

That Early Morning Fog: William F. Sibley's *Minakata Kumakusu*

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Introduction

My text today is Bill's translation of five letters exchanged between the naturalist Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941) and the historian Iwata Jun'ichi (1900-1945) in the summer of 1931. Bill selected, edited, and translated the exchange, wrote an introduction, picked a title, and included it as a chapter in the book called *Parting at Dawn: An Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature* edited by Stephen Miller in 1996 from Gay Sunshine Press. I want to focus on the title, which raises questions about the work of selecting and contextualizing translations.

According to Maeda Ai in his *Zôho bungaku tekusuto nyûmon*, a title is a code that indicates to readers how to approach a text, and something that brings together a text as a closed system from its beginning to its end (Maeda, 95-98). Maeda argues that the reader will be anxious if there is no title, which gives some direction to the reader. The title also regulates the story. As an example, Maeda points to Soseki's *Mon*. The Japanese title *Mon* was first made by Soseki's pupils before he started writing the series for *Asahi shimbun*. At the end of the piece, in a nod to the title, he included a scene set at a big gate in Kamakura.

In the case of this translation, I can imagine it was necessary to make a title for the chapter, but what Bill did is daring. The title, "Morning Fog (Correspondence on Gay Lifestyles)," sets the stage for our reading of the letters. "Morning fog," "correspondence," and "gay lifestyles"—we are made to look for these three codes as we read. But why these three? To explore this question, I'd like to look at the letter Kumagusu wrote to Iwata on

August 20th. Bill describes it as “perhaps the single most famous letter he ever wrote” (Sibley, 138). In this text, I believe we can see how the three codes intertwine in the form of an epistolary in which Kumagusu tries to express his belief in and passion for exploring the disdained and scandalous field of sexuality studies to the younger man Iwata, whom he highly admired as a scholar and whose friendship he was seeking.

Correspondence between Kumagusu and Iwata

In his *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950*, Gregory M. Pflugfelder cites both Minakata’s and Iwata’s works more than a few times, suggesting that it is impossible to write a history of Japanese male-male sexuality in Japan without relying on the scholarship of these two male intellectuals. I can’t emphasize enough the significance of Bill’s translation of these letters as primary sources in allowing us to examine how Japanese intellectuals talked about homosexuality in the semi-private sphere of letter writing. It’s not just his rendering of words in one language into another; it’s also his choice of what to translate. I brought a copy of the Japanese letter where I marked the parts Bill cut. I think the original was about twice as long as the English version. Please take a look at it.

Bill introduces Kumagusu as a “naturalist” whose specialties include botany and marine biology. Kumagusu came to the United States in 1887 where he studied biology in the Midwest and conducted biological research in Florida. He then moved to England in 1891 where he studied and worked at the British Museum, and came back to Japan in 1900. Kumagusu is best known for his study of slime molds (Sibley, 138). He also explored Japanese religions, folklore, and “folk history.” Bill explains this synchronization of science and religions as follows: “he even seeks to find in basic biological principles (here, the life-reproduction-death cycle of slime mold) ‘scientific’ grounds for certain religious doctrines (in

this case, metempsychosis, according to his own, possibly idiosyncratic reading of the Nirvana Sutra).” Moreover, Bill extends Kumagusu’s intellectual endeavor to Georges Bataille’s “analogies” and “parallels” between “biological functions pertaining to all organisms (in Buddhist terms, “all sentient beings”) and various human behaviors, especially sexual” (138-9). Kumagusu’s fascination with the structure of all life on earth and his effort to link the higher supernatural and human worlds to lower organisms has been dubbed “the Minakata Mandala” (139).

Bill cut a lot from the original letter, but he kept the part where Kumagusu emphasizes how humans can learn from these life forms: “How mistaken people’s perceptions can be!—to look at dead matter yet to consider it virtually lifeless in its original state” (Sibley, 157). The exclamation mark is the equivalent to the tone in the line: 原形体は死物同然と思う人間の見解がまるで間違いおる。(南方, 336).

Bill also provides his view of what is seen as Kumagusu’s “near-Emperor-worship” expressed in his writing about the imperial “command lecture” he gave to Showa Emperor Hirohito (Sibley, 139). Here Bill makes an analogy with Soseki whom he defines as “the Meiji novelist who more than any other single figure paved the way for a broadly anti-establishment culture (before the rise of Marxism in the 1920s, that is)” and brings Kumagusu’s activism to “oppose the consolidation of Shinto shrines (and the abolition of countless small shrines rooted in local folk cults) which was pursued by the state in the early years of this century.”

Iwata was an expert who was, in Bill’s words, “devoted mainly to research, especially of a bibliographical nature, on literary and historical sources related to male homosexuality from the classical (Nara and Heian) period down to the early 20th century” (Sibley, 141). He published a series of articles—“*Honchō nanshokukō*” or “On Man-Love/Lust”—in the journal

Hanzai-gaku (Criminology) in 1930. Kumagusu was so impressed by Iwata's analysis of male homosexuality that he contacted this young man, beginning a ten-year-long exchange of letters that continued until Kumagusu's death.

Anthropologist Nakazawa Shinichi argues that Kumagusu was critical of the intellectual marginalization of sexuality studies as a result of state-control of the marriage institution, the family system, and sexual behaviors (Nakazawa, 12). Bill too mentions this sanitization of intellectual inquiries in Kumagusu's severe critique of Yanagita Kunio and his "studious avoidance of sexuality and eroticism" (Sibley, 138). For Kumagusu, described as someone who was "committed to an ideal of a sublimated, spiritualized 'Pure Way'" (143), encountering Iwata was a relief and hope. These letters, full of what Bill with understatement calls "lengthy digression," transmit the excitement this sixty-four-year-old man had for this young man.

Gay Lifestyles

It is somewhat puzzling to see the word "gay" used to describe what Kumagusu wrote. Certainly he wrote about many examples of male-male sexuality in Japan and other areas. Yet, as Pflugfelder says, Kumagusu preferred the term *nanshoku* rather than "*dōseiai*" or "same-sex love" (Pflugfelder, 232). Bill too argues several times in his introduction that we should not use our modern terminologies to interpret what they were experiencing. I do not know why he chose the term, but again the title guides us to where we would not be able to get without it. With the word "gay" in his title, Bill succeeds in directing readers to an aspect of Kumagusu that is well known but isn't included in many of the officially sanctioned biographies of this very complex man. It also has the practical effect of keeping readers focused - because of the many digressions in the letters, even after the heavy editing Bill did,

it can be easy to lose one's way without this semantic guidepost.

Morning fog

In his letter to Iwata, Kumagusu enthusiastically talks about his love for and memories of two brothers (Hayama Shigetaro and Shinjiro) whom he first met 44 years ago—*zokkon no bijin* (南方, 22) or “devastatingly beautiful”(Sibley, 152)—who had passed away while he was in the U.S. He tells Iwata about the scene “through the all-encompassing mist that was yet unpierced by the sun’s rays” when Shigetaro came to send him off (153). Kumagusu writes, “As the old adage goes, ‘even if you accompany your dear friend on the first thousand years of his journey to say farewell, it is still farewell,’ and so I restrained him from coming any further with me. As we moved off in opposite directions we both kept turning around until we could no longer make each other out in the distance, and were finally parted” (154-154).

Kumagusu does not hesitate to express how important these boys were to him. “During my sojourn abroad and then my years in Kumano, by day or by night, I never forgot for a moment my two friends who were now dead and gone. The images of these Hayama brothers, as well as of my parents, had always been with me, always at my side. Although no words were uttered, they gave me suggestions through what is known as mind-to-mind communication” (Sibley, 154-5). He says that this “process” of working on his own research even thinking of them including “involved the spontaneous workings of my ‘subconscious,’” and “sometimes came to me in the form of reversed writing” (155).

Kumagusu later in his letter describes when he recently visited where he parted from Shigetaro, and shows the poem he wrote to Iwata: “That early morning fog/ all around us as we parted/ Saying only ‘Never forget!’--/ This morning I feel it in my bones” (Minakta, 160). The original is 忘るなよとばかり言ひて別れてしその朝霧のけさぞ身にしむ

(南方, 341). He gave this to the 4th brother and when they reached the shrine, he asked the brother to “present it to his older brother’s spirit.” The words “morning fog” evoke for Kumagusu his memory of Shigetaro when he saw him for what was to be the last time. The phrase perhaps serves as a reminder of the partially hidden nature of male-male love at the time, but also of the potential romanticism of such liaisons.

Why does Kumagusu write all these personal memories? His answer to my question can be found in the text: “Were you to say to me, ‘If there is in our world today even a single example of the Pure Way of Men, show him to me,’ I would venture to reply that precisely in order to show you that I am that single example I have written this letter, both in great haste and at great length. My penmanship is poor and even I cannot read what I have written here. But to send it as is, without revision or adornment bears further witness to the truth of all I have told you” (Sibley, 163). Bill cut a significant amount of Kumagusu’s various musings but keeps these lines to highlight Kumagusu’s view of “the Pure Way of Men” and longing for Iwata: “Perhaps you are snickering at me for having written of these strange experiences at such length, in the meantime neglecting the important work that I should have been doing on my fungus samples—for, indeed, wasting a prodigious amount of time and effort. That I have gone on at this length about trivial matters, to the point of incurring the derision of even someone like yourself who is not a fellow biologist, is all because of my propensity for loving friendship.” This sincere and candid statement made by Kumagusu is touching. He continues, “Anybody who would scorn this could only do so because he himself has no first-hand experience of what I’ve spoken of and can feel nothing on hearing of another’s.”

This whole section edited and translated by Bill seems to resonate with Nakazawa’s reading of Kumagusu as someone who tried to theorize and practice his sexuality as a social

identity or “way of life” (*sei no yōshiki* [Nakazawa, 46]). Bill’s text translates Kumagusu’s attitude expressed in this long letter as “Gay Lifestyles” and Nakazawa translates it into our contemporary Japanese word “*gei*” (49). Is the title evoking for us the formation of gay identity in Kumagusu’s letter?

In his introduction, however, Bill criticizes that to see Kumagusu’s effort to be a “struggle to ‘make himself and his world Gay’—a word that he did not, of course, know,” is to “have reified into an all-embracing conceptual construct with apparently little to do with something so mundane as homosexual love and relationships” (Sibley, 141). I honestly don’t know what to make of this, but I appreciate if you could share your thoughts.

Conclusion

I want to leave you with a few thoughts on why I was drawn to these letters as a topic for this symposium. I entered the program in 1997 and graduated in 2005. I took a few of Bill Sibley’s courses including one where he taught these letters, but it was after he passed away that I started reading his work closely.

The day before May 7th, I had just read “Morning Fog” for my course Queer Japan that I was teaching. The day we read the letters in class was fun. My students connected them to the fast-growing popular genre “boys love” in manga and anime. I think many of you got the email from the department on Friday, May 8th. That day, I was in my office working on a queer students’ performance for DePaul’s LGBTQA Month, which was going to happen the following day.

I had been wanting to teach a “Queer Japan” course ever since I participated on a panel with that name with Keith Vincent, Jonathan M. Hall and Sarah Frederick for the MLA meeting in 2004. I finally decided to teach the course in 2009. I had wanted to use the

translation for one of the sessions, and dreamed of inviting Bill to class, but the time went by so fast that I ended up not contacting him but thinking that I could invite him next year. Afterwards, it seemed like some kind of coincidence that we were reading Bill's words at such a time. At any rate, I've been glad of this chance to revisit his letters, and to think again about the meanings of translation and of the boundaries and possibilities that emerge from something as simple as a well-conceived title.

Thank you.

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