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## THE SOWERS OF THE ASIAN SEED: NAKAGAMI KENJI

Lisette Gebhardt, Tōkyō

### Postwar Discussion of Japanese Identity

When attempting to understand what “diversity” (*tayōsei*) and “change” (*ryūdōsei*) mean to modern Japanese society, it is useful to narrow down the scope of possible approaches and to single out concrete examples that illustrate in which ways something has changed, has taken on a different quality, or has become more complex. I would like to examine a few traits of the contemporary intellectual climate in Japan by introducing some models of reflection on Japanese society as discussed by certain artists and intellectuals. I shall mainly refer to the well-known writer Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992). Nakagami was the first author born after World War II to be awarded the renowned Akutagawa prize. Together with Tsushima Yūko (\*1948) and others he was labeled a “new generation writer” (*shin-sedai no sakka*). Nakagami’s appearance with his first striking texts and the direction his work took during the 1980s have much significance for an understanding of the intellectual scene of the last decades.

Between the postwar years and the 1990s many attitudes have changed. In the intellectual discourse in Japan, each decade has had its own “mood” or “flavor” with respect to the discussion of such issues as alienation in modern society, what it means to be Japanese, and the gap between tradition and modernity. The year nineteen sixty was definitely a turning point. While in the 1950s the Japanese were trying to attain equal status with America, the 1960s saw them expressing doubts about the rapid changes that modernization had brought about. As is commonly acknowledged, it was then that the traditional old family structure collapsed. Urbanization proceeded, destroying neighborhoods and villages rapidly. Now significantly ambivalent feelings towards Western civilization and the new Japan emerged. In his essay on Japanese theater and avant-garde dance of the 1960s, Jacob Raz explains: “[M]odernization could not be accepted, but neither could it be fought. It could only be laughed at, escaped from via nostalgia and ‘tradition’, or dug into and reconstructed as a nightmare image on stage.” (Raz 1988:11) Although one would have to stress that probably more people approved of the advantages that moder-

nization had brought than disapproved of them, the nostalgic attitude towards old Japan and the urge to “dig into”, to “reconstruct” and to “stage” the past is surely a characteristic feature of modern Japan.

The Japanese identity was reconstructed on various levels. In the 1970s scholars took a new approach to history, which we may call the school of the “Dark Side of Japanese History” (*yami no Nihonshi*). It teaches the history of goblins, demons and ghosts. These creatures were redefined as the victims of power politics, who, as the research showed, had been portrayed as early as the *Nihongi* and the *Kojiki*. This predilection for the “dark” historic dimension proves that the time was ripe to speak more openly of problematic social structures, and also that people wanted to know more about Japanese history than they could read in official textbooks. But the 1970s also saw the rise of the genre of *Nihonron/Nihonjin ron* (discourse on Japaneseness; nativist discourse), which eventually culminated in the 1980s in what could be called an “archaic backlash”. The discourse on identity partly tended to self-assertion through the mystification of Japaneseness, through a return to mythological Japan, through “Asian spirituality” or through Asian utopia, featuring issues such as the cure (*iyashi*) for the exhaustion suffered by modern Japanese society. It owed much to the fashionable international New Age thought.

Nakagami too dug deep into the layers of Japanese society. The 1970s and 80s models of reflection on Japanese society were mirrored in his writings. Here we also find what could be termed the duality of the post-war “nostalgic reconstruction movement”.<sup>1</sup> Nakagami was torn between political engagement for the cause of the *hisabetsu burakumin*,<sup>2</sup> a concern for intercultural relations, and the escape into regionalism and mysticism. He reconstructed the Japanese past, referring to the “dark side of Japanese history” as well as to an “animist” or “shaman” basis of Japanese thought. Nakagami shows a very specific attitude when he explores the Japanese past or the oppression of minorities and when he considers new options for the future of Japan. The author’s ideas are provoking. While he does certainly argue for more tolerance, his projections of Japan, Asia and the

1 The “reconstruction” of Japanese identity and the nostalgia for the past is the theme of IVY’s study from 1995; see the review in this volume.

2 It is difficult to account for either discrimination against or the origins of the *burakumin* [“people of the hamlet”]. On the problem of the discrimination victims (*hisabetsu*) in Japan see, for example, HANE Mikiso (1982).

problem of the *burakumin* should nevertheless be approached from a critical distance.

### Reflections on the "Roots"

Nakagami's works may be seen as a new variety of "Heimatliteratur".<sup>3</sup> In nearly all of his works, with the exception of the earliest ones between 1966 and 1968 (Kleeman 1991:19, 28), he concentrates on the Kumano region, where he was born and raised. In regard to historical and political issues this region has a special status in Japan.<sup>4</sup> When Nakagami writes about Kumano, this means for him to reflect on his own roots, to discuss national identity and to revise Japanese history critically. In the early 1980s Nakagami began to write a number of texts in which he transformed the image of Kumano into a magic or mythological realm<sup>5</sup> instead of presenting the difficult circumstances in which the people of the *roji* ("the alley"; a kind of ghetto) had to live more realistically, circumstances which he said he himself had experienced in his youth. In previous cycles of texts such as *Misaki [The Cape]*, *Karekinada [Withered Wood Bay]*, and *Chi no hate shijō no toki [The Ends of the Earth, the Supreme Time]* mythological elements are not lacking, but in *Sennen no yuraku [A Thousand Years of*

- 3 The theme of "Heimat", or of the lost "home Japan" is a topic that entered modern Japanese literature as early as around 1890. Within contemporary literature, primarily Fukazawa Shichirō and Minakami Tsutomu should be mentioned as authors who wrote on rural Japan and on regional customs and depicted them as the backbone of Japanese identity. There are, as far as I know, only few concise studies on the meaning of "home" and "region" in modern Japanese literature (e.g. WATANABE Kazutami 1992, and parts of the well known work of KARATANI 1993), a subject the analysis of which promises revealing results.
- 4 Kumano is the old name for the southern part of Kii Peninsula; it nearly corresponds to today's Wakayama Prefecture. The region holds an important place within Japanese mythology (Izanami is said to have died there while giving birth to the god of fire) and history (as the land of the hidden, *komorekuni*, Kumano is known is associated with the defeated and the outcasts; see KLEEMAN 1991: 85ff., 93).
- 5 His increasing obsession with Kumano could be partly claimed to be due to the ongoing changes his homeland was undergoing at the time (KLEEMAN 1991: 95). There is, however, a certain discrepancy between the author's image of Kumano in his fictional texts and in his essays where he is more outspoken on the issue of discrimination.



*Pleasure*], a so-called *rensaku shōsetsu* published between 1980 and 1982, the irrational prevails, and the *roji* as a realm where outsiders live becomes a place of supernatural dimensions. *Sennen no yuraku* shifts Nakagami's Kumano saga towards the fantastic. Although they are not as "otherwordly" as *Sennen no yuraku*, there are novels by Nakagami with similar characters and content such as *Yasei no kaenju* [1984-85; *The Wild Fire Tree*], *Nichirin no tsubasa* [1984; *Wings of the Sun*], *Izoku* [1984-92; *Different Kin*], *Sanka* [1987-89; *Paean*] and *Kiseki* [1987-88; *Miracles*] (see Hara 1993:323).

#### A Thousand Years of Pleasure (*Sennen no yuraku*)

*Sennen no yuraku* is a story that takes place in the outcast community of "Nagayama". The outcasts are despised by the farmers and villagers, but Nakagami turns the discrimination into a mystic revelation. The protagonists of the novel are six young men of the Nakamoto clan, which once belonged to the nobility but has since declined to the bottom of society for reasons the author does not clearly explain. All of them are gifted with nearly otherwordly beauty and charm. Nakagami suggests that they are endowed with supernatural powers. They have a blue spot, the birthmark of their former nobility, and are born seducers, conquerors, and prophets, possessing both Buddha-like and animal-like characteristics. Each of their lives takes a similar path. Born into this world with the help of the old midwife Oryū, they pass through early adolescence, indulge in drugs, erotic adventures, and crime and meet a cruel end at a young age. It would seem to be their fate to die for the people of the *roji*. Were they thus to overcome their destiny, they would simultaneously free the *roji* from its spell. On a broader scale, a thousand years of discrimination would finally come to an end if the Nakamotos were integrated into a more liberal and open-minded society.

The late scholar Isoda Kōichi (1931-1987) commented on Nakagami and *Sennen no yuraku*:

The appearance of Nakagami Kenji, also born after the war, whose novels paralleled the lives of the younger urban generation, was significant. His writings were rooted in the countryside of the Wakayama area where he was reared, and were deeply imprinted with the sensibilities of rural culture. As modernization transformed the face of Japanese society, it brought about an transformation of what might be called the vessel of the culture. As that

occurred, it was only natural that question should arise about what ought to be in the vessel. Nakagami's *Sennen no yuraku* depicts the closed society of the rural community where traditional customs existed side by side with legends of almost religious character. The culture of the villages, so closely bound together by blood ties and cultivation of the soil, may have been in great contrast to the elegance brought by modernization, but it was capable of providing a dynamic source of energy for that modernization. (1984:7)

Isoda is right when he states that *Sennen no yuraku* can be interpreted as a quest for what could be called the "vessel of culture", although he simplifies the structure of the work by claiming that the inhabitants of the *roji* represent rural culture. The inhabitants of the *roji* are obviously portrayed as *burakumin*. They are not farmers living in a closed community, but people who have gathered from various places, including vagrants, beggars, and traveling entertainers. Many do hard work, or work regarded as "unclean", such as butchering animals and manufacturing leather products. Nakagami's people of the *roji* are the offspring of defeated clansmen and clanswomen from the medieval wars, but they include members of other ethnic groups who have settled in Japan during different historical periods as well. With the concept of the *roji* Nakagami argues against the idea that Japanese society is homogenous. However, he also creates a myth of the outcasts that is based on common prejudices about them. For example he stresses animal-like, ferocious and irrational characteristics.

Both the *roji* and Kumano are intended as fictional concepts. They stand for the marginal. "Kumano" in the author's political, cultural and literary discourse, which is used in opposition to contemporary society and therefore is capable of stirring up new impulses. On the other hand, Nakagami's concept also contains disturbing elements and even seems at times to be nostalgic and regressive.

## Asia

It is by no means easy to deliver a complete exegesis of *Sennen no yuraku*. The text consists of an endless web of allusions and references to mythology, religion and history. It is replete with symbols, allegories and alternate possible meanings. Nakagami mainly employs linear, bipolar and cyclic structures: The Nakamotos are "impure" and "profane" (*sen*), but also "otherworldly" and "holy" (*sei*). In Kumano the oppressed within

Japanese history have gathered. The capital (Tōkyō, in former times Kyōto) is the place where central power is located, represented by the emperor. Kumano is old, dark, and related to chaos and death. The city is civilization; Kumano is “nature”. The latter is characterized by the oral traditions of the people, not by the written texts which establish the lineage of the emperor. Kumano is dominated by the tradition of folk belief, and by a “softer” version of Buddhism – that of Ippen Shōnin, who founded the Ji sect of Pure Land Buddhism, which teaches that in the utterance of Amitābha’s name all dualities are dissolved. Finally, Kumano represents Nakagami’s vision of Asia, a chthonic landscape, a pantheistic place, and an empire of the senses, in which opposites such as “good” and “evil” or “life” and “death” are dissolved. The linear structure (the history of the winners, the lineage of the emperors, the seven generations of the Nakamotos) and the bipolar structure further expand to form a cyclical model of eternal return or everlasting repetition, represented by the snake and Oryū. Here real time and all polarities or contradictions are transcended.

As Nakagami came to think of Japan’s heritage as part of Asian culture, his concern for its Asian neighbors grew, and he identified his *roji* as an “Asian space”.<sup>6</sup> The narratives (*monogatari*) he wanted to write were inspired by his visions of Asia and by texts such as the *Mahābhārata*, the epos of the gods of India, which for him was a great piece of Asian narrative (Yomota 1996:320). Nakagami disputes the notion of the homogeneity of Japanese culture. Against this image, promoted since the Meiji period by the state and conservative circles, and expressed by the imperial line and the *tennō*, he contrasts his concepts of plurality: regional Japan with its local culture, the brotherhood of outsiders within the nation, the *burakumin* of Kumano, the Ainu, the Koreans and an international brotherhood of these Japanese outsiders with the less privileged people of the so-called Third World countries in South America and Asia. Nakagami’s intention was to reread the official version of Japanese history in order to provide it and the surrounding countries with a common historical basis, to acknowledge the cultural influences of the continent on the island nation, and to accept the concept of a multicultural society free

6 WATANABE (1993: 788); YOSHIMOTO Takaaki (1992: 244), commenting on *Sennen no yuraku*, speaks of a “*ajiateki na sekai*” [a typical Asian world] as the necessary counterpart to the functionalized world of today.

of discrimination. With this tendency he followed a trend some Japanese artists and scholars had already established during the 1960s.

#### Excursion into the "Dark": The "Other History" of Japan

Regarding the background of Nakagami's writings, the largely self-taught author was very attentive to artistic and intellectual trends and read widely in both Western and Japanese literature, from symbolism to Genet, Faulkner, Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) and Ōe Kenzaburō (\*1935). Being also eager to absorb new academic output, he studied ethnology and anthropology and became involved with structuralist and postmodern theories.<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin was fashionable at the time, and Nakagami too was influenced by his works. He was especially fond of the notion of the "marginal" and the "carnavalesque", which he identified with Kumano. He regarded this landscape as a device to renew Japanese society through its carnivalesque energies. Writing about Kumano, which nearly became an obsession for Nakagami, meant for him to perform rituals of inversion, to create a new sort of *monogatari* (narrative), and to undermine both Japanese society and the literary scene.

Western theories of medieval millenarianism, of kingship, of the marginal and the trickster figure were discussed in Western academic circles during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Scholars such as Carlo Ginzburg, Viktor Turner, Mikhail Bakhtin and Edward Shils worked on the carnivalesque, on the role of outsiders in society and on the relation between the "center" and the "periphery". Some Japanese colleagues, led by the cultural anthropologist Yamaguchi Masao, adopted these theories and made them popular among intellectuals during the 1970s (Koschmann 1993:417). The anarchic power of laughter and the figure of the *dōke* (clown) and its meaning for Japanese society were discussed at length. The authors Ōe Kenzaburō and Inoue Hisashi (\*1934) transported the theories into the field of literature through works such as *Dōjidai gōmu* [1982; *Contemporaneous Games*] and *Kirikirijin* [1981; *The People of Kirikiri Village*] (Wilson 1989).

7 There is still not enough research on the meaning of postmodernism in Japanese literature, although this would also be a main issue in the case of Nakagami.

The 1970s became another turning point. While the nation gained international importance, the role of the intellectuals<sup>8</sup> underwent a change. Since the failure of the student movement of the late 1960s they had become aware of the fact that their potential to shape society was growing smaller. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the trickster figure and the marginal then emerged as intellectual devices, probably due to the insight that the role of the intellectual in consumer society could only be that of a “trickster”, a clown-like existence (*dōke*) of someone who could only try to hollow out the system by undermining it, not that of a serious voice. The techniques of *mitate* and *yatsushi*, used in Kabuki theater, in wood prints, and in poetry (*kyōka*) were during the Edo period employed to transport parody and veiled criticism of the oppressive political system. Today, leading intellectual figures like Ōe Kenzaburō have made use of this. He may have regarded the device to be an apt method of contemporary narrative presentation, as it also corresponds remarkably well with the citation, palimpsest or patch-work structures of postmodern literature.

The playful imitation of former patterns is a stylistic device of Edo art, and significantly new interest in the Edo Period arose in the 1970s, culminating in an Edo boom in the 1980s, lead by Aramata Hiroshi (\*1947), Tanaka Yūko (\*1952), Sugiura Hinako (\*1958) and Minagawa Hiroko (\*1930). Since the studies of Hamada Yasuzō *Warai – Nihon bungaku ni okeru bi to jōnen no nagare* [1973; *Laughter – The Line of Beauty and Emotion in Japanese Literature*, Gendai shisōsha], Ikeda Hiroshi *Nihon bungaku no warai* [1977; *Laughter in Japanese Literature*, Wakō senshō], and Hino Tatsuo *Edojin to yūtopia* [1977; *The People of Edo and Utopia*, Asahi Shinbun sha], such issues as “laughter” and “agrarian utopia”, or the uprising of peasants in the millenarian movement (*ē ja nai ka undō*) were revised. Ōshima Nagisa responded to the *Zeitgeist*

- 8 I am of course aware that it is crucial to the questions asked here to understand how the roles of the “intellectual” and of the “artist” have changed during the last fifty years (see on this e.g. KOSCHMANN 1993), from the critical intellectual of the postwar period through the engaged intellectual of the 60s and 70s and the authors of the *naikō no sedai* (the “withdrawn generation”) to the “spiritual intellectual” of the 90s, and so on. Today, it is even doubtful whether the term should be applied to people with an academic background who for example participate in the cultural industry as writers or artists. Maybe this type should rather be labeled the “intellectual *ludens*” of the end of the Shōwa and the beginning of the Heisei Era, who understands knowledge as a game.



in 1981 with his movie *Ē ja nai ka* [It doesn't matter]. The studies and the movie could be seen as an attempt to detect a sort of anarchic network behind the official feudal structures of that period, and to compose what Max Tessier describes in his comment on the Japanese cinema since the 1960s as "*contre-histoire*" (Tessier 1981:240).

Scholars such as Okiura Kazuteru (\*1927) and Amino Yoshihiko (\*1928), who began their research on oppressed minorities within Japan in the 1970s, intended with their studies to sharpen sensitivities to that problematic issue. In 1985, Okiura published a collection of texts on discrimination together with the left-wing writer Noma Hiroshi (1915-1991), *Nihon no sei to sen* [*The Holy and the Profane in Japan*, Jinbun-shoinsha]. On the other hand, the interest in the "dark" within the new branch of folklore studies could be identified as a retreat of those people disappointed with the stagnancy of Japanese society into a pre-modern world, which was weird, but full of dark coziness. There the pleasures of fantasies awaited them. A Japan could be found which had not yet been conquered by the brightness of Western technology, by the garish clarity of enlightenment (*keimō*), a realm of the soul, quiet and calm, such as Yanagita Kunio had already tried to conjure up with texts such as *Tōno monogatari* [1910; *The Tales of Tōno*, 1975].

### Darkness against Modernity

The interest in this "dark side" was significant for the intellectual climate of the 1970s and was further expressed in works like Tanikawa Ken'ichi's (\*1921) *Ma no keifu* [The Lineage of the Demons] and Baba Akiko's (\*1928) *Oni no kenkyū* [Goblin Studies], both from 1971. Tanikawa speaks of a "nightly realm", a "negative utopia" as characteristics of Japanese history (Tanikawa 1971:20). Baba writes in the preface of her book that in times of increasing mechanization (*kikaika*) and saturation the goblins, once a powerful force, had to face their final hour. She wanted to dedicate herself to the study of goblins, because she felt sorry for them (Baba 1975:10). With her remarks she is also trying to caution readers not to underestimate the power of the goblins. It is her admonition to an anthropocentric civilization that acknowledges only materialism. Reflections on the dark side of Japanese culture gained increasingly in number. To be mentioned are for example Matsuda Osamu's (\*1927) *Yami no utopia*



[1975; *Utopia of the Dark*, Shinchōsha], Komatsu Kazuhiko's (\*1947) *Nihon no noroi*. "Yami no shinsei" ga umidasu bunka to wa [1988; *The Japanese Curse. The Meaning of Culture Which Brings Forth the "True Nature of the Dark"*, Kōbunsha], and Sawa Shisei's (\*1927) *Yami no nihon shi*. *Kappa chinkon* [1987; *The Dark History of Japan. Repose of the Kappa Souls*, Sairyūsha].

While the reformers of Japanese history analyzed structures of discrimination by means of the concept of the "dark" structures of discrimination, the *Nihonjinron* apologists wished to distinguish Japanese culture from what the West had brought. They too relied on a dark, weird or enigmatic element said to be rooted deeply in the "muddy" soil of the Japanese earth. A remarkable re-evaluation of ghosts and demons occurred. In short, the "other history" or the "dark history of Japan" with its discourse on the outsiders (*ijinron*) is double-faceted: On the one hand it constructs an alternative version of Japanese history, a tradition of the Japanese revolutionary spirit as a means to criticize Japanese national politics and to compensate for the post-war generation's feelings of frustration in having failed to create a more agreeable society. On the other, it is a cultural criticism directed against modernization, a means of liberation from Western influence, which is felt to have captured not only the Japanese culture but also, as a "colonization of the soul", the Japanese mind.

#### Swamps, Mud, Rice Fields and Graves: Back to the Japanese Soil

The Japanese bond with darkness, with the spirits of death, with the "other world" is a notion which contrasts "tradition" and "modernity", East and West. The bipolar metaphors already existed at the turn of the century: The West is described as the rational, the bright, the male and the active, the East as the dark, the unconscious, the female, the passive, and the "ghostly", the very "other". Paradoxically the "East" referred to this Western pattern in many self portraits. The "dark" side of Japanese culture, which is thought to be still preserved in poor, rural regions, was since the 1960s an argument in avant-garde arts such as the theater and *butō*. Their focus was on the animal-like instinct that lies at the basis of human nature, and the "muddy soil" of poor rural Japan was contrasted with modern Japan and its alienation and materialism.

In his novel *Ōgon no kuni* [1969; *The Golden Country*, 1970] the late Endō Shūsaku (1923-1996) compares the essence of Japan to a swamp (1973:89), and Etō Jun meets his Japanese identity while he wades through a muddy rice field (Mishima 1996:120). The muddy rice field is also highly significant for Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986), the famous dancer, who came from Tōhoku, called himself a shaman from the north and located the real Japan in the poor rural regions. Here we already find the tendency towards regionalism (*chiiki shugi*) which has become an even more important theme since the 1970s. While Tōkyō is the symbol of a westernized Japan that has lost its identity, the countryside emerges as the true home of Japan where old customs are still preserved. For that reason the north, and especially northern Tōhoku, has become a symbolic landscape of resistance. In *Edojin to yūtopia* Tatsuo Hino (\*1940) claims that the alternative landscape is Hokkaidō. Tōno (in Iwate ken) and Osorezan (in Aomori), the Mountain of the Dead, are exoticized as enigmatic and weird, as “dark” (see also Ivy 1995). They are a refuge from modern society and a mystic twilight zone where one can meet the deceased and join the nation’s past.

Nakagami’s vision of Kumano is another prominent example, but he had his predecessors: In Fukazawa Shichirō’s (1914-1987) case it was the region of Shinshū, Minakami Tsutomu (\*1919) wrote on the local traditions of the northern region in *Echizen take ningyō* [1963; *The Bamboo Puppets from Echizen*] and Yoshikichi Furui (\*1937) tended in a similar direction. Like Nakagami, Furui got involved with the topic of a monk of the Shugendō-cult (*hijiri*) who strives for salvation in a very unorthodox way. This unorthodox attitude hints at indigenous traditions underlying Buddhist thought. In 1975 Furui wrote his *Hijiri [The Ascetic]*, in which he describes the change in the funeral rites of a remote village from indigenous customs to Buddhist ritual. Village life and customs are re-evaluated and their pre-modern closeness to earth – with burial in the earth as opposed to cremation – juxtaposed to the “modern”. The vision of the rural home (*furusato*) is contrasted with urbanization (*toshika*), the soil with the unreal realm of the city. Intervention by the state government in Tōkyō is claimed to have forced a unifying system upon the villagers, which even reaches as far as their burial places, taking away the rituals of old times and dislocating the people from their ancestors. This has brought

along alienation and an inauthentic way of life, dominated by the model of the metropolis.

Tanaka Min, a *butō* dancer, says in a statement: "I am an avant-garde who crawls the earth", and: "To be naked was for me a way to dress myself up" (Tanaka 1986a). When commenting on Hijikata Tatsumi, the famous exponent of avant-garde dance in the 1960s, Tanaka says: "He was always angry how our bodies are controlled historically", and: "He wanted to uncover what is hidden by ordinary society, so he started to research movement. For example old, old farmers' movements and old, old women's movements. He used these in his 1970 performance with the title *Dochaku*, 'Native' (Tanaka 1986b:146). The postwar nativist discourse in Japanese art focuses on the "natural", near-to-earth life of rural communities, which emerges as an all-embracing category, and therefore conveys a more acceptable, harmonious life style which could cure the exhaustion of modern Japan.

#### Japan as a Body: *Fundoshi* Aestheticism

While the body movements of Japanese farmers were crucial for Hijikata's art, the naked bodies of outcasts dwelling in the *roji* of Kumano make a strong argument for Nakagami. In his collection *Kishū: Ki no kuni, ne no kuni monogatari* [1978; *Ki Province: Tales of Treeland, Rootland*] Nakagami speaks of his home in Kumano as the "private parts" of the nation (*chibu*) (see Dodd 1996). If we cling to the metaphor of Japan as a body, we can say that the private parts as a shameful region were generally well covered, with the attention focused on the "face" of Japan, on the capital Tōkyō. Nakagami strips off the covering. The presentation of the private parts as a means of threatening, protesting and shocking is a widespread attitude throughout the world. In the contemporary Japanese art scene we find the gesture at the end of the 1950s when Hijikata Tatsumi (mentioned above) performed a spectacular dance inspired by Mishima's novel *Kinjiki* [1958; *Forbidden Colors*, 1968], for which he was equipped with a big shining phallus. Hijikata performed the dance again in 1968. He called his concept "Hijikata and the Japanese: The Rebellion of the Body". Like the designer Yokoo Tadanori (\*1936) and Kara Jūrō (\*1940) of the *avant-garde* theater, Hijikata and other *butō*-dancers stressed "Japanese colors" as the colors of "indigenous people." In one sense, beyond the

parody intended by Yokoo and Kara, this surely also meant a rehabilitation of “Japanese colors” and the Japanese body.

The protest of the phallic pose is again aimed in two directions: at the national political repression and, on an international level, at the repression of Japanese culture by Westernization. The attention given to the private parts when East and West compete is described by the author Nosaka Akiyuki (\*1930). In his *Amerika hijiki* [1967; *Seaweed from America*, 1977], he sketches an ironic yet compassionate picture of the Japanese inferiority complex, which many Japanese have cultivated since the defeat. The protagonist of the story is overwhelmed by his feelings of despair when the star of a Japanese sex show fails in front of his American guests.

### Rebellion through the Private Parts

The gesture of presenting naked private parts contains parodistic as well as aggressive elements. It is interesting that the Japanese underdog is seemingly more potent than his opposite, the proper bourgeois. The potent hero is an outcast, like Hijikata with his golden penis, and like Kara Jūrō in Ōshima's movie *Shinjuku dorobō nikki* [1968; *The Diary of a Thief in Shinjuku*], or Tanaka Min, who does a fire dance and poses much like we would imagine the heroes of Nakagami's scenario *Hi-matsuri* [1985; *Fire Festival*] to do so. This acting out of the body is a gesture which could be labeled – of course only when a male is involved – “*fundoshi* pose”.<sup>9</sup> We can see the gesture demonstrated in its most extreme form by Mishima Yukio: first when he posed in *Barakei*, a collection of portraits, photographed in 1963 by Eikō Hosoe (\*1930), then in the movie *Yūkoku* [Patriotism], and later when he acted out the role of a tragic hero in reality, committing ritual suicide (*seppuku*) in November 1970. Nakagami refers to Mishima in many ways: He uses myth to structure his text around the fate of an archetypical hero who has a beautiful body bound to die, he stresses male “aggression” (*bōryoku*), and like Mishima in his tetralogy *Hōjō no umi* [1965-70; *The Sea of Fertility*, 1971-74] makes use of the theme of cyclical recurrence.

9 In 1970 in his famous collection *The Truth About Carmen Marie* the photographer ARAKI Nobuyoshi (\*1940) used photos of the female “private parts” with the intention of provoking the public.

Nakagami Kenji's body-conscious text *Sennen no yuraku* illustrates "rebellion through the private parts". The six young men of the Nakamoto clan, Hanzō, Miyoshi, Fumihiko, Yasu, Shin'ichirō, and Tatsuo live their lives in a sensuous rush of sounds, odors and colors. The presence of the heroes' bodies and their sexual attractiveness is a main argument of the text. The protagonists are permanently prepared to reproduce; they can furnish an erection at any time, any place. In the chapter "Yasu the Oriental" we read: "[...] Yasu the Oriental explained that in Shanghai, where he had learned to dance, it would have been rude to the girl if the man did not have a stiff one between his legs when they danced" (Nakagami 1982:166). This permanent erection and addiction to the genital region bespeaks the deeply rooted wish to "reproduce" among the members of the Nakamoto clan. They wish to own both women and land, even outside their small enclave of the *roji*. This urge to sow their seeds outside their own realm means the expansion of the Nakamoto heritage into Japanese society, and its expansion into places outside Japan, such as China and South America, to which some of them go. When the Nakamotos leave the realm of the Japanese islands, this initiative to spread into the outer world is also described in terms of sexual activity.

### Creole Culture or the Japanese Embrace

The existence of the Nakamotos proves that there is no homogeneity in the Japanese culture. Like the artists of the 1960s and 70s Nakagami suggests that it is the underground of society where people come from who are capable of changing the fate of Japan. While Kumano means the private parts of the nation, this region is also the potent zone, the part which is able to give new life to the future and to regenerate Japanese civilization. Although the people of the *roji* are of no official importance, from their culture come the basic instincts, the vitality and the aggression which are also part of sexual intercourse, and which ensure the continuity of the species. It is the power of the hidden region which provides the way to creation and regeneration. Japanese semen spreads into foreign countries, and thus naked bodies, naked Japanese succeed in doing what the body of "Japan", dressed in its national clothing, has failed in: conquering new land.



## Yasu the Oriental

Of the six Nakamoto protagonists it is Yasu from the fourth chapter “The Death-Marks of an Angel” (*Tennin gosui*; an allusion to Mishima’s *The Sea of Fertility*) who embodies the expansionist urge of the family more than the others. He is a gangster who deals on the black market (*yamiichi*) and sells women, and he is nicknamed “the Oriental” as he says he learned to dance in Shanghai. The hint that his erotic style of dancing comes from China may be attributed to the notion of an “Asian potency”, of which Yasu has learned in China, and which in combination with his own special Nakamoto talents he now tries to use on another continent. Yasu’s dream is to found a colony in South America: “[...] to create a superior race he wishes that the men and women he leads do not marry each other. The children they produce should be mixed: He himself will take a black woman for his wife, will produce children with her and educate them, so that in their robust bodies there will dwell the wasp spirit of the Japanese” (p. 169).

How should we understand this? Nakagami has already been criticized out of a feminist perspective, but it seems to me, nevertheless, that most of the criticism sympathizes all too eagerly with the author Nakagami as an adherent of postmodernity. That is to say, after Mark Harbinson’s (1992:426) statement on *Hijiri* [1984; *The Immortal*, 1985], a text from Nakagami’s *Kumano-shū* [1984; *Kumano Collection*], one accepts without any doubt that Nakagami, while he handles stereotypes, does so to parody or transcend former images – in the case of gender as well as in the case of any portrait of the “other”, be it another text or another country. Of course, I do not think that Nakagami meant the visions of Yasu to be a call for a new Japanese colonial adventure. Rather he seems to have intended a complex allusion to former Japanese colonialism in Manchuria and South-East Asia,<sup>10</sup> to visions of the male and the female, to attitudes towards revolution and striving for salvation. Still, although Nakagami thinks on a meta-level (this is already evident when he nicknames Yasu “the Orien-

10 Nakagami discusses the Japanese imperial ambitions in a more detailed way in *Izoku*. With the figures of Tatsuya (a rather unintelligent *karate* fighter with “cyborg” qualities) and Makinohara (a right-wing ideologist) he examines the nationalist vision of the Great East Asia Prosperity Sphere (*Daitōa Kyōeiken*) in World War II.



tal”), one does not have to take a feminist position to find his *machismo* and his race discourse unpleasant at times. Furthermore, we should not dismiss our discomfort too readily by escaping to the concepts of the “postmodernist palimpsest” and the “parody”, and by claiming that it is the author’s sophisticated intention to criticize stereotypes by rewriting them.

In *Sennen no yuraku* the flow of Japanese tradition becomes modified by the creole element, and a mixed culture comes into being, but viewed critically this does not necessarily mean a development towards greater variety. It is just that non-Japanese women get pregnant by Japanese semen and have to donate their genetic material to equip a Japanese body with more muscles and strength. The creole body should, however, be ruled by the Japanese spirit. This image is paradigmatic for some of the paradoxes inherent in the author’s writing. In spite of the discrimination the protagonist experiences within Japanese society, he feels in a “national” way when he thinks in international categories. He ceases to be a Nakamoto and becomes a Japanese, “a guy smaller than the Europeans and the Americans, but like the wasp gifted with intense activity, this spirit of the Japanese” (Nakagami 1982:136). The embrace of a Nakamoto clansman means for a woman an embrace of the Japanese nation, a colonial embrace which will write into their bodies the thoughts of a superior mind.

The creole culture Nakagami presents here is not so much the culture of diversity he may have aspired to as a rather one-sided approach. In this connection it is interesting that the protagonist does not aim at a Western country, but at South America for colonial expansion. On the one hand he imitates “white” colonization, on the other he reinforces the notion of colored ethnicity, which becomes clearer when he tells us that one South American woman with whom he has sex claimed to be his sister. This semi-incestuous act stresses the notion of ethnicity and competition with the white race. Nakagami’s images of creolization are somehow inept, even didactic, like the final scene of the reunion of the young Ainu man with the Nakamoto clan. No less forced appear the relations in his last, unfinished novels *Izoku* [Different Kin] and *Daikōzui* [The Big Flood], serialized in the magazine *SPA!* from 1991 onward, in which Nakagami enlarges his image of the *roji* to the whole of Asia with protagonists from various Asian countries (Watanabe 1992:788). Although they are not all descendants from the Nakamoto clan, the protagonists are marked by the

“blue spot” (*ao-aza*; another allusion to Mishima’s marked heroes in *The Sea of Fertility*), the characteristic sign of the clan which once belonged to the nobility. In *Izoku* the blue spot becomes the sign of the Asian race, its “natural birthmark”, the so-called *mōkohan* (mongoloid spot).<sup>11</sup>

Nakagami’s theme of reproduction is closely linked to the themes of millenarianism and salvation. A nearly religious ritual, the sexual act brings immediate salvation by crossing the borderlines of reality (evident in the *Tengu no matsu* episode of *Sennen no yuraku*) and drowning the ego in ecstasy, while reproduction offers the possibility of continuing the blood line even for “a thousand years” until it is “cleansed” and the Nakamotos are ransomed from their suffering and restored.

### Fire, Water, Androgyny

In his novel *Yasei no kaenju* [*The Wild Fire Tree*; published 1986 by Magajin Hauzu], another story about young *roji* heroes, Nakagami further develops his idea of the creole existence. The protagonist is Maseru (the name lets one think of the verb *mazeru*, “to mix”), who calls himself Maui. He is the son of the Nakamoto woman Yoi and a “black” man she met in a bar in Kōbe. Although Maui’s father seemed not to be a “black” man but a man from the Pacific island of Maui (Nakagami does not especially excel in originality in his choice of names), he is called *kuronbo no maui* [“nigger Maui”] and identified as a “Negro”. Nakagami describes the circumstances of his birth in “Fujinami”. Fujinami is the name of the *roji* in Kumano this time which is characterized as a realm belonging both to “this world” (*kono yo*) and to the “other world” (*ano yo*; p. 5). His childhood is told through the ghost of Oryū. Nakagami further tells of his life as an adolescent in Tōkyō until Maui is to leave Japan on a ship to “Dabao” (Davao in the Philippines). Like all of the Nakamotos he possesses a special attractiveness that is only heightened by his dark skin. The author attributes to Maui the element of “fire”, the metaphor of light, the bluish

11 Nakagami also wrote an essay entitled “As a blue-spotted Mongoloid” (*Ao-aza no mongoroido to shite*; part of the collection *America, America*, Kadokawa shoten, 1985) on his experiences in Asian countries, his concept of Asia and his feelings when he remembered Fukazawa Shichirō’s work outside Japan. In fact, he seemed to identify Fukazawa’s concepts with “genuine Japaneseness”.

gleaming, which had already been the special sign of the six heroes of *Sennen no yuraku*.

Maui's darkness is the basis for an even more intensive allusion to light, as his skin contains the heat and splendor of the tropical sun. His "black" features are suffused with Oriental charm. Around his eyes there is the sex appeal of the "Oriental", as Kei says (Nakagami 1993:191, 193). He is a perfect being, and when he has sex with Kei, an important figure in the book, she says his body felt like fire, like a "phoenix" (p. 205). Kei is blonde and looks like Brooke Shields (p. 180, 194). She is deaf and dumb, and actually is a hermaphrodite. Her symbols are the fish and water, the primordial element from which all life comes. Equipped with both female and male organs and living in a world without the irritations of sounds or music, she is an entity in herself. She would have the means to save Maui from the tragic fate of the Nakamotos, if he entered her harmonious silent world, a world "before the world of the *roji*" (Hara 1993:331). She absolves him from all complexes by allowing him to have sexual intercourse with her (as a "white woman") and dismisses him from his role as the "black man" by saying "you must not call yourself a Negro" (*kuronbotte iikata, yoku nai wa yo*, p. 205) and asserting his "Oriental qualities" (in fact, this eulogy of the "Oriental" does not sound very subtle) of which she is very fond (p. 197). Kei lacks the arrogance of the white race (her phallic representation is only that of a boy, and she does not insert her male organ into Maui but into Tomy who seems to be a "white man"). Maui for his part does not despise her for being abnormal. They have a silent understanding with each other, a kind of "telepathy" (p.196). They would match perfectly, but Kei's lover threatens Maui and he has to leave. His "fire" cannot be calmed by the waters of "Kei". His stigma, his "blackness" cannot dissolve in her "whiteness" and his male fervor cannot find rest in her bisexual completeness.

### The Snake Motif and Cyclical Recurrence

Nakagami may have been busy deconstructing colonialism, discussing Japanese identity, and rewriting former texts. But what intention lies at the core of his argumentation? The motif of salvation is evident in *Yasei no kaenju* (through the existence of the hermaphrodite Kei) as in other texts by

the author. Nakagami's own position can perhaps be traced back to the mythical and fantastic layers of the texts.

Many artists and academics in the 1980s showed a new interest in mythology and folk belief, not only as material for their work, but also as a kind of spiritual guidance for their own lives. One cannot deny that Nakagami personally maintained an interest in "salvation", a position not far from the "spiritual culture" of the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, Nakagami was involved in the struggle for a search of meaning too. He found his vision in the uroboric structure of cyclical recurrence. *Saisei* (rebirth, regeneration) is the key term. It is symbolized by the snake image he often uses in his texts and which can be attributed to a new interest in Japanese "animistic" thought.<sup>13</sup> The lively interest in indigenous Japanese thought, in folk belief before the adoption of Buddhism, Confucianism or Christianity was, as I tried to explain above, characteristic of the intellectual mood of the 1970s and 80s.

### The Snake Tribe

In *Sennen no yuraku* and many other texts by Nakagami we find the motif of cyclical recurrence symbolized by the snake. For Nakagami the belief in the snake as a god is the animistic basis of Japanese thought before Buddhism entered the land. For him the serpent signifies mystical thinking. Beyond his personal fondness of it he may through this notion have intended to revitalize contemporary Japan. With this, Nakagami does not stand alone.

In a dialogue with the neo-conservative "spiritual intellectual" Kamata Tōji (\*1947), in the chapter "On the image of the snake" of their book, Nakagami muses on the origins of the Japanese: "Most likely the so-called Yamato people – we Japanese – were a snake-like (*hebi-teki*) culture; you

12 SHIMAZONO (1993) refers to a number of Japanese academics and artists ("spiritual intellectuals") who show an increasing interest in "spiritualism" which he calls the "New Spiritualism Movement" (*Shin-reisei-undō*) or *Shin-reisei-bunka* (1996). Kamata Tōji is one of the exponents of this movement as well as Nakazawa Shin'ichi.

13 The term is used rather haphazardly and embraces such notions as "Asian spirituality", folk belief, "water cult", indigenous Japanese thought, and Japanese vitalism (see also WÖHR's contribution to this volume).

could probably call us the snake people” (Nakagami/Kamata 1993:47). Nina Cornyetz, who refers to the same passage and analyses the snake motive in Nakagami’s writings, argues that “the snake remains a product of the archaic landscape, and as such it embodies a multiplicity that deconstructs the apparent closure of later renditions of the snake” (Cornyetz 1996:235). But does Nakagami’s statement that “we Japanese are a snake people” really relate to a sophisticated rendering of texts, or does it give proof of “multiplicity”? If one limits the interpretation of Nakagami’s snake image to an analysis of the metaphor in his texts, this means to neglect the interesting question: Why does Nakagami actually have to “reconstruct” the snake? In this we should not follow the ambitions of the postmodernists, but question his motivations as a person who takes part in the intellectual discussion on Japanese identity. In fact I cannot think without unease of Nakagami’s alacrity in talking to *nihonron* apologists such as Umehara Takeshi (\*1925)<sup>14</sup> and Kamata Tōji.

Nakagami makes use of the snake as a mystic symbol which is meant to embody the deeper layers of Japanese culture beyond Buddhism. The snake symbolism is connected with Japanese “animism” and the return to “Asian spirituality” within the “New Spirituality Culture” (*Shin-reisei-bunka*) (Shimazono 1996) of contemporary Japan. As far as I see it, Nakagami’s particular interest in the snake was not only due to a deliberate intention of deconstructing the “modern encoding of animism” (Cornyetz 1995:242), as postmodernist criticism may imply. At times it really seems that he wished to conjure up the alternative community of the “snake tribe” and followed rather fantastic discourses, which try to locate Japanese identity in an unwordly realm. Did the author want to reconfirm Japanese identity as embedded in the warm embrace of the snake god? One should reflect more thoroughly on the problem of whether Nakagami’s political consciousness and his claims against discrimination and nationalist ideology were muddled by nostalgia and a desire for “Asian spirituality”.

The snake is a multivalent metaphor. Nakagami’s snake image does not only lead back to what is imagined to be the genuine indigenous culture in a straight line, but is also contained in the spiritual atmosphere of the 1980s. The snake god emerges again as an inductor of the “gnostic mood”

14 He met with Umehara in a dialogue session (*zadankai*), 1984 published as *Kimi wa Yayoi jin ka, Jōmon jin ka* (Are you a Yayoi man or a Jōmon man?) Asahi shuppan sha.



(Nakazawa 1994:296) of this time. The label originates from Nakazawa Shin'ichi (\*1950), a "spiritual intellectual" and a scholar of the *new aka* [New Academism] who aims at the reconstruction of Japanese identity in the realm of the occult. In doing so he refers to Western mysticism paradoxically often.

### Uroboric Structures and "Animist Eroticism"

Employing the snake metaphor in 1990 means to invoke the resurrection of mysticism as a guide into the next century and to reestablish the tradition of occult romanticism in contemporary Japan. Nakagami was not the first author to employ these notions. Occult self-mystification is an argument of modernity, and in connection with the image of the snake it has its literati predecessors in Mishima Yukio and Ishikawa Jun (1899-1987). In his *neo-fin de siècle* style Mishima relates to the Uroboros. In the *Epilogue-F104* of his *Taiyō to tetsu* [1965; *Sun and Steel*, 1970], he tells of his vision of a gigantic snake curled around the globe:

If the giant snake-ring that resolves all polarities came into my brain, then it is natural to suppose that it was already in existence. The snake sought eternally to swallow its own tail. It was a ring vaster than death, more fragrant than that faint scent of mortality that I had caught in the compression chamber; beyond doubt, it was the principle of oneness that gazed down at us from the shining heavens. (Mishima 1970:103)

Like Mishima and Ishikawa, whose last work had the title *Hebi no uta* [1987; *The Song of the Snake*], Nakagami integrated myths from various countries into his texts and also relied on Greek mythology at the beginning of his literary career around 1967 (Kleeman 1991:29). In his later works he employs more "indigenous" models and leads an intensive dialogue with the Japanese dead, his own brother, the defeated in history, the Nakamoto heroes and Oryū. As the progenitor of the snake clan, Oryū, whose name could be understood as dragon=snake, seems to be immortal. In fact, she reappears as a ghost who still cares for the fate of the Nakamotos in *Yasei no kaenju*.

In this connection, it is interesting that one central point of reference within the discourse on national identity during the postwar decades is the realm of the dead (see also Ivy 1995). It seems that, beginning with Fukazawa Shichirō's *Narayama bushikō* [1956; *The Songs of Oak*



*Mountain*, 1957] through *butō* thought, Terayama Shūji's (1936-1983) *Aomori no semushi otoko* [1967; *The Hunchback of Aomori*], Furui Yoshikichi's *Hijiri* and Nakagami's Kumano sagas to recent texts the protagonists seem to be obsessed by the spirits of their forefathers. Consciously or subconsciously, the main space on which the discourse on Japanese identity focuses is the region of the *sai no kawara* [fields of the underworld], or the river of the underworld, the *sanzu no kawa*. Abe Kōbō (1924-1993) too was aware of this. He commented on it rather ironically in his last novel *Kangarū nōto* [1991; *Kangaroo Notes*, 1996]: The *sai no kawara* region had become the site of tourist excursions.

Nakagami was fond of snake fantasies. They meant for him as an artist the "uroboric" structure of a text, with its citations, repetitions and self-similarities. This structure was evident for him in mythology and in the oral tradition. On the other hand, with his textual dedications to the snake Nakagami was praising a pagan god, a symbol of fertility that not only was a device to enrich textual structures but also suggest a romantic vision, a way of thinking that was an alternative to materialism and modernization. Nakagami wrote in a quite ostentatious manner. His texts sometimes convey the impression of elaborated fairy tales, composed in the polyphonic structure so fashionable during the 1980s. That his novels seem to have the flavour of the *bōken shōsetsu*, adventure stories (Watanabe 1993:785), is not an incorrect perception. The portraits of his heroes, e.g. the Nakamotos, bestowed with supernatural beauty and attractiveness, and the androgynous Kei, gifted with magic powers (*chō-nōryoku*),<sup>15</sup> resemble the popular genre of *manga* [comics]. *Manga* too apply occult and mythological elements to a high degree. Nakagami's snake visions remind us of a recent popular introduction to Japanese mythology, which is decorated with *manga* illustrations (Yamamoto 1989).

Nakagami, who was once called a *seibin-chūshin-shūgisha* [a genito-centrist; *Subaru* 1996:123], could just as well be called the *tengu* of con-

15 Nakagami tells us in several passages of Kei's magic powers. Hanaoka, the man who controls her, an adept of "*būdō*" [martial arts; the term is written in *katakana* instead of the usually *kanji* written *budō*], seems to be gifted with supernatural talents as well (see p. 226). In a conversation between Maui and Tomy (p. 179) Kei is said to have probably been trained by a gypsy or a native Indian sorcerer, and to be capable of *saiminjutsu* [hypnosis]. This echoes the contemporary Japanese occult boom.

temporary Japanese literature. This huge type of goblin is a prominent figure of Japanese folklore, and it is closely linked to the fertility cult. Nakagami has left us a rich seed, with his Kumano visions, his tales of the sowers and the snake, and with his grotesque descriptions of the sexual organs as monumental relicts of tribal art, a textual body of "spiritual pornography" or "animist eroticism" of which various aspects still await further discussion.

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