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Ecological Perspectives on Kyōyō and Aesthetic Quality: Japan and America

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| 1. Two Historical Roots of Contemporary Japanese Education | 2. The Nature of the Aesthetic Response |
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Materialistic perspectives on life, as well as pragmatic, utilitarian, and positivistic views, are dominant in contemporary industrial societies, whereas aesthetic, spiritual, non-utilitarian perspectives are on the defensive today. The latter views are associated with traditional notions of kyōyō, or culturedness, which in turn are associated with upper socio-economic class tastes. Concern for the non-utilitarian, the aesthetic aspects of life is thus sometimes viewed as linked to elitism and to aristocratic privilege that today are discredited by mass societies such as the U.S. that favor, at least in principle, democratic ideologies. The philosopher John Dewey, for example, who in many ways represents a dominant American view, articulated this notion in his critique of traditional philosophies. Dewey, of course, was the major American philosopher who related the ideas of democracy, science, and pragmatism to education.

In this paper, an ecological view of the world, of man's place in the biological environment, is considered from the point of view of some of the late Gregory Bateson's ideas. Bateson closely related aesthetic and spiritual phenomena to deep ecological awareness, and thus found profound value in the aesthetic aspects of human life. He considered utilitarian perspectives, coupled with powerful technology that we have today to bring about changes in the environment for immediate human ends, of immense danger to civilization, because it brought about widespread damage to the natural environment. He had a strong distaste for the ideas of Dewey.

1. TWO HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE EDUCATION

Present day education in Japan has two historical roots: one lies in the Western ideals of utilitarian education, with a vision of mass schooling that leads to a progressive industrial society. This root was established during the Meiji period, when

Japan transplanted Western educational ideas and practices as part of the modernization efforts of the Meiji leaders. Although the exemplar of this vision of a mass-educated population has been the United States, today Japan is also a prime candidate for this position. Japan has attained a high level of formal education, with almost universal schooling up through the secondary level. Japan is among those nations that have a large proportion of students who continue through higher education. Scholastic achievement levels have been high, according to international studies, and this fact has tempted many political and educational leaders to claim that Japan's formal school system is related to the nation's prominence as a major economic power.

The other historical root lies in Japan's earlier traditions, particularly in that form of education involving cultivation in the traditional arts (such as calligraphy, Noh, or the tea ceremony). These in turn show the influence of imported ideas, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism and also exhibit the influence of indigenous Shinto. Many of these arts were historically practiced by the priests and aristocracy, but began to spread to the commoners in the Tokugawa period, through private schools (*shijuku*). Part of the motivation for learning these arts was to emulate the samurai, in order to improve one's social standing. As R. P. Dore has pointed out, the arts had become an acceptable part of education by the end of the eighteenth century; aesthetic enjoyment was considered part of being a cultured person.¹⁾

Today, as the Japanese have attained a higher level of personal income, these arts have spread further, and have been taken up by more members of middle income backgrounds, such that what had once been upper class culture, has attained a niche in contemporary mass culture, alongside, of course, high brow arts (such as ballet and classical music) imported from the West, and those more popular arts that may be considered by some, rightly or wrongly, often to be vulgar and unrefined. Considering how traditional arts have fared in many other countries that have industrialized, it is amazing that today we find an old art like the tea ceremony practiced by more people than ever before in the history of Japan.

The main agent for the propagation of the practice of these arts today has continued to be those schools that lie in the "non-formal educational system," outside of the credentialing process that normally determines one's place in the employment structure of contemporary society. On the other hand, the modern, formal educational system, which consists of mass compulsory schooling followed by high school and college, is associated with this process, and thus also with material success. The formal educational system is thus readily considered a means to an end, a means for obtaining the credentials necessary for determining one's place in the employment system. In the United States, the tradition of liberal education held strong in the idea of the University, but in recent years, has appeared to be on the decline, with more students interested in higher education primarily in order to find a desirable position in the employment market. Also the arts tend to be taught in terms of appreciation, rather than in terms of practice, when compared to Japan,

where many of the arts are taught so that they actually may be performed.

Although some of the traditional arts are included in parts of the official school curricula,²⁾ the major places for teaching and learning the traditional arts in Japan continue to be the private, non-formal schools. There are very few counterparts of these types of schools in the U.S.. In Japan, however, there is an entire array of non-formal schools that teach the various arts that are associated with culturedness. These schools teach arts both Western (such as jazz singing, violin, piano, or harp) and traditional (such as the noh dance, ikebana, *shodo*, tea ceremony, *shamisen*, and *nagauta*). A study conducted about ten years ago, in 1976, indicated that over half of all children in grades 1 through 9 took culture and art lessons outside of school. The percentage dropped as children approached the age for preparing for university entrance examinations. But many Japanese adults, after they have completed school and have found a more or less secure place in the world of work, begin to study and practice the traditional arts and often attend non-formal schools, such as those offered by Urasenke, Ohara, etc.³⁾ These arts also are offered in classes sponsored by large corporations for the benefit of their workers. Some Japanese pursue the practice and study of these arts for the remainder of their active lives.

It must be mentioned that in Japan, there are many other kinds of non-formal schools, among which are many whose sole purpose is to assist young people to succeed in the formal school system; many of these are "cram schools" that help students prepare for the entrance examinations to prestige schools and universities in the formal system.

Although a major motivation for studying the traditional arts in Japan may continue to be to improve one's social status, it must be remembered their cultivation is also connected to loftier ideals, that of aestheticism and spiritualism and kyōyō. Literacy, for example, today is considered a must for all classes of people in Japan in order to be able to participate more fully in every day life. But literacy, too, in Japan was at first largely associated with being in the priest or samurai class and part of the motivation for commoners in becoming literate in the Tokugawa period was to improve one's social status.

It must also be mentioned that for many progressive thinkers, the traditional arts are also sometimes linked with the persistence of undesirable feudalistic values in Japan. This link is especially evident when one considers the fact that many of the non-formal schools that teach traditional arts are associated with the *iemoto* system. But it must also be said that the *iemoto* system, with its emphasis on loyalty and bonding based on quasi-family relationships, has also served to help maintain the traditional arts in Japan, arts that could have very easily been lost in the industrialization and modernization process.

The interaction between the two systems in Japan, the formal school system and the non-formal system with its schools that teach traditional and Western arts, ought to be of great interest to educators outside of Japan because for countries like the United States, the tradition of aestheticism and its cultivation is much weaker,

and less deeply entrenched in the culture, compared to Japan. There is also a tendency in the U.S. for anything considered desirable to be incorporated into the formal school system, whereas in Japan, aspects of a culture that are deemed desirable by a group tend to be preserved by that group, with mechanisms to assure that these aspects are perpetuated from generation to generation. The *iemoto* system is one such mechanism for the maintenance and continuation of many old traditions that would have been otherwise lost.

Japanese traditional arts also have a record of great fascination for many Westerners. This is because, I think, they do evoke an intuitive response that is deeply aesthetic and spiritual. This has been the appeal to Westerners of books like *The Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzo, and *Zen and the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel. Many great artists and thinkers who have encountered Japan have been fascinated by her traditional culture, be it Noh, Kabuki, or haiku poetry. I am thinking here of persons such as Berthold Brecht, Sergei Eisenstein, Edward Morse, and Ernest Fenellosa. It may even be said that some of them, such as Lafcadio Hearn, helped the Japanese themselves value their own tradition of aesthetic sensitivity.

It also seems to me that today, many Americans seem to be afflicted by aesthetic and spiritual starvation, a result of living in a highly secularized and materialistic society, dominated by pragmatic values. America's Puritan tradition also seems to have had its effect; the Puritarians did not embrace the arts. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Westerners who are attracted to the traditional arts of Japan often tend to sentimentalize or romanticize them, a state that may lead later to disillusionment when the commercial aspects of some of the schools that teach traditional arts become evident.

2. THE NATURE OF THE AESTHETIC RESPONSE

For Gregory Bateson, the aesthetic response not only is one that can be felt universally when human beings encounter great works of art or perceive beauty in nature, but also is one that is important for our psychic survival. From such a point of view, therefore, the association of the traditional arts in Japan with elitism may not be the only factor in its appeal to many practitioners; there are more basic and profound reasons as to why they invite such a loyal and persistent following, and these reasons are related to the universal nature of the aesthetic.

The aesthetic response is interpreted by Bateson as a response, "with *recognition* and *empathy*," to "the pattern which connects."⁴ For Bateson, the formal educational system teaches hardly anything about the "pattern that connects."⁵ Reality, for Bateson, is pattern, rather than things. When we perceive "things" in the conventional way, it is a false perception, for we are really dealing with relationships and patterns rather than "objects." What we "see" is something in our heads, and that something is not the object itself that we think we see, but a transform of what takes place in our optical-mental system. To put it in another way, we are

dealing with descriptions of patterns, and not directly with that which is being described. Patterns of connection are connected to each other by patterns. Thus from a wider point of view, the whole of life is united in a relationship of patterns. Nature itself has a wholeness, and interconnectedness, as the study of biological ecosystems reveals. The aesthetic response, then, is a beholding of this complex of patterns, its metapattern, "the sense of unity of biosphere and humanity which would bind and reassure us all with an affirmation of beauty,"⁶⁾ a kind of discovery of the "patterns of connection and more abstract, more general (and most empty) proposition that, indeed, there is a pattern of patterns of connection."⁷⁾ In one of Bateson's discussions, he has considered the complex combination of patterns and metapatterns as analogues to Buddhist mandalas.⁸⁾

The aesthetic response to what is around us, and within us, is related to the idea of "grace," defined in the sense of an attainment of innocence, beauty, like the movement of a tiger, and a mindfulness that has purity because there is a loss of purpose, self-consciousness, and contrivance. "Grace" is not only related to beauty, but also to the sense of religiousness. For example, Bateson's interpretation of totemism is that it was based on an analogy between the social system and the natural world, the world of animals and plants. "Perhaps the attempt to achieve grace by identification with the animals was the most sensitive thing which was tried in the whole bloody history of religion."⁹⁾ Bateson's interpretation of the cave paintings of the prehistoric Aurignacians in what is today France is that they were drawn not for practical, magical, reasons, that of improving the hunt, but for restoring an empathy for life. The invention of tools to improve the hunt was a step in cultural evolution that distanced human beings from nature, from animals that they hunted. With tools, human consciousness became more separated from nature because to think more deliberately, in terms of purpose, meant mental processes that separated subject from object. Such new thought processes meant that humans increasingly could regard themselves as separate entities from the animals that were hunted and the rest of the environment. The drawings expressed grace, while at the same time they were drawn as an attempt to return to that state of grace, that pre-conscious state of aesthetic closeness to nature including our own bodies, that sense of being alive and being a part of a larger whole.

Art, therefore, for Bateson, is a corrective to the deliberateness and conscious purpose of humans as they define the world narrowly in economic and political terms. It is a corrective to our treating other living beings as objects, including our tendency to dehumanize others and ourselves. The aesthetic response is thus viewed by Bateson as very closely related to the I-Thou relationship that Buber discussed.¹⁰⁾ Conscious purpose separates us from nature and from ourselves, and is directly related to the breakdown of complex ecosystems, such as rain forests and coral reef systems. For from the time of the invention of tools, and of agriculture, with the domestication of animals and plants, as human beings applied their knowledge to attain economic and political gain, the natural environment was destroyed, and desertification processes were set in motion. Today, of course,

natural ecosystems are being destroyed at a pace more rapid than ever before in our history, due to our more powerful technology.¹¹⁾ For Bateson, the fact that “an ancient ecosystem—the primeval forest, the desert, the Everglades, the arctic tundra—for those of you who have ever seen such things, of which there are not many, is an incredibly beautiful thing,”¹²⁾ is of immense importance. The aesthetic response not only serves to restore our sense of psychic wholeness, but is also necessary for us to free ourselves from those manipulative thought patterns and actions that lead to the massive abuse of others, and of the entire living system that makes up the planet.

While the spirituality involved in the practice of Japanese traditional arts can be separated from specific religious doctrine or dogma, much of the traditional arts of Japan are nevertheless historically related to Zen philosophy, with its invitation to us to enter a state of mind that is pre-literate, that is non-striving, spontaneous, undeliberate and has “no-mind.” The pedagogy involved in the teaching of these arts for a long time involved no textbooks, except for the advanced practitioners, for whom the secret teachings were revealed through books that were not usually made available to the novices. In many musical traditions, like the study of the *shakuhachi*, notation of the music was developed relatively late; it may be that part of communicating the aesthetic in the teaching of these arts involved the Zen idea of eliminating verbal, prose explanations, perhaps to avoid an over-intellectual approach. (The relatively recent practice of printing text books showing how to do the tea ceremony through photographs and words in order to make the ceremony more acceptable to Westerners may not be a good idea, if I am right in my interpretation.)

Also, an important method for learning these traditional arts has been often through imitation and rote learning, with numerous repeating of acts so that the acts can be done with greater spontaneity, and appear more natural as they become more non-conscious, as they become a basic part of the person’s being. A naturalness is achieved in performing these acts, and is itself an expression of grace. As Zeami writes in his treatise on the aesthetics of Noh, the *Kadensho*, audiences respond to this grace in the highly skilled Noh dancer. The art of calligraphy reaches the highest level, too, when the writing both signifies and embodies “grace”—when the calligraphy is written effortlessly, and without any sense of contrivance.

Bateson bemoans the modern loss of the “core” of the religious experience in the practice of Christianity and other religions. “I hold to the presupposition,” he says, “that our loss of the sense of aesthetic unity was, quite simply, an epistemological mistake. I believe that that mistake may be more serious than all the minor insanities that characterize those older epistemologies which agreed upon the fundamental unity.”¹³⁾ Thus he has argued that the aesthetic is of crucial importance in human life and in the survival of the entire biosphere, and that the foundations of much of our scientific thinking are based on a serious epistemological error. Bateson, a scientist himself, however, does not abandon science, but argues for a science that recognizes the importance of the aesthetic; indeed in his *Mind and*

Nature, written while his life was reaching its end, he attempted to lay the groundwork for a new science that is based on epistemological presuppositions that do not lead to actions that fundamentally result in widespread destruction of natural systems.

The ritualistic aspects of many of the Japanese traditional arts may also be part of the aesthetic. Bateson recognizes the importance of ritual in human life. "Attempts have been made in the last hundred years to create social systems with a minimum of symbolic, supernatural, and ritual components. Education has been secularized, and so on. But could a system be viable with only laws and ethical principles and no fantasy, no play, no art, no totemism, no religion, no humor?"¹⁴⁾ Many of these arts incorporate rituals into their performance. In fact the preparation for performing the art becomes continuous with the art form. Preparing for the Noh play is thus ritualized: the floors are cleaned as an act of purification and the wearing of the costumes and placing of face into the masks are also made into ceremonies. Rubbing the inkstone with water to make the ink for Shodo is important also as part of the ritual to prepare one's mind for the act of using the brush. The tea ceremony of course makes the entire act of preparing and serving tea into a rite that invites aesthetic response. The ritual is made continuous with everyday life, by including the entry into the ritual as part of the ceremony.

Japan, especially since the Meiji Period, has adopted many Western practices that have led to large-scale environmental deterioration, and it remains to be seen whether the traditional arts have lost their relatedness to the sense of "deep ecology," that aesthetic and spiritual awareness of the interrelatedness of the environment. As Allan G. Grapard has pointed out, some of Japan's cultural traditions contain "a vast storehouse of notions and practices which may be helpful in establishing a culturally grounded ecophilosophy."¹⁵⁾

I have tried to argue, using ideas from Gregory Bateson, that important aspects of ancient wisdom are still relevant today, and are found in the teaching of the traditional arts in Japan today, and are in part a source of their popular appeal. Whether, however, the aesthetic insights they offer are carried over into the recognition by the Japanese of the deterioration of the natural environment is something that is not clearly or readily apparent.

NOTES

- 1) DORE, R. P., *Education in Tokugawa Japan*. London: Athlone Press and Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1984, p. 57.
- 2) See my essay, "Japanese and U.S. Curricula Compared," in *Educational Policies in Crisis: Japanese and American Perspectives*. New York: Praeger, 1986, pp. 61-95.
- 3) Asian Cultural Center for Unesco, *Traditional Forms of Culture in Japan*. Tokyo: The Center, 1975, p. 97.
- 4) BATESON, Gregory, *Mind and Nature*. Toronto, New York and London: 1980, p. 9. Emphasis in the original.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 8.

- 6) Ibid., p. 19.
- 7) Ibid., p. 18.
- 8) BATESON, Gregory, "Ecology of Mind: The Sacred," *Loka*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1975, p. 26.
- 9) BATESON, Gregory, "They Threw God Out of the Garden: Letters from Gregory Bateson to Philip Wylie and Warren McCulloch," ed. by Rodney E. Donaldson, *CoEvolution Quarterly*, Winter, 1982, p. 64.
- 10) BATESON, Gregory, "Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation," *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972, p. 446.
- 11) BATESON, Gregory, "Conscious Purpose Versus Nature," *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, pp. 426-439. I was struck also by some of the similarities between ideas about conscious purpose discussed here with Dr. Tadao Umesao's critique of contemporary industrialized society's almost exclusive focus on economic efficiency in his "Soul and Material Things" keynote speech for the 1973 Kyoto Congress of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design.
- 12) BATESON, Mary Catharine, *Our Own Metaphor: A Personal Account of a Conference on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972, p. 26.
- 13) BATESON, Gregory (Note 4) 1980, p. 19.
- 14) BATESON, (Note 12) 1972, p. 237.
- 15) GRAPARD, Allan G., "Nature and Culture in Japan," in *Deep Ecology*, edited by Michael Tobias (San Diego, California, 1985), p. 241. A criticism of Bateson's ideas may be found in the same book in the essay, "Toward a Philosophy of Nature—The Bases for an Ecological Ethics," by Murray Bookchin, pp. 213-239.