[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1800-1890, Daily Life)]

Document 23: "I indulged in every manner of folly and nonsense." Autobiography of Katsu Kokichi (1802-1850), written 1843.

For the last three or four years I had fallen into dissolute ways and been spending most of my time in the Yoshiwara. So much so that the roughnecks who prowled through the quarters had become my underlings, and no one dared defy me. Naturally, this took huge amounts of money, but I was determined not to fall into debt, and so I hustled every night at the markets. I just barely stayed ahead.

One day in the summer I was summoned to Hikoshirō's house in Kamezawa-chō. Before leaving I gave my wife instructions concerning the children and the house. At my brother's house everyone was in tears. His wife took me to Shintarō's room and said, "Kokichi, why do you persist in behaving so recklessly? Your brother has made inquiries about you here and there, and worried that you might do something truly dreadful, he's decided to lock you up in a cage. Shintarō and the rest of us tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't listen. The cage was finished yesterday—it's in the garden—and your brother was ready to throw you in last night. Shintarō persuaded him not to, but I really don't know what to do. Go take a look at the cage, in any case."

I went out to the garden. The cage was sturdily built with double enclosures. I said to Shintarō and my sister-in-law, "I appreciate my brother's concern. This time, though, may I suggest that you get some candles to light for me, because I've already made up my mind to stay in the cage for good and not come out even if I'm forgiven. . . . After a humiliation like this, I could never show my face to men. I will fast and die as soon as possible." . . .

Young Magoichirō, my landlord, was getting over his head in debt. A while back when I'd found him a wife, I had fixed things up by cajoling the peasants on his fiefs into covering immediate expenses. He had lately taken to drink, however, and become increasingly careless, thinking nothing of inviting a common townsman into his living quarters to tipple with him. His uncle Sennosuke deceived him at every turn and helped himself to household articles to pay for his amusements. Another kinsman, Kurahashi, duped him into lending an enormous amount of money. And now more recently Magoichirō had moved into his house the daughter of a rice shop owner in the neighbourhood and was spending his nights in drunken revelry. His finances were as bad as they had ever been.

Someone suggested to Magoichirō that he hire someone called Ōkawa Jōsuke to oversee his accounts. The men on Magoichirō's fiefs opposed this, as did his father-ini-law, Gonnosuke. They asked me to block the move, but when I talked to Magoichirō about it, he became angry and threatened to evict me. I told him off in so many words and made him apologize. . . .

"Reflections on My Life": Although I indulged in every manner of folly and nonsense in my lifetime, Heaven seems not to have punished me as yet. Here I am, forty-two, sound of health and without a scratch on my body. Some of my friends were beaten to death; others vanished without a trace or suffered one fate or another. I must have been born under a lucky star, the way I did whatever I pleased. No other samurai with such a low stipend spent money as I did. And how I blustered and swaggered about with a trail of followers at my beck and call!

I wore kimonos of imported silk and fine fabrics that were beyond the reach of most people. I ate my fill of good food, and all my life I bought as many prostitutes as I liked. I lived

life fully. Only recently have I come to my senses and begun to act more like a human being. When I think of my past, my hair stands on end.

He who would call himself a man would do well to not imitate my ways.

Any grandchildren or great grandchildren that I may have–let them read carefully what I have set down and take it as a warning. Even putting these words on paper fills me with shame.

I have no learning to speak of, having taught myself to write only in my twenties—and barely enough to cover my own needs at that. My friends were all bad and none good. Unable to distinguish right from wrong, I took my excesses as the behavior of heroes and brave men. In everything I was misguided, and I will never know how much anguish I caused my relatives, parents, wife, and children. Even more reprehensible, I behaved most disloyally to my lord and master the shogun and with uttermost defiance to my superiors. Thus did I finally bring myself to this low estate.

I am most fortunate in having a filial and obedient son. My daughters, too, are very devoted. My wife has never gone against my wishes. I am altogether satisfied to have lived until now without any serious mishap. At forty-two I have understood for the first time what it means to follow the path of righteousness, to serve one's lord and one's father, to live with one's kinsmen in harmony, and to have compassion and love for one's wife, children, and servants.

My past conduct truly fills me with horror. Let my children, their children, and their children's children read this record carefully and savor its meaning. So be it.

Source: Katsu Kokichi, *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai*. Trans., Teruko Craig. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988, 106-107, 119, 156-157.

Context.

Traditional Japanese norms prescribed lofty behavioral patterns for all members of the ruling samurai (warrior) class: loyalty to superiors and parents, moderation in all things, and frugality. They were to live off the government stipends that went with their status and to stay out of the world of commerce. And they were to avoid socializing with the commoner classes. As this autobiographical account from the middle-level samurai Katsu Kokochi (aka Musui) makes clear, however, the reality often differed from the ideal. While many tried to follow the norms, great numbers of samurai families had fallen into poverty and debt by the early 1800s, forcing them to make money by any means possible. Coarse and debauched behavior was not uncommon, even though Musui's self-serving late-life reflection shows that loyalty and morality remained the ideal.

Questions.

1. What features of Musui's (and his companions') behavior surprise you? Explain how they violate the samurai ideal?

2. What conditions in society might explain why so many samurai had to take out loans to make ends meet?

3. Do you think Musui's final "reflections" are sincere? If not, why might he have expressed such regret?

Terms.

Yoshiwara. This entertainment section to the north of central Edo (Tokyo) was dominated by brothels that attracted both samurai and merchants.

Hikoshirō. Musui's half brother (twenty-five years his senior), he became family head in 1827, when their father died. Others named here are relatives who lived in the Hikoshirō household.

"*Filial and obedient son*." Musui's son Katsu Kaishū became an important official, serving as captain of the first modern Japanese ship to sail abroad, negotiating for the Tokugawa government during the Meiji Restoration, and rising to be naval minister in the 1870s.