

CULTURE AND CONNECTION

Learning about People through Folklore

An interview with Dr. Ayako Yoshimura, folklorist and Japanese studies librarian at the University of Chicago

Interview by Cheyanne Flowers

What is folklore?

When people think of folklore, they think of tales passed down traditionally through storytelling. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, folklore is “traditional customs, tales, sayings, dances, or art forms preserved among a people.” For Ayako, folklore is anything that is a reflection of human expressive behavior.

“People think of it as stories, but it’s not just stories; it’s broader than that. It also includes material culture – food that you eat, clothes that you wear, seasonal customs that you practice. Folklore can be shared ethnically, regionally, nationally, or through religion, but each family or occupational group can have shared folklore also.”

Ayako Yoshimura is a folklorist and Japanese studies librarian at the University of Chicago. She completed her Ph.D. in Folklore at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she also served as a Japanese studies bibliographer. Through her work there, she discovered that she could continue serving the public and being in an academic environment by becoming an academic librarian. Ayako is a folklore specialist who studied Wisconsin and American folklore. Although her background includes the study of Scandinavian-American folklore, much of her work has centered around Japanese cultural aspects, particularly foodways, clothing (kimono wearing), and identity.



Ayako presenting on the kimono at the Trickster Art Gallery during the event Indigenous Dance Celebration, October 19, 2019; photo courtesy of Sachiko Fukai.

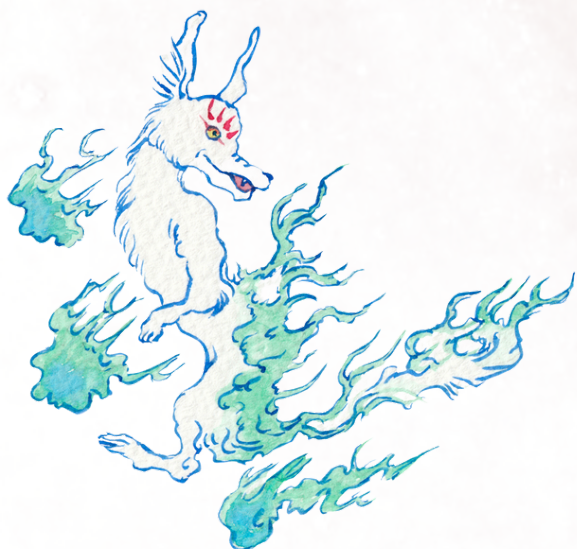


Illustration of kitsunebi, an atmospheric ghost light usually accompanied by a fox

Her interest in folklore came from a young age. As a child, Ayako was interested in Yōkai, ghosts, and traditional Japanese folktales about the supernatural. Because her family did not share her interest in the supernatural and did not allow her to watch supernatural-related television programs, she relied on her friends at school to lend her magazines about UFOs and other paranormal activities. This interest, along with a desire to study other cultures of the world, would lead her to moving to the U.S. for college, getting a B.A. in Folklore and Cultural Anthropology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a M.A. in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland.

As an undergraduate, Ayako was interested in an array of subjects, such as cultural geography, religion, sociology, and more. She wanted to choose a discipline that would give her the opportunity to explore different aspects of culture. That is when folklore became an option.

“One of the benefits of being a folklore scholar is the versatility that comes with folklore's interdisciplinarity.”

Because folklore, as an academic discipline, focuses on people, it naturally covers a wide range of subjects – languages, literatures, history, art history, religious studies, psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, politics, etc. The flexibility of folklore attracted her.

While in graduate school, Ayako studied kanashibari, which proved to be an interesting subject in folklore, because of its dual status as a traditional phenomenon related to a supernatural presence and as a physiological symptom known as sleep paralysis. While investigating the phenomenon, she came to the realization that she would not be able to get a fuller understanding of her research because of her lack of personal experience. She was told that if she wanted to pursue a career in academia, it was best to pick a topic she wanted to be known for.

“I didn’t want to be necessarily known as a kanashibari specialist,” she chuckles.

Shifting her focus from kanashibari to food and clothing culture, Ayako followed her own academic lane that has carried her throughout school and her career so far.

“I could relate to people more easily with tangible material-culture stuff.”

“If you learn history in school, you only learn big events like military, political, and economic incidents. But if you learn about what everyday people were actually doing and how they were living, your understanding will be different.”

Through folklore, Ayako believes that you can have a better understanding of not only people, but of history as well. For her, learning the complicated steps and causes that led to actions and effects is interesting. She states that the source of her wanting to learn about the everyday lives of individuals stems from her own upbringing.

Ayako grew up in Nagano-ken, a landlocked and relatively mountainous area located in the Chubu region of the main island Honshu. Her parents, however, were born and raised in Tokyo. Because her parents were not native to the Nagano area, there was only limited exposure to local Nagano customs. Thus her source of folklore was her own family, which inspired her to learn about the lives and customs of people as individuals. This interest has also assisted her in understanding more intricate nuances about culture, because she understood that people interpret and react differently to societal norms and cultural beliefs.



panoramic of Nagano city

In today's contemporary culture, there are many kinds of people with backgrounds that are a mixture of customs. It helps when you interact with other people and try to understand them as individuals, rather than according to socio-cultural categories such as race, religion, socio-economic status, etc.

“The study of folklore is useful; information and knowledge about regional, ethnic, and religious customs are important, but you still want to get to know someone as an individual, because you don't know how those customs have shaped that person.”

Being a Modern Day Folklorist



image of a kimono up close

One aspect of Ayako's folklore research is through the art of doing. To study foodways, she practices foodways. To study clothing, she wears clothing.

"What you wear will communicate personal information about you. Could be religious, could be familial. Whatever it is, it communicates about you."

One day, she wore a wool kimono to work. Everything was fine until she noticed how much noise the fabric would make when she moved. Working in a library, she was worried that the fabric noise would be a disturbance, but it proved to not be an issue. In fact, everyone she encountered loved that she was wearing kimono. For her, that personal experience is important in her research.

"I wouldn't have learned that this kimono was loud or that it was difficult walking and getting on the bus if I hadn't experienced it myself," she says.

In terms of challenges in being a modern day folklorist, because she focuses on individuals, Ayako does not run into challenges often. However, folklorists who focus on bigger groups of people might have troubles with technology. Before, folklorists would make cultural dissemination maps that showed how a certain cultural element was transmitted. Since resources are available on the internet now, the usefulness of such maps has dwindled, because the transmission of cultural information no longer depends upon people's movements.

However, technology has had positive effects, in her opinion. With everyone having a device with internet capabilities these days, it is easier for people to get information. Instead of relying on oral tradition within a group, people acquire information from smartphones. People also have access to tools that allow them to share information about their everyday lives easily as well.



woman recording a video on her smartphone

“Now you can take your own video, write your own article, and you can tell people about your culture and lore yourself.”

Ayako cites YouTube daily life vloggers and the website Discover Nikkei as examples. Vloggers, in a way, are sharing folklore by sharing daily cultural/modern cultural rituals. Showcasing their daily life, routines and customs for their viewers allows their views to learn about the vlogger's individual folklore and culture.

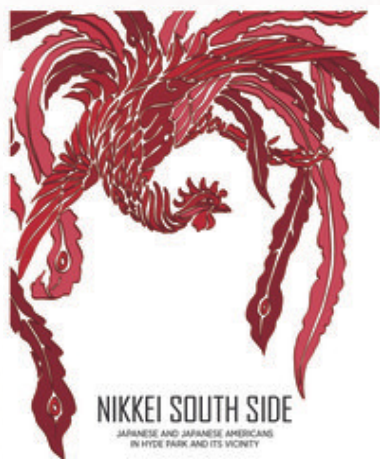
Discover Nikkei has proven to be helpful in allowing people to share their stories about being a part of the Japanese diaspora. Ayako herself has learned more about second, third, and fourth generation Japanese people from other countries.

“I think technology has served well for people to share information. It’s great that people can tell their own stories their own way rather than academia having to find it valuable enough to share. I think that’s fantastic. Seeing how other people live is much easier now.”

Bringing Folklore to the Library and the Community

Ayako's desire to be a folklorist was present since her undergraduate education, but the journey of becoming a librarian was unexpected. She started to consider how she wanted her professional journey to continue after her doctorate program. She began working as a part-time bibliographer at her university.

In the beginning, she did not see the connection of her folklore background being useful for her then-current position, but still found joy in what she was doing. She observed the full-time librarians, seeing how they also had a passion for their research disciplines and combined that with educating the community. It was then that Ayako began to think, “if I become a librarian in a large research institution, I can do what I want - serve the community by being a resource as a librarian and as a folklorist.” From then, she accepted the role as Japanese studies librarian at the University of Chicago in 2015.



flyer from Ayako's curated exhibit*

Because of the pandemic, Ayako has not been able to do as much community outreach as she would like, but that has not stopped her from finding ways to share her research. She is currently presenting an exhibit at the University of Chicago Library called "Nikkei South Side: Japanese and Japanese-Americans in Hyde Park and its Vicinity," which focuses on Japanese students attending the University and living in the area during the Meiji and Taisho periods, as well as the Japanese-American community that thrived in the area in the 1940s and 1950s.

Inspiration for this exhibit came in 2018 when a Japanese-American woman donated her mother's and grandmother's kimono to the Japanese Culture Center. Ayako was put in touch with the woman to give her information about the kimono. The woman informed her that she once lived in Hyde Park when it had a large Japanese and Japanese-American community, including a Japanese gift shop on 53rd Street that was owned by the woman's friend. This information surprised Ayako; at that time, she lived on 53rd Street and knew of no such shop!

Within a few weeks, a researcher from Japan reached out to Ayako. They spent time going through archival materials available in the library's special collection research center. She thought that as a Japanese studies librarian, she should know more about the history of the University and the neighborhood in relation to Japan; she was eager to share her findings.

"There was so much I didn't know, and most of the information I found I put into the exhibit."

**Note: Due to increasing cases of COVID-19, access to the Library, including the Exhibition Gallery, is temporarily closed to visitors. If you would like to visit the gallery, please contact Dr. Yoshimura. Contact information can be found on the next page.*

What to Remember about Folklore

Folklore might hold different meanings for different people, but one thing remains the same: people and culture. When asked about what she wants people to remember about folklore, Ayako had this to say.

"Folklore, for me, is about human expressive behavior. Each individual has a different package of folklore that consists of various elements: family, ethnicity, region, nation, religion, gender, etc. Recognizing that encourages people to treat one another as individuals. Sure, Japanese culture is interesting, but it (nor any other culture) is not a homogeneous entity. Culture and folklore operate most tellingly at the individual level."



two people sitting seiza-style (traditional Japanese way of sitting)

For more information on Dr. Yoshimura's work

- [Profile and Publications](#)
- [University of Chicago's Japanese Studies Collection](#)
- “[A Glimpse of Meiji Kimono Fashion](#).” In *Digital Meijis: Revisualizing Modern Japanese History at 150*, edited by Tristan R. Grunow and Naoko Kato (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Library), 2018.
(Meiji at 150 Podcast [Episode 72](#).)
- “Kusemono na kusamono: Lutefisk 曲者な臭もの：ルタフィスク [Smelly stinker: lutefisk].” *Chiba-Wisconsin Association News*, [Volume 15 \(October 16, 2009\)](#): 3. (In Japanese)