

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF JAPAN

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In this paper I shall discuss general trends characteristic of anthropological study in Japan, dealing with the major concerns of Japanese ethnologists. I shall not review specific works concerned, since reviews of Japanese ethnology are available elsewhere, and other papers given in this conference will also refer to many important publications in Japanese anthropology. For the sake of convenience, I shall refer in this discussion to two publications: *Ethnology in Japan—Historical Review* (The Japanese Society of Ethnology, 1968), a convenient and handy volume in which ethnological studies in Japan are well presented, and Chie Nakane, *Kinship and Economic Organization in Rural Japan* (London, Athlone Press, 1967) to which are attached an extensive bibliography and a review of major trends in the study of rural Japan (pp. 173-197).

The Study of Japan, as an Anthropological Field

The beginning of Japanese ethnological studies outside Japan was closely associated with national political and military expansion before and during the second world war. Countries in which scholars then worked were Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia, China, Formosa, and Micronesia. Southeast Asia, India and its adjacent areas, Africa, and Arctic regions are new fields, added after World War II, and most of the ethnologists working in these areas are young people who received their anthropological training after the war. Their research was influenced by the development of anthropology in the United States, Britain, and France and is considerably different from that done before the war. Prewar research abroad was rather unsatisfactory in spite of the eagerness of the scholars engaging in it. The period when they were in the field was generally short because of lack of funds, and none had received proper training in field methods. No university in Japan taught ethnology and no ethnologist ever had anthropological training in either Britain or the United States, where training for field work was an essential part of the curriculum. Except for a very few who studied ethnology in Vienna, most ethnologists were self-trained and they came from various disciplines, such as sociology, history, science of religion, folklore, and ecology. However, these scholars, who are regarded as the first generation of Japanese ethnologists, were important in the development of postwar

anthropology in Japan. It has been on the foundation of their devoted activities that postwar anthropology has developed.

During the last two decades, anthropology in Japan has advanced greatly. Graduate training in anthropology is offered by five universities, and the number of anthropologists who have had formal training in cultural and social anthropology and have conducted field work abroad is increasing. Ethnologists who have conducted intensive field work abroad for more than one continuous year and produced a thesis of a good quality are, however, surprisingly few, about a dozen. The majority has conducted brief surveys of about two months, and these studies have often been carried out as members of group expeditions including scholars of various disciplines. Although the total quantity of foreign field research including these brief studies is now considerable, it represents only a relatively small part of the total of anthropological publications in Japan. The majority of the studies are works on Japan (mostly rural Japan, including studies of Okinawa and the Ainu).¹

These circumstances reveal the traditional Japanese attitude towards foreign cultures. Japanese in general have not shown genuine interest in foreign cultures and anthropologists seem to have shared this attitude. The predominant concern of Japan with the West as manifested in the past century was based primarily on the desire to improve Japanese culture or the Japanese nation after the model of the West. There was no genuine interest in comparing different cultures. The keen Japanese interest in China and Chinese culture derives from similar motives. China was an advanced country from which civilization came to Japan and it has long held an important place in the history of Japan. Japanese interests in the West and China thus sprang from egocentric concern with these nations as having cultures more advanced than the culture of Japan. Otherwise, the Japanese have had hardly any curiosity about other cultures. For example, the general lack of knowledge in Japan about even southeast Asian countries, where Japanese economic involvements are heavy, is surprisingly poor. In Japan today, the shortage of experts on Asia and Africa is felt considerably. Such a general attitude, I think, discourages students from specializing in anthropology or other social sciences dealing with Asian countries.

As I have already noted, the usual explanation for the scarcity of foreign field research by Japanese ethnologists is lack of funds. However, I think that most students of anthropology today still do not show a genuine desire to do foreign research and that their primary interest continues to be Japan. It should be noted that students in Japan who study anthropology are very few as compared with students of sociology and other disciplines. During the last twenty years, general public interest in anthropology and the number of university lectures in anthropology have certainly increased greatly, and students of anthropology talk much of the theories of anthropologists such

as Lévi-Strauss and Leach. But the number of thoroughly trained anthropologists with substantial foreign field experience has not increased as much as one might expect. I believe the general lack of genuine interest in foreign cultures is indeed a principal drawback to the development of anthropology in Japan.

This general attitude, which applies to Japanese intellectuals as well as to the general population, is reflected in the nature of anthropology in Japan. The majority of Japanese anthropologists deal with Japanese data, and their primary concerns have been always directed to Japanese issues. For example, the major issues attracting their attention have been *the ethnogenesis of the Japanese people* and *the social organization, mostly studies of kinship, of rural Japan*. These two topics reveal the influence of Viennese ethnology and social anthropology. These topics and the approaches they imply are also closely affiliated with the traditional concerns of Japanese folk ethnology, which has concentrated upon the collection and interpretation of old local customs of Japan. Japanese anthropologists studying Japan generally have a fairly rich knowledge of local customs, and many of them have been closely associated with Japanese folk ethnology. They are, however, generally weak in their knowledge of foreign cultures. It is only rarely that Japanese anthropologists who study Japan have ever done intensive foreign field work of one year or more. Some of these ethnologists, particularly those who study the ethnogenesis of the Japanese people, have done hardly any field work but nevertheless have rich ethnographic knowledge. Many of the older generation of Japanese ethnologists may be so described. On the whole, whether they have done field work or not, their commitment to Japanese issues has been disproportionately heavy.

I think that this inclination toward study of their own culture has given Japanese anthropologists an excessively strong local color in ways of presenting information, modes of discussion, and in the concepts they employ. This is decidedly a handicap for the development of anthropological studies. Most of the scholars write their papers only in Japanese, which all the more aggravates the handicap. I believe that as long as they continue to write their papers in Japanese for Japanese, their backwardness in the scientific study of anthropology will continue. The localism is further strengthened by the fact that exceptionally few scholars have had training abroad. Of course, this circumstance relates closely to some traits of the Japanese educational system and to the lack of anthropological tradition in Japan. Localism may also explain the fact that although many American anthropologists have worked in Japan and produced many works on Japan, communication between them and most Japanese scholars has been very unsatisfactory. As a matter of fact, Japanese scholars rarely discuss or criticize works of non-Japanese in the same way as they do the works of Japanese colleagues. On the other hand, Japanese works referred to by

American scholars show partiality; a limited set of publications always appears as their references. There seems to be much difference between the subjects of discussions of American and Japanese anthropological circles. This is indeed very unfortunate for both American and Japanese anthropologists, and is a significant hindering element in the development of anthropological studies in Japan.

It is interesting to make a comparison with the situation in India, with which I am familiar. Indian anthropologists are also mostly concerned with India and hardly have interests outside their own nation. As in Japan, social anthropology and cultural anthropology in India developed only after the second world war. However, Indian anthropologists maintain very good communication with non-Indian anthropologists, British, American, French, Japanese, or of other nationality. I think this is one of the reasons that Indian anthropology has advanced farther than Japanese anthropology. In fact, anthropological works on India are much read by, and their theoretical concerns are shared with, anthropologists who do not specialize in India, whereas Japanese works on Japan are read by a fairly limited circle interested in Japan rather than in theoretical issues. I myself have never encountered in Japan such satisfactory cross-national discussion as is found in Indian anthropology. India has two seeming advantages. Most of its leading anthropologists were trained in Britain or the United States so that they share basically the same ground as Western anthropologists. A second probable advantage is that India as a field of study has attracted many social anthropologists, becoming one of the major fields of social anthropology, and these studies have led to stimulating theoretical discussions. (I suspect there may be also other interesting reasons which explain differences between anthropological studies on India and on Japan.)

Need for Interdisciplinary and Comparative Studies

When Japanese anthropology is examined from the viewpoint of the subjects of its concern, we may see a strong emphasis on *social organization* (kinship oriented) and *ideology including religion*, whether the approach is some current of ethnology or social anthropology. The number of anthropologists who specialize in psychocultural studies is relatively small and they form a distinct group influenced by American anthropology after the war. Unlike Japanese anthropologists, these scholars maintain exceptionally close contacts with American counterparts. Specialists in material culture are very few (although a considerable number is found in archaeology, which has a much longer tradition than ethnology in Japan). There are almost no specialists in linguistic anthropology, although some linguists have interests in anthropology.

It is *rural Japan* that has been the subject of most research and publication. Here it is important to note that rural Japan is the field of both anthropolo-

gists and folk ethnologists, and it is also one of the important fields of sociologists, economists, and historians (see bibliography of their works in Nakane 1966). To American anthropologists, many of these works fall within the scope of anthropology. However, Japanese ethnologists form a distinct group lacking good communication with other social scientists in the nation who also study rural Japan. For Japanese scholars there are marked boundaries for each community of scholarship, such as sociology, economics, or history. What is important for them is not the subject matter or the commonness of interest, but the affiliation with a group, which is usually formed through their teachers or by the department of instruction in which they had their early training. They believe that any group has a distinctive approach and problem orientation, which is not supposed to be shared with that of other groups. It is like a field of wet rice, thoroughly belonging to the members of a particular household but to no one else. The members who form a group know each other very well but not the members of other groups. Without such personal connection, they hardly discuss their scholarly interests. Close contact between scholars of different groups would doubtless be mutually beneficial.

Soon after World War II, the need for interdisciplinary studies was felt by several leading scholars, who in 1947 established the Nine Academic Societies League for the Study of Human Affairs (Kyūgakkai Rengō). This consisted of nine related scientific societies: physical anthropology, ethnology, folk ethnology, sociology, psychology, human geography, linguistics, archaeology, and the science of religion. The League promoted joint research annually in different parts of Japan, such as Tsushima, Noto, Amami, and Shimokita. Results of these studies were reported each year at a joint convention which included a symposium on a common theme. However, these efforts have turned out to be rather disappointing. A group of scholars representing each of the scholarly societies worked in a common area, but they hardly ever conducted truly successful interdisciplinary work. Each specialist reported his own work without any functional linkage to the studies of co-workers in other disciplines. Every scientific society was like a typical, isolated Japanese village under the common administrative system of a prefecture. Each society observed minimal civil amenities by sending a representative to the field each year and a reporter or speaker to the annual convention; and the results were published every year in the form of an official joint publication. However, the individual representatives developed no communal links with members of other groups, and the societies have generally remained quite distinct from each other.

As the foregoing example illustrates, interdisciplinary studies are generally poorly developed in Japan. If what might be called an interdisciplinary approach has ever truly been gained, it has been only on the theme of ethnogenesis of the Japanese people. Since the end of the second world

war, symposia on this subject have been held occasionally in which ethnologists, physical anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists, historians, and folk ethnologists came together to present the results of their research and engage in interdisciplinary discussion.² These scholars have maintained fairly good cooperation on this common subject, a fact which is largely attributable to long personal contacts since prewar times when Japanese ethnology was carried out by a limited circle of scholars from disciplines other than anthropology. However, after cultural/social anthropology³ developed as an independent discipline among the other social sciences, the former interdisciplinary cooperation weakened. It should be also noted that the relation between anthropology and sociology in Japan has traditionally been poor, as is well reflected in the study of rural Japan. Anthropological studies on rural Japan had been closely associated with folk ethnology and it is only recently, owing to the influence of social anthropology, that sociological concerns have come into vogue in these studies.

The study of rural communities in Japan has been traditional since the 1930's and has been the major focus of rural sociologists. These sociologists have held a kind of prejudice against ethnologists on the grounds that the methods and concerns of the latter should properly be directed to the study of primitive peoples outside Japan and that ethnology lacks effective methods of studying complex societies such as Japan. It has also been a fact that studies by ethnologists have lacked the kind of sophistication which might impress the sociologists. Moreover, anthropologists have not ventured to enter discussion with sociologists, and they have been interested in the application to the Japanese scene of concepts or theories formulated by Western anthropologists dealing with Africa and elsewhere without realizing the extent of the differences between Japanese culture and these foreign cultures, of which they have limited knowledge and no personal experience. For example, many anthropologists studying Japan have carelessly applied the term "lineage" to the *dozoku* (Nakane 1966: 82-94). Such mistaken application of the term lineage would have been avoided if they had only been familiar with the kinship systems of the Chinese or the Hindus. Such misconceptions are not confined to Japanese anthropologists but also to some American anthropologists studying Japan. It is interesting to note that these scholars also have never done field work in a society with unilineal kinship.

It is my conviction that ethnologists specializing in Japan must have a fairly good comparative knowledge of Chinese society or other societies of Asia. One of the most important stimuli in developing Japanese anthropology is a comparative perspective, and this, needless to say, is essential to a scientific approach. In Japan the comparative perspective has tended to be neglected in favor of complex interests in the peculiarity of Japanese culture. It is regrettable that foreign anthropologists specializing in Japan,

regardless of their national affiliation, are apt to become as parochial as the Japanese. To see Japanese culture in comparison with American culture would certainly be interesting and it should shed light on various issues, but we must add a third culture for further comparison. Only in this way can anthropological study in Japan contribute to the theoretical development of anthropology.

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NOTES

1. See *Ethnology in Japan*. Studies of Japan represent more than half the total. The study of the Ryukyu Islands, including the Amami Islands, developed particularly after the war. Subjects of investigation there are closely linked with the culture of Japan proper so that the Ryukyu Islands are not truly a foreign area.

2. See, for example, E. Ishida, M. Oka, N. Egami, and I. Yawata: *Nihon-minzoku no kigen* (The Origin of the Japanese People), Tokyo, Heibonsha, 1968. A symposium, "Ethnogenesis of the Japanese People," was conducted at the 8th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, 1968.

3. After the war, in Japan the terms "cultural anthropology" and "social anthropology" replaced the prewar term "ethnology," which became unpopular. Although there are direct links of scholarship between the two, as I have noted, the term "ethnology" has partially distinctive meanings.