

**ODE TO  
MOUNT  
HAYACHINE  
(HAYACHINE  
NO FU, 1983)**

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In the first sequence of Haneda Sumiko's 1996 film *Women's Testimonies: Pioneer Women in the Labour Movement (Onnatachi no shōgen: Rōdō undō no naka no senkuteki joseitachi)*, we see the director sitting at an editing table watching footage she shot ten years earlier. The footage shows a gathering of four women actively involved in the labour movement in the interwar period in Japan. *Women's Testimonies* began as a documentation project, as in some of Haneda's independent documentaries. In 1982, socialist researcher Ishidō Kyotomo organised a roundtable discussion with these activists, who played an important if unacknowledged role in the history of the labour movement. At his invitation, Haneda recorded the meeting and individual interviews with some of them. Inspired by her desire to "preserve the history of these women," the director returned to this footage fourteen years later, adding additional images and information. This transformation of commissioned projects into independent films, sometimes by re-editing her work, is essential to understanding Haneda's working method and the singularity of her approach.

Haneda was one of the few women to work in non-fiction films in Japan in the post-war period. In the 1950s, she began working for the publishing house Iwanami Shōten, where she joined the Iwanami Photo Library. There, she was one of the editors of a popular series of pocket photo books documenting the social and cultural changes of the day. Soon, Iwanami set up a film department to produce public relations, corporate and educational films for the government and private companies. Haneda joined the department as a scriptwriter and editor and then worked as an assistant director before directing her films. She worked at Iwanami until the early 1980s, making over fifty short and medium-length films, many of which showed great formal inventiveness on subjects such as women's education in rural areas, nature and science, cultural heritage, and traditional performing arts. Haneda left Iwanami when she reached retirement age in her early fifties. She set up a small production company with her husband, Kudo Mitsuru, which allowed her to develop her independent filmmaking.

The question of authorship often gets raised about filmmakers who, like Haneda, worked between different production modes and across subjects, specialising in corporate films, sometimes for television, while attempting to do more personal work independently. Scholars of Haneda's work have pointed out that many of her films contrast the public (educational) and the private (intimate) spheres in their content and formal approach. Other filmmakers, many of them women, share this method of working; they make the most of the opportunities available to them, coping with inconsistent access to funding and distribution by using small formats, inventing alternative ways of exhibiting and distributing their films, and working for television or taking commissions alongside more personal endeavours. The tension between Haneda's experience of making educational and promotional films and the possibility of developing both independent projects with limited resources and a different relation to research and production time is at the heart of her filmmaking.

*The Cherry Tree with Grey Blossoms (Usuzumi no sakura, 1976)* was Haneda's first independent project. It is a medium-length film made over several years about the

multiple meanings of an ancient tree in a small farming community and a personal meditation on mortality and the cycles of nature. *Ode to Mount Hayachine*, Haneda's second independent film, started as an idea in the mid-1960s but was not completed until 1983. The idea for the film first came to Haneda when she witnessed a performance of the Hayachine *kagura*, a traditional ceremonial dance with mystical and religious origins, performed on Mount Hayachine in Iwate Prefecture, Tōhoku Region in northeastern Honshū. She could only film it several years later, in 1979, working closely with the village community and a small crew (including contributions from several cinematographers such as Segawa Jun'ichi and Nishio Kiyoshi, with whom she collaborated throughout the years). Shot over three years, it is a work of immense creative range and, like other works by the filmmaker, resulted from lengthy observation and research. Initially, she produced a more conventional 50-minute film for Iwanami, *Hayachine: Village of the Kagura (Hayachine: Kagura no sato, 1981)*, which focused mainly on the history and performances of the *kagura* and allowed her to fundraise and prepare to make a longer film. Initially a religious mountain dance and musical genre, the *kagura* underwent many transformations throughout the years, changing according to the social and cultural shifts of the places that influenced its forms. In the film, Haneda meticulously registers two related but different forms of the *kagura* performed in two close villages, Take and Ōtsugunai, one in the mountains and another in the foothills. The differences in origin and performance, the remaining religious elements in the dances and their secularisation, and the history of the families and households that practice, transmit and preserve the *kagura* tradition together give the film its character.

Given the opportunity and the funding to continue working independently, Haneda made a different and longer film, which put Mount Hayachine and the environment that initially gave birth to the *kagura* at its centre. *Ode to Mount Hayachine* is a film about the gradual disappearance of traditional village life in Japan and a portrait of these rural communities in the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s. The making of the film coincided with the abandonment of traditional forms of agriculture and the progressive desertification of the countryside. In it, we see the careful and lengthy preparation of the Nambu cigar leaves, mainly carried out by village women. We follow the entire cycle of tobacco production through the seasons, from the harvest to the drying of the leaves and the sale of the product in the city market – a commentary on the centrality of traditional agriculture in the changing economy of these households.

The 1970s and 1980s in Japan saw a revival of critical ethnography and an increased interest in studying folklore, performing arts, and folk music and art. Haneda avoids the pitfalls of folklorist nostalgia – the so-called "retro boom" – and the essentialisation of the farmers. Many nuances emerge as she reveals the hierarchies that govern the lives of the communities she films, their differences, and how modernity permeates every gesture and object. Portuguese filmmaker Paulo Rocha, who collaborated with Haneda on his film *Island of Loves (A Ilha dos Amores, 1982)*, partly shot in Japan, wrote the following about *Ode to Mount Hayachine*:

"For Haneda, the mountain gods, the plastic products in the small shops in the village, the people who dance the *kagura*, and the tourists are just as passionate and fantastic. Everything is just as important to her non-

sentimental gaze. Past and future, nature and machinery, mountains, and towns.”<sup>1</sup>

*Ode to Mount Hayachine* unfolds hypnotically around a series of *kagura* performances and haunting images of the unchanging mountain that index the passing of the seasons and the cycles of nature. The *kagura* dance appears in the film as it is performed, with its modern adaptations and changes. Haneda shows the public performances staged for the many tourists who visit the area during festivals and smaller, more private performances, some of which occur in people's homes. She emphasises the rehearsals and the transmission of ritual movements from generation to generation, upon which the survival of these performances depends. As the dances promote tourism and affirm regional identity, Haneda's detached approach reveals the gradual transformation of an ancient, traditional practice into cultural memory.

As Haneda wrote in the book she dedicated to the film, published in 1984, *Ode to Mount Hayachine* captured a unique moment that preceded a radical change in the region. As she points out, the fast train would soon arrive in Iwate, the cultivation of tobacco leaves would decline, and the landscape would be transformed. In one of the first and crucial sequences in the film, we see an old traditional house being dismantled. The thatched houses of the area gave way to more modern and comfortable homes. Some of the performers seen in the film would soon stop performing, handing over the teaching of the gestures and meanings of the *kagura* to a younger generation. The dance, now primarily performed at festivals, has been reinvented, popularised, and mostly severed from its magical and religious origins.

*Ode to Mount Hayachine* was one of the first documentaries released commercially in Japan. The film was a hit with the communities in Iwate and an unexpected national success. It was shown in Tokyo as part of the *Équipe de Cinéma* programme at the Iwanami Hall. Founded in 1974, the *Équipe de Cinéma* sought to introduce, distribute and promote foreign, independent, art-house films in Japan. This activity led to the creation of the Tokyo International Women's Film Festival in 1985, in which Haneda participated, showing her films and taking part in workshops and discussions.

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The whole text by Paulo Rocha, as well as other translations from Haneda's book on *Ode to Mount Hayachine*, published in 1984, are available on Matteo Boscarol's website *Asian Docs*: <https://storiadocgiappone.wordpress.com/2021/11/28/haneda-sumikos-writings-3-paulo-rocha-on-ode-to-mt-hayachine/>