). The field was then flooded and a plank or ladder pulled around to ensure a smooth surface. Rice plants were started from seed in rice beds then transplanted into the paddy field. Lines of women moving backwards in unison thrust the plants into the mud. With the hot sun beating down on their backs and reflected by the water, their legs eaten by insects, it was an arduous job, but enjoyed to a certain extent as it offered them a rare chance to natter with neighbours and relatives who came to help. Parties

which followed planting and later harvesting were the highlights of the year.

In winter although there was nothing to do in the fields, there was a lot of work in the mountains. Undergrowth was cut, trees felled or thinned, branches cut and bundled to be carried home for kindling. A year-round supply of charcoal for the *hibachi* brazier had to be made as well as firewood chopped for the bath. Winter evenings were long. “Nothing to do” commented Mr. Tani. For the men perhaps, but the women had to make clothes for the family by the light of oil lamps. How did they keep warm? There was no heating except the *hibachi*, people just wore layers of cotton quilted garments. I now know why Ohara people are so though. Even today Mr. Tani rejects any form of room heating, relying on his old quilted jacket for warmth instead.

Mr. Tani was somewhat of an exception in that he worked as a teacher for a number of years. The only outside jobs available in the old days were related in some way to agriculture or forestry, or connected with housebuilding; carpenters, thatchers and the like. People relied on their own resources. When someone fell ill or had an accident the chance of them surviving a tortuous journey by rickshaw to a distant doctor was slim. Households kept a medicine chest filled with cure-all pills and lotions. Once a year a medicine salesman came from Toyama to offer fresh concoctions. Mostly though they depended on home-made herbal remedies extracted from plants or animals found in nearby fields and mountains.

“What” I asked Mr. Tani “are the things you miss most from the old days?” “Well” he said, “we had such fun after all the work was done, women prepared huge meals, lots to eat and drink. Nowadays women don’t know how to cook properly. All the time in the world but they don’t cook.” As I glimpsed a Lawson’s carrier bag on the kitchen table, I could understand.

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