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An Anthropologist of Japan from Europe Looks at the Anthropology of Europe from Japan

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An Anthropologist of Japan from Europe Looks at the Anthropology of Europe from Japan

Joy Hendry

Oxford Brookes University

It was an intriguing experience to attend the workshop at Japan's National Museum of Ethnology (the Minpaku) on *The Anthropology of Europe and its Extending Horizons* in January 2011. On the one hand, as an anthropologist from Europe who specialises in the study of Japan, the tables were being turned on me, so that I could get a sense of how it feels to be the object of study, especially as one of the participants worked in a society rather close to my own; on the other, as an anthropologist working in any other society, I could find areas of comparison and points of shared interest with those carrying out the research, in both cases a rather new field for anthropology. The comments I write here are presented in this spirit of liminality, then, rather than as an expert in either the theoretical basis of the discussions, namely the idea of 'the social', or any of the regions of Europe being discussed.

Udagawa (2010: 1) described the Minpaku's 'clear inclusion of Europe as a target for anthropological research' as an attempt 'to rethink the very academic basis of anthropology'. She argues that the discipline was developed in the West by Westerners who wanted to study non-Western societies, and to turn the tables—a process that has been happening since the middle of the 20th century—was to undermine that fundamental regional bias. On my very first visit to the Minpaku, in 1981, when the exhibition had been open for only four years, I remember being delighted to find exhibits both of Europe, including objects as close to my own student life as bar stools from London, and also those of Japan in which I was interested for my own research. For as Udagawa also notes, the view of anthropology outside academia holds quite strongly that the idea is to look at so-called 'primitive' or 'third-world' societies, so the study of Japan was another break with tradition.

When I chose Japan as my field of study, in the early 1970s, there had been but a few American village studies (notably Embree 1964, Smith 1978 and Norbeck 1954), a British study of Tokyo life (Dore 1958), and a few European inquiries, but the anthropology of Japan by outside researchers was in its infancy. Many young Japanese anthropologists were cutting their research teeth in Japan at that time, but they tended to choose unusual, peripheral areas, which if not 'primitive' (let us ban the word henceforth) were often less technologically developed than the major cities which housed their universities, and the venture was still somewhat in the same vein as the folk studies epitomised by a generation of Japanese scholars such as Yanagita Kunio and Origuchi

Shinobu. The social anthropological study of Japan was thus for a while a rather singular field, and when the Japan Anthropology Workshop was founded in 1984, it had a mere 30 members.

Studies of the more mainstream Japan by both outsiders and Japanese anthropology students have mushroomed since that time, as have studies of American society by American anthropologists, and European society by European anthropologists, and this recent research has responded to the plea of Kuwayama (2003) that the endeavour become a more equal partnership between the researcher and the researched. The study of European societies by Japanese anthropologists has taken a little longer to get going, and Mori's choice of research location was also unusual when she started it. However, the investment of that time and effort on the part of Umesao and his early Minpaku team has paid off by putting the institution at the forefront of this new venture we might call collaborative anthropology.

I have received much collaboration from Japanese anthropologists since the outset of my own field studies in Japan; notably from my supervisor Yoshida Teigo, whose seminar I joined when I arrived as a visiting PhD student at Tokyo University, and Matsunaga Kazuto, who introduced me to the important figures in my chosen site for fieldwork, but also from Aoki Tamotsu and Nagashima Nobuhiro, whom I met in Oxford before setting out, and more recently from Nakamaki Hirochika, Yamashita Shinji, Hirose Yoko and Kuwayama Takami, through shared theoretical interests. It was a privilege for me, then, to be able to offer a small visiting slot at Oxford Brookes University for Shioji Yuko when she arrived in the UK to work in the Cotswolds, and a home for the administration of a collaborative team project with Nakamaki on the study of company museums.

With this background, it was particularly exciting then to be invited to attend the workshop on *The Anthropology of Europe and its Extending Horizons*, and I was delighted to be seated with Shioji and listen to the work she had prepared on British charities and the 'social' relations they involve. As she has been part of the Nakamaki team, I had already had the experience of hearing her present on a society rather close to my own, and indeed I had learned something about the matrilineal practice of passing on porcelain and other prized household goods in British families, and was able to add an example to her data. The village in the Cotswolds that she chose for her fieldwork is a tourist location, it is true; it is also a place city slickers choose to escape their urban confines in the evenings and at weekends; but its inhabitants, both old and new, seem to share quite a few ideas of the social that are held much more widely in the United Kingdom.

My first major comment on the theme of the workshop comes out of this notion of sharing ideas of the 'social', however, and it is also a comment on the mainly Japanese background of the participants in the workshop, for I felt—as an anthropologist of Japan—that I was able to learn something about Japan, as well as something about Europe. Mori (2010) has explained the origin of her interest in European ideas of the social, which includes a contrast with Japanese ideas, and I found this a very useful basis for understanding that Japanese aspect of the approach. The background of understanding

changes in the notion of the social was a Japanese one, contrasting the uses of the term used in Germany (but also by a Turkish immigrant) with those in Japan, and I could identify with that, for I know quite a lot of the Japanese research.

I also know something of several European languages, and I was concerned that there may be some more basic, internalised differences in the use of the idea of the social than were being picked up in the generalised introductions to the way studies in Europe needed to be set in a context of Enlightenment thinking. This is definitely a background to be reckoned with in the academic approach to fields such as anthropology, as scholars throughout Europe evolved a discourse that reflects some shared understanding of the basic tenets of that period. It therefore undoubtedly underpins the way that European anthropologists start out looking at the world. However, my feeling during the presentations at the workshop was that the richest ethnography of ideas of ‘the social’ was to be found in the parts of the papers that tried instead to get inside the thinking of the local people with whom the researchers worked.

There was a definite difference in the way that each of the speakers presented themselves—their attire, their use of English, and their general demeanour—and this, I suggest reflects the *ways of being* that each of them had picked up in the places where they worked. The ‘chunked mental models’ that were described some years ago by Maurice Bloch (1991) when he suggested that we need to take into account the things that we embody and absorb cognitively while doing fieldwork, also reflect a definite idea of the social relations we learn to enact. This embodiment of the ways of being of the people with whom we work takes the researcher to the heart of their project, and I felt it could maybe have formed an interesting extra part of the analysis to take it into account. I could identify quite closely with the charitable workers of Chipping Campden, but the lives of French farmers and Finnish elders were based in different social zones to that of my upbringing.

In the case of the charitable workers, their view of the world they inhabit is quite global; probably a hangover from the days of imperial power, which was still quite strong when they were educated. For them, being part of Europe is a relatively recent identity, and the aid contributions to countries of the British commonwealth—through Oxfam and other such agencies—forms a major backdrop to their involvement. Their idea of community is the same one that still underpins the views of many people in Britain who think they know what anthropology is about—if they know at all—whereas their view of Japan, and the Japanese anthropologist whom they found in their midst, may be quite distinct. In the first case, the poorer people of a world they think of as ‘underdeveloped’, or at best ‘developing’, and still in need of their patronage; the latter a strong independent people with a very different heritage.

Of course, the French and Italians have had their empires as well, and the people who formed the focus of those presentations had their links with the outside world, but Nakagawa’s presentation demonstrated a greater concern with making a living at a local level, rather than contributing to the living of people in far off lands, and their views of community certainly reflected those issues. Takahashi’s presentation about the movement of Finns through different geographical manifestations of their social groups were again

very much focussed on their local community, rather than set against the backdrop of a wider world with demands and needs that underpinned a responsibility in their lives.

In the end, though, we were all working to understand those different manifestations of community, and the means were very similar: through living with, and sharing the lives of, the people who form the focus of our interest. In my case, the very location of the presentations and the congenial dinner we shared afterwards offered me an area of common ground in the field of anthropology, and another area of common ground in the problems for women of working in such a field at the same time as having and rearing children. Perhaps we shared as much in our social relations, despite our diverse backgrounds, as some of the people of the common European background did in their diverse work situations. Our ability to share stories and experiences in any case contribute to the idea of an anthropology among equals, who can study each other's social lives without finding themselves in an inferior position. The occasion and its outcomes thus make a valuable contribution to the new epistemological approach advocated by Mori for the international workshop.

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