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INTRODUCTION:
THE CONTRIBUTION
OF SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
TO JAPANESE STUDIES

IN THE last few years, there has been a growing interest in Japan by European scholars trained in social anthropology and other related fields. We are, however, geographically rather isolated from one another, and we have few opportunities to share our ideas and cooperate in our work. Our colleagues in Japanese studies are usually not anthropologists, and our anthropological colleagues generally know little of Japan. This book brings together a collection of papers which characterises our work and represents a first attempt to establish some cooperation between us for the future. It also has two further aims: to draw the attention of anthropologists to some of the insights that studies of Japan may bring to topics of current interest in the field; and to demonstrate to Japanese specialists the value of the contribution anthropologists may make to the general understanding of Japanese society.

Of course, we can turn to the long-established tradition of cultural anthropology in Japan and the United States. In fact, some of this 'anthropological heritage' has come under heavy fire recently, particularly from two scholars from quite different disciplines, whose work is discussed critically in some detail in van Bremen's paper following this one. For anthropologists, however, such work has provided us with a great deal of inspiration and background to prepare us for fieldwork, and many of us are indebted to its practitioners for personal help in Japan. But again, we are hampered for regular communication by problems of distance, and, moreover, Europeans have

developed some distinct philosophical traditions: in Britain, for example, this is particularly so in social anthropology. We have different theoretical approaches and we also ask different questions. It will be evident from the contributions that we claim no great unity, and there is of course considerable transatlantic influence and communication; but the tangle of European traditions is somewhat different from those currently expounded in the United States, and the aim of this book is to give some of these diverse ideas an airing.

It should be emphasised that several Japanese anthropologists have incorporated European approaches into their studies of their own society. Our two Japanese contributors, Professors Yoshida and Matsunaga, are among these, as is evident from their contributions to the book. The well-known work of Nakane Chie is of course a prime example, and, as I will indicate shortly, my view is that some of the controversy surrounding her work can in part be explained by a misunderstanding of modern social anthropological approaches.

One of the reasons why social anthropology has not figured very largely in Japanese studies is because of the earlier emphasis in the former on the study of pre-literate peoples, especially those with whom the rest of the world had had little communication. Only recently have we turned to examine industrialized societies, and in this Introduction I am going to suggest that this background gives us a particular advantage in looking at the specific case of Japan. At the same time, it will also be possible to outline some of the approaches shared by the contributors to this volume.

To start with the most general and uncontroversial of our common features, all the contributors to this book talk about Japan on the basis of experience gained through fieldwork, albeit in many cases in addition to considerable library research. Ideally this involves participant observation. The researcher lives as far as possible a life identical with the people he or she is interested in. In other words, we try to live as far as possible as a Japanese person might and, most importantly, to see the world through Japanese eyes. We aim to gain an inside view of Japan and to understand the categories of the Japanese language, not as dictionary translations of English, French or German, but as Japanese concepts, related to other Japanese concepts, and forming part of *a* Japanese—not necessarily *the* Japanese—view of the world. For in a complex society it is likely that there are a number of quite distinct world-views, although some features may be shared.

Thus we are concerned, among other things, with time and space, because these are culturally variable concepts and therefore need to be interpreted in a Japanese context. It might be thought that time and space are universal aspects of the world, valid in the same way for every society. Anthropologists have shown, however, that this is not the case and that there is a surprisingly large variation in the way in which different societies measure time and comprehend space. By understanding the way in which these notions work in a particular society, it is possible to gain considerable insight into some of the central preoccupations and ways of thinking of the people being studied—hence the emphasis given in this book to the question of time and space in contemporary Japan.

In this volume, Berque's paper, although written from the standpoint of

cultural geography, exemplifies this approach in his consideration of Japanese perceptions of nature and its relation to space, focusing particularly on the relationship between subject and environment. Bachnik's paper describes the way in which the self is perceived and the Japanese emphasis on relationships rather than the self *per se*, and again much attention is devoted to the problems of trying to relate a subject to its environment or context. Valentine is concerned with the place and indeed the definition of dance, and with its spatial and temporal constituent features in a Japanese view. Beillevaire and Caillet are concerned with ritual, the former in the Ryūkyū Islands, where he demonstrates a relationship between space and what he prefers to call temporality, or 'being in time', while the latter discusses the perception of time in the Japanese ritual year, which incorporates three different calendrical systems, two imported from outside Japan. Finally, Crump considers Japanese conceptions of number and cosmos, which he compares with traditional Pythagorean views.

It might be commented that a native Japanese is in a better position to elucidate such concepts, but this leads to another characteristic feature of social anthropology. We tend to be looking at societies other than our own, and even Professor Yoshida and Professor Matsunaga, like other Japanese anthropologists who work in Japan, are usually looking at parts of Japanese society quite different from those in which they were brought up. This is the crux of the matter, for the values and categories we are taught as children become natural to us, unquestioned unless we move out of our own society of upbringing, so that in looking at our own societies, we always run the risk of taking for granted things which are in fact culturally relative. After all, time and space are things with which we are exceedingly bound up, and the same may be said for the subject of our second section, traditional religion and its contemporary meanings.

Here, for example, the papers by Picone and Lewis touch on topics such as abortion, illness and death, which can be highly emotive in one's own society; the anthropologist as outsider may well be able to take a more dispassionate view. Once we have moved out of our own milieu for a period, it becomes easier to stand outside when we return, but by and large it is thought to be difficult to become detached enough to make a useful social anthropological analysis of the precise area to which we initially belonged.[1] We tend to follow Rousseau's maxim, reiterated by Lévi-Strauss (1966: 247), that to know Man one has to view him from a distance.

There is, of course, a problem with similarities between the societies of the observer and the observed, which may nevertheless be very different from other societies. We may well be more likely to note down, or just to find more interesting, differences between our host culture and that of our upbringing, as I have discovered in comparing Kim's account, from a Korean point of view, of some phenomena which I have also described elsewhere from my English one.

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1. The recent work of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney would seem to be an exception to this, although she is well aware of the problems. She returned, after many years in the United States, to the very area of her upbringing to carry out fieldwork for her *Illness and Healing in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge University Press 1984).

This raises an issue which has been of recent concern in Britain, discussed in a volume of papers addressing the subject of semantic anthropology, where it is argued that our explanations as anthropologists are 'as semantically engulfing as are those of the people we seek to explain; how unwittingly we impose shapes on the ethnographic data we claim to extract from other societies'.[2] It seems, then, that at the level of cultural background, at least, we have in this volume a splendid forum for the minimization of this problem, for there are here the reports of observers from no less than ten different nations, each with a different, though no doubt in many cases related set of 'cultural baggage' to apply to the study of Japan.

There is, of course, a heavy bias in favour of a European heritage, and the authors all come from industrialized societies; but this brings up one of the two-way benefits of our particular field. Japan is one highly industrialized society which has a very different cultural background from most other such societies. Within our own communities, then, we can provide detailed information to make possible an assessment of the numerous figures published comparing 'industrialized societies' as if this quality automatically gives them all sorts of other comparable features. We are well qualified, if we are so inclined, to enter into the debate about the usefulness of 'convergence theory',[3] the assumption that the more industrialized or 'modern' we get, the more alike our social life will become—or, to put it in the more stark and sarcastic terms used by Collick, that 'modernization' is a '. . .sort of escalator leading from "traditional" to "modern" society—and that the differences between societies are simply the result of their different positions on this escalator' (1981: 9–10).

In this volume, for example, the papers of Lewis and Picone present evidence which challenges the theory that secularization accompanies industrialization, examining instead new features of religious behaviour which seem to have emerged in an urban context. Lewis discerns the importance of 'pseudo-scientific' explanations for traditional ideas, whereas Picone demonstrates an increasing trend for individual, solitary 'consumers of the sacred' to draw on the impersonal mass media rather than on other members of the community for spiritual needs, although she argues that they thereby recreate traditional notions whose very demise has led them to behave in this way.

Kim's paper considers the relationships between economic development and social change in a specific community, providing data which challenge the common view of modernization as a unilineal transformation of societies. She in fact finds more traditional patterns of social organisation in a group with great economic development than in one with very little change in the economic sphere. Ben-Ari's paper demonstrates the persistence of traditional patterns in a

2. Parkin (1982: 5), referring also to Crick (1976).

3. Dore (1973: 10–13 and ch. 13), for example, addresses this problem and argues for at least a modified version of convergence theory, including some influence from the Japanese side. See also van Bremen's article in this volume.

modern community, but also indicates an increase in individual freedom to choose whether or not to attend community functions.

The evidence from Japan would suggest, however, that it is just too simple to talk about the rise of the individual as part of industrialization. This is amply indicated by the papers in the first section by Bachnik and Berque, which discuss Japanese perceptions of self and subjectivity respectively.

From our participant point of view, we have access to information about Japanese society which can help to explain the way in which superficially 'Western' institutions work in practice in the Japanese case. Thus within the social sciences we can complement the work of sociologists, economists and political scientists, for example, by operating at a grass-roots level. Anthropologists have usually sought out small groups to study so that they can get to know all the members well—and they spend long periods of time with the same people. They are thus in a position to distinguish what people do from what they say they do, and what they say they should do. It seems likely that such detailed work could be valuable to scholars interested in a much broader level of analysis, especially where overt similarities to Western institutions may cloud the Japanese modification of them. In this volume, the paper by Ben-Ari, setting a local sports day in the wider context of leisure and modernity, ably illustrates the advantages of this approach, as does Lewis's challenge to theories of secularization. Moeran's analysis of the importance of drinking sessions for local political behaviour is a particularly good example, since the political system at a national level is so similar to those of other industrialized countries, on which it was based.

One of the chief aims of at least British social anthropological work has been a holistic approach, which in my understanding implies that one needs to evaluate all things within their social context. Several papers in this book illustrate the value of this approach. Valentine's examination of elements of Japanese dance in their wider context is a good example, as is Linhart's interpretation of modern *sakariba* as a response to the pressures of urban life, this being the culmination of a consideration of this phenomenon in its historical context. Crump, too, relates the Japanese concern with numbers to the 'exigencies of Japanese life', illustrating how traditional symbols continue to be adapted to modern needs.

An interesting question here is whether this 'holistic' and 'contextual' approach helps us to understand a people who describe themselves in precisely these words—holistic and contextual—in several contributions to the *Nihonjinron* literature (i.e. Japanese theories about what it is that makes them uniquely Japanese). Kumon Shumpei exemplifies this style of writing (in English) when he contrasts the Japanese cognitive process, which he describes as 'analytical', i.e. going from a whole to its parts, with a Western one which he sees as 'comprehensive', i.e. proceeding from individual elements to a larger whole. This he illustrates by comparing a Japanese expression of understanding, *wakatta*, which literally translates as 'divided', with a Western expression 'to comprehend' which implies the opposite (1982: 8–9). This is part of the evidence adduced to support his notion of Japanese as 'holists'. Further examples include an intriguing suggestion that Japanese word order follows a similarly analytic

ourse which may be represented as '(S,v,p)' where S denotes a system, v a ariable within that system, and p the value the variable takes in the specific case being discussed (ibid.: 13–14). This scheme seems to apply particularly to sentences with both *wa* and *ga* in them, where the word followed by *ga* may be seen as a variable of the word followed by *wa*.

The part of Kumon's argument which characterizes Japanese as contextualists contrasts the notion not only with that of 'individualist', but also with that of 'collectivist', according to a distinction made by Yoshida Tamito. Put succinctly, the contextualist retains a personal identity, which the collectivist probably loses, but this personal identity is virtually inseparable from the contextual identity. Thus the individual changes, like the Greek god Proteus, depending on the context he belongs to or the people he is with. Kumon goes on to explain that a contextual, when separated from or not in a context, is like an amoeba and has no definite shape. However, once he joins a context, his shape is determined.[4]

Kumon gives as examples of contexts for self-realization the *sō*, *nakama* and *uchi*, 'inside' groups to which a Japanese individual may belong. The existence and importance of such groups for Japanese people has been pointed out by many observers, including anthropologists. Indeed, the so-called 'group model' of Japanese society has been a target for some criticism recently. Befu, for example, has pointed out the common failure of commentators on Japanese society to distinguish between the group model as an ideological statement, and the group model as a proposition about actual behaviour (1980: 36). He suggests also that the emphasis on the group model is related to the contrast it provides with the individualistic nature of the societies of the observers concerned and, for Japanese commentators, the harmonious and unique picture it presents of Japanese society (1980: 38–43).[5] Ben-Ari's paper in this volume takes up the issue to some extent, and Bachnik points out the slippage here between a 'group model' and 'groupism' in her discussion of the more general problems of distinguishing between models and human practice.

The criticism of the group model is part of a wider criticism of the idea that any one model can be used to explain a complex society like that of Japan, with the implied assumption that there is one, homogeneous Japanese people about whom all sorts of statements can be made (e.g. Sugimoto and Mouer 1981: 3). Sugimoto and Mouer seem to suggest that this so-called holistic approach was initiated by Ruth Benedict's experience, previous to working on the Japanese, with the small-scale societies which formed the more traditional subject-matter of, in her case, cultural anthropology (ibid.: 5). (This is the criticism of anthropology, mentioned earlier, which is reviewed in the next paper.)

In my view, there is a problem here about the various uses of the term 'holistic'. There is a great deal of difference between looking at social phenomena in their

4.   An example of some of the possible implications of the contextualist argument has recently been published in English (Hamaguchi 1985).

context, seeing them as part of a 'whole', as anthropologists are wont to do, and suggesting that the whole of a nation like Japan is made up of homogeneous parts. Kumon's use of the term would seem to add yet another dimension to its meaning, although I think his notion is closer to the former type than it is to the latter. Moreover, his argument about 'contexts' actually encourages a more microscopic view.

His argument is also concerned with cognitive processes which are learned along with language, not necessarily implying any more homogeneity than that of sharing modes of communication (including language, symbolism etc.). In this respect, several of our papers operate on the same level, particularly those which are concerned with notions of time and space; and Valentine's examination of dance as a cultural document is an example of a different order. On the other hand, some of the papers, such as those of Beillevaire, Yoshida and Matsunaga, demonstrate meticulous attention to regional variation in conceptions of cosmology. Nevertheless, Yoshida makes the important point that these regional studies should not lose sight of the more global perspective which emphasises similarities between cultures.

It is important, then, not to confuse the self-analysis of *Nihonjinron* with anthropological description. The very existence of the *Nihonjinron* debate is itself ethnographically important, as Befu has recently shown (1984), and it presents a problem to the outside observer to decide whether or not it is possible to use the same criteria for analysis as these Japanese writers use themselves. For their type of approach diverges from the ultimate aim of anthropology in that they appear to seek to demonstrate Japan's uniqueness by comparison with unspecified amorphous outsiders—usually deemed Western—whereas anthropology seeks (if not always successfully) to find some universal principles by which all human societies can be described, and thus sets out to describe any particular society in relation to those principles. In other words, one tries to avoid explaining Japanese society in one's own terms, or solely in Japanese terms, but rather to apply value-free criteria as far as possible. Bachnik's carefully argued paper illustrates both the complexities and the success with which such an exercise can be accomplished.

Thus Moeran is able to compare the behaviour of his Japanese potters with that of Maoris of New Zealand, in the light of general theories about political oratory in 'traditional' societies; and Yoshida can interpret the dual sovereignty and complementary protection between brothers and sisters found in the Amami and Okinawan islands as a case of the classification of powers comparable with the situation found in ancient India and among the Meru of east Africa. Matsunaga's paper contributes to the abundant material on the propensity of people to make classificatory distinctions between left and right.

Nakane Chie's work has been classed with *Nihonjinron* (see, for example, Hata and Smith 1983), but *Japanese Society* (1973) is also clearly based on theories of social anthropological analysis. I think much of the criticism of this book stems

1983: 367). The 'model' presented in *Japanese Society* is not in my understanding meant to explain all behaviour everywhere in Japan, but rather to elucidate an underlying structure, another kind of language, which is quite different, since once such a structure is identified, variations and transformations are only to be expected. Nakane's *Kinship and Economic Organisation in Rural Japan* (1967) well illustrates her awareness of such variations.

One of the problems of anthropology and its 'holistic' tradition is that one needs to define a small enough 'whole' with which to work. In this sense, one may return to Kumon briefly and note that the Japanese 'contexts' provide ideal manageable groups for anthropological investigation. The long-term nature of many such groups makes possible the type of face-to-face interaction which characterises the small-scale societies on which anthropologists are trained. It is obviously not a 'small-scale' quality of Japanese society which makes it directly comparable with societies in Africa, New Guinea and South America. It is partly, I would argue, the way in which it has skilfully maintained face-to-face groups within the complex, industrialized nation it has become. This makes possible a kind of analysis now rather less applicable to studies of, for example, European communities.[6]

It is as difficult to describe succinctly what are the qualities of such face-to-face groups as it is to explain briefly what is social anthropology. In the space available here I can make only a few summary remarks, but I hope they will communicate the essence of the matter. One of the striking characteristics would seem to be the effectiveness of diffuse sanctions as a means of social control. In societies with no written laws or courts of any kind, or without even a centralised political system, some kind of order is nevertheless maintained in everyday life. Members of such societies share a system of values, a set of norms about how to behave in their relations with one another; and for the most part they live within the limits of each other's expectations. It is one of the interests of the anthropologist to try to ascertain the social mechanisms which underlie such order, and these vary widely from place to place.

It is sometimes useful to look at the sanctions which come into play when someone does step out of line, or to see what happens when a dispute arises. In such a society, there are nevertheless various institutionalized ways of dealing with recalcitrants, but these may take the form of quite spontaneous reactions on the part of the people around at the time, including gossip, ridicule and informal ostracism. There may also be notions of what we would class as supernatural retribution, so that illness and accidents may be interpreted as punishments for some misdemeanour. Evans-Pritchard's convincing arguments for the role of notions of witchcraft as a means of social control amongst the Azande people of the Sudan (1937) provide but one concrete example. Such explanations are not unknown in Japan, as is evident in the papers of Lewis and Picone.

6.   Interestingly, the papers in this book which are most concerned with ready-made 'wholes', the studies of Beillevaire and Yoshida in islands of the Ryūkyū chain, are also particularly concerned with variations between them and structural features which appear to be common.

However, it is not the particular mechanisms which are of interest here, but the general principle that people living in face-to-face groups are constrained by the experience to behave in a way which is acceptable to other members of their group. In a complex society, an individual has the ultimate option of moving away from a group which he or she finds intolerable, but the more involved one becomes in a group the harder it is to break the bonds. Where the importance of belonging to such a group is fostered from an early age,[7] as in the case of Japan, this is sometimes almost impossible.

Thus even in a country where there is a legal system it is useful to be able to analyse other mechanisms of social control, especially where there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the system is in fact rather little used if it can be avoided. These mechanisms will vary from group to group, but my own research would suggest that Japanese education inculcates in children a predisposition to respond to diffuse sanctions and pressures associated with identification with a particular group.

A similar argument could be put forward about politics and decision-making. A training in social anthropology provides one with a certain amount of knowledge about how decisions are made in politically acephalous societies, with no system of leadership immediately recognizable from a Western point of view. I suggest that this can be quite useful when one is confronted with the emphasis on consensus and unanimity which is found in Japanese ideology. When a vote produces 100 per cent agreement, as used to be the case in elections in the village where I worked, one needs to look elsewhere to see how decisions are being made. Moeran's discussion in this volume of the importance of *sake*-drinking sessions for political manoeuvring is a good illustration of this point.

One is to some extent concerned here with a problem familiar to anthropologists, but by no means exclusive to them, of distinguishing between ideals and practice. In this case the distinction operates on two levels. At the level of the complex, 'modern' industrialized society, Japan has ideals and institutions not unlike those found in other industrialized nations. In practice, these operate at the grass-roots level in quite different ways. Thus Kumon is able to write about 'the attitude most Japanese have *vis-à-vis* the present Constitution. They simply do not care much about its applicability to reality. The actual behavior of the Japanese is not really determined according to laws like this' (1982: 15). At the grass-roots level too, ideals are shared which may not represent actual behaviour—Moeran gives an example in talking of the popular idea that statements made under the influence of drink are afterwards forgotten—but it is with an understanding of the distinction in mind that people are able to interact with each other.

Another feature of small-scale societies is that people come to know one another very well. There is a lot of role play, since the same people wear different hats in the same arenas, and with the same companions, so that there are various ritual mechanisms for distinguishing these roles from the individuals who play

7.   I have described elsewhere (1984, in press) how this notion is fostered in small children.

them. In a complex society, one may well play all one's different roles on different stages, with quite distinct groups of people who rarely overlap. The description of the Japanese as 'contextual' would seem to provide an explanation of how they deal with the problem of combining qualities of both types of society. Linhart's paper provides an illustration of the variety of behaviour possible among the same group of people.

In the context of a face-to-face group, much interaction takes place along lines understood only by members of that group, or perhaps by other members of the same society who have been socialised to understand the type of symbolic communication which characterises interaction between members of such a group. The training of a social anthropologist to interpret the symbolism of exchange, for example, or of ritual behaviour in general would, I suggest, prepare him or her to examine group relations at a level which may be quite outside the experience of an observer from an individualistic society which places little emphasis on group identity. Indeed, it sometimes seems that Western writers feel they have 'explained' Japan when they describe the so-called 'group model', which has become so notorious these days. For an anthropologist, to identify the existence of face-to-face groups in a complex society should be just a beginning, a welcome aid to establishing a 'whole' to which they can apply well-established techniques of analysis.

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