

A scenic landscape photograph of a flooded rice paddy field in Akita, Japan. The foreground is filled with lush green rice seedlings planted in neat rows in the water. In the background, there are green fields, utility poles with power lines, and distant mountains under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. A large red arrow graphic points from the right side of the image towards the left, containing the word 'AKITA' in white capital letters.

AKITA

THROUGH THE CHANGING TIMES

What I felt after reading Isabella Bird's Unbeaten Tracks of Japan is that she did not like food in Akita, unfortunately. To me it was a little surprising, because now they food in Akita is quite popular, nationally and internationally. It raised my interest, how the food in Akita has been changed to a worldwide-popular cuisine from a disgusting one which Bird explained. Also, I am interested in food culture including any habit that has to do with eating. In our field trip, I observed so many interesting things about the food culture, and each of them is quite unique and appealing.

INNAI

Innai is famous for its cherries, Inaniwa Udon, and it is fair enough to say its one of the most important areas in Akita to represent its food culture. Its History is very unique and deep, it used to flourish as a silver mining town.

The town became a lot smaller after the diminish of the silver mining industry, but it is a very pretty town with some traditional construction remaining. According to the very kind guides that showed us around the town, there has been a major change in its eating culture. Back in the old times, the people used to eat high sodium food in order to combat the cold in Akita and the hard working for the silver mining. It was said that if you lived up to 35 years old, you were lucky. People focused more on combatting the cold and getting as much as nutrition as possible. Today, people are eating healthier, since they have the technology to combat the coldness. Also one of the unique cuisine is Innai is carp fish. They eat them as Amani, and they eat them from head to toes.

YOKOTE

It was an amazing experience to stay at a

local farmer's place in Yokote. I observed a very slow and self-sufficient way of life. They grow a lot of crops not for business, just for their family and friends. They try to make everything from scratch and eat very healthy. I also observed a cooperation among family, their son helping out them cooking. The mother taught him cooking as a little boy, and as a result, he can help his family and they are all very happy. In the old times, cooking was a women's role and the men in the family did not cook at all, according to the mother in the family. Also, they kept some pickles such as Iburigalkko, and eggplant flower sushi as a well-preserved food. They eat Hoshi-gaki as well, and they all showed me the wisdom of overcoming the long winter of Akita.

JINHGUJI

Besides the very interesting lecture about

Shintoism by Kannushi san, what interested me was how healthy and young he looked. It was a big surprise to hear that he was in his seventies when he looked like he was 45. According to him, the secret to stay healthy is to eat vegetables everyday and not to eat fast food.

To conclude all the observation I conducted, what I can say is that the food culture in Akita has been changing a lot, but not as much as the ones in bigger cities. In Akita, there are not much stuff, but instead, they have time and the beautiful mother nature that make them stay healthy. They keep the tradition to stay healthy, and that is the secret of their happy life.



AKITA OF BIRD'S TIME: AKITA DURING THE MEIJI RESTORATION ERA

They all wear a single, wide-sleeved, scanty, blue cotton garment, not fastened or girdled at the waist... and if they wear any headgear, it is only a wisp of blue cotton tied around the forehead. The one garment is only an apology for clothing, and displays lean concave chest and lean muscular limbs. (Bird, 16-17).

Coming from an English and highly religious background, Bird was understandably unappreciative of what she deems to be scarce clothing. And yet, in her letters, it seems she was, to a degree, aware of the function their clothing had that time. Dalby asserts that “[d]elineation of rank was probably the most important social function of clothing in pre-modern Japan” (7-8).

At that time, elements such as the color, textile, and form of clothing told much about a person's socio-economic standing, such that those who wore blue cotton coats were often peasants, and those that wore trousers had occupations that involved movement such as kuruma-runners and farmers. In addition, although Western clothing or yofuku, was rising in popularity in the cities like Yokohama and Kubota, it was hardly seen in the rural areas, which indicates that Western influence dissipated the farther one goes from the urbanities.

AKITA OF TODAY: AKITA IN THE HEISEI ERA

These days, locals have more options to choose from and are not limited by colors, form and the like. Factors such as price, quality, style, seasonality, comfort, and brand are more critical in the individual consumer-decision

process. The delineation of socio-economic standing is no longer as evident as before in fashion, as Japan itself is a country which have many middle-class citizens. Fashion then is an interesting focus of study as it not only speaks about the individual but also says something about the area and community they live in.

For those in Innai, they wore collared shirts on top of their long-sleeves, pants, and shoes - perfect for the colder climate in the mountains as well as their job as local tour guides. Their shirts also showed the name of their company. Companies have become increasingly important for the people of Innai. Because the silver mine are no longer in operation, most residents now work as in companies or as kaishain.

In contrast, our host family in Yokote wore lighter and looser clothes at home. For farm work, however, they wear clothes that are

easy to move in and is alright to be soiled. As Yokote is mainly an agricultural or farming area, I feel that many residents share these fashion preferences when out in the fields.

Finally, the priest in Jinguji wore a button-up shirt with shorts for the warmer weather there. Although he was a priest, he did not wear traditional clothes. Japanese style clothes or wafuku are no longer used for everyday wear but for special occasions such as festivals. Some have been redesigned such that they can be worn casually like the kimono jacket.

Interestingly, when asked what fashionable is, the locals replied with, “wearing what is appropriate”. Cities like Tokyo which have eclectic fashion, but for more remote places in Japan like Akita, a remnant of Bird's time still remains - and that is the observance of an unspoken

etiquette. Compared to before when class consciousness was important, now there is a pressure to conform to the community's expectations as well as their idea of what is appropriate. For the people of Akita, appropriateness is tied to function and work. Clothes are more tools than avenues for self-expression. Personal preferences still manifest, yes, but must within the bounds of not interfering with work.

In the end, even with the increased options, the Akita people's decision capabilities are still restricted by the community's expectation based on the individual's role in society. If fashion is to be understood a means of self-expression, then for these locals in Akita, the community they belong to is very much part of their identity.



AKITA OF BIRD'S TIME: AKITA DURING THE MEIJI RESTORATION ERA

He asked me if I noticed that all students kept their mouths shut like educated men and residents of Tokyo, and all country people keep their open. (Bird, 161)

Since Bird does not speak Japanese, she does not directly talk about regional dialects in Japan in her book. However, the attitude of Ito, a translator, and guide of Bird, sometimes shows how people in city and countryside saw each other at that time. Ito was only about 18 years old when he traveled. He was a well educated man from Yokohama, who speak fluent English that sometimes he look down local people in country sides. It was a time of Meiji restoration that central Japan which Westernized and urbanized became a standard or something regarded as superior as new

Japanese culture. In countries like Kubota had not reached to the influence of restoration that people still wear, eat, live, and speak as traditional Japanese that include usage of regional dialects.

Linguistics. A variety of a language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by features of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary, and by its use by a group of speakers who are set off from others geographically or socially. (Dictionary)

Regional dialects reflect the history and culture of the land which is diverse and beautiful. Still, people often think that is better to speak and behave like people in the central area because it is more “progressive” and “Cool.” On the other hand, Bird describes Kubota as authentic Japanese view with traditional style housing

and living that she liked Kubota a lot. Then, let's take a look at how people in Akita perceive and use their regional dialects today.

AKITA OF TODAY: AKITA IN THE HEISEI ERA

Regional dialects in Akita usually divided into three different parts of Akita. Northern dialect, central dialect, southern dialect. This division of regions inside of Akita has its origin in different Han each area used to belong to Edo era. Also, there are smaller subdivisions in each region. Places visited on our field trip (Innai, Jinguuji, Oomori) all belong in southern dialect. However, there are some different accents and way of speaking of each area. Our host family told us that dialects in Oomori, which our host family lives, is a mixture of Yokote and Senboku. According to talk by the host family, people in Yokote speak more slowly and softly compare to people

in Senboku. Those dialects got together in Oomori mainly because marriages of people between different areas.

Currently, I have been in Akita for about a year, and I still have some trouble understanding Akita dialect when I talk to local people mainly elderlies. However, people usually speak differently with people in the same community and people from other places. Therefore people who met in field trips such as local guides in Innai, host family, and priest of Jinguuji, did not have that strong Akita dialect. Local guides in Innai said that they use more dialects when they talk to people who speak same dialects. In all of the Innai, Jinguuji and Oomori said that young people in their community do not use Akita dialects anymore. It is because

the spread of central dialect by media and education in school. Host family told us that they are prohibited to use Akita dialect in school. They sometimes played a game of not to use dialect and had to stand in the classroom if they use it. However, teachers also used dialects when they became angry, they laughed.

In the end, some people who are trying to keep their dialect as their language while many people stop using it. Asuka Aoya is a singer from Gojome town from Akita, who wrote a song named “Anbeiina” using Akita dialects. People say that they feel more comfortable or relaxed when they speak with dialects. As a variety of languages, it still carries a role of an identity of a place, and I want it to last for long in the future.



CITIES IN AKITA BY WAKI SHUNNOSUKE

INNAI

“The summer grass- It is all that’s left, of ancient warriors dreams” (Matsuo Basho)

On the way to Yuzawa, Bird had stayed a night in Innai. Her stay in Innai was accidental due to heavy rains and bad roads. From her descriptions in the book, she appears to have liked her stay at a local inn. In her letter, she recalls to have received a lot of attention from local residents out of curiosities. In the Meiji period, westerners in Akita were not common, but people seemed to be more curious of her belongings, rather than herself. Unfortunately, she did not visit Innai mining, but the Innai mining at Meiji era had prospered and it once had a largest silver production in Japan. During this period, a lot of people came to work in Innai from all over Japan.

Today, the once prospered mining village

had completely disappeared and it is covered with deep forests. We cannot see any houses around the place, but a number of gravestones who passed away in the mining remain. One of the local guides mourned how everything eventually changes over time. He told us, once the village had prospered, but now what is left here is the grass and trees. It is totally gone just like a famous poetry by Matsu Basho.

YOKOTE

In Meiji era, Isabella Bird left a rather positive description of farmers’ lives in North parts of Akita. For her, farmers in Akita appeared to be very family oriented just like any other cities at the time. After people finished working, they came back home and spent time together with their children. Farmers appears to not be economically affluent, but within the limitation, people made all kinds of efforts to satisfy their needs. After all, Bird concluded

that they appeared to be quite satisfied with their humble lives.

In Heisei era, Farmers lives in Yokote had changed drastically since 1980’s. Today, the village has a problem of aging and population influx to city areas. We had an opportunity to meet a host family in Omori village. The family consists of husband and wife, three sons and one grandparent. But just like other families around them, two sons live far away in Tokyo and only one son lives with them. Their lives are centered around agriculture. We stayed at a house locates next to farming fields. Every morning, the husband takes care of the farming fields before going to work. His wife works in the fields on weekday and ships the crops to the market. These days, local farmers had started an online stores to ship their products to Tokyo.

JINGUJI

We had an opportunity to visit a local shrine in Jinguji. In the shrine had a small talk session with a Shinto priest. He showed us a list of names of people who reached certain ages, which is believed to have a bad luck. In Shinto tradition, when they reach these ages, they go to Shrine to purify their soul to start a new life. Considering the size of the community of Jinguji, the lists had a considerable large amounts of names. Shinto tradition seems to be still a large part of people’s lives in Jinguji.

To conclude, the way people lives had been changing from Meiji era to Heisei. Sometimes, these changes were brought by a decline of a major industry (Innai mining), or because of human mobility and demographic change in Omori village.



