

Country Rhyme and Reason: Life in Rural Japan

by Catrien Ross

A few weeks after moving to rural Japan I realized that I had encountered another country. Gone were the familiar patterns of life in central Tokyo. Here were very different rules.

One evening in early December, an unfriendly visitor arrived. Puffing himself up like a blowfish, he announced that he hailed from the main branch (as opposed to the side branch) of a certain local family. He wanted to confirm whether it was we who had been foolish enough to telephone the police station concerning hunters in our area. At the time we had not known it, but every year, November 15 to February 15 is hunting season in Japan. Alarmed by the first sound of gun shots in our back garden, an actual mountainside, we had immediately called the police to ask what was happening.

What puzzled us is why this man even knew about our call, but we later learned that he was head of the local hunting group. Whether the police informed him about us, or whether he suspected us as newcomers is unclear. But hunting was a tradition in these parts he said. Always had been and always would be, and we had no business interfering. As he stalked off into the darkness, he warned that if ever we called the police again, something unpleasant would surely befall us.

Thus we were welcomed to the Japanese countryside. We were concerned enough about the visit to nail shut our second floor windows to prevent unwelcome entry into our rickety old farmhouse. We also called a friend in Kasumigaseki, the bastion of officialdom, who assured us that Japan does not tolerate threats or intrusions, especially by hunters. But several hunters came anyway, firing off their guns at uncomfortably close range, tramping with their panting dogs through our front yard, which borders a common path. Eventually, however,

we recognized that the first hunter's visit had been a bluster, a means of putting us in our place before we got any ideas about changing the way things in the country were supposed to be. Bullying, rustic style.

The Japanese word for rural districts or the country is *inaka*. It is a term with numerous implications. It can simply mean, for instance, one's birthplace, one's native origins. During the August *Bon* festival to remember the dead, Japanese by the millions return to their *inaka* to visit family graves and pay respects to ancestors. Used derisively *inaka* can mean the boondocks, the sticks, where only hillbillies and other rustic louts would choose to live. Japanese living in Tokyo often enjoy poking fun at *inaka* customs and manners, at *inaka* food and dress. The term can also be nostalgic, as in the vague dream many Japanese people have of retiring to the country to run a small farm.

WEAVING NEW PATTERNS

Throughout Japan, connections are everything, and what you can undertake depends largely on who you know. In central Tokyo, when I was doing business, my contacts were critical, but equally important was how highly I was regarded by those who knew me. In the *inaka*, connections are more fundamental. Community spirit remains strong, and almost everyone is a member of the local village group, or *kumi*. This group is involved in all neighborhood decisions. There are village clean-up days, when streets are tidied, ditches mended, vegetation trimmed. There are festivals to arrange, monthly activities to manage. Inevitably there are funerals. Each *kumi* member attends the funeral of another member who has died. So there is financial as well as emotional help for the grieving family, since, in Japan, people typically give cash at funerals. Such concern recalls my native Scotland and reminds me

that in the countryside, human beings can be much more alike than they are different. When my mother's second husband died, on the small Scottish island where he was born, every man from his village took a turn shouldering his coffin to the grave site. There each man took a turn shoveling the earth for the actual grave. It was a way of remembering and being remembered. Community ties.

There are sound reasons for village associations in Japan. Rural life can be hard, the winters in many areas long and cold. Community members pitch in to help one another during hard times. There is a support system that extends beyond the single family household. Many things can get done through the *kumi*, which imparts a sense of cooperation and continuity. The catch, of course, is that you must be a member in good standing. If not, you are in danger of becoming an outcast, a person unable to participate in basic community life. In Japan someone like this is said to be cut off from 80% of all that makes life worth living. The only activities still open—the remaining 20%—are being born and dying. In the *inaka* this can be a terrible stigma.

We were given a lesson in *kumi* ties last winter. In the rush of our move we had not yet joined the association governing our tiny hamlet, where there is a total of six houses, three of which are occupied. One morning we were snowed in. Our neighbor, who so far had seemed an amiable young man, told us that the local bulldozer would soon be on its way. We requested that our path be cleared, for which we would gladly pay if he would tell us the cost. Soon after, the bulldozer lumbered up the mountain road and cleared the snow right to the edge of our property. The snow at our house was left entirely untouched. The bulldozer operator then went in to have tea with our neighbor and we later shoveled the road ourselves. The lesson

was clear: no *kumi* membership, no help when needed. Another experience in rural relationships.

This incident, however, convinced us that we would never join the *kumi*, no matter what the inconvenience. After all, my Japanese partner and I had moved from Tokyo because we love the mountains and had sought a solitary life where we could combine our writing and Oriental Medical therapy in a natural setting. To join a group where every move would be approved or disapproved was not what we wanted at all. In this isolated farmhouse it has been easy to remain outsiders.

It was a wise decision because we have since discovered that when disagreements among *kumi* members, the insiders, arise, the resentments die hard. *Inaka* memories are long. Our other neighbor is an old farmer who for years has not been on speaking terms with the farmer who owned our land. The reasons for the quarrel seem obscure to me, but our neighbor is convinced his cancer is a result of the fight. Behind us stands the house of another farmer who several decades ago began the first rice field here, despite a water shortage on the mountain. He has never been forgiven for his selfish action, although his character is such that neighbors fear to truly stand up to him. Although he no longer lives here, every June he still plants his rice field and every October he brings in the harvest.

When I first planted my vegetable garden last Spring, this farmer tried some of his own *inaka* bullying. Those vegetables will never grow, he declared, surveying my newly planted cauliflower, cabbage and broccoli. What would someone from Tokyo, and a woman at that, know about vegetables? Farming is so difficult he declared, and stomped off. Well, my vegetables did grow. In fact they grew to an enormous size. I have a green thumb, and all my organic, pesticide-free vegetables and herbs are thriving. The farmer who used to farm this land now asks for produce for his wife, and he and I regularly swap vegetables. My gardening efforts have been grudgingly,



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if not totally accepted. I have heard that the suspicion is that I, being a city person, am using expensive fertilizers that no *inaka* farmer could afford to use—hence my good results.

But it is exactly the typical *inaka* attitude toward the land and nature that I find particularly distressing. These days people who live in cities tend to view nature as something one jumps in and out of, like a bath. In Japan the words nature and natural are now trendy selling points: they help sell products. But while tourists can be messy and disrespectful towards the countryside, it is *inaka* residents who seem to care the least about the natural beauty that surrounds them. Nature is there to be used, not noticed or appreciated. Mountain ravines become dumps for all manner of garbage: worn-out toasters, discarded bicycles, pots and pans, old tires. I was shocked to see farmers spray their own fields with dioxin, which they regard as cheap and convenient. Never a thought is given to pollution of the water supplies, or the endangering of their own or the community's health. And organic farming is rarely done. Bags of chemical fertilizers are hauled in and spread on even the smallest fields. Insecticides are heavily used on certain

vegetables. It just blows away in the wind and does not settle in the earth, said one farmer I asked about such spraying. Knowledge about companion planting and natural farming methods seems to have been lost years ago. *Inaka* may be country, but *inaka* in action is about as far removed from natural as one can get.

On the other hand, enjoying and preserving nature is not what the Japanese *inaka* is all about. Especially these days, when the big cities beckon with promises of office jobs and life away from the farm. The *inaka* is a place from which to escape. Few young people in Japan today desire to work the land, preferring cleaner, lighter work instead. The old people are left behind, and when children do stay, usually the son, he often has a hard time finding a wife who will agree to live in a rural area. The beauties of nature are nothing compared with the attractions of the city and the economics of modern life.

Yet there is a feeling of independence in this *inaka*, which is encouraging. The neighboring town, known for its hot spring baths, is filled with elderly farmers who must work their farms by themselves, their children unwilling to lend a hand. So wizened men in their

eighties roar down the main street on motorcycles. One farmer in his mid-seventies, saddled with the mortgage payments of a big, new house which his son built and then left behind, is still employed at construction sites. He, too, gets around by motorbike. He entertains me with stories of his youth and the various trials of his adult life. Born in this country place, he will die here. There is a resilience among the older generation in the *inaka* that seems to be entirely missing in their children. But this is a complaint I hear echoed by friends in Tokyo, who fret about Japan's future because the nation's young seem spoiled and lost.

TO EVERYTHING ITS SEASON

Since I moved to the country to live, my sense of nature and what is essential has changed dramatically. In many respects, life has slowed down. In central Tokyo I was always looking at my watch to catch the next appointment. Now I don't wear a watch and my days are measured by the weather. Planting is central to my existence. What's more, living naturally seems easy in a decrepit Japanese wooden house that is some 130 years old and cradled on three sides by mountains. Water comes from a spring and there is no sewage system. We have converted the traditional pit in the ground into a composting toilet. The bath must be fired by wood, and there are no outside lights at night. From the start we meant this to be a nature research center and it has become exactly that. In time with the seasons we do intensive, natural farming and grow a large variety of herbs. Room by room we have repaired the house interior entirely by ourselves, although the work is far from finished. Every day is an experiment in the natural life. I have come to accept that there are rhythms I cannot control and events I can only watch as they happen. A heavy rain, for example, means

that the water supply will once again be secured, but I cannot order rain. A sunny or cloudy day can reset my gardening schedule. Working with plants has given me a patience I did not know I had. Growth cannot be dictated according to my whim. Everything comes in its own season. Living on a mountain is teaching me that it is the moment that counts.

My perceptions of excitement have also changed. One recent highlight was taking one of the dogs out for a midnight walk and encountering an 80 kilogram wild boar skillfully tearing down ears of the neighbor's ripe corn. Already foxes have come, and raccoon dogs, the occasional squirrel and rabbit, and countless pheasants. I realize that food supplies for animal populations are rapidly dwindling, that Japanese farming has meant the demise of species, like the bear. Nature in Japan, as in many other industrialized countries, is something to be conquered, subdued and shaped for human purpose alone. Although the mountains around me are covered with trees, they are not natural forests,

which disappeared long ago. Instead they are stands of cedar and cypress, planted in the millions for economic reasons. Natural bio-diversity is not something that figures in industrial strategy, which sacrifices entire species to achieve its end.

But to paint my new life in Japan as that of a nature recluse would be to only tell half the story. Six months after moving into the farmhouse, my partner and I opened a small clinic close to the station in the nearest city. From the start it has been extremely busy. My working days are now spent treating *inaka* people, who have shown a surprising openness in receiving therapy from a foreigner. I have become a country practitioner, on intimate terms with the aches and pains of rural living.

Of course I have paid a price for my new direction in life. Gone is my hectic Tokyo schedule and regular meetings with friends and associates. Gone are the heady but impersonal discussions concerning the economy, politics, social issues, the world's woes. My computer and fax keep me connected to any number of people and therefore to outside news and outside work. But things have changed. Distance distances, and even old friends no longer stay in touch as they once did. My move to an *inaka* is viewed by some as premature or even irresponsible. It is not quite real to those who believe that the true business of living has to be carried on elsewhere.

Yet living as I do now has shown me that only that which is personally experienced counts for much. In experiencing truth for myself, I encounter the only truth of lasting value. Borrowed ideas and philosophies have no real power to change the individual, much less society. Although in the *inaka* I am still an outsider and probably always will be, I am no longer a bystander in my own life. With this commitment has come personal transformation. I will never be the same again.

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Photo: Catrien Ross

The QRQ Nature Research Center opens a door to another country in Japan