

# What is Vernacular Studies?

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This paper aims to provide a general outline of the development of vernacular studies in Japan as well as a vision for the future of vernacular studies based on that development.

## **1. What is Vernacular Studies?**

Vernacular studies “within the social context of anti-hegemony and counter-enlightenment in Germany during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, came about through merging the philology strongly promoted by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and the Grimm brothers and the research on local society conducted by Justus Möser (1720–1794). It then spread all over the world and is a study that seeks to understand intrinsically the human life that unfolds on a level different from the social phases thought of as hegemonic, omnipresent, central, and mainstream using disciplines that have uniquely developed in each area of the world. This branch of learning includes the relationship between the former and latter lines of thought, confronts the body of knowledge formed by standards of the former, and creates knowledge that overcomes those standards” (Shimamura 2017).

The most important thing for understanding vernacular studies is that this discipline’s full formation came about in Germany in opposition to the enlightenment centered in France in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and to the hegemonism of Napoleon, who tried to dominate all of Europe. Afterward, societies that shared their anti-hegemony context with Germany were encouraged directly or indirectly by Germany’s vernacular studies.

They vigorously formed this discipline, but each in its own way. Specifically, vernacular studies has developed and arrived in the present day in regions such as Finland, Estonia, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines, and India and in newer nations like the United States, Brazil, and Argentina.

What vernacular studies has consistently investigated throughout its academic history is human life on a different level from social phases that have been considered to be hegemonic, omnipresent, central, and mainstream. It is knowledge that was brought about through the close study of these. Generally, modern science is a body of knowledge produced from broad social phases considered hegemonic, omnipresent, central, and mainstream, but vernacular studies becomes compellingly unique by confronting these characteristics and attempting to create knowledge that overcomes their broad social application. Therefore, while it is a type of modern science, vernacular studies is also an alternative discipline that contrasts with modern science in general.

Vernacular studies aims to intrinsically understand human life that develops on a different level from social phases considered to be hegemonic, omnipresent, central, and mainstream. Additionally, in its research and study process, the inclusion of interested parties as research subjects and ordinary citizens is an important technique. In addition to researchers affiliated with the academy (professional educational and research facilities like universities), vernacular studies has many diverse, non-academic actors responsible for its research. For this reason, it is also known as a “field discipline” (Suga 2013) and “the intimate Other of the academy” (Noyes 2016: 14). However, its method for intrinsically understanding research subjects originates from its history of incorporating concerned parties, such as research subjects and citizens, as important actors in the research. Furthermore, this phenomenon is not limited to Japanese vernacular studies but is widely visible to various extents in every country’s vernacular studies, including the United States.

## 2. Kunio Yanagita's Vernacular Studies

The reception and development of vernacular studies in Japan began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, scholarly pursuits of Kunio Yanagita (1875–1962), beginning around 1910, led the way to its development. The magazine *Kyodo Kenkyu* (*Local Studies*), launched by Yanagita and others in 1913, was an academic medium that played an important role in the subject's early stages. Using that magazine as a platform, Yanagita presented, one after another, research studies important in the history of vernacular studies. Through the magazine, residents of the provinces took interest in “local studies,” and unaffiliated vernacular studies researchers began to appear among them.

Publication of *Kyodo Kenkyu* was suspended in 1917, but following that, magazines related to vernacular studies were published, including *Dozoku to Densetsu* (1918–1919), *Minzoku* (1925–1929), and *Minzokugaku* [*Vernacular Studies*] (1929–1933). Through these magazines, Japanese vernacular studies grew, simultaneously gradually accumulating a store of many related materials and research results based on them. These magazines nurtured their readership, unaffiliated intellectuals in Japan's provinces, into becoming vernacular studies scholars. The magazines also played a large role in systematizing them as members of a network, with Yanagita at its center.

Incidentally, as Kazuko Tsurumi (1997) indicates, it is important that Yanagita did not perceive research that pursued folk traditions themselves as vernacular studies. Rather, he thought of it as a type of “social change theory,” which, in this case, does not fit simply into the Western “modernization theory,” which attempts to universally measure the West's modernization, nor is the same as modernization theory in sociology.<sup>1)</sup> Instead, it considers how people's life-world (see below), that is to say languages, art, emotions, beliefs, relationships between people and nature, daily lives of women, and cultural creativity of children, among others (in other words, cultural elements brought

about and kept alive in daily life), change within society's structural fluctuations. From there it alternatively asks what should be abandoned, what should be kept, and what should be newly introduced? It considers how we should combine things being kept and newly introduced as we move toward the future. Thus, it was thought that this series of investigations should be conducted by people living these lives themselves.

Yanagita's unique social change theory itself is the most Yanagita-like of the forms of vernacular studies, a vernacular study that he produced over the course of 50 years (and that has a multifaceted nature). It is the prototype or model of Yanagita vernacular studies. The main materials that expanded this type of vernacular studies were folk traditions kept alive in the life-worlds of the people of that time. Folk traditions that Yanagita systematically collected were positioned as a corpus, a body of data, in the development of the social change theory.

### **3. The Many Forms of Vernacular Studies**

However, what is described above is merely the prototype of Yanagita vernacular studies. In reality, the reception of vernacular studies proceeded based on an understanding different from Yanagita's original idea. Furthermore, alternatives that differed from the prototype Yanagita conceptualized also came into existence. To go one step further, Yanagita himself sometimes produced research distanced from his own vernacular studies prototype.<sup>2)</sup> Below is a list of the ways in which vernacular studies was received after Yanagita as well as types of vernacular studies research that arose as alternatives to Yanagita's prototype.

(1) Folk tradition studies, namely, research on folk traditions themselves (e.g., origins or historical transitions of folk traditions, studies on their meanings). Vernacular studies' further systematization and formalization progressed and spread from the late 1930s onward with the formation of the "Folk Tradition Council," launch of the magazine *Minkan Densho* [*Folk Tradition*], and publication of the general outline *Kyodo Seikatsu*

*no Kenkyu* [*Local Studies Research*], all in 1935. This came to be a field of vernacular studies with some distance from the social change theory that Yanagita had conceived.<sup>3)</sup> Until the early 1990s, this type of vernacular studies was mainstream for the field, and today, popular understanding of vernacular studies aligns with this type.

(2) Merging with historical studies. This line has two schools of thought. One school of thoughts centers on graduates of Kyoto Imperial University (now Kyoto University) Liberal Arts College History Department, connected with the line of research on “cultural history” by Kazuo Higo, Akihide Mishina, Toshijiro Hirayama, Kenichi Yokota, along with others, and Naojiro Nishida. This school considers folk traditions as historical data and tries to incorporate them into studies of history. The other school of thought centers on associates of the Tokyo Education University Faculty of Literature History Methodology Department, which includes Taro Wakamori, Tokutaro Sakurai, and Noboru Miyata, among others. While this school maintains some distance from mainstream historical studies, it considers research on folk traditions as one methodology for historical studies.

(3) Literary study lineage starting with Shinobu Orikuchi and his line of pupils. This is a school of Japanese literature that treats folk traditions, including oral literature, in relation to creation and lineage theories of literature.

(4) Folk Art Studies. Under the direct or indirect influence of Shinobu Orikuchi and with activity led by the “Folk Art Council,” established in 1927 before the war, and the “Society of Folkloric Performing Arts,” established in 1982 after the war, this school advances research on expressive culture and performance.

(5) Merging with religious studies. This line of study addresses folk traditions within the context of religious studies. Often referred to as “religious vernacular studies,” researchers in this line include Ichiro Hori, Hitoshi Miyake, and Iwayumi Suzuki.

(6) The “attic museum” line led by Keizo Shibusawa. Vernacular studies research also has a context of material culture research or socioeconomic history studies. Within the history of world folkloristics, the attic museum line is indirectly related to folk-life vernacular studies developed in Scandinavia (Shimamura 2016: 25–27).

(7) The line of folk architecture research launched by Wajiro Kon. Like the attic museum line, folk architecture is also indirectly related to folk-life vernacular studies developed in Scandinavia (Shimamura 2016: 25–27).

(8) International oral literature studies directly connected with foreign oral literature studies in the West and elsewhere. The lineage of researchers including Toshio Ozawa (Germany), Yukihiisa Mihara (the Latin-speaking world), Kimiko Saito (Russia), Ichiro Ito (Russia), Seiji Ito (China), Hisako Kimishima (China), Hiroyuki Araki (comparative oral literature studies), and folktale researcher Keigo Seki fits into this category.

#### **4. Contemporary Vernacular Studies**

From the 1920s to around 1990, vernacular studies generally developed within the eight research frameworks listed above. However, since around 1990, a revival movement of the Yanagita school of social change theory has occurred.

Yukihiko Shigenobu (1989) and Michiya Iwamoto (1998) had theoretical studies showing precisely vernacular studies’ changes during the period since the 1990s. Shigenobu said that vernacular studies is by nature “a tactic of knowledge that is narrated while confronting oneself from the ground up,” and the methodology consists of “confronting one’s own ‘everyday’ and weaving words that tell the story of oneself.” For example, he argues that as the “listener” and “speaker” question one another, as people living in the “present time,” on “quality of life changes due to daily life surpassing the size of people’s stature” and the mechanism of “modern times” that laid the groundwork for this, it becomes possible to understand these characteristics from a

place of shared “account.”<sup>4)</sup>

After re-examination of Yanagita’s vernacular studies ideology, Iwamoto argued that vernacular studies settles the “question of everyday life stretching out in front of society’s eyes” and that it “shows the way to happiness for the future of human life.” “The vernacular” as “past knowledge” used by vernacular studies was thus nothing more than subject matter for those studies. Nevertheless, vernacular studies later lost this awareness, and Iwamoto criticized the field for changing to one that aimed to study “the vernacular” itself, calling this “vernacular studies academization of cultural property.” He argues that the field needs to change (return) from a discipline that studies “the vernacular” as an object to a discipline that studies *within* “the vernacular.”<sup>5)</sup>

Neither Shigenobu nor Iwamoto use the phrase “social change theory,” nevertheless, their arguments are clearly deeply connected with the Yanagita school; for this reason, it can be said that they gave a fresh start to vernacular studies as a theory of social change.<sup>6)</sup> After this revival, studies were produced on a wide variety of subjects and fields, including market economies, consumption, science and technology, agricultural policy, war, violence, disaster, political power, lifestyle revolution, existence, medical treatment, memory, cultural heritage, tourism, multiculturalism, immigration, and nationalism.<sup>7)</sup> Most of these studies attempt to show how people’s life-worlds respond within society’s structural changes by analyzing specific experiences, knowledge, and expressions brought about and kept alive in those life-worlds. Many of these studies, which conform to and interpret internal life-worlds of people affected by social change, can also potentially expand discussions on ways to conceive even better life-worlds for people within social change. In this way, one can identify these studies as having features of vernacular studies’ social change theory as proposed by Yanagita. This status, which came about during and after the 1990s, is called “contemporary vernacular studies,” following Yanagita’s “what is called modern science.”<sup>8)</sup>

In the present day as well, vernacular studies research of the eight types run parallel to

or are reciprocal with “contemporary vernacular studies.” After taking a bird’s-eye view of the history of world folkloristics, the author concludes that Yanagita’s social change theory vernacular studies and the “contemporary vernacular studies” that developed the former in the context of modern society both represent the state of creative vernacular studies produced by Japan. The greatest potentiality for vernacular studies would be progress in this direction. This, of course, does not deny the other eight types’ existence. Again, all intellectual pursuits that “intrinsically understands the human life that unfolds on a different level from the social phases thought of as hegemony, omnipresent, central and mainstream, and includes the relationship between the former and latter lines of thought, confronts the body of knowledge formed by the standards of the former, and creates knowledge that overcomes those standards” can be integrated under the name of vernacular studies.

##### **5. What is *Minzoku* (The Vernacular)?**

The form of vernacular studies in Japan can generally be described as above, but what exactly is the “vernacular” (*minzoku*)? The author defines it as the “experience, knowledge, and expression brought about and kept alive in life-worlds.” Following this “life-world” (*Lebenswelt* in German) is *Lebenswelt* or life-world as reported by phenomenology, the world “that alone is just one realistic world, bestowed by actual perception; it is the world that is experienced and that can be experienced” (Husserl 1995: 89); “the place where all of our lives actually happen, that is intuited by reality, experienced by reality, and able to be experienced by reality” (Husserl 1995: 92); and “the world given to us as a real thing in our concrete, worldly lifestyles” (Husserl 1995: 93). It is “pre-scientific reality that is self-evident according to people who are confined to a natural attitude” (Schutz 2015: 43), “the realm of reality into which people can intervene through their own actions and upon which they can effect change” (Schutz 2015: 43), and “the realm of reality seen as straightforward fact by normal adults with a commonplace attitude and whose eyes are sufficiently opened” (Schutz 2015: 44). Only there can a “shared, communicative world environment [be] comprised” (Schutz 2015:

44–45), and it is considered “by people to be a special, supreme reality” (Schutz 2015: 45).

Furthermore, when translating the Japanese “minzoku” into English, until now the word “folklore” has been used; however, the author uses the more fitting English phrase “the vernacular.” Despite efforts by Alan Dundes (1965) and Dan Ben-Amos (1972) to update the definition, the word “folklore,” as used until now, cannot completely erase its commonly disseminated image of “rural, old-fashioned and strange legends and customs.”<sup>9)</sup> Thus, the concept of “vernacular” has come up as a word to replace “folklore” in recent American studies.

In American studies, the term “vernacular” began to be used in the 1950s in vernacular architectural studies (Vlack 1996: 734). Later, this word came to refer to more extensive topics, including the performing arts, industrial arts, food, and music (Vlach 1996: 734). However, Leonard N. Primiano (1995) was instrumental in polishing it as a theoretical concept.

Primiano considered the etymology of “vernacular,” revealing that it had implications of “local,” “native,” “personal,” “private,” and “artistic.” After examining the tendency of its conceptualization in neighboring fields, he redefined “the vernacular” as a concept meaning “the creativity discovered in personal lived experiences.”<sup>10)</sup> Then, thanks to this concept, realities of human life that had not fit into the previous term of “folklore” came within grasp.

Agreeing with Primiano’s argument, in addition, the author combines Primiano’s concept of the vernacular with phenomenological “life-world/Lebenswelt” to define the vernacular as “lived experiences, knowledge, and expressions that arise in the life-world,” that is to say “minzoku” in Japanese.<sup>11)</sup> Furthermore, by translating “minzoku” as “the vernacular,” the author also believes that the English title for the Japanese *minzokugaku* (vernacular studies) should be changed from “folklore studies”

or “folkloristics” to “vernacular studies.”

## **6. Global Vernacular Studies**

Finally, I would like to touch on the potential of vernacular studies in the modern global context. Kunio Yanagita once discussed the connection between ethnology and vernacular studies as follows.

Ethnology (ethnography) is “a field of study that surveys from the outside” (Yanagita 1986: 47). In contrast, vernacular studies is “a field of study that surveys from the inside” (Yanagita 1986: 47). Certainly, ethnology (ethnography) accomplishes “one large advance” (Yanagita 1986: 45), and there are many “results that we should be grateful for” (Yanagita 1976: 42). Ethnology provides much encouragement for studies of the “folklore of nations,” but on the other hand, “it is no match for everyone taking up their own section that is close at hand” (Yanagita 1976: 42). People who are subjects of ethnological (ethnographical) study need to pursue “the joy of learning their own distant past directly and with a sense for their own mother tongue” (Yanagita 1976: 42). Then, as “ethnography progresses even further, and has an encouraging influence on a whole country’s vernacular studies” (Yanagita 1986: 56), “whole-country vernacular studies will be established in each country, comparison and integration will become possible at the international level as well, and once one is able to see the degree to which their own results apply to those of other nations, we will catch the first glimpse of world folkloristics” (Yanagita 1986: 55).

Yanagita’s “world folkloristics” theory was prominent from the late 1920s to the 1930s; however, in recent years, some ethnologists have taken an interest in it. On analyzing Yanagita’s world folkloristics theory, Takami Kuwayama found that it has the potential to confront the Western-centered hegemony system that is still strongly rooted in ethnology (Kuwayama 2008, 2014).

Furthermore, seeing world folkloristics as effective to a certain end, Junzo Kawada defines modern ethnology's state as the age of transmissions from natives: "I can't help but think that the relationship between researchers and research subjects in ethnology and cultural anthropology has surely arrived at the situation foreseen by Professor Yanagita in *World Folkloristics*. From there, I think that contrary to Professor Eiichiro Ishida's former assertion that whole-country folkloristics should expand to comparative ethnology and cultural anthropology, the time has come for comparative ethnology and cultural anthropology to become world folkloristics, as with Japanese vernacular studies" (Kawada 2007: 127).

Yanagita, Kuwayama, and Kawada commonly assess vernacular studies as an anti-hegemonistic field of study; world folkloristics, as its synthesized body of work, is also anti-hegemonistic. Vernacular studies' anti-hegemonistic nature, seen throughout its history, can also be confirmed here.

Yanagita conceived of anti-hegemonistic world folkloristics over 80 years ago. Along the way, while he believed that world folkloristics was the ideal form of research in vernacular studies, he simultaneously thought it would be a long time before that concept was fully realized.

This may have been a matter of course given the times in which he lived. However, over 80 years have passed, and circumstances have greatly changed. In the present globalization, through the development of a highly informed global society and permeation of postcolonial thought, world folkloristics is anything but "far in the future." We could say that it is moving toward realization as a present-day topic (Shimamura 2017).

The author considers the global development of vernacular studies, as conceptually imagined by Yanagita, to be world folkloristics and calls the phase in which it is moving toward realization in actual society "global vernacular studies (GVS)." Surely modern vernacular studies is just about to enter a new phase of "global vernacular studies

(GVS).”

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### **Notes**

- 1) For more on modernization theory in sociology, see Tominaga (1996) and others.
  
- 2) Yanagita’s *Kyodo Seikatsu no Kenkyu* consists of Part 1 “Local Lifestyles Research Methods” and Part 2 “Categorization of Vernacular Materials.” Specific examples from Part 2’s “vernacular materials” were adopted as guidelines for research topics in later vernacular studies (vernacular studies as folk tradition research). However, as one can see from a close reading of Part 1 “Local Lifestyles Research Methods,” Yanagita himself strongly preferred vernacular studies as social change theory even in this book. Vernacular studies explains “the state of society today, combining the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor” and “things that have remained unexplained after all kinds of tries, through questions that stretch to the everyday life of society right in front of us” by “learning about the past of commoners” and “the paths that commoners took up until now.” In that case, these questions are not cookie-cutter, “single-model,” simple things that can be resolved by “people thinking about things and writing them in books.” Therefore, they must be pursued in a way that “we confirm once again for ourselves whether the laws preached and established by

external superiors are also carried out in each of our own local areas”; in other words, they must be pursued using “local lifestyle research methods” (Yanagita 1967: 7–30). For a long time, however, later vernacular studies forgot Yanagita’s vernacular studies concept.

3) However, taken broadly, such studies by Yanagita could be reasonably interpreted as potentially connoting social change theory vernacular studies (a prototype of Yanagita’s vernacular studies).

4) Shigenobu later discussed his own assertion in greater detail (2012, 2015).

5) Iwamoto later expanded the claim (2002, 2007).

6) Before the arrival of Shigenobu and Iwamoto, one researcher took the initiative to address the necessity of this social change theory vernacular studies. That person was Choshu Takeda (1975). He stopped at drawing on Kunio Yanagita’s (1990) “What is Called Modern Science” to raise a question, but he did discuss the state of social change theory vernacular studies using the expression “the history of social commentary within urbanization.”

7) For more on vernacular studies trends in the 1990s and later, see Shimamura (2017).

8) Kunio Yanagita asks “What kind of wind should carry us forward from here?” He then calls vernacular studies a science that emerges from introspection and “recognizes, judges, and further reflects the lifestyles of the past, no, the lifestyles that continue even now.” He calls this vernacular studies a “modern science.” He then writes that the field “meets the demands of the present world” “for the sake of wider society, for the sake of the happiness of our fellow citizens, and for the sake of making them wise and correct” (Yanagita 1990: 567–584). This paper refers to vernacular studies that tries to inherit and develop this intention as “contemporary

vernacular studies.”

Regarding the relationship between contemporary vernacular studies and history, I remark additionally as follows. Social change at the time of “social change theory vernacular studies and the ‘contemporary vernacular studies’ that developed that into a modern context” refers not just to modernization. Social structure transformations in history were all social changes, and therefore, contemporary vernacular studies by no means rejects historical outlooks. “Contemporary” in contemporary vernacular studies does not indicate the present day of research subjects but is the present day in terms of aiming to create theories as “modern science.”

- 9) For more on the “difficulty of using” the word “folklore” in America, see the First Annual Meeting for “Interdisciplinary Research on the Function of National Histories and Collective Memories for the Democracy in the Globalized Society” (JSPS Topic-Setting Program to Advance Cutting-Edge Humanities and Social Sciences Research) (2012: 6–12).
- 10) The definition of “vernacular” was composed by Shimamura based on the context of Primiano’s argument.
- 11) The concept of the vernacular is also a standpoint for discovering socially critical implications as positioned by Hideyo Konagaya: “It is full of potential for mixing up and changing relationships of authority, such as social class, space, as well as race and ethnicity, gender, etc.” (2016: 17). In other words, the concept of the vernacular contains the meaning of “lived experiences, knowledge, and expressions that arise in the life-world” as well as the construct based on discovering social criticism implications within itself. The author uses the term “critical vernacular” for the latter, defining it as “a field that searches for critical implications toward institutions and authority within the vernacular.”

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