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Foragers as Fetish in Modern Japan

Mark J. HUDSON
Master's Program in Area Studies
University of Tsukuba

This essay examines the relationship between the hunter-gatherers of the Japanese Islands and discourses about Japanese modernity and national identity. Three main points are made: (1) even as Japan has become ultra-modern, it has successfully incorporated prehistoric hunter-gatherers within its stories of national history and identity; (2) this “Japanization” of prehistoric hunter-gatherers has been based on a fetish-like desire for an authentic Japanese tradition that penetrates deep into prehistory; (3) although these discourses about Japanese hunter-gatherers share many similarities with European and American debates on so-called primitive societies, such universal themes have been generally ignored by Japanese scholars and critics who stress the particularistic aspects of Japan’s foraging peoples.

INTRODUCTION

Even as it has embraced the modern, Japan has made a fetish of tradition, building its modernity upon the invention of an un-changing, before-modern identity rooted in agriculture, especially rice agriculture. In the words of anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney [1997: 660-661], “agriculture came to symbolize the pristine past. Representing the primordial Japanese identity, uncontaminated by foreign influences and modernity as represented by the city, this past is symbolized in reconstituted agriculture and the rural.” The concept of Japan as a nation of rice farmers has, since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, been regularly re-invented and continues to hold a powerful sway over the Japanese imagination [AMNO 1996; EDWARDS 1991; OHNUKI-TIERNEY 1993, 1997; VLASTOS 1998].

Within the context of this symbolic equation of agriculture with Japanese identity, the presence of hunter-gatherers in the Japanese Islands becomes historically problematic. If the Japanese are an agrarian folk, then “Japanese hunter-gatherers” should not exist. In reality, however, Japanese scholars have been able to incorporate both prehistoric and ethnographic foragers into an imagined national community and in doing so to ignore the many contradictions within Japan’s agrarian myth. It is proposed here that this “Japanization” of Insular hunter-gatherers has been accomplished by the creation of a Japanese prehistory steeped in historical desires and nostalgias that verge on the fetish. The concept of the fetish used in this essay can be understood as “an object regarded irrationally with peculiar reverence or affection or fear” [DREVER 1952: 96]. As discussed below, Japanese prehistory becomes fetish-like in terms of its substitution in place of what is perceived of as lost Japanese tradition.

MORE JAPANESE THAN THE JAPANESE?

The term “Japanese hunter-gatherers” can be used either in a geographical sense to mean foragers who lived in what we now call the Japanese Islands, or else it can be made to imply that those foragers had or have a shared ethnic or cultural communality with other Japanese peoples. In the early days of Japanese anthropology there seemed little doubt that the Ainu and the Stone Age peoples who had produced the archaeological sites being discovered across the country could not be Japanese in the ethnic sense. Most scholars linked the Ainu with the Stone Age remains, although a few also supported the concept of pre-Ainu peoples such as the Korpokunkur [HUDSON 1999: 36]. The possibility of hybridization between the Japanese and Stone Age and/or Ainu groups had been raised by Koganei [1896], von Baelz [1908] and others. It was not until the 1930s, however, that a serious attempt was made to incorporate the Stone Age — which by then was widely known as the Jomon — into a fully Japanese prehistory. Comparisons of Jomon and Yayoi skeletons by Kenji Kiyono led him to argue that both the Ainu and the Japanese had evolved from the same Proto-Japanese base [KIYONO 1949]. The use of such thinking for nationalistic ends is well-illustrated in a World War II policy document discussed by Dower [1986]. The authors of this report argued that “even in ancient times there had been a ‘main line’ or ‘main race’ among the peoples who came together to form the Japanese race. This main line could be called the original Japanese, and by a process of natural selection and assimilation it gradually absorbed the other racial strains into a single “enduring structure”” [DOWER 1986: 269].

This idea of a racial “main line” is not, of course, one that has any biological basis, yet it has been enormously influential in Japan, a way of combining the reality of ethnic diversity with the fantasy of racial purity. Disturbed by such uses of prehistory for nationalistic ends, from the 1930s Japanese archaeologists moved completely away from discussions of ethnicity in prehistory [HUDSON 1999: 44-49]. In archaeological contexts, therefore, the term “Japanese” came, by a process of default, to be used in its geographical sense as an inclusive label for all the peoples of the Islands, past and present. At one level this usage can be seen as avoiding the discrimination inherent in ethnic labeling. In my view, however, such usage is potentially discriminatory because, in the absence of explicit discussion as to who “the Japanese” actually are, the meaning of the term can be easily manipulated. I thus differ from Kaner [1996] in arguing that although we will never know for sure who was/is Japanese, the question needs to be at least asked.

An example of this problem is provided by biological anthropologist Kazuro Hanihara’s comment that the Ainu are “more Japanese” than the mainland Wajin Japanese [UMEHARA and HANIHARA 1982: 217]. This deliberately provocative comment was made at the end of a book-length conversation between Hanihara and philosopher Takeshi Umehara and in the context is just another way of thinking about the question “Who are the Japanese?” If one uses the term “Japanese” in its geographical sense then the Ainu can indeed be seen as more Japanese than the Wajin by virtue of having lived in the Islands for a longer time. In a similar vein, one might argue that African-Americans are “more American” than Irish Americans since the major influx of the former population occurred before the latter. On one level both these comments can be interpreted as attempts to re-think in-built assumptions and thus to empower minority voices.

Both comments have meaning because they are *meaning-less*: African-Americans are no more American than any other group, but neither are they *less* American, and the same applies to the Ainu in the Japanese context. The problem, of course, with Hanihara's statement is that in calling the Ainu "Japanese" and assigning them a "Japanese" biological and historical heritage, it is easy to overlook the fact that many Ainu want nothing more than to be officially recognized as a *non*-Japanese indigenous minority, a courtesy still refused by the Japanese government.

Calling the Ainu and their Jomon ancestors "Japanese" opens them to analysis and speculation by a whole range of *non-specialists*. An excellent example can be found in the work of Takeshi Umehara. Since the 1980s, Umehara has proposed a view of Japanese identity that emphasizes the non-agricultural Jomon and Ainu peoples and the deep roots those groups have in the Islands. Umehara characterizes (modern) Japanese culture as an amalgam of native (Jomon/Ainu) and foreign (Yayoi/Chinese/Western) elements and he uses this binary structure to explain the fundamental processes of Japanese history [UMEHARA 1990, 1994]. For instance, in attempting to answer the question "How can we explain modern Japan's economic development?", Umehara [1990] builds on the work of economist Tsuneo Iida in the following fashion:

According to Iida, Japan is ... an egalitarian society where Marx's ideal has been almost completely realized. ... Where does this egalitarianism come from? It cannot be understood only through the influence of Western democratic philosophy since Japan is more egalitarian than Britain or America.

In answering the previous question I believe we have to consider the oval structure of Japanese society. Put very simply, Jomon culture was a culture that prized egalitarianism. Hunter-gatherer or fisher-gatherer societies do not accumulate wealth and when an animal is caught it is shared out equally. Amongst the *matagi* hunters of the Tohoku — whose society is derived from that of the Jomon — the person chosen as the leader of a hunting party is the one most suitable for the particular animal that is being tracked, be it a bear or a wild boar. During the hunt everyone follows that person's directions, but when the hunt is over he becomes an ordinary person once again. The animal that is caught is equally distributed to old people and widows who did not participate in the hunt.

The houses of the Jomon culture were of exactly the same size and surrounded a central plaza. This shows that Jomon society was almost completely egalitarian. Class and status developed when the Yayoi people came along and defeated the Jomon people, establishing a state. [UMEHARA 1990: 16-17]

Clearly there are some elements of truth in Umehara's characterization of contemporary Japan and the Jomon as egalitarian societies. Anyone who has visited or studied Japan will know that Japanese society and language are deeply hierarchical, yet it has been widely proposed that class is much less important in contemporary Japan than in most Western countries [cf. CLAMMER 1995: 98-119; KENRICK 1990]. Similarly, while Jomon houses are not all the same size, Umehara's conclusion that the Jomon was egalitarian probably represents the consensus in Japanese archaeology¹⁾. What is most striking here, however, is the way Umehara

bridges the gap between the two periods by explaining contemporary society by reference to prehistoric precedence. The social exploitation and other “problem areas” in Japanese history that developed after the Jomon can then be explained away as non-Japanese foreign influences. Thus, although egalitarian social organization is found amongst hunter-gatherer groups all over the world, Umehara argues that such egalitarianism is particularly important in Japan since it offers a way of linking past and present through the use of supposedly uniquely Japanese behavioral patterns.

Notwithstanding their reductionist nature, Umehara’s writings have enjoyed considerable success in Japan, influencing politician Ichiro Ozawa among others²⁹. It was not until the mid 1990s, however, that popular interest in Japan began to focus on the Jomon. As noted by Habu and Fawcett [1999], the excavation of the Sannai Maruyama site in Aomori City brought media attention on the Jomon for the first time. With Sannai Maruyama, there now seemed clear archaeological evidence of truly affluent hunter-gatherers that the Japanese could be proud of. The archaeology of the Jomon period is enjoying increasing popularity in Japan and this is due in no small part to the excavations at Sannai Maruyama. The aggressive publicity program begun by the local authorities in Aomori has boosted tourism in the region and made Sannai Maruyama a household name in Japan. The use of Aomori as a venue for part of CHAGS 8 has also served to increase interest in Sannai Maruyama overseas.

The current popularity of Jomon archaeology in Japan does, however, have a negative side in “dumbing down” debates over prehistoric Japan and the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. According to media and other popular accounts, the main message from Sannai Maruyama is that hunter-gatherers were more complex than we thought [e.g., KOYAMA 1996]. This message of forager affluence was one well-known to anthropologists for several decades [e.g., KOYAMA and THOMAS 1981], but the relative lack of interest in hunter-gatherer theory and indeed in anthropological archaeology in general amongst Japanese archaeologists mean that these simplistic views of the Jomon will probably not easily be challenged.

FORAGERS AND THE FETISH OF JAPANESE TRADITION

If, as many historians and anthropologists have argued, modern Japan built its “mirror of modernity” on agriculture and the agrarian, how could hunter-gatherers be so easily incorporated into a distinctively Japanese national (pre)history? I would like to suggest that one answer lies in the sheer all-consuming power of “tradition” in modern Japan. Marilyn Ivy has argued that this desire for tradition transcends the actual presence or absence of traditional culture in the involvement of “the consuming and consumable pleasures of nostalgia as an ambivalent longing to erase the temporal difference between subject and object of desire, shot through with not only the impossibility but also the ultimate unwillingness to reinstate what was lost” [IVY 1995: 10]. Ivy goes on to compare this nostalgia with the fetish, “the denial of a feared absence through its replacement with a substitute presence” [IVY 1995: 10]. She proposes that the most charged topos of Japanese fetishism is, arguably, “that of the emperor, who, despite his postwar denial of divine status and his placement as a powerless symbolic monarch, still remains a deified icon for nationalists, literally embodying the logic of fetishistic denial, with all its disturbing political effects” [IVY 1995: 12]. This idea of the emperor as fetish is, I believe, a

compelling one and is supported by the appropriation of hundreds of Kofun-era burial mounds as “imperial mausolea” even though their actual links with the early Yamato emperors are in many cases unproven. Alongside the emperor, however, sits another, equally powerful fetish—the desire for a deep Japanese prehistory which is born out of the very real anxiety that the prehistory of the Islands may not, in fact, be purely Japanese.

While writing this essay I received information about an event titled “Let’s Meet at Sannai Maruyama” (三内丸山で会いましょう). The themes for this meeting, which was held at the Sannai Maruyama site on September 25, 1999, were “Jomon *sake*”, “The life of Jomon women” and “Jomon music”. Lectures on these topics were to be followed by an outdoor concert and African folk tales under a full moon. Although I was not able to attend this event, descriptions of the evening and letters from participants published in a newsletter produced by a volunteer group at the site are extremely interesting and are used in the analysis in this section.

The three characters 酒(*sake*, wine), 女(woman) and 音(sound, tone, voice) figured prominently on one of the posters for the event. This poster portrays cartoon drawings of a frustrated-looking boy holding a flower and watching a smiling girl who is hard at work collecting berries. However, the discussions of gender and Jomon society at “Let’s Meet at Sannai Maruyama” were more complex than this poster seems to suggest. Women emerge not simply as objects of male sexual desire but as mysterious, powerful, shamanistic figures who provide links between contemporary Japan and Jomon Sannai Maruyama.

What is especially interesting about the three themes of “wine, women and song” is how they are all used to tie contemporary Japan to its prehistoric roots. While there was some discussion of the mechanics of Jomon wine-making at the meeting [SANNAI FILE 2000a: 2-4], this seems to have been tangential to the experience of shared participation in a festival (*matsuri*). A man from Tokyo writes, in the somewhat mystical language common to many of the participants’ letters, “Songs, stories and the moon. People and nature were in harmony and, spanning 5000 years of time, a Jomon festival was re-lived here” [SANNAI FILE 2000a: 5]. Central to this “festival” and to the proposed links between Jomon and contemporary Japan was the presence of an *itako*, a female medium from the Tsugaru region of Aomori. One of the main tasks performed by *itako* is to call the dead ancestors of clients in order to console the living [BLACKER 1975: 159-160]. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that a theme common to many participants’ letters from “Let’s Meet at Sannai Maruyama” is that of mourning the departed—both deceased relations and more abstractly the Jomon past [SANNAI FILE 1999: 2-4]. A woman from Saitama recalls that her somewhat scary image of *itako* was softened by the sympathy shown by the *itako* at Sannai Maruyama when she spoke about the death of her mother. A man from Osaka also writes that the gentleness of the *itako* made his wife feel closer to her own departed mother. A second man from Tokyo is more poetic: “It was a rather mysterious scene. The atmosphere was such that it made you think it might have been the same 4500 years ago. Remembering the dead was like mourning this transient world. It was as if, across time and space, one could hear the laments of mothers who had lost their children” [SANNAI FILE 1999: 3].

As mediums between the living and the dead, *itako* voice the sounds and feelings of those who have passed before. The explicit link between remembering the recent, remembered dead and lamenting the distant, desired dead of prehistory is striking in the comments from the Jomon

evening at Sannai Maruyama. Equally striking are the many parallels between this evening and Ivy's analysis of *itako* on Mt. Osore in northern Aomori Prefecture [IVY 1995: 141-191]. Recalling the dead on Mt. Osore becomes, in Ivy's work, a metaphor for remembering a "traditional" past that is both denied and desired: "The dead can literally be made to speak again on Mt. Osore. And if the dead can speak again, both the archaic Japanese past and the past of individual seekers can be kept suspended on the threshold of vanishing (not gone, not quite)" [IVY 1995: 143]. On one level Sannai Maruyama is a locus of what Ivy terms "the vanishing", events and places suspended before disappearance. As an archaeological site, it does of course physically vanish once another section is excavated; and yet to read most popular accounts of the site one would think that it has not been destroyed by an irreversible process of salvage archaeology but rather "rediscovered", brought back to life as a central topos of Japanese historical identity. At the same time, however, an important difference also exists between Sannai Maruyama and the other marginal places and practices discussed by Ivy. Despite their apparent remoteness and marginality, Sannai Maruyama and Jomon culture are fast occupying a central place in narratives of the Japanese past, representing not so much the vanishing as the buried ruins of Japanese identity which await excavation and rebirth.

As will have become clear already, women seem to have played an important role at the "Let's Meet at Sannai Maruyama" event. This phenomenon requires a much more sophisticated analysis of gender than will be possible here. However, at least from the published accounts in the Sannai File newsletter, the interest in Jomon women seems not to have been part of any sort of feminist critique of contemporary Japanese society, but rather a way of establishing a "Japanese" tradition with deep prehistoric roots. Thus, for example, what is seemingly the most extreme feminist comment from the evening, by anthropologist Kazuhisa Eguchi, that "we consider the possibility not only of a shamanistic role for [Jomon] women, but of a more broadly matriarchal community" is tempered by the same scholar's remark that "In that sense, I think society in the Jomon Era did not include the unnatural patria[r]chal system brought in later from China and other countries" [SANNAI FILE 2000b: 3]. The possibility that at least some Jomon groups may have practiced uxorilocal residence cannot be discounted [cf. HARUNARI 1986; MOURI and OKU 1998], but there is no evidence that the Jomon was ever a matriarchal society and Eguchi's comments recall those of Umehara who attributes the desecration of Japanese culture to foreign influences.

NATURALLY JAPANESE?

The themes of nostalgia, desire, and reconstituted tradition are clear from even the preliminary discussion of Sannai Maruyama and its Jomon foragers presented in the previous section. As noted at the beginning of this essay, even while embracing the hubris of the modern system, the Japanese began to valorize aspects of "traditional" life that seemed to hold a promise of stability and security. The still-familiar patterns of rural life were an obvious place to start in the reconstruction of Japanese tradition in early Meiji, but another important theme was Nature. Japanese writings on nature and the relationships between humans and the natural world display a variety of viewpoints and approaches but two themes are relevant to the discussion here. The first is the idea that the agricultural landscape is not a completely artificial, "cultural"

construction but part of the natural physical landscape of Japan. The second is the related view that traditional, pre-industrial societies have intimate relations with the natural world which have been eroded or lost with industrialization.

A full analysis of these themes would require much more space than is possible here, but the crucial point is that Japanese “tradition” became synonymous not just with culture but also with nature. Rice fields came to be seen as part of a “naturally” Japanese environment, and “Ultimately, rice paddies also stand for the Japanese nation itself with its quintessential beauty and changing colors marking ‘the Japanese seasons’” [OHNUKI-TIERNEY 1993: 98]. “Japanese nature” thus became linked not just with mountains and forests, but also with paddy fields, gardens, and purely symbolic representations of the natural environment [ASQUITH and KALLAND 1997; MORRIS-SUZUKI 1995: 263]. Hand-in-hand with this Japanization of nature comes the view that the ecological crisis following industrialization can be attributed to Western civilization and Judeo-Christian ideology. This view reaches its extreme expression in the influential work of palynologist Yoshinori Yasuda who argues that the ecological harmony of Jomon forest culture offers a solution to contemporary ecological degradation. In a logic disturbingly reminiscent of the wartime Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere, Yasuda argues that as the only advanced country (*senshin-koku*) in monsoon Asia, Japan has a responsibility to spread its Jomon heritage of ecological harmony [YASUDA 1987: 292; see also YASUDA 1990, 1999].

Of course, if ecological harmony was really a characteristic of primitive societies then presumably it would be the less advanced countries of Asia that are closest to this heritage and thus in a stronger position of leadership. While the links between primitive societies and ecological awareness are not totally spurious, they are nevertheless complex [see e.g., MORRIS-SUZUKI 1995: 265-266]. Such complexities have, however, been largely ignored in the Japanese context where not only have the Jomon been idealized as traditionally close to nature, but the Ainu have also been incorporated through their perceived social primitiveness. As late as 1964, for example, agricultural historian Tadashi Watanabe could write that in the late 19th century, “Hokkaido’s interior was still a wood-clad virgin land, on which the aboriginal Ainus and wild beasts such as bears, wolves and deer roamed” [WATANABE 1964: 1]. Berque [1980: 129] has noted that:

à côté d’une tendance à ne plus voir dans les Aïnou des êtres différents, donc à les fondre dans la «nature» japonaise, existe une tendance à exagérer leur naturalité; c’est-à-dire à les assimiler à la «nature» de Hokkaidô, et à la Nature tout court. (...as well as a trend to no longer see the Ainu as different beings, but to incorporate them in the “nature” of Japan, there exists a trend to exaggerate their naturalness; in other words to assimilate them into the “nature” of Hokkaido and Nature as a whole.)

In recent years this idea of the Ainu as an ecologically aware indigenous people has been enthusiastically adopted by the Ainu themselves. On one level this reflects a simple desire to pass on an unpolluted earth to future generations [e.g., KAYANO 1999: 820]. At the same time, however, Ainu discourse about nature brings into sharp focus the political side of the environmental crisis in Hokkaido where, as Kayano [1999: 817] notes, Japanese fishermen

annually catch around fifty million salmon off the shores of that island whereas Ainu in Sapporo are legally allowed to take only twenty fish. While valorizing the abstract idea of pristine nature that the Ainu are supposed to represent, the Japanese have so far done very little to put these ideas into practice.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay has done little more than present a rough framework for the further analysis of the complex relationships between modernity and Japanese foragers. This framework is, however, supported by the many similarities between views of foragers in Japan and those found elsewhere. The romanticization of hunter-gatherers and their supposedly close links to nature has deep roots in the European tradition. Similarly, the gap between such idealized images and the reality of economic and ethnic discrimination is by no means unique to the Ainu experience. The particularly frenetic nature of late capitalism in Japan serves to intensify the “consumption” of hunter-gatherers in Japan but the basic structure of discourse on foragers in Japan is by no means unique to that country.

Notwithstanding these similarities, however, the universal theme of a shared human hunter-gatherer heritage has been largely ignored by Japanese scholars and critics who stress the particularistic aspects of Japan’s foraging peoples. Lee and DeVore’s [1968: ix] “feeling that the human condition [is] likely to be more clearly drawn [among hunter-gatherers] than among other kinds of societies” finds its ironic parallel in Umehara’s proposal that the original Japanese condition is found in its purest form in the prehistoric Jomon people and their Ainu descendants. Both of these statements can be said to invoke a similar romantic view of the foraging lifestyle, but the crucial difference between the two is that Lee and DeVore display a concern with a shared human experience whereas Umehara’s writings attempt to separate the Japanese and their proposed ancestors from that experience³⁾. Reading Umehara’s comments on the egalitarianism of *matagi* hunters cited above, for example, one might assume that their social structure was unique but, in fact the temporary leaders of *matagi* hunts find their parallels in many societies, including the “rabbit boss” of the Shoshoni [cf. FIEDEL 1992: 229].

This particularistic approach to archaeological and ethnographic diversity is a common one in Japan and is by no means confined to hunter-gatherers. The historical focus of Japanese archaeology is one reason why this approach not only continues but gains strength as the prehistory of the Islands becomes longer and more complex. Japanese scholars rarely deny diversity as such in the prehistoric record, but their fetish-like focus on the “Japanese past” prevents them from seeing the exciting abundance of ecological, ethnic and other variation in prehistoric Japan and hinders a deeper international understanding of the significance of the hunter-gatherers of the Japanese Islands.

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NOTES

- 1) According to Hayashi [1997: 51], "The social surplus of the Jomon was, under the egalitarian principle of that culture, designed to be entirely exhausted. In other words, a cycle of accumulation and exhaustion was the essential nature of the surplus in Jomon society. In Yayoi society on the other hand, surplus — however meager — was cumulative, leading to a full-fledged hierarchy." Hayashi may be right here but there has been little attempt to test such theories using the Jomon record. Furthermore, in this article at least, Hayashi also has little to say about the social relations used to reproduce this proposed Jomon egalitarianism.
- 2) See Ozawa [1993: 175]. This book has been translated into English but the passage on Jomon environmentalism was omitted from the English translation [OZAWA 1994: 148; cf. HUDSON 1997]
- 3) Recently, Lee [1992: 43] has criticized the earlier statement in *Man the Hunter*, noting instead that "The Human condition is about poverty, injustice, exploitation, war, suffering. To seek the human condition one must go, as Wolf and Hansen [1975] did, to the barrios, shantytowns, and palatial mansions of Rio, Lima, and Mexico City, where massive inequalities of wealth and power have produced fabulous abundance for some and misery for most. When anthropologists look at hunter-gatherers they are seeking something else: a vision of human life and human possibilities without the pomp and glory, but also without the misery and inequity of state and class society."

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