

On the “Nature” of Japanese Culture, or, Is There a Japanese Sense of Nature?

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Conventionally, the “Japanese” sense of nature is depicted as being both unique and homogeneous: it is seen to be holistic and different from the “Western” concept of nature. Examples of this are numerous, but are often similar to a paean by Brecher found in his recent book on the subject:

In Japan, nature has always been viewed as essentially good and as a principal fountain-head of liberation, be it spiritual or corporeal. By becoming one with the self and accepting subordination to the oneness of Creation the individual can live in intimacy with the natural world. (Brecher 2000:80)

Such poetic assertions are then followed by a seeming paradox: why, then, do the Japanese have such a poor record of caring for their environment? This echoes, obviously, the famous opening of Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, one of the key texts in establishing the discourse of Japanese Otherness:

The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways. (Benedict 1946:2; see also Robertson’s introduction to this volume)

Both assertions, that the Japanese know how to live in harmony with nature and that they have concreted over and polluted that very same nature, erase diachronic and synchronic differences. Historically, we can find a variety of attitudes toward nature in Japan¹ and, important for the modern case as well, these differences were often

based on class differences – by this I mean class in its Marxist sense: a particular relationship to the means of production.

In this chapter, I would like to challenge the standard representation of Japan as a holistic society, as one that falls back on the simplest form of othering: depictions of Native Americans, Pygmies, Alaskan natives, Amerindians, and others, also include holistic constructions of nature without also noting that these more “natural beings” are often the most efficient and, by some people’s standards, the most callous exploiters of nature’s bounties. Yet, it must be noted, this sort of othering corresponds to a widespread assumption amongst many Japanese that *their* nature is somehow unique and that part of the experience of being Japanese includes the “unusual” experience of living on islands, with the threat of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, and four very clearly marked seasons, and that this experience has formed a particular Japanese character (cf. Watsuji 1972).² But is this really the most accurate way to understand Japanese attitudes toward nature? If we look at the Japanese relationship with the natural not only as a social construct, but also as a construct that has varied over time and region, and differed according to class, we might solve the puzzling dichotomy that represents the Japanese as being very sensitive to nature, but somehow also totally insensitive to the environment (cf. Asquith and Kalland 1997).

One of the starting points for discussions of the difference in attitudes toward nature in Japan and “the West” is to deconstruct the term *shizen*, an imported Chinese term made up of characters that are often translated as: oneself (*shi*, *ji*) and “to decree,” “if so, in that case,” “due, proper, reasonable, respectable, justifiable” (*zen*, *nen*). The Chinese word from which it originates, *ziran*, initially designated a state of being that was “opposed to the will and the designs of the self (*wo*) and therefore associated with non-action (*wu wei*)” (Berque 1997:137). This state represented an opposition to that which was culture, and eventually the term came to be extended to that which was “distinct from humanity and of . . . human nature” (Berque 1997:137). The term was extended to include what might be called the environment, and it arrived in Japan with Buddhism in the sixth to eighth centuries. *Shizen*’s long entry in the *Kodansha Encyclopaedia of the Japanese Language* gives meanings that include the “natural” world, the universe, all things of heaven and earth, the material world, that which is “fresh” and without artifice, and, in opposition to the experience of freedom and duty that is culture, it connotes a world of casual necessity.

Few writers note, as does Berque (1997), that in its “foreign roots” and various usages, *shizen* rather resembles the English term “nature”; although Berque is correct to argue that the large overlap does not mean that all meanings of both words are mutually translatable. Both English and Japanese have other terms that are applied to aspects of “nature” – environment, ecosystem, ecology, and climate being a few such terms in English. In general, however, the fact that the Japanese word includes the character for “self” is then contrasted with a Euro-American post-Darwinian and post-Freudian notion of nature as something which is the object of human activity and must be “conquered”: a concept whose roots are seen to lie in Cartesian notions of the mind/body dualism and Platonic notions of nature as something outside that needs to be understood. Again, few of these definitions look at the etymology of the term nature itself – a linguistic analysis of which produces a similar confusion to

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the Japanese term *shizen*, a point which Asquith and Kalland (1997:8) have neatly made. "Nature" is not just the ecological world outside us, as used in English (and a discussion of the relevant terms in other Indo-European languages would take too long to go into here), but is also "what we are": the nature of being human, a quality, like *shizen*, of the self. More importantly, however, analyses of terms and their meanings are not, for an anthropologist, to be understood without reference to human actions: to deconstruct *shizen*, to argue that this imported word tells us something about how the Japanese have, over centuries, understood and lived with nature, is a fallacy of the highest order.

The first point to make is that despite claims, here and there in the world, for people's ability to live "closer" to nature or to be alienated from it, the fact remains that whatever the natural world is, it is always experienced by human beings as part of the social. There is no "raw" nature, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss; humans are always "cooking" it. Moments of unmediated experience in the natural world are highly prized and there is plenty of work on Japan which insists that the Japanese are able to do this because of some Buddhist- or Shinto-induced sensitivity;³ but first the person having the experience must do it in a place they define as "nature" and one person's nature might well be someone else's culture. Moreover, Zen Buddhist ideas, as they relate to esthetics and the practice of certain arts, are often posited as a blanket ideology for all of Japanese Buddhism by outsiders; they have also been used to inform post-Meiji ideas about Japanese arts by the Japanese themselves (Pincus 1996). Yet, in the Japanese case as elsewhere in the Buddhist world, the doctrine of Buddhism argues that the world of appearances is illusory: the only "pure" experience is one in which the self and the world are forgotten. Such Buddhist ideology does not mean the self should get lost in the natural, but that it should transcend it, as it is non-existent and impermanent anyway.⁴ There is, then, a difference between a Platonic notion that the "truth is out there" somewhere, while we live in the shadows searching for it and a Buddhist notion that it is all illusion and that human transcendence is to become part of nothingness rather than to continue suffering the illusion of being. Yet in both conceptions of the world we can only know what we experience and, by experiencing it, we transform it into socialized understanding.

What, then, of Shinto, the native religion of Japan, that is so often noted as being at the root of a Japanese ability to live with nature, rather than trying to conquer it? As an ancient animistic tradition, Shinto was created as an organized religion in opposition to Buddhism's importation to Japan in the sixth to eighth centuries C.E. Some of its concepts might well be pre-historical, but are now filtered through an interaction with Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism that is centuries old. It must also be understood that, over the centuries, Shinto religious practices have always been at the mercy of politics; no more so than today when they have been relegated to the arena of cultural nationalism (cf. Yoshino 1992). The idea of folk Shinto practices (cf. Tsurumi n.d.(a)), which are closer to a Japanese spirit are often reconstructed from the practices of fishing and farming communities,⁵ and generally tied to the nostalgia for the *furusato* (hometown) that is seen to be located somewhere in the countryside (Robertson 1991; Vlastos 1998).

What has been best studied of this strand of religious thinking in Japan is in relation to the term *kami*, a concept that encompasses both anthropomorphic beings, and the power/spirit that can imbue rocks, mountains, trees, places, people momentarily,

actions, etc. (cf. Herbert 1967). To translate *kami* as god, in a Judaeo-Christian sense, does not work for these other manifestations of the concept. Yet, whatever a *kami* is, as Yamaguchi (1991) has pointed out, it is always best expressed in something made (*tsukuru*): that is, that while some *kami* seem to represent the very forces of nature itself, the representation of, the offerings to, and the very beingness of these forces are to be found in made/manufactured objects. Thus we know that a rock is *kami* because it has been wrapped in folded white paper hung on twisted straw rope (Hendry 1993). We find the more anthropomorphic *kami* such as Amaterasu represented by jewels or mirrors or a sword (the *shintai*), secreted behind the doors at the back of altars, wrapped by the architectural design of Shinto shrines themselves. Sometimes there is no *shintai* hidden away, and the very place – the shrine and its paths and garden – act as the very embodiment of the *kami*'s presence, bringing us close to the concept of the simulacrum. And even offerings to *kami*, argues Yamaguchi, should be paradoxically fresh, of nature, and yet made into mimetic objects that will “associate something in immediate view with the primordial things of the distant past” (Yamaguchi 1991:64).

In short, while traditionally the Japanese have not used a vocabulary of conquering nature, as it is assumed “the West” does, it has always had a vocabulary that reveals an attitude to nature as something which must be worked on to be acceptable, something that is acted on, trimmed, shaped, appeased even, but never truly experienced in its raw form. That is, the highest form of Japanese nature is estheticized and best expressed in various forms of art. It is no surprise, then, that when Japanese writers write about nature, their books are invariably tied to art or literature.⁶ Yet even that generalization can only stand so far – for while it can be argued that farmers shaped the rice paddies and fields, that charcoal burners and woodcutters shaped the “wild” forests of Japan, and that the *yamabushi* (mountain priests) and Shinto and Buddhist priests dealt with what could not be totally controlled – developing rites of appeasement and containment – all humans do suffer from powerful natural events in the raw: violent storms and earthquakes, for example. No society that I know of, not even those in the Euro-American world, has come up with a way to control these events: to argue that the Japanese have some superior handle on coexisting with such imminent disasters is to ignore the lives of Italians who live near Mount Etna, Alpine dwellers who live with the threat of avalanches, North American midwesterners who live with the threat of tornadoes, coastal dwellers living with the threat of hurricanes, and the many regions of the world where earthquakes are common events. Is there something holistic and Buddhist about these people's ability to pick up the pieces and rebuild their homes?

It has been suggested by Asquith and Kalland (1997) that the Japanese perceive nature on a continuum from bound to unbound: from that which they can shape to that which cannot be controlled. I would like to build on this idea to argue that the Japanese experience of nature is never a single experience: that the experience of nature for urban dwellers in Japan has more in common with the experiences of urban dwellers throughout the industrialized, developed world than it does with, in the example given below, the experience of fishermen. Moreover, there are elements of political and economic expediency, national mythmaking and class differences that must be taken into account when talking about nature in Japan. Thus, despite the cultural differences in how a bound nature might be shaped, or interacted with

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(*bonsai* versus the ubiquitous English lawn), people in towns experience a nature that is created by the form of the city itself: by its parks, gardens, access to places to grow one's own flowers or vegetables, and so on. In this I am taking some of Berque's (1995) ideas in a different direction, for while he has written about how the city can shape such experiences, he still lays emphasis on some pan-Japanese relationship with nature that makes these experiences somehow different from those of Euro-Americans. While I would not disagree with the idea that nature in an urban environment might be valued somewhat differently from society to society, I also think that urban nature anywhere is bound nature, and its presence in the urban indicates a certain attitude that assumes nature can be managed and that modern decisions about its management are made often by politicians.⁷ Thus a *mélange* of rural practices, esthetic ideals and a reconstruction of things Japanese by politicians is used, vis-à-vis Japan's cultural nationalism, to articulate Japanese difference from "the West" (Gluck 1985). However, the homogenous national discourse deconstructs if we look at particular examples; in order to make this point clearly I will turn now to a very specific empirical example.

ON FISHING, TECHNOLOGY, AND RITUAL

One of the disconcerting aspects of working as a maritime anthropologist in the era of cultural relativism and deconstruction is that the material on fisherfolk around the world so often throws up important similarities. From types of nets used and the way in which knowledge and skills are transmitted to the way in which modern methods are incorporated into traditional fishing techniques and the position of women in fishing villages: the similarities are often more numerous than the cultural differences in fishing societies. The most frequently encountered similarity is embodied in the simple statement that fishermen are more superstitious than other people. If by superstitious it is meant that they engage in more ritual activity and worry more about luck than others, then this statement is very true. However, "superstitious" rarely means that fishermen are above using modern technology.

During fieldwork and later visits (1984–86, 1987, 1991) to Kuzaki-chō, a ward of Toba City in Mie Prefecture, Japan, I was witness to the changes in local discourses related to nature – in this case, the weather and the sea itself. The peninsula of which Kuzaki was part, Shima hantō, was part of one of the first national parks established in postwar Japan; thus, while shielded from some of the effects of industrialization, the men and women of Kuzaki were keen to talk to me about what had changed in the 20th century and to discuss the benefits and limitations of modern life. I was also frequently told that, despite a very rich and active ritual life in the village, many other ritual practices had died out – particularly those related to fishing – because fishing was becoming an increasingly unimportant economic activity. In order to understand this, it is useful to describe how the village's remaining 25 fishing families dealt with the weather.

All Kuzaki fishermen listened to television and radio weather reports as many times a day as possible, sometimes switching between television channels to see if another weatherman had a different forecast. Yet these same men also spent time watching the sky and sea – science was not considered totally reliable in predicting what might

happen in nature. Many afternoons were spent at Kuzaki's fishing cooperative waiting for the head of the cooperative to approve the departure of the village flotilla for an evening's prawn fishing. If the sky was clear and the sea calm, but the cooperative head hesitated because of weather reports that predicted a rapid change, then those afternoons were spent in increasingly acrimonious discussions. Rebellion would be in the air: clouds would be studied and analyzed, the phase of the moon taken into account, the type of waves observed; the tide would be considered; ancient grandparents would be consulted to see if on other days in other years such weather had ever turned; women who were known to have some sort of sense about the weather would be hailed as they made their way across the docks; and the cooperative head would be urged to ring, yet again, the coastguard weather service. It was not that the fishermen did not believe that the weather at sea could change rapidly – they were acutely aware of the fact that men died at sea even in what seemed the calmest of conditions – but the question would be whether the timescale of the weather report was seen as accurate: would the change in weather happen later than predicted, giving enough time to come back with fishing done? Would the change be so drastic? Would the storm even reach the coasts? After all, would argue the men who had sailed on Japan's huge global fishing fleets, their offshore fishing did not take them very far out to sea. These were seen to be important points and, before Kuzaki fishing was so tightly organized by the cooperative in the 1920s and again in the 1950s, choosing what to do would have been left to individual fishermen. Ironically, the opposite situation was more bearable: if stormy weather was supposed to improve and the cooperative allowed fishermen to head out to sea, individual men could decide not to set out – that was permissible and even prudent. But nothing was worse than to lose a day's income because the weather forecasts were wrong by several hours, or even a day or two: that was deeply resented. In such a situation a man could feel lucky and argue that his experience told him it would be all right to fish, but this counted for nothing at the cooperative.

It was this increasing dependence on science that led some men to say to me, rather bitterly, that skill no longer counted for anything in fishing. In the past, they would say, it was a man's knowledge of the shore, his previous experience of the weather and the seasons, and his luck that made all the difference. In the 1980s it was weather reports, sonar, and modern equipment that made all the difference. "Any idiot can fish these days" one friend told me frequently – a statement that shocked other maritime experts when they encountered it in my Ph.D. thesis. "Any idiot can fish, he just needs the money for the latest equipment," he would continue. Yet, in spite of such cynical statements, the same man spent a great deal of time worrying about his luck and looking for ways to improve it. Thus there seemed to be an interesting view on the limitations of science: it made it possible for "any idiot" to be able to take up fishing, but science could not make the fish run or keep you safe at sea – that took luck. There was no clearer example of that for the fishermen of Kuzaki than the failure of the seeding of *kuruma ebi* (prawns) after a few years' initial success.

The prawns, spawned in fishing farms, had been seeded into the waters around Shima peninsula to add to a natural increase in the prawn population that occurred in 1975, and for a few years there had been good money to be made from *kuruma ebi* fishing; but the hoped-for natural reproduction and increase of the prawns in the sea did not seem to be happening. By 1987 the Kuzaki cooperative had decided it was

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not worth the expense of buying in more cultivated prawns – increased cuttlefish catches seemed to make up the financial difference, so why pay out to seed prawns that would eventually disappear again?

The same thing had happened, but more quickly I was told, with *awabi* (abalone): the artificially grown abalone never seemed to survive in the ocean nor did it thrive and grow to a large size in tanks. The problem was different in each case according to the fishermen. Prawns could not survive in water polluted by the increased levels of sewage from tourist hotels and this was not helped by the overuse of bait by amateur line fishermen: the bait fell to the sea floor and helped create harmful algae infestations. Abalone, on the other hand, needs rough rocks to cling to, safe dark places to hide in, and a spacious habitat in order to grow to a large size: no tank could provide that. While these local fishermen were very concerned about conserving their environment and acquiesced, despite grumbling, in the cooperative's rules to prevent overfishing, they saw themselves in a no-win situation. Battling the larger industrial forces that had polluted the sea almost beyond, if not beyond, repair was something they did through their local and national politicians – and even once, in 1984, by sending older fishermen to visit Prime Minister Nakasone with a large, live lobster and a plea about environmental policy – but to little avail. In such cases neither science nor nature was seen to be able to cope with the worst effects of modernization, and fishing was definitely seen to be a dying way of life.

Yet, hand in hand with this pessimism and very clear understanding of what was happening to the environment, the fishermen and diving women also had another level of discourse about their work: skill and experience might count for less in the 1980s, but were still valued despite angry statements to the contrary. And necessary to have along with these individual qualities was the need for good fortune or luck. That is to say that no fisherman or diving woman ignored the many large and small rituals that accompanied their work – not even the men who relied the most on technology. This point was brought home to me when a friend finally bought the fishing boat of his dreams: this boat was larger, had a more powerful motor, sonar, a built-in toilet, an onboard refrigerator and cost ¥5 million (about \$50,000). When I asked him why he had spent so much money after having told me many times that fishing wasn't worth it, he replied that it was for the tourists, who were where the money was. Just as prawns had appeared to naturally increase in 1975 and had led to fishermen making lots of money, in 1985 the increase in domestic tourists who came to Kuzaki not just for the food and scenery (cf. Martinez 1989) but to try their hand at fishing were seen to be a moneymaking opportunity. Yet even a boat purchased for such a prosaic venture needed to be properly launched. And a few days after it arrived in Kuzaki the boat was purified in a ritual that many claimed was very ancient indeed.

First, the new boat had to be decorated with *bata* (flags) which had the characters for *dairyō* (large catch) printed on them. Ideally each household which was related to the owners of the new boat had to provide one of these flags. Then the boat was launched from the harbor, and on board there had to be as many children as possible, for children bring good luck (so do foreigners, it was said). If possible, I was told, a longhaired woman should also come along to represent the *fukunokami* (the *kami* of good fortune). Also included were friends from the fisherman's *dōkyūsei* (age grade). Leading left from the beach toward the open sea, just outside the harbor, the boat should circle round three times to the left. That is, around to the port, the side for

pulling in fish. The first turn was for *dairyō* (large catches), the second for safety, and the third turn was for the *fukunokami*. At the end, offerings of *azukigohan* (rice with adzuki beans), *kenchin*⁸ salad which was eaten on various other ritual occasions such as weddings, and sake were made to the deity of the sea from the bow. These offerings were then made again off the port side, and then off the stern. No offerings were made off starboard: the fishermen said that "nothing important happens on that side."

When the boat returned to the harbor, a crowd gathered and the boat owner threw gifts of *sechi mochi*,⁹ coins, fruit, and sweets to the waiting villagers. These gifts represent the wealth of a good catch, which must be shared with others. This was explained as "a fisherman has to give in order that the deities reward him with good luck. He must share his luck with others." This is a theme that recurred during the New Year ceremonies in Kuzaki when household boats were cleaned and decorated and their owners had to throw large catches of sweets and fruit to the women and children waiting on the dock. After the rituals at sea, the household held a banquet on the harbor by the new boat.

The ideal of sharing good fortune was a strong one: any fisherman who had had a good catch was expected to throw an impromptu party on the dock the next day during net cleaning; any women and children present would be given sweets and the men sake. Any fish that a lucky household kept also had to be shared: some was left as an offering on household and village shrines, some given away to poor kin who might not often have fresh fish to eat. Such rituals were not limited to a new boat's launching or to New Year celebrations either. Each year, at the start of the abalone diving season, the sea itself was ritually blessed, while women divers prepared themselves for the season by drinking *amacha*, a diuretic tea that purified them internally. All equipment, for fishing or diving, was constantly cleaned, checked, and decorated with amulets or good luck symbols; and every female diver made the monthly climb up Kuzaki's sacred mountain, Sengen, to leave offerings for the sea god and to pray for good health and safety at sea for themselves and their family. No village Buddhist festival occurred without offerings being left to the Shinto sea deities, and no Shinto festival happened without offerings being made at the Buddhist temple. While older villagers lamented the loss of certain practices – the yearly pilgrimage to a nearby shrine whose deity was famous for protecting boats; the attendance of festivals outside Kuzaki in other villages – the fact remained that the people of Kuzaki, compared with their urban counterparts, spent more time in ritual activity. Festivals to celebrate the presence of the deity, which in more urban areas had been reduced to cultural expressions of Japaneseness or to being seen as expressions of community solidarity (Bestor 1988; Robertson 1987), were taken rather more seriously in Kuzaki.

Yet it would be wrong, even for a small community like that of Kuzaki, to write of a uniform experience of belief. One thing that became clear in my two years in the village was that men who had left fishing and moved into other sorts of occupations had a different attitude toward rituals. One such man, when I first arrived in the village, took me to see Kuzaki's Shinto shrine, where the sun goddess Amaterasu is enshrined, and offered to open the inner sanctum for me to look at – something I do not think a fisherman would ever have dared do. And even amongst the most dedicated believers it was not unknown for ritual practices to be done lightheartedly:

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mankind might well be at the mercy of the *kami*, but it did not mean that the rituals done for them had to be devoid of gossip, jokes, and teasing the foreigner. Other personal practices and beliefs, as in urban areas, appeared to depend on the individual: illness, worrying about passing exams, being concerned about fertility, taking care of the dead – adherence to these rituals in Kuzaki seemed to be premised on the same principles as they might be elsewhere in Japan (cf. Reader and Tanabe 1998): need, personal preference, and concern for the opinions of others. When it came to rituals for diving and fishing, however, no one stinted: “It’s my livelihood,” said one woman to me; “I don’t take chances with that.”

It would be easy to attribute these practices to a less modern way of life, but such a position just would not hold true for the fishermen I knew: they were intimate with modern technology and lived very modern lives, owning the same sorts of houses and consumer goods as most Japanese (see also Kelly 1992). Divisions in belief, as nebulous as that is to measure, did appear to be occurring depending on occupation; that is, non-fishermen were not as observant in Kuzaki as were fishermen. And the wives of such men were often more outspoken about religion as well. “We do it because the grandparents expect us to,” explained one young wife to me as she hurriedly decorated the *butsudan* at the very last minute for O-bon. Women who dived and whose husbands fished said very different things about the need to worship: the *kami* might be unpredictable – you could pray and they might or might not answer – but if you did not pray, then the consequences could be quite bad. When I took to trying to dive in the summer of 1984, I was urged to pray to the *kami*: they would not mind that I was a foreigner, I was told. It was a fisherman who tried to explain the “why” of this to me:

Diving is dangerous you know. You can get caught in the rocks swimming along a narrowing crevice; you can stick your hand into a hole to feel for *awabi* and be stung by a puffer fish, or bitten by an eel. No matter how skilled [*jōzu*] you are or how much experience you have, it is dangerous and you can’t be afraid [*kowai*] or you’ll never be any good. No diver who is fearful can ever be any good.

I think he was also talking about fishing. The point of his statement is valid for both: you cannot ever really control or make accurate predictions about nature in any of its manifestations: the weather, puffer fish, eels, the reproduction of prawns, the spread of dangerous red algae, or the growth cycle of abalone. While skill, experience, and consulting others, even the use of modern equipment, can help, in the end no one can really control all the factors. For that reason, as one man laughingly told me one day: “We pray. If the *kami* give to us, good; if they don’t, well we won’t make offerings. But we pray.”

Nor were humans considered to be infallible, so rituals for safety at sea were still very important. This attitude was very different from that of urban dwellers who relied mainly on weather reports for their information (normally to decide what to wear), and whose ritual life was less active and more aimed at praying for success at work and/or school. The contrast between these two attitudes could be seen when the urbanites came to holiday at the seaside: fishermen and divers were very critical of what they saw as an urban inability to take care of the environment, and this included cleaning up beaches after they had spent the day sunbathing, as well as larger concerns

about industry and polluting the sea itself. Urban visitors to the seaside valued the fresh seafood and some would come to fish or swim, but they generally ventured outside as little as possible.

All these types of activity in nature lead us to a very different analysis than is usually offered in relation to Japanese nature in the urban environment or in the arts: in these cases nature is seen to be incorporated or depicted in such a way that a Japanese sensitivity to and identification with the natural is assumed. Fishermen could also make such claims: urging me to go see the first cherry blossom in the village; showing their bonsai collections to me; contrasting the shape of a Japanese woman in a kimono to the "unnatural" look of a woman in Western dress. This discourse of a unique Japanese experience of nature coexisted with their disdain for urban Japanese who were seen to be so careless about nature. The existence of these two different yet analogous tropes could well reduce a researcher to writing, yet again, about the dichotomy in Japanese attitudes toward nature, but if we introduce the ideas of class difference as a measure, in some part, of different relationships with the environment – we might well come up with a solution to this problematic opposition.

ON THE CAPITALIST EXPERIENCE OF NATURE

In a polemic against *nihonjinron* depictions of Japan as unique, the economist and journalist Ben-Ami (1997) has argued that Japan's drive to modernize made it no different from other capitalist countries in the western hemisphere. While Dore (2000) and others might well argue that we could find different structures of profit-making and -sharing even in Western countries, much of Ben-Ami's argument is valid. The spirit of capitalism, as Weber described it, is the essential idea that moneymaking is important and beneficial: however Japanese companies choose to spend it, they still need to make a profit. And throughout the industrialized world, profit-making and caring for the environment have long been at odds. The famous cleaning up of the US/Canadian Great Lakes, for example, considered to be so polluted that they were nearly dead in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was accomplished more by moving industry to countries where pollution laws had not become so strict and where workers would work for less money anyway than by the rapid enactment of strict anti-pollution laws. The air of Chicago's south side is much cleaner in the 21st century than it was in the 20th, but unemployment and poverty are also markedly higher: the great steel mills of the area are almost all closed down. Even today, the United States' national imagery of wilderness, of "purple mountains' majesty" and "fruited plains," is at odds with its reluctance to sign the Kyoto Agreement on Global Climate Change (Kageyama 2000). It should be no paradox, then, that having accepted the challenge to industrialize during the Meiji Restoration, and having striven to succeed in a global business world, Japanese industrialists have shown a similar callousness toward the environment.

For some writers, such as Brecher quoted at the outset, this similarity is puzzling: given that the Japanese have such a close relationship to nature, how could they allow their companies to so harm it? Such an approach does not take into account Japan's national vision since the Meiji Restoration in 1868: the drive to modernize was a much more powerful discourse than that of any dissenting voices. The promise of

a better life for a large portion of the peasantry and town dwellers could also not be ignored as being attractive, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. It became a source of national pride and national priority that all Japanese take part in building up, yet again, a healthy industrial Japan. Such a vision included competing with more expensive Euro-American products and production techniques: the capitalist leaders of Japan, as in some parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific today, were able to achieve this by paying employees less and by ignoring any impact their industries might be having on the environment.¹⁰ The difference, as Tsurumi (n.d.(b), part III) has noted in an analysis of the famous Minamata mercury poisoning cases, is not in the priorities of industry, but in people's power to make industry accountable.¹¹ In the US, litigation against polluting companies can be enough to bring about change; in Japan, a society where going to court is a last resort, not a first one (cf. Feldman 2000), it can take 30 years even to get to court.

Yet, someone like Brecher might ask, why did not industrial processes get remade when they arrived in Japan, as so much else has been over the centuries? The Japanese, after all, are not only sensitive to the beauties of nature, but use this sensitivity as part of their esthetics and describe it as key to the experience of what it is to be Japanese. Moreover, the Japanese recycle and can conserve more fiercely than most modern societies; how is it that they will allow their companies to deforest Indonesia? And, while noting that Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have branches in Japan, let us not mention whaling.

First of all, as previously suggested, the class differences between experiences of and attitudes towards nature are varied in Japan. As long ago as the 11th century the courtier Sei Shōnagon noted how much tougher life was for diving women, who worked at the mercy of nature (Morris 1967). She was thankful for the tranquil and beautiful life she led at court, where divers and the sea were the subjects of wistful poems, and cherry blossom viewing and firefly chasing were much more rewarding experiences of nature. While these latter pursuits have now become part of the construction of a modern Japanese identity, with cherry blossom viewing a national event, the divide between urban dwellers and others, as shown in the example of fishermen above, remains. The divide is no longer between a small aristocratic elite and a large peasantry, but between an urban middle and working class and a shrinking (less than 10 percent) rural-based population. And it is not a divide, as I have noted, between technocrats and artisans, as much as a divide between people whose experience of nature is limited to that of a sprawling urban environment interspersed with occasional visits to the shrinking "real" Japan and the people who occupy that endangered space.

For urban dwellers, beautiful nature is often the cultivated pine tree on a rocky shore (when they can find a bit of rocky shore) and, despite claims to the importance of oneness with nature, seeing the tree is enough – only *innaka* (country) folk might still worship the tree. Japan is, as many surveys prove year after year, not a religious country, or at least, not religious in any Judaeo-Christian or even "primitive" way (cf. Reader 1990). That is to say that Shinto has been elevated to the sphere of cultural practice and not religious worship. Parts of green Japan are maintained because they are too mountainous to farm or establish factories on: they can be seen as part of "wild" nature, and it is important that they be available for domestic tourism (Moon 1997). The important difference here is between the

esthetic experience of nature in what Asquith and Kalland would call its "bound" form and the actual experience of dealing with nature in its more "unbound" form – fishermen appreciate the pine trees and forests as well, but wonder if wild boars might not come charging out at them from the latter. And while the sea is beautiful to contemplate, and in the 1980s most Japanese preferred to do that, rarely swimming in it, it is fishermen and diving women who know it for the very dangerous place it is. Thus, for the urban dweller, as long as they are recycling and there exist some nature parks and "wilderness" to gaze upon (cf. Urry 1990), it is easy to imagine that all is right with Japanese nature – a situation that politicians and manufacturers encourage. Such examples could be taken from other industrialized nations; in fact, the historian Simon Schama has recently made a similar point in his BBC series about industrializing 19th-century Britain. In contrast, for many fishermen, a dwindling population both in Japan and around the world, nothing could be more wrong with the environment and the biggest problem, from their point of view, is urban complacency. This last is, of course, a generalization, for some urban dwellers do get involved in environmentalist movements (cf. Knight 1997), and housewives are demanding pesticide-free milk and food for their children in Japan as elsewhere. But, to use a Marxist term, the alienation of the urban worker from their environment is generally quite complete and "nature" has become only a place to visit. This is, sad to say, a typical experience of urban life in all industrialized capitalist countries, and Japan is no exception.

In conclusion, then, I am arguing that, while the Japanese experience of nature can, in some part, be conceived of as having a different history and does perhaps make use of different tropes for nature's place in humankind's existence, we should not mistake a once elite discourse about the esthetics of experiencing nature for the pragmatics of living within nature. All human societies have to cope with the natural environment: describing it, attempting to shape it, or submitting to it when necessary. The ideology of being in nature, as some would have it for the Japanese, does not preclude the possibility of trying to bind it up: in fact the most beautiful examples of Japan's "working with nature" are often the most culturally bound examples of nature as culture. It could be argued that the elite practice of bringing the natural under the control of esthetic ideals is precisely what makes it possible, in some part, for many Japanese to ignore the destruction of theirs and others' environments: as long as one beautiful pine tree and interesting rock formation are wrapped as if sacred, who worries if the coast around them is covered in concrete? It is not a dichotomy of both living in harmony with nature and yet somehow not caring about its destruction; what we see in some modern Japanese attitudes toward nature is the resolution of this dichotomy: nature as an esthetic can always be maintained, no matter what the state of the water or the air might be. Yet, for fishermen, farmers and some urban dwellers in Japan, this is not good enough and it is they who might, ultimately, make a difference.

NOTES

- 1 A recent attempt to look at such differences, in the light of gender ideology in Japan, is Rosenberger's chapter in Asquith and Kalland (1997).

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- 2 Watsuji's seminal work, *Fūdo*, translated as *On Climatology*, was written as a philosophical treatise, and in response to Watsuji's time in Europe studying philosophy with Heidegger. In the main Watsuji's book is an attempt to construct a contrasting model of being – this is never stressed enough – in response to the German philosopher's ideas. While Watsuji was critical of Heidegger's approach, he followed the German's anti-Cartesian line, a fact Berque (1998) examines in an insightful article. It is Befu (1997), however, who looks at Watsuji's nationalistic agenda.
- 3 Many writers on nature in Japan refer to a paper by Schmithausen (1991a), in which he argues that the Japanese inserted into imported Buddhism the doctrine of the sentience of plants and trees. These references ignore Schmithausen's next article, "The Problem of the Sentience of Plants in Earliest Buddhism" (1991b), in which he discusses how the concept can be found in original Buddhist texts; so the question becomes more "Why did other Buddhist societies drop it?", rather than "Why did the Japanese insert it?"
- 4 This is a simplistic summing up of various strands of Buddhist doctrine, but it will suffice to stand against the view held by some Westerners that Buddhism is all about being one with nature. For an important analysis of how Western views of Japanese Buddhism were shaped by Suzuki's work with, yet again, Heidegger see Sharf (1995).
- 5 This practice amongst Japanese social scientists of looking for "real" Japanese beliefs and practices in the margins of a modern/modernizing society was pioneered by the work of Yanagita Kunio (1981 [1950]) as well as of Miyata (1983), and can still be seen in such works as *Animizu no sekai* (Murataki 1997). Kawada (1993) and Ivy (1995) have both described and critiqued this sort of nationalistic mythmaking, which is, of course, a process all nation-states go through.
- 6 There are endless examples of this. A few are Anesaki (1933), Hirakawa and Tsuruta (1994), and Kawazoe (1957).
- 7 An edited book which manages to combine Orientalist views of Japan's relationship with nature with hard facts on the changes to its environment over the last century is Golany et al.'s *Japanese Urban Environment* (1998).
- 8 According to the villagers, the three ingredients of this salad – rice, fish, and vegetables – represent the three sources of Japan's wealth: the fields, the sea, and the mountains.
- 9 The same sort of huge *mochi* (rice cake) is used in Kuzaki weddings, as well as on other ritual occasions. *Sechi* seems to be a dialect word to refer to this type of pink and white *mochi*.
- 10 The practice of reshaping the environment was not necessarily new in Japan either. Walker (2001) looks at the damage to Ainu ecology that followed Japan's conquest of the north between 1590 and 1800, thus locating a disdain for the environment of others in a pre-industrial Japan. For a more recent example, the profits to be made from creating golf courses in Japan, despite the environmental destruction this causes, is another case of how a Japanese reshaping of the landscape can create problems; ironically in this case because the fertilizers and pesticides needed to create a perfect green lawn poison the water sources.
- 11 The villagers of Minamata, mostly fishermen, became ill from what was finally diagnosed as mercury poisoning. The nearby chemical plant was polluting the sea and the mercury was accumulating in the fish that they caught and ate. The victims of this "disease," with symptoms somewhat like those of BSE, took almost 20 years to get compensation. The case is now well documented in the literature on Japan (see George 2001; Ishimura 1990; Smith and Smith 1975).

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