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Supernatural Snow Stories: Some Notes on Suzuki Bokushi's *Hokuetsu Seppu* and Regional Identity in Echigo

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Suzuki Bokushi wrote on snow and everything touched by it, from scientific observation of the shapes of snowflakes, to Daoist conceptualizations of rust as insects of metal, to hoarfrost demons and the spirits of the loom chamber. Bokushi's *Hokuetsu Seppu* – translated as *Snow Country Tales: Life in the Other Japan* – is an encyclopedic work pervaded by intense observation of all things snow – natural and supernatural. After nearly forty years of negotiations with Edo literati – Santo Kyoden, Okada Gyokuzan, Suzuki Fuyo, Takizawa Bakin, and Santo Kyozan – *Hokuetsu Seppu* was published in Edo in 1837 to great acclaim.

Wooden tablet with text from *Hokuetsu Seppu.* A matching playing card is attached on the subject of "snow insects."

According to Anne Walthall, *Hokuetsu Seppu* was an "encyclopedia of snow," born out of Bokushi's fervent desire to show Edo readers the radical difference of life in Echigo, where "the architecture of their houses, their culinary habits, their customs, their cottage industries, and their very psychology are determined by the necessity of surviving in a cold, hostile environment" (Walthall XLV). As a wealthy peasant, Bokushi utilized not only his own ethnographic accounts of surrounding villages but had the opportunity to entertain and collect the stories of innumerable travelers. He gathered stories of locals in nearby villages and wrote thousands of letters over his lifetime to a diverse network of correspondents, including early naturalists interested in the study of flora, fauna, and Chinese medicine (Marcon 180).

Bokushi sought to capture the hardship and difference of life in the snow country and often complained bitterly to his readers about the misconceptions of travellers who visit only in the pleasant summer months and know nothing of the trials of winter. Moriyama Takeshi's translation of Bokushi's chapter on *hatsuyuki*, or the first snowfall, demonstrates these feelings:

> The people of friendlier climates take pleasure in the snow. In Edo, . . . the first snow is regarded as especially delightful. People set out in little boats, accompanied by geisha, to watch the snow… The people of the snow country can't help but be envious when they see and hear such things. The difference between the first snow in Edo and our first snow is the difference

between pleasure and pain…(Moriyama, *Crossing Boundaries in Tokugawa Society* 3)

The ephemerality of snow – falling, melting, then vanishing – is a common image in Japanese verse; it is winter's cherry blossoms, in a sense. Bokushi's criticism of the aesthetic appreciation of snow is remarkable considering his own poetic aspirations. Bokushi not only collected the letters of poets but organized large-scale poetry contests. However, when recalling poets composing verse on the subject of delicate icicles, Bokushi quipped that icicles are "as inconsequential as a duck fart"[1] (Bokushi, *Snow Country Tales* 128).

Bokushi's intentions for *Hokuetsu Seppu* are clear. Moriyama notes an 1807 letter in which Bokushi stated: "I want to publish a book about our life here in the snow so as to make our life known around the country together with my name (Moriyama 211). Moreover, Takahashi Minoru's account of Bokushi's first letter to Santo Kyoden describes how Bokushi decided to include many detailed illustrations of snow gear and other apparatus to emphasize the heaviness of life under the snow (Takahashi, *Hokuetsu Seppu no Shisō* 94-5).

However, despite the clarity of Bokushi's intentions, *Hokuetsu Seppu* is a divided text. It is divided by content – between the ethnographic observations of life under snow; and supernatural phenomena, strange happenings, and encounters with ghosts and monsters. It is also divided by authorship, where the debate on the extent of Santo Kyozan's collaboration in the work remains unsettled. Lastly, it is divided by the differing literary styles of Kyozan and Bokushi.

The individual chapters follow an alternating pattern between matter-of-fact descriptions of life and the everyday in the snow country, and narrativized accounts of tragedy, horror, and the supernatural. These narratives include decapitation by avalanches, sudden deaths in freak snowstorms, encounters with ghosts in the snow, the giant cat of Tomariyama, and interactions with strange humanoid beasts. For instance, in the chapter "Oddities at Hishiyama," Bokushi describes the sight of avalanches at night , where one may see "a venerable old man in a white robe and with a head of long white hair come riding down these avalanches, holding high a sacred staff" (Bokushi, 87). The direction of the avalanche's flow down the valley determines whether the year's harvest will be rich or lean.

Walthall has criticized Kyozan's direct contributions to the work indicated in the text by the prefacing remarks 'Momoki says,' stating that Kyozan "insisted that curiosities and marvels be included in the last chapters" such as the "witty description of eating shaved ice with soybean powder, the humorous false etymology of tempura, [and the] salacious tales of wolf transformations in China" (Walthall XLIV). Indeed, Kyozan's apparent contributions are major departures from the text in terms of subject, tone, and style, often involving elaborate puns or playful language. They are light and humorous, rather than grave, and –importantly – they don't always concern the snow country. Takahashi Minoru expands on these criticisms to include not only the 'Momoki says,' selections but the wider inclusion of supernatural tales within the text. He speculates that perhaps the snow material was running out, or that it was necessary for *Hokuetsu Seppu* to conform to the

genre of mysterious tales in order to capture the attention of readers (Takahashi 14-16).

Moriyama Takeshi, on the other hand, argues that the contrast between the pseudo-ethnographic accounts of the snow country, and tales of the supernatural indicate that "the contents of *Hokuetsu Seppu* were also strongly controlled by Kyozan [who] suggested topics to write about in order to attract a wider audience" and that "there was obviously a clear idea on the urban editor's side, too, of how to represent the snow country to an urban audience" (Moriyama 240). Some of the sensational inclusions advocated for by Kyozan include 'bear-hunting in the snow,' 'a traveller's death in a blizzard,' and 'Echigo's Seven Wonders.' From this perspective, Kyozan and Bokushi are collaborating co-authors of a work that ultimately presents a double-vision of the snow country.

During the forty years in which Bokushi negotiated for publication, other works emerged that presented haunted visions of Echigo. In 1812, *Hokuetsu Kidan*, authored by Tachibana Konron with illustrations by Hokusai, was published to relatively little success. This text featured almost exclusively supernatural content, but as Bokushi stated, "There was not one word about snow" (Takahashi 10.) In contrast to *Hokuetsu Kidan*, Bokushi desired to produce a text that captured more than just monsters, where the snow country is more than a place of exile, or an uncharted land where all manners of monsters were thought to roam. Nonetheless, *Hokuetsu Seppu* did not exorcise the supernatural from its pages.

Hokuetsu Kidan provides a useful contrast with *Hokuetsu Seppu* for understanding the changing representation of the supernatural in the snow country. In the case of the *Hokuestu Kidan* and many other early works, Echigo is presented as a mysterious place, uncharted and untrodden. As an unknown location, it is suited for flights of fancy and the imagination. Consequently, it is the setting for all kinds of monster tales and the supernatural. However, this usage -- as an unknown place -- was made possible specifically because it did not have a strong regional identity in the minds of Edo readers. It is precisely because Echigo was strange and unfamiliar that it was possible to imagine all sorts of wild, supernatural occurrences. In this sense, Echigo was no different than any other far-flung and unknown territory for its capacity to engender the monsters of terra incognita.

The nature of the supernatural is markedly different in *Hokuetsu Seppu*. Because Bokushi provides detailed descriptions of everyday life and customs in the snow country, Echigo may be strange but it is not unknown. Instead, the supernatural within *Hokuetsu Seppu* is tied to what is distinctive about the region – namely, snow. Avalanches, spirits of the loom chamber, footprints of giant beasts and ghosts in the snow are all connected to a regional identity of life under the snow. The supernatural and their habitat are entwined. I would suggest that this is emblematic of the beginning of a larger trend of

Ghosts in the snow

using monsters to connect to regions of Japan, such as the connection between *yōkai* and *furusato*, domestic tourism, and *yuru kyara*.

There are, of course, other forces that have contributed to the association of Bokushi's work with the Minami-uonuma of today. The development of *minzokugaku* across Japan played a significant role in the representation of local places but often suffered from the same problems as travel literature, in that far-flung and peripheral locations were still being represented by outsiders rather than inhabitants. The relationship between the ethnographer and their informant was unequal, and the native informant sometimes had little control over how their region was represented, such as in the famous case of Yanagita Kunio's *Tōno Monogatari*. While *Tōno Monogatari* raised awareness of Tōno and its traditions, Yanagita relied on aspiring writer Sasaki Kizen for material but presented him as an uneducated informant in the introduction to the text. This was likely done to increase the credibility of *Tōno Monogatari*. In doing so, however, Yanagita dashed Sasaki's hopes of literary collaboration and presented a vision of Tōno perhaps different from Sasaki's own.

Minzokugaku favoured women and children as the ideal informants, presumably because they were more connected to the home and daily life. They were thought to present facts without artifice. For Japanese native ethnographers, the worst informants were literary authors, who were believed to be distorting the reality of everyday life in their literary pursuits. For this reason, Yanagita ignored Suzuki Bokushi and *Hokuestsu Seppu*. Yanagita believed that *Hokuetsu Seppu* must have been written entirely by Bokushi's urban collabororator, Santo Kyozan. There is some irony to this as the relationship between Bokushi and Kyozan seems to have been genuinely collaborative. Yanagita may have ignored *Hokuetsu Seppu* because he was projecting his own experience as ethnographer in strictly unequal relatonships.

In the field of *minzokugaku*, or Japanese native ethnography, Bokushi's detailed accounts of life under the snow became an object of study, despite Yanagita Kunio's low appraisal of the text as being ghost-written by Kyozan. In 1936, The Attic Museum produced a detailed index of *Hokuetsu Seppu* for researchers, wherein they could find the categorized contents of the text. The publication of the Attic Museum's index corresponds with Kawabata Yasunari's famous novel, *Yukiguni*, which was serialized between 1935 and 1937. Here, too, Bokushi's depiction of everyday life has had a tremendous influence, argues Takahashi Minoru in an elaborate comparison between the texts in *Hokuetsu Seppu no Shisō* (Takahashi 6-7). It is also worth mentioning that Minakata Kumagusu made use of *Hokuetsu Seppu* to write about strange sounds in Echigo in an 1896 submission to the journal of *Nature*.

The third major event that affected the influence of *Hokuetsu Seppu* on regional identity was the Japan National Railway's Discover Japan campaign and the subsequent rise of domestic tourism driven by *furusato-zukuri*. Marilyn Ivy discusses Japan National Railway's Discover Japan campaign in the 1970s, noting that these posters always depict images of rural villages, shrines, and lonely train stations while omitting markers of place (Ivy 1). In other words, names or recognizable details were purposely excluded from these advertisements to evoke feelings of *furusato* while

simultaneously generalizing the experience to be representative of most Japanese. The Discover Japan campaign suggested that rural areas were *furusato* for all Japanese, and that one could travel to the countryside for an experience of an authentic Japan.

There are numerous meanings associated with *furusato*: *furusato* is the opposite of the city. Moreover, this distinction between *furusato* and the city is not only spatial but also temporal. *Furusato* embodies the past in two distinct senses: first, it imagines a pre-modern – or at least, early modern – agriculturally centered way of life, ensconced in Japanese traditions, village community and festivals; and second, it embodies the personal past: childhood, memories of growing up and doting mothers, and old communities and neighbourhoods.

The flexibility of *furusato* as a concept with its range of meanings and associations with childhood is similar to the associations of Japanese monsters. As markers of the old, the authentic, the nostalgic, and reminders of childhood's belief in flights of fancy, monsters and *furusato* are closely related. *Furusato* are where monsters live. The themes of *Hokuetsu Seppu* and its depiction of local tools, handicrafts, and traditions resonated with the *furusato* boom. The rise of Sakaiminato as a *furusato* for the monsters of Mizuki Shigeru provided another model for weaving together the local area with Bokushi's text.

"Bokushi Street" sign


"Bokushi Street" landscape (1)


"Bokushi Street" landscape (2)

Sakaiminato, the hometown of the manga artist and *yōkai* researcher Mizuki Shigeru has emerged as a major tourist destination since the 1990s. The town contains hundreds of brass statues in the shapes of the Japanese monsters that Mizuki illustrated in his prolific work, local shops selling Mizuki merchandise, and a large museum dedicated to showcasing his manga. Even the trains leading to Sakaiminato have been colorfully decorated with his most famous characters.

The popularity of Mizuki Shigeru Road has established itself as a model for other aspiring monster towns. In Minami-uonuma , the municipal government has built Bokushi Road as a "recreation of an Edo era post town along the Mikuni highway" ("Bokushi Street," The Snow Country Tourist Zone). With covered wooden walkways rebuilt to

resemble Suzuki Bokushi's descriptions of Echigo in Snow Country Tales, the new design is a testament to its folkloric past. The shapes of snowflakes that were included in *Hokuetsu Seppu* have been reproduced as tiles along the road; the yellowed pages of Snow Country Tales have been sealed in protective plastic and distributed on the walls of shops, museums, and restaurants, and even the vending machines have been designed with special viewing windows to include a page. Walking down Bokushi Road becomes a form of reading where the customs and creatures of Snow Country Tales are mapped onto the physical space of contemporary Shiozawa.

While the monsters and supernatural elements of *Hokuetsu Seppu* have seen a recent re-emergence with the rise of regional mascots and *furusato* tourism, there have been many developments contributing to the relationship between *Hokuetsu Seppu* and regional identity. But perhaps the most significant event – the starting point – was a shift in imagination and representation. The difference between *Hokuetsu Seppu* and *Hokuetsu Kidan* is a re-configuration of the imagination, between the supernatural of the unknown, mysterious place, and the known supernatural tied to the lifeways of the snow country. Another way of thinking about this change is in the ability of local people to represent their regions in literature. For locals, like Bokushi, the ability to represent one's own home was uncommon. Usually, distant places were represented by established authors or travelers. Bokushi's ability to capture the essence of life in the snow country and present this difference to his Edo readership opened up space for imagining new kinds of regional difference, premised not on terra incognita but the hauntings of everyday life under the snow.

Vending machine with a page of Hokuetsu Seppu

Notes

1 In the original Japanese, Bokushi compares icicles to the fart of a *suiko* (水虎).

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