

Globally Pioneering Ecologist: Kumagusu Minakata (1867-1941)

Thought of Diversity from Buddhist World

By Isao ADACHI

Japan had a giant of knowledge named Kumagusu Minakata who lived from the late 19th century to the early 20th century – between the Meiji era (1868-1912) and the Showa era (1926-1989). He globally acclaimed achievements in such fields as biology (centering on slime molds), comparative folklore and comparative religion, and waged a campaign against logging in connection with the government-ordered consolidation of forest-covered shrines in an effort to maintain ecosystems. He was one of the scholars who first used the term “ecology” in the world.

At the 10th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP10) in Nagoya, developed and developing countries battled over the use of biological resources. They reached a compromise at the last minute, but the meeting highlighted the depth of problems.

How to harmonize the maintenance of ecosystems and the social activities of human beings is closely linked to biology, thought and religion. Minakata’s originality deciphering the world as a diversified universe in the early 20th century is still applicable as a bellwether today.

Minakata was born in 1867 in Wakayama Prefecture, western Japan, where “Kumano Kodo” (sacred sites and pilgrimage routes of the Kii mountain range) listed as one of the World Heritage sites is located. He studied English under Korekiyo Takahashi, who later became prime minister, at a preparatory school (a predecessor to the prewar Dai-ichi High School that became the prestigious University of Tokyo). Among his classmates were novelist Soseki Natsume and *haiku* poet Shiki Masaoka.

But Minakata dropped out of the school after two years. He went to the United States, where he again quit school and continued to teach himself and collected animal and plant samples while traveling to Caribbean countries and Latin America with circus troupes.

He spent the last seven years of his 15 years abroad through 1900

studying at the British Museum. According to sociologist Kazuko Tsurumi’s book “*Kumagusu Minakata*,” he got acquainted with cura-

tor Wollaston Franks and was asked to collate Oriental study materials and later allowed to study at the museum.

He did not belong to any particular university or academic society in Japan but contributed 50 articles to *Nature* magazine and 323 articles to *Notes and Queries*. One of his *Nature* articles on astronomy, “*The Constellations in the Far East*,” was reviewed by *The Times* and other publications, winning him instant fame. Although he was poor in London, his in-depth knowledge and high caliber attracted many people and he forged a close friendship with Sun Yat-sen who led the Chinese Revolution.

Minakata fully understood Western science but produced a very imaginative philosophy of the world and the universe based on *Mandala* (an imaginary palace contemplated during meditation) of the Shingon sect of esoteric Buddhism. *Mandala*, a Sanskrit word meaning “circle,” schematically arranges various Buddhist images, bodhisattvas and vidyaraajas (kings of mystical knowledge), with Mahaavairocana (a benevolent Buddhism saint) as its center.

Minakata thought that phenomena or things are not connected to one center but closely linked as if a mesh through various connecting points like various Buddhist images as arranged on *Mandala*. It is his view of the world in which region-by-region diversity and association exist at the same time. Minakata, while studying comparative folklore, said, “Things that exist in Japan also exist in Europe, and things that exist in Europe also exist in Japan.” He was immune from a narrow-minded theory of Japan as a special or superior country.

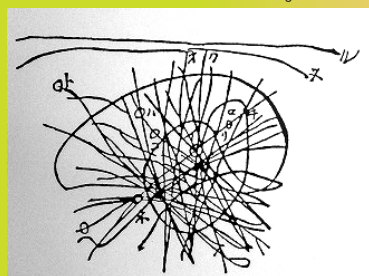
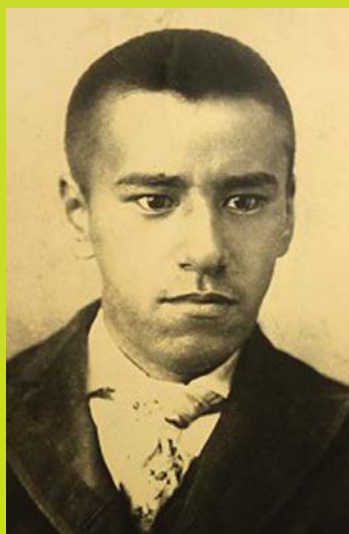
In 1906, the government enacted a shrine consolidation law that called for small shrines in each village to be merged into only one shrine. Tsurumi called the law “part of a government policy to make *Shinto* a national religion.” Logging around the closed shrines rampantly took place to sell lumber.

Minakata led the campaign against deforestation, believing that religious devotion had protected forests but that logging would doom animals and plants and break up ecosystems, and religious faiths of people would wither. He succeeded in protecting the forests of nature-rich Kashima island in Wakayama Prefecture with the help of Kunio Yanagida, the father of Japanese native folkloristics, and other people.

Many Japanese biologists ignored Minakata but Emperor Hirohito (posthumously known as Emperor Showa), who himself was a leading biologist in his own right, asked to “hear from Minakata” about vegetation in Kashima during a visit to Wakayama Prefecture in 1929. The emperor took off his hat to show reverence for Minakata.

As creatures on earth are in a crisis situation, it is worthwhile to profile Minakata who created a vision beyond the limits of Western philosophy. **JS**

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Left: Kumagusu Minakata at age 24 (photographed in Jacksonville, Florida, United States)
Above: A “Mandala” drawing by Minakata