

Rethinking Nature in Contemporary Japan

From Tradition to Modernity

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The Struggle with Nature in Kubo Sakae's *Land of Volcanic Ash* The Relation Between Fertilizer and Soil

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Abstract It is said that no work has had ever greater impact than one of Kubo Sakae's plays, *Land of Volcanic Ash* (*Kazanbaichi*) in modern Japanese drama. The play was published in the literary magazine, *Shinchō*, from 1937 to 1938 and first staged by the *Shinkyō Gekidan*, a *Shingeki* Troup in those days, in the year when it was completed. Kubo Sakae was born in Sapporo on 28 December 1900 and died in Tokyo on 15 March 1958. *Land of Volcanic Ash* describes people's lives in an agricultural community in Obihiro, Hokkaido, where they have harsh and inhospitable climates in Japan. The climates could resemble more that of southern Canada or northern Europe, than that of the rest of Japan.

Keywords Kubo Sakae. *Kazanbaichi*. Hokkaido. N. P. K. Tsukiji little theatre.

Discussion of Japanese theatre in the West tends to centre on premodern Noh and Kabuki. Since the modern period, theatre and drama have developed at a great rate; however, maybe due to *japonisme*, the traditional is still preferred abroad. I hope that this discussion of the modern play *Kazanbaichi* 火山灰地 (*Land of Volcanic Ash*, year of publication) will provide an incentive for readers to focus on the modern.

Kubo Sakae 久保栄,¹ the author of *Land of Volcanic Ash*, debuted as a playwright in the early thirties and died in 1958. During that time he was at the centre of the *shingeki*² movement. Kubo addresses two major themes in this play: the struggle between humans and nature and the relations

1 Kubo Sakae was born in Sapporo on the northern island of Japan, Hokkaidō, in December 1900. His father managed a brick factory and served as president of the Sapporo Chamber of Commerce. Kubo was raised in Tōkyō and joined the elitist educational system from the First Middle School, to the First High School, to the prestigious Tōkyō Imperial University. At college he majored in German and later joined the literary division of the Tsukiji Little Theatre co-founded by Osanai Kaoru and Hijikata Yoshi. His first play was *Shinsetsu Koku-sen'ya kassen* 新説国姓爺合戦 (The Battle of Coxinga New Version, 1930).

2 *Shingeki* refers to the new modern theatre movement that began in the early twentieth century.

between workers and capitalism. This paper will focus on the aspect of his way to deal with nature.

Land of Volcanic Ash is a large-scale play in two parts and seven acts. Even with contemporary stage technology, staging the complete play would require about seven hours, so understandably it is rarely produced. The most recent full production was in January and March 2005 by the Gekidan Mingei 劇団民藝 (People's Art Theatre).

Sixty characters appear. They include agricultural scientists, workers and their families, landowners, farmers, charcoal makers, women and children. Of this large number, the agricultural scientist Amamiya Akira, his wife Teruko, her father and agricultural scientist Dr. Takimoto and his disciple and manager of the cable company Karasawa are the main characters involved in the scientists-nature-farmers issue.

Modern Japanese literary arts, particularly drama and fiction, have pursued realism since the Meiji period (1868-1912). It is commonly accepted among critics that the play *Land of Volcanic Ash* brought that search to completion.

The play is certainly naturalistic and is considered to be a major example of 'realistic theatre' (*riarizumu engeki* リアリズム演劇). At the same time, it is a new kind of drama that deconstructs naturalistic expression, especially in the poetic sections concerning nature.

Land of Volcanic Ash features all social classes and, for instance, in the prelude to Part 1, in which farmers appear, a farmer recites a 'poem'. Such a lyrical method would have been unthinkable in Ibsen's or Chekhov's time. Five poems are inserted – before the first and third acts, the opening of the second act, and in the afternoon and evening of the sixth act. They depict how nature brings both joy and sadness to the people of Hokkaidō.³

This lyrical method is a major characteristic of this play. By including poetry, Kubo deconstructs the naturalistic style dominant at that time and brings a new expressivity to drama. He is a good example of the avant-garde artist ahead of his times forging new experimental works.

In addition, Kubo claims to have aimed at the "unification of scientific and poetic form" (Kubo 1989, 9) in this particular work. Scientific form refers to a Marxist analysis of capitalism and poetic form to the artistic formulation of 'living language' by characters situated in society and based on Aristotelian dramaturgy.

This play is about the struggles of people who lived in the northern island of Hokkaidō in the thirties. Specifically the social issues are about fertilizers, poverty, labour and exploitation, love and the collapse of the family. Due to the constraints of space, I will focus on what has direct connection with nature, i.e. the problem of fertilizer and soil, which leads to the tragedy of scientist Amamiya Akira and his theory.

3 For further discussion on Kubo's poetry, see Inoue 2009.

Japan comprises five major islands. The main islands are, from the south, Okinawa, Kyūshū, Shikoku, Honshū, and Hokkaidō. Honshū, the central elongated island, is referred to as “inland Japan” and it is where Tōkyō, the capital, is located.

The setting of the play is the Tokachi Plain in Hokkaidō, where the city of Obihiro is located. Here the events of the play unfold. Many settlers moved to the new land of Hokkaidō after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. They cleared the primeval forest and made the land arable. Fifty years after that is the period during which *Land of Volcanic Ash* takes place.

Japan in general has four seasons, which rotate every three months or so. But unlike the other parts of Japan, Hokkaidō has three seasons – spring, summer and autumn – that take up half the year, and a long, cold and snowy winter that lasts for the rest of the year. Instead of rice, beans were the main crop and the farmers were poverty-stricken. In this play the relation between the flax crop, land and fertilizer is questioned.

Kubo’s literary style, which draws from a deep knowledge of traditional literature, has received critical recognition for its expressive quality from Murayama Tomoyoshi and others. The first example is from the prologue of Part 1, in which the land is described in the following way:

The original inhabitants called this town | “The place where the rivers part” | It lies nestled in the acute angle | At the confluence of Japan’s sixth largest river and its tributary | Which flow together at the tip of the town | Like a sparrow’s severed tail. | An agricultural town in the northernmost part of Japan, | It lies in a plain | Where the snow thaws later | And the frost falls earlier than anywhere else; | A town small as a kernel of grain | In a peasant’s wrinkled palm. (Kubo 1989, 27)

The second example is from Act 3.

But even as they are ravaged by cold, famine, crop failures, and floods | All the menaces contrived by nature and man to dissuade them | The people who live on this land persevere like the nameless grass | That springs from rocks in desolate terrain. (Kubo 1989, 28)

The opening verse recited by a farmer provides an overview of the relations between humans and nature. The “original inhabitants” refer to the Ainu people.

The poem in Act 3 portrays the charcoal burners, their terrible working conditions out in raw nature and their ferocious attachment to their livelihood:

Above these huts grown thick with pigweed, | Oh terraces carved into the mountainside, | Stand charcoal kilns of hardened limbs lashed

numb by an unseen whip, | Crouch the burners who will fire the kilns today and again tomorrow, | *The joy of their work and the curse of their life* | Bound up with the kindling they cut down from the peaks. (Kubo 1989, 87; emphasis added)

The italicised line above has become a famous quotation.

The agricultural policy of this district has been based on Dr. Takimoto's theory. Restated in Amamiya's own words: "the soil of Japan is rich in potassium...There is no particular need to apply fertilizers containing potassium" (Kubo 1989, 70). He continues to explain that, as long as anybody can remember, they have been using alfalfa and Chinese milk vetch in paddy fields in Japan (Kubo 1989, 137).

In the rest of Japan, there are large quantities of potassium contained in night soil, compost and ashes. Inland Japan has traditionally used organic materials like Chinese milk vetch and clover. Chemical fertilizers were introduced and were established in the Taishō period (1912-1926).

According to Amamiya, the growth of agricultural products is affected in the following way:

Three basic nutrients are [...] N (nitrogen), P (phosphorous), K (potassium) [...] in order to preserve the soil [...] it is necessary to replenish [the soil] constantly by supplying three elements in precise amounts to the predetermined ratio. (Kubo 1989, 70)

Dr. Takimoto's contention is that there is no need to use potassium-rich fertilizer as Japanese soil already contains ample amounts of it. Dr. Takimoto is Amamiya's academic advisor and father-in-law. However, Amamiya's stance is that the resultant deficiency in an appropriate fertilizer simply serves to reinforce the primitive agricultural methods that have been practiced since settlers arrived on the island. Primitive agricultural methods refer to the Meiji period bureaucratic agricultural policy that was not based on scientific analysis. A constant use of the same fertilizer makes the land less productive.

Ignorant of such knowledge, farmers continued to grow flax with fertilizer provided by the fertilizer companies; consequently, they were unable to rise out of poverty. Herein lies the trickery of capitalism. By using fertilizer recommended by the agricultural union, farmers enjoyed various benefits. The major one was that they could buy fertilizer without cash at hand; furthermore, what they purchased would be delivered to them. Today most farmers own cars or trucks, but back in 1930 people pulled carts and trucks were available only at special outlets.

Amamiya noticed at a flax competition that almost all the entries had been grown with only pure phosphorous fertilizer and realised that the long-term use of the single fertilizer had damaged the soil and led to low-

grade flax crops. This compound fertilizer was produced by Karasawa's company and distributed to farmers through the agricultural union. Flax was thus grown in phosphorous enriched land with no other supplementary nutrients.

The vicious cycle of gradual soil degradation, decreasing yield and farmers' persistent poverty continued. To raise the yield, supplementing potassium fertilizer is important. As a matter fact the solution is to supply the elements of N, P, K at a constant ratio. Then the farmers could climb out of poverty.

Amamiya announced his theory for the first time to the public at a special radio broadcast on New Year's Day:

[...] no matter how diligently they [farmers] labor, plagued by frosts and [...] floods and [...] crop failures [...] the majority of farmers languish in the depths of inescapable poverty, and even though I am a man of meager talents, I would like to do something, anything to ensure that the power of knowledge is applied to bring happiness to these farmers, all of them. (Kubo 1989, 72)

Amamiya thought that, by applying academic knowledge to the development of agricultural productivity, farmers could be saved from impoverishment. He published an article on combining fertilizer in a major scientific journal and tried to present his ideas over the radio. However the radio broadcast was interrupted due to objections to his lecture as negating agricultural policy.

Listening to her husband's radio lecture, Teruko discovered for the first time that he had been conducting research that refuted the agricultural theory of Dr. Takimoto, her father. Teruko then asked her husband to give up such research. She also revealed to him that her father was providing funding for his research. Amamiya was taken aback by this, but insisted that conflict of opinion in academia was inevitable. He told Teruko that he could not afford to lie to the farmers.

From this point, the tragedy of the Amamiya household began. Teruko had to decide whether to take her husband's side or not and Amamiya whether to confront Dr. Takimoto and his theory or not. Their marriage and family were forced onto the road to destruction.

Amamiya pondered over how to save poor farmers from having to invest in fertilizer. Even in the face of a serious lack of potassium, poor farmers could not afford to buy potassium fertilizer, for it was the most expensive of fertilizers. Of the three chemicals needed to be balanced at a particular ratio, Amamiya proposed to decrease the investment in nitrogen. Nitrogen stimulates the growth of plants and a deficiency has the serious effect of stunting growth. As a fertilizer, it is also expensive.

Amamiya's plan was to encourage the growth of red clover as a green fertilizer, decrease the need for nitrogen fertilizer and spend the sav-

ing in costs on increasing the potassium ratio in the compound fertilizer. Amamiya's contention was that the issue was not only a matter of raping the land, but of also sacrificing the farmers themselves. Dr. Takimoto, who believed that he had always served the interests of agriculture, was greatly angered by the accusation of being the farmers' enemy. After that incident, the two were no longer on speaking terms.

Fortunately, a farmer called Shōsaku had listened to Amamiya's radio lecture and tested the idea of using compound fertilizer for flax. As flax does not tolerate continuous cropping, Shōsaku planted flax in a used pea field. As the soil was already depleted of nutrients, simply adding some potassium was insufficient to grow the kind of flax that would pass the quality assessment test. Both Shōsaku and Amamiya were extremely discouraged. In addition, Shōsaku found himself saddled with large debts.

As a result, Amamiya hesitated over whether to announce his theory or not. Teruko, caught between her husband and her father, begged her husband to cancel his formal announcement.

In this way, new research led to the dissolution of the family and, at the same time, Amamiya experienced difficulty conducting research in a nation at war. In spite of everything, Amamiya chose to brave the storm and present his paper at the scientific research association's conference in Sapporo. His action was said to have raised a glimmer of hope for intellectuals in difficult political times.

Land of Volcanic Ash was written in 1937, when Japan had just become a wartime regime: anti-war protest was forbidden, moderate liberals were arrested, and citizens did not feel free in such censorious times. Kubo used Amamiya's conflict with authority as a pretext for raising hope in a dark age.

In the twenty-first century we have a developed awareness of the immense damage chemical fertilizers harbour. Takimoto and Amamiya's research could be dismissed as the limited understanding of the thirties with their trust in chemicals. Nonetheless, Amamiya's research was cutting-edge science at those times. It was advanced to extricate farmers from poverty and free them from the exploitation of capitalism.

Forty years later, well into the seventies, chemical fertilizers were still considered all-powerful and central to agricultural policy. As they are used in farming even today, they cannot be rejected as obsolete. Together with pesticides, we will have to continue questioning the effects of chemical fertilizers.

Furthermore, this play addresses the reality of a large company with capital manipulating poverty-stricken farmers. Such a problem is not unknown in our society today. The joy and sadness that the difficult relations of nature, labour and capital engender have not ended. This play also teaches us that the freedom and happiness of each of us who must live in nature is not unrelated to the above problem.

It is exactly because art is born from society that it can vividly portray how we live.

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