An English Translation and Cultural Interpretation of the Poems of Four Representative Works of *Nihon Kakyoku* (Japanese Song)

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キーワード：*Nihon Kakyoku* (Japanese Song), Aka Tonbo, Hamabe no Uta, Yashi no Mi, Kōjō no Tsuki

Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to explain the process of translation of the poems of four representative works of the early twentieth century genre of *Nihon Kakyoku*, or Japanese Song, and thereby to introduce the linguistic and cultural background to the poems. The paper was inspired by A Recital of Japanese Song, London, March 2002, (in which the writer was privileged to participate, giving readings of her translations of the poems).

As far as the translation itself is concerned, it is true to a certain extent of any translation from one language to another, that if the cultural background to what is to be conveyed is unfamiliar to the reader, then much of the intended meaning may be lost. Similarly, in an attempt to convey the sense of the original language as faithfully as possible, while in as natural a style as possible in the target language, this not infrequently necessitates or results in a slight difference in approach in the choice of linguistic expression used. This is particularly the case with translation from Japanese to English. Due to the characteristic brevity and ambiguity of expression of the Japanese language, with its tendency to omit the subject, for example, to imply rather than explicitly state the intended meaning, and its wealth of intrinsically ‘Japanese’ words and phrases, any translation into English invariably requires additional linguistic information. In certain cases, where there is no exact equivalent of, or suitable alternative to, a Japanese expression in English, it can indeed seem more appropriate to choose to use the Japanese term itself, rendered in romanization, in the hope that it will gradually be assimilated into English — as is already the case with numerous terms closely related to Japanese cultural tradition — thus both naturally facilitating greater knowledge of Japan and its language, and relieving the very necessity of further translation of the term. Nevertheless, initially, the concept of the term still calls for explanation. Furthermore, given, by its very nature, the essentially often symbolic imagery or ‘condensed’ mode of expression employed in the language of poetry in general, and especially in the traditional Tanka and Haiku forms
of Japanese poetry — in terms of the predetermined number of lines and syllables in the original — but even in that of Shintai-shi (literally, ‘new-style poems’, the Western-influenced poems of the early twentieth century period), and of many of those which were set to music as Nihon Kakyōoku, translation of poetry presents a yet greater challenge.

Though with the aid of as much background research as possible, in the translation of the following poems of four representative examples of Nihon Kakyōoku, decisions as to singular or plural, for example, and the definition of the subject where it is otherwise not stated, are ultimately based on my own interpretation of the poems. I have tried to be as faithful as possible to the original order of the lines, though inevitably, due to the different syntactic structure of Japanese and English, this has not always been possible. I have at the same time endeavoured to give consideration to rhythm, and to the relationship between the sounds and shapes of the English wording I have chosen, in terms of alliteration and assonance as per English poetic tradition — particularly with a view to the translations being rendered in the form of recitation before a sung performance of the actual songs in Japanese. While regrettably it has not been possible to retain the same rhythm or number of syllables as in the original Japanese, again due to the differing morphological construction of the two languages, I have done my utmost to convey the prevailing Japanese ‘flavour’ and ‘atmosphere’ of the original poems, and in my choice of wording to achieve a ‘tone’ or ‘style’ of language (albeit in another language) as near to the original as possible.

As far as the rhythm of the original poems is concerned, however, it is interesting to note that, though of varying lengths and number of lines, the poems tend to be mainly composed of lines phrased in the traditional 5 and 7 syllable metre. From the point of view of rhyme, alliteration and assonance, while the English language, with its wealth of potential sounds or sound combinations, (estimated at theoretically amounting to over 89, 165), lends itself readily to numerous possibilities in this respect, the Japanese language, with its regular syntactical structure, its fixed adjectival, adverbial and verbal inflections, and final particles, with each word composed of a combination of established syllables, each of which in principle ending with a vowel, and with its pure vowel sounds, consists of a predetermined number of only 112 sounds in all. (This probably, of course, amounts to slightly more if the classical forms are taken into account.) As a result of the relatively limited number of sounds in the Japanese language, therefore, the same sounds naturally tend to occur together with quite a high degree of frequency. Nevertheless, in the words of Professor Kindachi Haruhiko:

“All in all, the sound unit structure of the Japanese language is simple. . . . Though such a language tends to sound simple to the ear, however, it does have the advantage of sounding beautiful when sung. . . . As far as songs in European languages are concerned, the reason why those in Italian and Spanish sound so beautiful, is that a great many of the sounds in these two languages end in pure vowels. . . . The most frequently occurring vowel in Japanese is ‘a’, followed in order by ‘o’, ‘i’, ‘u’, and ‘e’ respectively. ‘a’ and ‘o’ are the two vowel sounds most favoured in song, and especially from the point of view of sopranos, if the top extended notes of a song happen to be on these vowel sounds, they can apparently be sung with extreme ease. In this respect, the Japanese language is very well suited to singing.”

This is of particular interest, as the five poems under discussion here are all those which subsequently became songs. Moreover, a further point of interest is the degree to which the poems do appear to contain a conscious arrangement of alliterative and assonant consonant and vowel sounds. (See the poem, Hamabe no Uta, below.)

Where the original poems tend not to use any form of punctuation, instead sometimes employing the device of leaving a space between phrases, I have found it necessary for clarity of meaning in most cases, to insert punctuation, based on my comprehension of the phrasing. The subtle difference in nuance from a visual point of view intended by the Japanese poet in his/her choice of the use of Kanji or Hiragana, is also something inevitably impossible to reproduce in English — though this is, of course, equally the case when a poem is recited, or with the setting of a
poem to music, where the visual (typographical) element is lost. In fact, the gradual appearance of the poems in several publications, the occasional revising of the works on the part of the poet, and particularly the setting of poems to music, has resulted in various versions of the same poem, each with a slightly different arrangement of phrases and lines, choice of Kanji or Hiragana, and, in the case of Hiragana, the old or modern form. As, however, I have personally approached the following poems from the point of view of their being the inspiration for songs, and as they tend generally to be known rather in their song-form than in their original capacity as poems, I have chosen to use the song-form typography in the reproduction of the poems in Japanese. Since, however, each of the several authoritative publications of the songs — including music textbooks for use in Primary Schools (in which the song Aka Tonbo is contained), Junior High Schools (in which Aka Tonbo is once more contained, as well as the songs Hamabe no Uta and Kojō no Tsuki), and High Schools (in which the song Yashi no Mi is contained) — still gives a slightly differing form of the poems in terms of the use of Kanji and Hiragana, I have taken it upon myself to select one of these, namely Nihon Kakyoku Senshū (A Selection of Japanese Song), and have reproduced the respective poems in the versions in which they appear in this publication.

1. Aka Tonbo Red Dragonfly

Poem by 三木露風 Miki Rofu (1889-1964)
Song by 山田耕筍 Yamada Kōsaku (1886-1965)

夕やけ小やけの 赤とんぼ
Owarte mita no wa itsu no hi ka

山の畑の 桑の実を
Yama no hatake no kuwa no mi o

小籔に摘んだは まぼろしか
Kokago ni tsunda wa maborooshi ka


お里のたよりも 絶えはてた
Osato no tayori mo taehateta

夕やけ小やけの 赤とんぼ
Yūyake koyake no aka tonbo

とまっているよ 竹の先
Tomatte iru yo sao no saki

In the evening sunset, in the gentle glow — red dragonfly!
When was it that I saw it from my [1] nursemaid’s back?

Gathering mulberries in the mountain fields
With a small basket. Was it a dream?

Even word from [3] her village ceased to come.

In the evening sunset, in the gentle glow — red dragonfly!
[4] Look, it’s settled! On the tip of a pole.

This poem, which later came to be possibly the best-loved of all Nihon Kakyoku, was composed in 1921 by the
lyric and symbolist poet, Miki Rofū, and published in the same year in an edition of Kashi no Ki『桜の木』 (Oak Tree), a journal of poems and songs known as Dōyō, or Children’s Poems/Songs — or more specifically, Sōsaku Dōyō, or Creative Children’s Poems/Songs. The composing of Dōyō represented a movement which began in the Taishō period (1912–26), to create poems and songs with Japanese themes and of high artistic quality for children. While the idea of Dōyō was that they were written specifically for children, there are others which are not so readily obviously so, and, as with Aka Tonbo, which are open to different interpretation and debate. This was in fact a debate which existed even with the beginnings of the Dōyō movement:

“The question of whether the poet of Dōyō was writing for himself, or whether he was directing what he wrote to children, is a question which Dōyō by their very nature embody.”

In the preface to his first collection of Dōyō, Shinju-shima『真珠島』 (Pearl Island), Rofū himself wrote:

“In Dōyō, the poet himself appears. Unless the poet himself appears, they will not be good Doyo. As far as creative approach is concerned, I believe that in the composing of Dōyō too, the poet should express himself... Dōyō are poems which express innocent fresh sensibility and imagination in simple language. In simple child’s language — that is, using child’s language to express something no different from in an actual poem. Dōyō are poems.”

As with Aka Tonbo, many Dōyō, with their references to fond memories of childhood and the natural scenery and seasons of the countryside — and, as in the case of Aka Tonbo, particularly after it acquired, in 1927, the beautiful, lyrical melody of its song-form setting — came to appeal widely to all ages. Aka Tonbo is in fact a recollection of the poet’s own childhood spent in the countryside of Tatsuno in Hyōgo prefecture, inspired by the sight of a red dragonfly, symbolic of the end of summer and the coming of autumn.

NOTES
(i) 負わって Owarete = 背負われて seowarete = ‘being carried on the back’. As the passive form of the verb in the original Japanese here stands quite complete in itself, both the subject and the discharger of the action of ‘carrying’ are omitted. In translation into English, however, it is necessary to make a decision as to 1) ‘who was being carried’ and 2) ‘by whom’ or ‘on whose back’ the action of carrying was taking place. From the overall tone of the poem, in terms of it being seen as a personal reminiscence of childhood, one would assume the subject of the carrying to be the poet himself, as a young boy — hence the choice of ‘I’ in the first person. What is interesting here is that, while the subject is naturally often omitted in Japanese where it is mutually understood to both speaker and listener, where the context is not entirely or immediately clear, as might be the case in a piece of literary or poetic writing, such as this, it is very much left to the imagination. Though one would instinctively think that it would be his mother’s back on which the young Rofū was being carried, therefore, it seems, in fact, that even from the Japanese point of view, there are various possible interpretations, and consequently various theories. With a little background research, however, we discover that Rofū’s parents separated when he was young, and that he was brought up by his grandparents. Rather than being carried on his grandfather’s back, however, since mention is made later of a Neya — a nursemaid, babysitter, or nanny, someone whose job it was to take charge of the young Rofū — it would seem more appropriate that it should be his nursemaid’s back. The idea of a young girl of possibly only about ten years old carrying a younger child on her back was not so extraordinary in this period in Japan, when in poorer families with several children, it would often be the case for an elder sister to help take care of a smaller sibling, which role included carrying him on her back instead of the mother. It was, in fact, the custom in certain families for a young girl, often a relation from a less well-off background, to be employed to take care of young children in return for board and lodging, in preparation for her marriage, which the family would then be responsible for arranging. As this
custom did not exist in quite the same way in, for example, the context of British society of the period, and each of the various possibilities of translation in English has a different connotation, it was difficult here to decide as to which term would be the most appropriate for Neya in English. While ‘babysitter’ sounds too modern, ‘nanny’, though referring to a woman employed to take care of children, and more suitable period-wise, could be taken for the familiar term for ‘grandmother’. This misconstrued image at the beginning might then conceivably cause confusion with the later reference to Neya at fifteen. All in all, ‘nursemaid’ seemed to be the closest of these three choices, both in terms of period and sense.

(ii) The term 嫁に行き yome ni iki literally means ‘go to be a bride’, or rather ‘go to be a daughter-in-law’. This refers to the custom of a woman leaving her own family to enter the family of the person she was marrying, with the underlying connotation that she would thereafter belong to, and serve the family, the concept of which is difficult to convey in translation. I chose to use the slightly old-fashioned English term ‘wed’, as style-wise it seemed to suggest the mood of the original, and associated the idea of ‘going to be wed’ with the idea that the nursemaid was to be married into another family after returning to her village, as mention is made in the following line. (See following note (iii))

(iii) The term 里 sato can be variously interpreted as ‘the countryside’, a ‘village’, ‘hamlet’, or ‘group of dwellings in the countryside’, or ‘one’s parents’ home’ or ‘one’s old home’. I felt that the term ‘village’, modified by ‘her’, most suitably incorporated all these ideas. It is extremely difficult, however, to know to whose sato the poet is referring here, and again there seem to be differing theories. The honorific (ador) ‘o’, as is placed before sato in the poem, used when speaking to or about someone to whom one would show respect, can also be used to convey a general tone of politeness in speech, and is sometimes used when speaking to children, in order to encourage in them an awareness of politeness. While still used today, this usage perhaps particularly reflects the language of the period. After much consideration, I came to the conclusion that the poem, while being a nostalgic recollection of Miki Rořů’s childhood, represents at the same time an association of his childhood with his nursemaid, whose existence, in the absence of his mother, must have had the greatest importance for him. The activity of gathering mulberries in the second verse, which takes us on in time to when he was a little older, was presumably also something done with his nursemaid. When he had grown a little older again (in the third verse), and there was ostensibly no more need for his nursemaid, now aged fifteen, she left to be married. No news from his nursemaid’s village meant that the poet had no means of learning about her, and that the tie of friendship and affection shared with her had been severed.

The circumstances of the composing and the content of the poem were in fact clarified by an account by Rořů himself, originally published in 1959 in a commercial journal entitled Shinsin Shōhō (Forestry Report), which featured an article on dragonflies. Though the account was discovered and recorded in 1966, by the director of the Dragonfly Society, Eda Shigeo, in an article entitled The Secret of the Song, Aka Tonbo, its existence was not generally brought to light until 1990, when it was printed in an article in the Asahi Shinbun newspaper, On the Dōyō, Aka Tonbo. The circumstances of the discovery and revealing of this account are introduced in a valuable work by Professor Wada Noriko of Hyōgo University, Miki Rořů – Aka Tonbo no Jōkei (Miki Rořů – The Circumstances of Aka Tonbo). It was written by Rořů at the age of 32, during a four-year period spent teaching literature, language and aesthetics at a Trappist monastery in Hokkaido. Rořů wrote as follows:

“... It was a memory from my childhood. The year I wrote Aka Tonbo was 1921 (10th year of Taishō), and the place was a Trappist monastery near Hakodate in Hokkaido. One afternoon at about 4 o’clock, I looked out of the window, and suddenly noticed a red dragonfly. It was standing perfectly still on the tip of a pole in the gentle air and light. For quite a long time it made no attempt to fly away. Meanwhile I watched it. Afterwards, I composed Aka Tonbo. ... There was a young girl in the family, employed to look after me. The girl carried me on her back. There was a sunset above the western hills. A dragonfly flew into the grassy field. I saw it from the
young girl's back. This is something I remember. It is something I recalled when I saw the dragonfly in Hokkaido... As the girl was already quite grown up, she went back to her village. What I heard was that she had got married. The mountain fields were fields to the north of our house..."

The discovery of this account is of great importance, as it naturally marks the end of the long debate concerning the interpretation of certain phrases in Aka Tonbo. (My translation of the poem, based on my own interpretation of the content, was in fact completed before coming across Professor Wada's work.)

(iv) Though an actual Japanese equivalent term for 'Look!' does not appear here, I felt the sense to be incorporated in the final exclamatory particle, yo, of とまとっているよ Tomatte iru yo, which embodies a nuance of emphasis, persuasion, or attracting attention. The image of the dragonfly which has settled on the tip of a pole in this last verse, connecting once more with the start and the inspiration of the poem, brings the poet back to the present. While until this point the sentiment of the poem is perhaps more that of inward reflection, here the poet would seem to be appealing to his reader to reflect on the wonder of the dragonfly.

2. Hamabe no Uta Song of the Shore

Poem by 林古渕 Hayashi Kokei (1875–1947)
Song by 成田為三 Narita Tamezo (1893–1945)

Roaming along the shore in the early morn,
I recall the things of the past.
In the sound of the wind, in the semblance of the clouds,
In the approaching waves, and the colour of the shells.

Wandering along the shore at eventide,
I recall the people of the past.
In the approaching waves, in the ebbing waves,
In the colour of the moon, and the twinkling of the stars.

This poem, by the poet Hayashi Kokei, a scholar of classical Chinese and Japanese literature, was first published in 1913, in issue 8, volume 4 of the journal Ongaku おんがく ['Music'], or 'Music', edited by Ushiyama Mitsuru. While the poem was not written to be a Dōyō, and the poet himself was not directly connected with the Dōyō Movement, after the poem was set to music in song-form in 1918 by the composer, Narita Tamezo, who was connected with the
movement, it came to be included in Dōyō (song) collections. At the same time, as with Aka Tonbo, this reflective poem, with its evocative depiction of Nature and the elements, became, in its melodious song-form, one of the best-loved, representative works of the Nihon Kakyoku genre.

NOTES

(i) The subject of さまよえず samayoeba and もとおり motooreba is not given here, inevitably leaving various possibilities of interpretation and translation, as, for example: If/When I roam/one roams. I preferred to try to conjure up an immediate impression of the atmosphere, with the idea of ‘As I roam/wander’, or ‘Roaming/Wandering －, I －’. The expression motooreba, from 回る・廻る もとおり motooru, is an ancient usage, meaning ‘to roam/wander to and fro’.12

(ii) The meaning of あした ashita here is not ‘tomorrow’ (明日), which is pronounced in the same way, and which it might naturally be thought to be. When written in kanji, it shares the kanji for ‘morning’ (朝), usually pronounced asa, and actually means ‘early morning’. This expression has disappeared from contemporary Japanese usage, but can still be found in works of poetry.13 In keeping with this poetical (classical) tone of the expression, I chose to use the English ‘morn’, rather than ‘morning’. Similarly, I chose to use ‘eventide’ for the corresponding poetical ゆうべ yube in the second verse.

(iii) 昔のこと mukashi no koto, ‘things of the past’; 昔の人 mukashi no hito, ‘people of the past’. Due to the lack of a distinction between the singular and the plural, it is difficult to know here whether the poet is referring to one particular event in the past, or to one particular person. It is also difficult to know as to how long ago in the past the poet is referring in the use of the term 昔 mukashi — whether it is in fact to unknown ‘ancient days long gone’, or whether it is to his own personal and relatively more recent ‘past’. There is a theory that the poem was written on the poet’s return as an adult to the shore of Shonan Kaigan, near Tsujido Higashi Kaigan, in Kanagawa prefecture, where he had once been taken as a child45, which would mean that the poem might be interpreted as the recollection of an episode in the poet’s childhood. When the poem was first published, however, it had the addition of a third verse, in which mention was made of a red garment, presumably referring to a woman, and also of the poet’s being taken ill. In fact, though, this third verse was apparently a rather incongruous combination of the first part of an original third verse and the last part of an original fourth verse, which came about as the result of a mistake in the printing of the work, and the correct lines of the verses having been lost.15 As only the two original complete verses are usually sung today, however, rather than trying to specify too concretely from this implied background, I have chosen to interpret the poem as a reflection or musing on the events and people of the more distant past (which still does not exclude the implication of a specific event/events or person/people), as inspired by the awe of the unchanging natural elements. The final particle ぜひ zo at the end of the two phrases, mukashi no koto and mukashi no hito, which would seem to be used in an emphatic sense here, with the nuance of stressing the strong association with the things and people of the past that the scene evokes, was unfortunately not possible to render in translation.

(iv) The るる ruru of 忍ばるる shinobaruru denotes a sense of natural occurrence, and is often used with verbs connected with feeling, as with shinobu, ‘recall/recollect/think upon (a past event)’, here. It also conveys the idea of ‘thoroughly and continuously’. However, both as I felt this sense to be incorporated in the combined imagined expanse of time of ‘roaming/wandering’ and the state of ‘recalling’, and from the point of view of the number of syllables and the rhythm of the line in English, I have not tried to render it in translation.

(v) For the translation of さま sama in 春のさま kumo no sama, I have purposely chosen the slightly formal word ‘semblance’, rather than ‘appearance’ or ‘look’, both because it seemed to suit the classical literary tone of the language of the original, and from the point of view of alliteration — combining the initial and final sibilants ‘s’ and ‘ce’ of ‘semblance’ with the initial ‘s’ of ‘sound’ in ‘the sound of the wind’ and the final ‘ds’ of ‘clouds’, and the final ‘s’ sounds of ‘waves’ and ‘shells’ in the following line.
(vi) The expression かけ kage in 星のかげ hoshi no kage in the last line of the second verse, which can be written with various different Kanji, (though here written in Hiragana), incorporates contrasting nuances of ‘light’ and ‘that which is produced as a result of light’, i.e. a ‘shadow’, or a ‘reflection’ — (see verse 1, line 2 of the last poem, Kōjō no Tsuki). When used in connection with ‘the moon’, or ‘stars’, it invariably has the meaning of ‘light’. In my translation of kage, however, I have chosen to employ a slight degree of poetic licence by using the word ‘twinkling’ rather than the literal translation of ‘light’, in order to make a connection between the image of ‘the shells’ in the last line of the first verse, conveying the idea of numerous shells scattered on the shore and numerous stars scattered across the sky. The poet makes a connection between ‘the shells’ and ‘the moon’ in repeating the word ‘colour’ to refer to both, rather than using the word ‘light’ for the moon, and I feel that in the use of the word kage to refer to the stars, the connotation of each individual star ‘twinkling’ is implied.

(vii) The final particle よ yo, in 風の音よ kaze no oto yo and 雲のさまよ kumo no sama yo in the first verse, and 寄せる波よ Yosuru nami yo and かえす波よ kaesu nami yo in the second verse, would seem to be used here in an exclamatory sense, the nuance of which was not possible to convey in translation. The repetition of the word ‘in’ at the beginning of the two phrases in each of the two lines in the English, however, somehow seems in itself to convey a sufficient exclamatory mood in English.

(viii) The final particle も mo, in 寄せる波も Yosuru nami mo and 貝の色も kai no iro mo in the first verse, and 月の色も Tsuki no iro mo and 星のかげも hoshi no kage mo in the second verse, would seem to be used here in an emphatic sense. Though the particle has the meaning of ‘too’ or ‘also’, or ‘even’, and is often translated as such (See Aka Tonbo, verse 3, line 2), I did not feel that the sense here was quite strong enough actually to translate it in this way. As in the case of yo (note (v) above), the use of ‘in’ at the beginning of the first of the two phrases originally ending with mo, and an ‘and’, being an abbreviation of ‘and in’, at the beginning of the second phrase in each of the two lines, seems to render the sense of emphasis sufficiently.

Hamabe no Uta is a good example of the use of Alliteration and Assonance in a poem in Japanese, particularly of assonance. The main vowel sounds which occur are お o and あ a — the most frequently used vowel sounds in the language — followed by う u, い i and え e. (See Introduction above.) My interpretation of the pattern of alliteration and assonance, which would seem to apply both in the context of a specific line itself, and in relation to sounds in the following line, is as follows. It is represented by use of the romanized script, as, since the beginning consonant sounds of Japanese are always attached to vowels in a single syllable, they do not appear independently when written in Hiragana. The most prominently alliterated consonants are shown underlined, and the ‘o’, ‘a’, and ‘u’ vowel sounds are represented by black and white dots, and stars, respectively.

Ashita hamabe o samayoeba
Mukashi no koto zo shinobaruru
Kaze no oto yo kumo no sama yo
Yo suru nami mo kai no iro mo

Yube hamabe o motooreba
Mukashi no hito zo shinobaruru
Yo suru nami yo kaesu nami yo
Tsuki no iro mo hoshi no kage mo

3. Yashi no Mi Coconut

椰子の実

Poem by 矢崎藤村 Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943)
Song by 大中島二 Ōnaka Toraji (1896–1982)

名も知らぬ遠き島より
Na mo shiranu toki shima yori
流れ寄る椰子の実一つ
Nagareyoru yashi no mi hitotsu
故郷の岸を離れて
Furusato no kishi o hanarete
汝は今も波に幾月
Nare wa ima no nami ni iku tsuki

前の樹は生いや茂る
Moto no ki wa ai ya shigereru
枝はなお影をやとなせる
Eda wa nai kage o ya naseru
われもまた渚を枕
Ware mo mata nagisa o makura
ひとり身の浮き寝の旅ぞ
Hitorimi no ukine no tabi zo

実をとりて胸にあつれば
Mi o torite mune ni asureba
新たなり流離の憂い
Arata nari ryūi no urai
海の日の沈むを見れば
Umii no hi no shizumu o mireba
潮り落ち異郷の涙
Tagiriotsu ikyō no namida

思いやる八重の汐々
Omoiyaru yae no shiojio
いずれの日にか国に帰らん
Izure no hi ni ka kuni ni kaeran

From a far-off unknown isle,
A single coconut drifts ashore.
Separated from the shore of thy birthplace,
How long hast thou floated on the waves?

The tree that bore thee flourishes thick,
And its branches create a canopy shade.
I too have the shore for my pillow,
A solitary roaming voyage.

As I take the coconut, and press it to my breast,
The distress of wand’ring afar grows anew.
As I watch the setting of the sun on the sea,
Tears of longing course down my cheeks.

Reflecting distantly on the folds of the tide,
When, I wonder, might I return to my land!

This poem, composed by the lyric and romantic poet, and novelist, Shimazaki Tōson, was first published in 1901 in his volume of Shintai Shi 『New-style Poems』, entitled Rakubai-shū 『落梅集』. It was inspired by the extraordinary episode recounted by a friend of Tōson, the folklorist Yanagita Kunio (柳田國男1875–1962), of his discovering, in 1897, a coconut washed up on a beach in Aichi prefecture in central Honshu. In the poem, ‘Tōson, who viewed his own life as a journey’, seemingly identifies with the plight of the coconut journeying across the seas, possibly from the Japanese island of Okinawa, or some other distant southern island. The setting of the poem in song-form thirty-five
years later, in 1936, which gained great popularity all over the country as a *Kayōkyoku*, a so-called ‘popular song’ of the time, brought about a rearrangement of the original free-style, flowing couplet form of the poem into a more regulated form of three verses and a coda, to fit the melody. Despite the free-style form of the original poem, however, it nevertheless still employs a slightly classical style of language.

NOTES
(i) In keeping with the classical tone of *nare*, used for the second person singular at the beginning of the fourth line of the first verse, I have chosen the English usage of ‘thou’ and the accompanying auxiliary verb ‘hast’. The term *nare* was in fact originally used as a form of address between equals, especially between intimate friends, and with a person of lower social status than the speaker, in a way similar to the term ‘thou’. It would seem that in addressing the coconut in this way, the poet is not only personifying it, but sympathizing with it on a mutual basis. Although the second person singular possessive and the second person singular object are typically omitted in the third line of the first verse and the first line of the second verse of the Japanese, I have kept the same tone, with ‘thy’ and ‘thee’, in the necessary rendering of these parts of speech in the translation.
(ii) The term *somo* here expresses the idea of *sometsemosomo* or *ittiittai*, a term difficult to translate directly into English in itself, but used to emphasize the phrase which follows it, which if translated directly reads ‘How many months on the waves?’ Though not translating the word *somo* as such, I have attempted to convey the idea of emphasis in terms of the length of time the coconut spent on the waves, by giving the addition of the idea of the passage of time or slow movement, with the image of it actually ‘floating’ on the waves.
(iii) I have chosen to translate the term *moto* of *moto no ki*, which literally means ‘origin’, ‘source’, or ‘starting point’, in the sense of ‘bearing’, or ‘giving birth to’, using further personification to create an added sense of affinity between the coconut and the poet, with the idea of both being far away from the sustaining comfort of parent and birthplace.
(iv) The *ya* which appears in the two phrases, 生いや茂れる *oi ya shigereru* and 影をやなせる *kage o ya naseru*, is a particle which conveys the sense of a rhetorical question. The poet would thus seem to be asking himself for confirmation, or wondering to himself, as to the fact that surely, by now, ‘the tree ... flourishes thick’, or ‘its branches create a ... shade’. In the latter phrase, I have chosen to insert the word ‘canopy’ to render more poetically the image of the coconut tree creating a huge ‘roof-like’ shade, using the word adjectively.
(v) The expression *浮き寝* of *ukine no tabi*, literally means ‘floating sleep’. It is used variously to refer to the state of water birds sleeping on the surface of the water, or to the state of sleeping in a boat moored at sea. The term *uki* itself, meaning ‘floating’, is also used to imply the meaning of ‘misery’ or ‘wretchedness’, the term for which, though written as *uki* with a different Kanji, it shares the same sound. It is the same *uki* of *uki yo, ‘the floating world’, which also implies the transience and piteousness of life’. By connotation, *ukine* thus conveys the idea of ‘sleeping in an uneasy, troubled state of mind’. As in the previous line, however, the poet has already expressed: ‘I too have the shore for my pillow’, and as the expression *ukine no tabi* is qualified by the word ‘solitary’, I chose to use the expression ‘roaming’ to translate the idea of *ukine no*, feeling that, in this context, particularly also when used adjectively to qualify *tabi*, ‘voyage’ (see following), it incorporated the idea of ‘uncertainty’ and ‘uneasiness’. For the term *tabi* here, I chose to use the term ‘voyage’ in a figurative sense, rather than ‘journey’, inasmuch as the coconut’s journey is a ‘journey across the seas’, and in likening the poet’s *tabi* to that of the coconut. As also in the previous poem, Hamabe no Uta, the final particle *zo* here is used to express emphasis. Though this nuance is very difficult to render in English, the nuance would seem to be conveyed in the strength of the association of the words themselves, and, naturally, in the expression of the voice in recitation.
(vi) The expression 異郷の涙 *izyō no namida*, which literally means ‘tears of/in a foreign/strange country/land’, implies tears of longing for one’s own land.
(vii) In the translation of the expression 激り落つ tagiriotsu, literally ‘seethe/well up and course/flow down’, I have added ‘my cheeks’ for descriptive clarity, while at the same time abbreviating ‘seethe/well up’, taking this as implicitly incorporated in ‘course down’ in the context of tears, in order to maintain, together with (v) ‘Tears of longing’ in the first part of the line, a balanced number of syllables overall.

(viii) The term 八重 yae literally means ‘eight-fold’, but is often used to convey the idea of ‘multi-fold’ or ‘multi-layered’. Used in the combination with 汐 shio, meaning ‘tide’, it refers to the ‘boundlessness’ of the ocean. The やる yaru of 思いやる omoiyaru, in the first half of the line, conveys the idea of an action ‘reaching into the distance’, and thus, combined with the verb 思う omou, ‘think’, the sense of ‘reflecting’. I have chosen to incorporate the idea of ‘boundlessness’ by combining the word ‘distant’ with the expression 思いやる omoiyaru, to become ‘reflecting distantly’, and by translating yae as ‘the folds of the tide’, with the image of an endless, distant, recurring tide.

5. Kōjō no Tsuki Moon Over the Ruined Castle
荒城の月
Poem by 土井晚翠 Doi Bansui (1871–1952)
Song by 浣斎太郎 Taki Rentarō (1879–1903)

春高桟の 花の宴
めぐる 川霧 影さして
千代の松が枝 わけ出でし
むかしの光 今いづこ。

秋陣営の 霊の色
鸣き行く雁の 数見せて
植ゆるつるぎに 照りそいし
むかしの光 今いづこ。

今荒城の 夜半の月
変わらぬ光 たがためぞ
恒に残るは ただかずら
松に歌うは ただ風

天上影は 変わらねど
栄枯は移る 世の姿
写さんとてか 今もなお
ああ荒城の 夜半の月

Haru koro no hana no en
Meguru sakazuki kage sashite
Chiyo no matsugae wake ideshi
Mukashi no hikari ima izuko

Aki jin’ei no shimo no iro
Naki yuku kari no kazu misete
Uru tsurugi ni terisoishi
Mukashi no hikari ima izuko

Ima kōjō no yowa no tsuki
Kawaranu hikari taga tamezo
Kaki ni nokoru wa tada kazura
Matsu ni uta wa tada arashi

Tenjō kage wa kawaranedo
Eiko wa utsuru yo no sugata
Utsusan tote ka ima no nao
A kōjō no yowa no tsuki

In the high turret in spring, a banquet to greet the 花の宴 cherry blossom,
In the sake cup passing from hand to hand, a reflection cast by the moon.
Between the branches of 古の松 ancient pines, the moon sheds forth its light,
Radiant glow of the past, where now has it gone?

Autumn samurai battle camp shining white with frost,
Crying as they go, wild geese flock to the sky.

(iii) Autumn samurai battle camp shining white with frost,
Swords planted firm in the ground gleam bright,
Radiant glow of the past, where now has it gone?

Midnight moon now o’er the ruined castle,
Unchanging glow, but for whom does it shine?
All that remains on the castle wall is vines,
All that sings through the pines is stormy winds.

Though the glow of the moon in the sky is unchanged,
The fluctuating world of glory and decline —
Is this image not reflected even now in its light?
Oh, the midnight moon o’er the ruined castle.

*Kōjō no Tsuki* is one of the earliest songs in the Nihon Kakyoku genre. The poem and song were both composed in the same year, 1901, commissioned by the Ministry of Education of the time, as a so-called Gakkō Shōka, or ‘School Song’, for middle school level, and included in a Ministry of Education publication entitled *Chugaku Shōka-shū* (Anthology of Songs for Middle School). In reciting the bygone days of the samurai of the clan society of the Edo period, symbolized by the castle, which came to an end with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and the emergence of a modern Japan, the poem, by the lyric and romantic poet, Doi Bansui, reflects upon the passing of time, and the transience of human life.

“Surely, even now, people must feel a certain sense of poignancy in this lyricism which embodies the reflection of time.” Together with the song, Aka Tonbo, this song is indeed one of the most deeply loved in the Nihon Kakyoku genre. It is thought that the poet took as the model for the image of the castle in his poem the castles of Aoba-jō in Sendai, Miyagi prefecture and Tsuruga-jō in Aizu Wakamatsu, Fukushima prefecture, both in northern Honshu. Unfortunately, it was not possible in translation to do justice to the classical style of the language of the original poem.

NOTES

(i) Though the term 花 hana literally means ‘flower’, it is frequently used to refer specifically to ‘cherry blossom’, intrinsically ‘Japanese’ and symbol of the spring. In other words, to Japanese, it is immediately obvious that 花の宴 hana no en, literally ‘a flower banquet’, refers to the traditional celebration of the cherry blossom, (still continued today, though in a somewhat different vein), ideally held at night in the light of the moon.

(ii) The term 酒 sakazuki which means ‘wine cup’, refers specifically to a cup for sake. As the term sake, which in the past used to be translated as ‘rice wine’ is one example of quite a number of terms related to Japanese culture which have eventually been taken into English, it is only natural now to leave it as it is.

(iii) The term 千代 chiyo in 千代の松 chiyo no matsu literally means ‘a thousand years’, denoting a very long passage of time.

(iv) I have taken the liberty of inserting the word ‘samurai’ in the translation of 秋陣営 aki jin ei, ‘autumn battle camp’, for the purpose of intensifying the Japanese historical context and atmosphere of the poem.

(v) I have interpreted the expression 霜の色 shimo no iro which literally means ‘colour of frost’, to denote the fact that the ‘autumn battle camp’ is covered with frost. I have extended the translation to ‘shining white with frost’, in order to emphasis both the image of the colour, and the fact that the frost appears white as it does because of the light of the moon upon it.

(vi) The expression 数見せて kazu misete literally means ‘shows numbers’, or, by extension, ‘great numbers’. As
we know that the wild geese to which this refers ‘cry as they go’, I have taken it to describe their setting off in great numbers to migrate to a warmer climate, which idea I have incorporated in the translation I have chosen, ‘flock to the sky’. 

(vii) There would seem to be various possible interpretations of the image, or symbolism, of the scene of 植うつるぎ uaru tsuragi (‘Swords planted firm in the ground’), one of which might be that it represents ‘defeat in battle’, and, by connotation, the idea of ‘downfall’, ‘collapse’ or ‘ruin’. As always with Japanese, here too, it is very difficult to know whether tsuragi, the word for ‘sword’, is intended in the singular or the plural, though I have interpreted it in the plural. The fact that the swords ‘gleam bright’ in the moonlight, and are ‘planted firm in the ground’, implies that they are unsheathed, and perhaps, therefore, that, having done their job in battle, they have been left abandoned. As, though, the following line bespeaks ofむかしの光 mukashi no hikari, the ‘radiant glow of the past’, suggesting that in this verse the poet is still describing the scene of the castle in its original state, the contrary symbol of preparedness for battle, or loyal commitment on the part of the samurai to their lord and the cause of battle, would also seem to be possible. This is a rather similar idea to one of numerous theories presented in a section on the subject in the work Okotoba Desuka...6, by Takashima Toshio, which states: “Apparently, in the past, there was a ceremonial practice whereby swords would be stood upright in the ground, and prayers offered up for victory in battle.” In fact, the scene may well have been created out of the imagination of the poet himself, though still possibly as the result of some actual historical association. As yet, however, there would appear to be no definite evidence available to determine any one particular interpretation of this image.

(viii) Though the term 堅 kaki used here in fact refers to a boundary fence, hedge or wall, the translation ‘castle wall’ would appear to be most appropriate in this context.

The main difficulty in the translation of this poem is that of not being able to convey the image of the wooden structure of the Japanese castle -- albeit only the ruins of such a castle in the poem -- which differs somewhat both from the sturdy stone castles of England and the fine, bespired, fairy tale-like castles of Europe. On first hearing the song, and before becoming familiar with the appearance of the Japanese castle, the atmosphere it evoked in fact reminded the writer of the painting, The Enchanted Castle (full title: Landscape with Psyche outside the Palace of Cupid), by the French artist, Claude (1604/5? -82), in the permanent collection of The National Gallery, London. Though this work, inspired by Greek mythology, is quite different in subject matter, such is the universality of the fundamentally very ‘Japanese’ theme of Koj no Tsuki, which, with the moving melody of the song, appeals widely, regardless of cultural background. This is, of course, greatly true of all music, and poems which become song. (It is nevertheless of interest to note that in later years, the poet worked on translations of Homer’s Iliad.) In the translation of the poem, however, I trust that the inclusion of references such as ‘samurai’, as explained in note (iv) above, manage to impart at least the overall and underlying sense of ‘Japaneseness’ which it naturally embodies for the Japanese reader.

Conclusion

It is my hope that the above translations as they are -- ideally in the form of readings as an accompaniment to the songs themselves -- might contribute a little towards making the genre of Nihon Kakyoku better known outside the Japanese-speaking world, and that they will perhaps serve to provide a new insight into the spirit of the Japanese people. At the same time, I trust that the explanation of the translation process will help to elucidate the cultural background which lies behind, and which is so intrinsically connected with, the language, the subject—matter, and the sentiment of the works.

Footnotes

1) A Recital of Japanese Song by the Japanese Baritone, Hiroshi Haku (勲宏), accompanied by Junko Kobayashi
（小林純子）piano, with readings of English translations of the songs by Caroline Kano（狩野キャロライン）.
Authorised and sponsored as an official event within ‘Japan 2001’（A Celebration of Japan, May 2001—March 2002）.

2) Trnka, Bohumil, A Phonological Analysis of Present-Day Standard English, p.112.

3) 「とにかく、日本語の音の単位の構造は単純である。……こういう言葉は耳に聞いて単純であるが、しかし、歌になった場合は美しく聞かれるという長所がある。
 ユーロッパの歌曲の中で、イタリア語とスペイン語の歌が美しいというのはこの二つの言語は、母音で終わる音が多いせいである。……日本語では母音の中で「a」が最もよく使われ、以下「ì・u・e」の順である。aとoは、もっとも歌に好まれる母音で、ことにソプラノ歌手たちは、高く引いて歌うところがこの音だと非常に歌いやすいと言った。日本語はその点、声楽に適した言語である。」Kindaichi, Haruhiko, "Nihon no Uta to Kotoba", p.287.


5) 「童話で書く詩人が独自のために書くのか、それとも子どもに向けて書くのかという問題は、言うなら
ば童話というものが本質的に持っている課題である。」Hatagaka, Keiichi, Dōyō Ron no Keifu, p.251.

6) 「童話にはやはり自分が表に出す。それが表出されなければ善い童話ではありません。創作態度として
は童話でつくることも自分をうたふことを思ってみます。……「童話はすなわち、天真のみづみずしい
感覚と想像を、容易な言葉でうたふです。容易な子供の言葉で、それはほとんどの詩と異なる


8) Eda Shigeo, Aka Tonbo no Uta no Himitsu（The Secret of the Song, Aka Tonbo）, in vol. 1, issue 7, Konchū to Shizen（Insects and Nature）, 1966.（枝重「赤とんぼの歌の秘密」（「昆虫と自然」）一巻七号）

9) Iemori Chōjirō, Dōyō Aka Tonbo wo Megutte（On the Dōyō, Aka Tonbo）, Asahi Shinbun, 24.2.1990.（家森長治郎，「童話「赤とんぼ」をめぐって」，朝日新聞）

10) 「……私の小さい時のおもいでである。「赤とんぼ」を、作ったのは大正十年で、処は、北海道函館付近
のトラピスト修道院に於いてであった。秋に午後四時頃に、窓の外を見て、ふと眼についたのは、赤とん
ぼであった。静かな空気と光のなかに、竿の先に、じっととまっているのであった。それが、かりに長い
間、飛び去ろうとして。私は、それを見た。後に「赤とんぼ」を作ったのである。……

「家で親んだ子守り娘がいた。その娘が、私を負っていた。西の山の上に、夕焼いていた。草の広場に、
赤とんぼが飛んでいた。それを負われている私は見た。そのことをおぼえている。北海道で赤とんぼを見
て、思いだしたことがある。

「大分大きくなったので、子守り娘は、里に帰った。ちらと聞いたのは、嫁に行ったということである。
山の畑というのは、私の家の北の方の畑である。（後略）」In Shinrin Shōhō, quoted in Wada, Noriko, Miki Rofū-Aka Tonbo no Jōkei, p.109.

11) Ushiyama, Mitsuru ed. Ongaku（Music）.（山本充 主宰『音楽』）
12) Yokoyama, Tarō, Dōyō e no Osasoi, p.172.
13) Yokoyama, Tarō, Dōyō e no Osasoi, p.172.
moriyoshi.akita.jp/site/music/ha 4.html＞. 11 January 2002.（浜辺の歌音楽館, 森吉町観光情報ホームページ）
15) Yokoyama, Tarō, Dōyō e no Osasoi, p.173.
16) 「自分の生涯を旅人とみる藤村」Sawa, Masahiro & Wada Hirofumi eds., Nihon no Shi, p.38.
17) 「人はこのように＜時＞の影をつつみこんだ叙情に、いまもなんらかの切実感を味わうのではないか。」
伊藤, Shinkichi et al. eds., Nihon no Shiika, p.59.
18) 「昔の戦の必勝祈願に、刀を地面に立てて祈る風習があったと聞いています。」In Takashima, Toshio, Okotoba Desuka...6; Ichiretsu Ranpan, Haretatsu-shite, p.246.

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**Acknowledgements**

The writer would like to express her gratitude to Professor Takahashi Sakutaro of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and Dr. Thomas McAuley of the University of Sheffield, England, for their invaluable advice and guidance in the compiling of this paper.