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Lake of Heaven, Dams, and Japan's Transformation

By Ishimure Michiko

Translation and introduction by Bruce Allen

Ishimure Michiko has often been referred to as the "Rachel Carson of Japan". Her bestselling book *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease* (*Kugai jodo; waga minamata byo*, 1972) alerted many Japanese to the dangers of industrial pollution and shaped the conscience of a generation of politically and environmentally aware writers and activists. Ishimure has gone on to develop the Minamata story into a trilogy. She has also written a wide range of poetry, essays, novels, and noh drama and is the recipient of several international literary prizes as well as Japan's Asahi Prize and the Philippines' Magsaysay Prize. She continues to be involved with the struggle for the rights of Minamata victims, and for the rights of other victims of prejudice and modernization. At the core of her writing and life work is the attempt to bring about a rebirth of the endangered "kotodama"—the spirit of language—that has been at the heart of traditional arts and culture in Japan and throughout the world. This article introduces her work and presents an excerpt from her novel *Lake of Heaven*.



Ishimure Michiko

Ishimure's 1997 novel *Lake of Heaven* (in Japanese, *Tenko*) tells the many stories of a traditional rural mountain village in Kyushu which is destroyed in the process of constructing a dam. It deals with the lives of the villagers as they attempt to retain their culture—its stories, dances, music, mythology, and dreams—in the face of displacement, destruction of environment, and rapid industrialization and urbanization hyped as modernization. The work can be roughly classified as a novel, yet its mythopoetical nature stretches the familiar Western conceptions of the novel form. Its narrative style is based on an interweaving of multiple tales, dreams, and myths, told with a circular, rather than linear time conception, evoking a strong sense of the noh drama. Its storytelling style may also remind readers of that found in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Indeed it is perhaps no coincidence that Roy also has gone on to write with great concern about big dam construction and its devastating effects on local culture and environment. Poet Gary Snyder describes *Lake of Heaven* as "a remarkable text of mythopoetic quality—with a noh flavor—that presents much of the ancient lore of Japan and the lore of the spirit world—and is in a way a kind of myth-drama, not a novel." The story becomes a parable for the larger world, "in which all of our old cultures and all of our old villages are becoming buried, sunken, and lost under the rising waters of the dams of industrialization and globalization."

The inspiration for *Lake of Heaven* was drawn from an actual sunken village, Mizukami Mura, located on the Kuma River in Kumamoto Prefecture. When I visited Ishimure in the spring of 2005, she arranged for friends to show me the area. I could see the barely-visible remains of the old village, resting on the bottom of the lake that had been created by the construction of the Ichifusa Dam. Later, I learned more of the fraught history of the dam. Built in 1960 for the purposes of flood control, water use and electrical power generation, in the floods of 1965 the Ichifusa Dam operators "mistimed" the opening of the flood gates, resulting in a "more than doubling" of the damage that would otherwise have occurred. The dam authorities have never officially acknowledged responsibility for the incident, but the residents still bitterly recall the destruction.

I also visited another village in the area, Itsuki Mura, which was in the process of being destroyed as yet another, even larger dam, the Kawabekawa Dam, was being constructed. Some of the last, elderly settlers were still working their old land in the midst of the eviction process going on around them. As a token measure for "environmental preservation," construction workers were erecting a scaffolding around an enormous ginkgo tree, several hundred years old, preparing to excavate it and attempt to move this symbol of the old village to a location in the new village above the projected flood line. The Kawabekawa Dam project, however, has sparked bitter protracted antagonism between pro-and anti-dam factions, often driving wedges among the villagers, fishermen, farmers, and prefectural and national governments. Delays and protests have prolonged its construction, with the process now in its 40 th year. At present it is unclear whether the dam will ever be completed. Even if it should eventually be finished, the earliest estimates are that this would require another ten or more years.

Meanwhile, local residents and the prefectural authorities have come to question the post-war enthusiasm for dam building as a panacea for everything from economic stimulus to flood control, irrigation, electric power generation, and rapid modernization. Serious questions have been raised as to whether this dam is really needed for water control purposes and as to whether it could be ever be economical—even in the most limited sense of the word; ignoring the wider cultural and environmental costs incurred. The anti-dam group argues that the surrounding forests serve as a flood prevention force. The trees provide a "green dam," such that a man-made one is not needed. The national government, for the most part, continues to regard such arguments as uninformed bunkum. Alternative proposals have been made to develop the valley as a nature conservation area. Still the project plods ahead in the midst of bitter opposition and doubts about its efficacy even among former proponents.

Highlighting an unexpected positive turn of events, my tour also included a visit to one other dam, the Arase Dam on the Kuma River. In a landmark decision, this dam has been slated for removal by the Kumamoto prefectural government—over the strong opposition of the national government. The Arase Dam was built in 1954 as the first in a series of three dams on the Kuma River, later to include the Ichifusa dam which inspired the stories of Ishimure's *Lake of Heaven*. The story of the Arase Dam's retirement may be instructive for the consideration of other dams. Dams have limited lifetimes. Their retirements, like their births, require considerable money and effort. The Arase Dam—after 50 years—has gradually become filled with sediment, sand and gravel, reducing its capacity for flood control, water supply and electric power generation. The cost of maintenance and repair further diminishes its reason for existence. The work in progress on removing the dam, cleaning out the sediment, and restoring the river will require four more years. Reflecting on this experience, the

prefecture is in process of reconsidering whether all of its dams are really needed and serve or violate local interests. Such enlightened calculations continue to face vested construction interests at the local, regional and national levels that continue to promote and build unnecessary or environmentally and culturally damaging public works projects in the face of mounting opposition from local residents, farmers, fishermen, and the wider public.



The Arase Dam

Notes:

Ishimure Michiko, Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow is available in English translation by Livia Monnet. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, U. of Michigan Press, 2003.

The original Japanese version of *Lake of Heaven* is: *Tenko*. Tokyo: Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1997.

The following section from *Lake of Heaven* is from Chapter 5, "Secret Song."

Villagers have gathered by the shores of the dam-constructed lake which has submerged their old town, Amazoko. An older woman, Ohina, is helping her daughter Omomo to take over the sacred ritual responsibilities for the village, including singing and dancing, thus hoping to preserve the ancient traditions that had been in danger of being lost when Sayuri, the former *miko* shrine maiden, died recently. Masahiko is a young man who has recently come from Tokyo to the countryside by Amazoko for the first time. He had simply planned to spread the ashes of his deceased grandfather, Masahito, on the lake and then return. He ends up, however, staying on, drawn into the culture and land of his ancestral village and realizing how much of his own spiritual existence had been cut off.

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Omomo's body was swaying back and forth gently. She was holding a rather long set of light red prayer beads hanging from her hands. Two older women nodded to each other as if exclaiming, "Ah!" This was because this string of beads—beads that Sayuri had used when she recited her prayers—was the very same string of coral beads that had come from Oki no Miya shrine. Omomo fingered the beads, holding them to her breast as she chanted something, and then turned toward the elders to greet them. Ohina, standing at the back of the room, signaled Kappei with her eyes. Then she pointed to the entrance of the straw hut. Kappei nodded in understanding. He went to the entrance holding a carpet and spread it out at the feet of the elders. Then he smoothed out the carpet with his big hands, as if looking for sharp stones or twigs. Finally, he signaled silently to the elders to sit.

"How comfortable," the elders commented politely. They sat down quietly and once again gave their attention to Omomo and Ohina in their white robes. Just then the wind gusted and Omomo's hair swayed to the side. With the sky not yet yielding its last rays of light, the tips of her long hair fluttered gently, as if expressing a sign of the coming twilight.

The first voice sounded.

On hearing it, the thought came to Masahiko of those *sal* trees faintly lit up amidst the mountain dew. He had seen these trees for the first time in this mountainous land. Their trunks were smooth and golden, with flecks of red. Omomo's song conveyed the impression of those trees murmuring, off in the distant mist.

In the moonrise

Of the autumn equinox,

From Oki no Miya

Already your servant

Has come.

Already your servant

Has come.

Omomo looked out with half-opened eyes. With the prayer beads hanging from the opening of one sleeve, she raised them slowly to her breast in a just-barely perceptible movement. Her manner was entirely different from the flashy movements of the singers on TV. Her voice and the motions of her body were like the spirit of a tree, or of a thing answering to a faint, distant wind.

The elders sat up straight to welcome the arrival of the servants of Oki no Miya.

Here at the

Meeting place
At the base
Of heaven,
Welcome the new moon.
Over the mountains
Come flowers
And pampas grass,

The blue shell princess
From Oki no Miya.

The god of the mountains.
The master of the cave under heaven.
The lord of the oceans.

If you pass
Down the road
Of a thousand leagues,
A thousand grasses
And vines too
Shall turn red
And become
Beautiful woven silk.
Let us take
One stem of the
Thousand-year pampas grass
And make an offering.

Oshizu and Chiyomatsu's eyes moistened as if they had already entered the darkening surface of the water. Thinking back on the story Chiyomatsu had just told about the lake in the womb of the mountains, Masahiko tried to hold on to the fragments of his grandfather's words that came to mind. Yes, he used to speak of a lake of a "divine wedding." Masahiko remembered his mother's casual-sounding voice, after she had put him in the mental hospital.

"The nurses talk about him, you know. They say that Grandfather often talks to himself. And he goes on about some sort of 'divine wedding lake.' I suppose his memories of his youth must have been quite happy. It seems the nurses hear him talk about how good the old days were—but then he says we ruined his life and pushed him into the hospital. As he got older your grandfather often talked about that divine wedding lake. He must have spent some pretty romantic days at that lake where he had his honeymoon, don't you think? That lake—I wonder, just which lake do you suppose it was he went to?"

Kiyohiko, his father, had answered in his usual expressionless voice, "I didn't hear anything about it, but it doesn't matter, does it? It didn't hurt anyone, did it?"

"But I . . ."

Machiko had started to speak, but cut herself short with an unnatural-sounding laughing voice. Masahiko remembered the conversation well.

Masahiko now understood what his grandfather Masahito had really meant by his words. Omomo had sung of "one stalk of the thousand-year pampas grasses;" and in fact there really was a place called "Susuki Bara," meaning the "plain of pampas grass."

"Perhaps it was the remains of the mouth of a volcano. There was a plain called 'Susuki Bara.' The old folks used to say that below it was Amazoko Lake, the place where the goddess of Oki no Miya and the Lord of the Mountains met. It was the lake of the divine wedding."

His grandfather had told him these stories. The Isara and Tamama Rivers flowed into the ocean, and where they met amidst the currents of the sea was Oki no Miya. The old people said that twice a year, at the spring and autumn equinoxes, the goddess of the ocean palace and the god of the mountains met and exchanged places. In the village of Amazoko the people sent off the mountain god and received the goddess from Oki no Miya. The two gods came from the oceans and the mountains riding on dragon gods. According to his grandfather, Amazoko was the meeting place for the gods.

While Masahiko was listening to Omomo's song, the words of his grandfather, with their music-like cadences, fell into context. So was that what it was about, he wondered. His grandfather must have been trying to convey the spiritual world of his lost village to his weak grandson whose ears had become damaged. Thinking of it now, grandfather must have been so overcome by sorrow that he was unable to move either forward or backward. He had restrained himself with the strength of a man of the countryside. And yet, in the end, the words had just broken out.

"Go blow yourselves up, Japanese islands! Just blow yourselves to bits!"

His inner world had already been destroyed. In the car as he was being taken to the mental hospital he had been completely surrounded by other cars—going forward, going left, going right and coming up from behind.

“We’re in the midst of an army of enemy tanks. We can’t escape. All we can do is go on like this!”

The voice that Masahiko would never forget had been the old man’s cry of desperation. The inner cosmos in which he had been brought up, where people had lived in a world of myth, now lay destroyed at the bottom of the lake and he had been left as a lone survivor, wandering in an unknown megalopolis. He must have come to think of himself as some sort of unripe rice plant that had been mowed down. He had seen it while being led away by a family that regarded him as just a demented old man—the Japanese islands had turned into a giant conveyor belt carrying slabs of concrete, all covered with trembling swarms of vehicles.

He must have imagined he was about to be devoured by the ever-increasing horde of cars that looked so much like a pack of rice weevils. But it was his grandfather’s very last words following that outburst that had sent Masahiko back carrying the urn of cremated bones to the lake that now covered the old village.

“The string of the *biwa* of Moonshadow Bridge . . .”

And now that string had begun to stir within Masahiko’s body, urged on by Omomo’s voice like a small spring of water bubbling up into the mist.

Then in a low voice Ohina began to sing, taking over for Omomo. It felt as if the grasses and trees all about were waving gently in the wind.

Yaa

Hore Yaa.

The five-colored clouds

Are in the shadow of the moon,

Dimly visible

In the mirror of the water.

The sound brought something back to mind. It was the night he first met Ohina, after they had scattered the ashes and she had sung. How he longed to hear that song again. Then Ohina took a string of black beads into her hands.

Yaa

Hore Yaa.

The waters’ destination—

Hold fast to the light

Of the distant world

In the darkness.

Yaa

Hore Yaa.

Staying

Just one night

The feeling doesn’t end.

It is also in

The shadows on the water.

When he had heard the song the time before without understanding the meaning of its words, he had simply thought it interesting to discover that such songs existed, but now he realized that this song told of the wedding of the gods.

A half moon was rising over the water, its light reflecting on the surface. Omomo started to sway back and forth and the tone of her song changed to a clear rising pitch. Masahiko felt he was hearing the sound descending from the heavens.

Ho-o--

Ho-o--

Ho-o--

Repeating the call three times, she passed along the edge of the lake in front of the people and then returned. Masahiko was unable to see her facial expression. He could tell that Kappei was breathing with great care. As the final “Ho-o--” slowly faded away it made him think of birds vanishing into a starry sky.

Ohina’s voice swept low over the grasses behind her like the traces of a breeze and trailed off into the spaces between the trees. For a few moments there was silence. Then, in an unusual voice that sounded like the striking of a plectrum, once again she sang, “Ho-o-- Ho-o--,” the sounds as if descending from

the heavens.

A thought came to him—this is the moment where a vanishing mountain people's spirit is transformed into art. And then, as if gathering together all her voices and inhaling them into the sky, a powerful new verse began—as if woven into a tapestry of sound.

White heron

White heron

Night singing bird,

Let the flowers fall.

The name of the princess

Whose bed lies in the water

Is the Blue Shell Princess

Of the Palace of the Ocean.

The name of the mountain god

Is *Amazoko-no-unabara-no-mikoto*.

This one night's stay

Amidst the thousand-year pampas grasses,

Amidst the shadow of the moon,

A stalk of grass

Sways and becomes

Countless flowers.

Since ancient times

In Amazoko

The water of the lake

In the womb of the mountain,

With its fragrant smell

When night comes,

Keeps the dragons

Attending

The Blue Shell Princess,

Pulling her long, shining

Blue hair,

Till she becomes

The goddess of the mountains.

The Isara River

Shows the way.

Flow on,

For the bounty

Of the oceans and the mountains.

The landscape Masahiko's grandfather had tried to describe to him now began to appear. The place of the wedding of the gods was the lake that lay in the womb of Amazoko Mountain. The villagers paid their respects and offered songs so that the night of the divine wedding would come to pass successfully. On the eve of the autumn equinox the gods returned peacefully to spend the night together at the unseen lake. If on the following morning there was a faint whitish tint in the Isara River even when there had been no rain, this showed that the wedding of the gods had taken place happily. And all along the river, in the mountains and in the fields, the land became moistened. And for another year fecundity would be spread throughout the land, from the mountains to the distant sea. And the plants at the depths of the ocean, and all the fishes too, would thrive. Amazoko was the dwelling place of the gods who enriched the mountains and the seas.

In his childhood Masahiko had thought of these tales of a far-off forgotten mountain village as merely the fragments of memories of an old man who had been

separated from his hometown. In those days the only one who had been there to really listen to his grandfather's stories was the big old ginkgo tree. Now he had come to realize that in order to see into the world that had been hidden in his grandfather's mind it wasn't necessary to resort to ideas from ethnology or the recently fashionable ecological theories about saving the earth. All that was needed was to share in the feelings of these elders right here; these people who continued to return to Amazoko in their dreams.

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Masahiko felt something in Ohina and Omomo's voices awakening emotions that had been slumbering in the deepest reaches of his heart. It was as if the strings that had been reverberating within him were at last sounding together. In Ohina and Omomo's singing he could hear the kind of sounds he'd been searching for—sounds like the verses of the *imayou* songs of the distant past. He could hear a composition that had not yet been performed for the outside world; one written for *hichiriki*, *shakuhachi*, *sasara*, *koto*, *otsutsumi* drums, and other stringed and percussion instruments. It was a piece that started singing all by itself; at times bursting out with a heavily-layered feeling of life, and in some verses filled with the presence of an autumn evening in the fields and mountains, faintly reverberating with the soft sounds of insect voices calling to a distant world.

For the first time he could feel himself walking down Utazaka, passing by the weeping cherry tree and placing his hands on the mulberry trees of the old Silk Estate. He looked up at the sky, sharply framed by the ridgeline of the mountains.

Nearby was a large well, set off by a mossy stone wall with fern leaves waving about, growing from its cracks. The villagers called it the "Ikawa" well—but could it be that this well gave birth to the wind also? In its dark water the face of a person was reflected. The face of neither Ohina nor Omomo, it had faint, carefree-looking eyebrows and its eyes, which seemed partly cast downward, looked long, narrow, and dim. Its slightly-grinning expression was inscrutable. Could this be the face of his great-great grandmother Nazuna who had taken in and raised the child left by the Lord of the cave? It was said that she had lived over one hundred years, but would she appear with a face like this? He felt himself trembling.

His grandfather had slipped away from the world of such things and for a while he had tried to become a person of the city. Compared to the villagers he had been somewhat more cultured. Also, through the generations in which they had used the name Michihiko, the family had owned enough mountain land to build a temple. And even if his grandfather's estate had been ruined, still he had established a home in Tokyo and had sent his son to college and on to a position with a trading firm, enabling him to make a decent living. Why then, had he become so strange?

The things in his speech and behavior that people called strange were limited to his military experience and to things connected with the village of Amazoko. Perhaps if the difference between two people's experiences is too extreme, one person may become fearful of the things he or she can't understand about the other person and end up saying the person is demented or mentally ill.

Masahiko felt the warm hand of his grandfather—the hand with fingers lost in the war in Okinawa—being placed upon his shoulder.

The words, "My lost fingers . . . they're playing the biwa," sounded in his ears.

The leaves of the mulberry trees shone with a fresh light and then became immersed in the thin fog. Why was it that Masahiko, who would have been thought to be ignorant about plants, knew the shape and form of mulberry leaves, and of their delicate, slender branches that swayed and reached toward the sky? He found it fascinating to think how the strings of his biwa had come from the insect-chewed leaves of a mulberry and its body had come from the trunk of a mulberry. His own *biwa* might not be quite like one in the *Shoso-in* Museum, but to him the beauty of its shape was unrivalled. He couldn't help wondering what history lay behind the making of his *biwa*, with its exotic shape.

He recalled hearing the talk of his friends at school, leaning on one elbow and blowing smoke from their cigarettes as they spoke, casually spouting off things like, "The modern era is an age when meaning has become completely deconstructed." He wondered what kind of feelings about the realities of life lay hidden behind those words. They seemed pale and insubstantial.

But looking at things from the village of Amazoko, here he saw people living with the rhythms of the growing of the trees, the flowing of the waters, and the waxing and waning of the moon. Here he couldn't say that existence was meaningless. Even just thinking of a *biwa*, couldn't a person discover within its form a profound world of order? The villagers see and understand such meaning and bring it together. They look on existence as being one image of the world placed in the midst of the entire creation; one in which all animals and all people, themselves included, have to take their parts. They can't help but give it meaning.

He had understood this just from one moment of seeing the fresh light shining from the leaves of the mulberry trees. In this place, wasn't meaning being reborn moment-by-moment, like the plants growing on the bottom of the lake? At least, he thought, it's this way for me, and for people like Ohina, Omomo, Kappai, and the elders, and the villagers who return to Amazoko in their dreams.

He felt as if he had been entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out the last will of this dying mountain region. He felt himself trembling as if he had been allowed to slip through a gate into a secret region.

Introduction and translation by Bruce Allen, who recently completed a translation of the entire novel. Prepared for Japan Focus and posted on February 21, 2006.

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