

Cultural Reverberations among Fukushima Radiations: Institutional vs Emotional Versions of the Nuclear Accident.

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For centuries, Japanese culture has attracted the interest of foreign scholars of different disciplines, who were intrigued by several aspects that appeared to them of difficult understanding. One feature that has been of particular concern, mainly among anthropologists, is the overt contradiction between some forms of thought, values and customs. The management of the Fukushima nuclear crisis has offered the world yet another example of this contradiction. On the one hand, Japan has been able to recover from the natural disaster with a quickness and firmness of ground-level responses that seems unprecedented. On the other hand, the slowness and lack of preparation in dealing with the nuclear accident have raised concern across the world. In this article I show that cultural explanations have been used to justify this discrepancy and to attribute the inability to manage the crisis to regulatory and organizational forces. Cultural analyses have been politicized to allow both rhetoric of justification and one of accusation. I analyze some Japanese sources that explain this contradiction from the standpoint of the official report of the Fukushima case and of an unofficial, independent blog.

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One point on which scholars, anthropologists and other social scientists, and observers of Japan have often found agreement is the coexistence, and in many cases the juxtaposition, of different and conflicting sets of cultural responses; a fact that became obvious since the first ‘westerners’ visited the country in the late XV century. These ‘unaware ethnographers’ were Catholic missionaries mainly from Spain, Italy and Portugal, who planned to expand their proselytism to what at the time was named Cipangu. Reading some of the early accounts of these religious personalities, one finds intriguing semi-ethnographic descriptions of the Japanese population. The Japanese were depicted as extremely courteous, sincere and gentle people, who in the eyes of these enthusiastic proselytizing agents could, much better than any other populations encountered until then in the ‘Indian territories’, be liable to true conversion (Tamburello 1998). This enthusiasm started to gradually cool down when the European priests got to know better the local population and some of them witnessed directly social acts such as some of their barbarous forms of punishment for apparently futile crimes (such as theft of vegetables at the marketplace), or their absolute lack of emotion when witnessing or participating in cruel events, such as executions or ritual hara-kiri (Cooper 1995). This discovery of a contradictory set of ‘cultural features’ came to the fore quite soon, as in 1593 all missionaries were forcedly expelled out of the country and what came infamously known as the Christians’ hunt produced several hundreds of martyrs, mainly converted Japanese, a small group of which are still celebrated on the 6th of February in the Catholic calendar.

Proceeding in history, Japan continued to astonish the world when coming out of a 260-years- long isolation, in which commercial contacts were maintained only with China and Holland, the country was quick to modernize and gain a world role in politics, after winning wars with China (1895) and Russia (1905). Japanese culture was a pleasant mystery, and numerous European intellectuals at the turn of the XX century avidly sought to collect pieces of Japanese arts and handicrafts, to study Shinto, Bushido, the tea ceremony, Zen Buddhism, calligraphy, ukiyoe painting and the many other expressions of ‘high culture’ that Japan had to offer to the world. Then, after two decades of intense and high-speed modernization in which Japan had industrialized quickly its mainly agrarian economy and had established modern prototypes of work unions and socialist movements, the reality of things turned ungraspable again. The Manchurian accidents, followed by the escalations of violence in South-east Asia and China and by Pearl Harbor, again taught the world how incomprehensible a country Japan was.

The war period was not only one of devastation and horrendous crimes, it was the time in which North-American anthropologists started to be actively engaged in understanding cultural patterns through the culture and personality approach (Gorer 1943). Japan was on the agenda, and a group of scholars frantically struggled to explain the explainable, often leaving out the unexplainable. The Second World War produced one of the most celebrated masterpieces of scholarship and knowledge on ‘Japanese culture’, the book by Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which was published in the aftermath of the conflict (Benedict 1946). Benedict’s book is itself half a mystery, similarly to the traits of Japanese culture it depicted. Ruth Benedict did ethnographic fieldwork outside Japan; she interviewed mainly war prisoners in North American camps and Japanese people who had migrated to the US before the war. As she did not speak the language, she was who to a Malinowskian follower would simply not be a qualified ethnographer. Nonetheless, Benedict’s book has been celebrated as one of the best-ever anthropological works on Japan. Her book has enjoyed 15 editions in Japan, selling over 1.5 million copies there; thus making it the best-selling anthropology book in Japan. The question here is not how Benedict could write such a book without coming into contact with Japanese culture in Japan, but why her work was so well received in Japan. The answer may not be, as some analysts have argued (Hendry 2012) that Japanese people have found in the book a number of social and cultural features that they are not able to express self-reflectively, or that the book is simply so convincingly well-written. In a rare joint interview, Ruth Benedict dialogued with Yanagita

Kunio, the father of Japanese folklore and, allegedly, of the Japanese anthropological school. In the course of the interview, Yanagita humbly remarked that a well-trained and sensitive western anthropologist could sometime grasp more than what common Japanese would normally do. However, this does not mean that the complexity of Japanese culture can become understandable, since it is partly obscure even to its people. This is the issue which will be addressed by this article, how culture can become essentialized to justify practices and ideas that not only to external but also indigenous observers find difficult to explain.

On March 11, 2011 (one month after the National Foundation Day, February 11) Japan was hit by one of the most violent natural catastrophes of the last thirty years. Following a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and a 14 meters tall tsunami, the territory around Fukushima was hit with a violence that could have been perhaps foreseen but not expected. Fukushima happened to be the place where four of the most problematic nuclear reactors in the country were located, and the disaster spread further like an oil stain. Sixteen months after the event, the overall figures on the casualties directly related to the disaster and on the number of evacuated people (over 300,000) are not yet certain. What in the first instance looked as a serious accident, though not even comparable to Chernobyl, gradually revealed its true magnitude as, for instance, the area to be evacuated was extended from a 3 to a 20 km radius and the meltdown of two reactors turned into three hydrogen explosions.

In recovering from this disaster, Japan has been giving the world another conflicting message. It has surely astonished for its promptness to stand up again, for the hard-working nature of its people and their common efforts to restart life in its traditionally poorest region, the Tohoku. The Japanese message has also been one of concerted action, of an extremely well organized collective answer to the hardships and the sorrow that followed 3/11. It is doubtful whether another, perhaps Western European, country would have been able to do the same. However, Japan has also given another, less high-sounding but inherently serious, message; that is, one of the top three world economic powers has been unable to manage a nuclear disaster of this entity. Following the explanations to this failure provided by two Japanese sources, here I will argue that cultural explanations are very powerful tools that can be used by different actors and with different motivations to confuse and obfuscate reality; or, as Yanagita wisely noted, to render social actors unaware of the cultural foundations of their own practices.

Cultural Reverberations over Radioactive Threats

On 9 July 2012 the Financial Times published a short and cautious article under the section Global Insight. The article was titled, 'Culture blame games are no way to prevent future crises' and took inspiration from the official report on the Fukushima crisis issued by the National Diet of Japan in July 2012. The article commented on the summary produced in English by the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission led by Kurokawa Kiyoshi which is divided in three sections: conclusion, description of the events, and future recommendations. The main point of the Financial Times article was that Japan had offered a dangerous lesson to policy makers from different countries by concluding that cultural issues are mainly responsible for the failure in dealing effectively and promptly with the Fukushima nuclear crisis. How this message was conveyed is not adequately clear from this article but can be extrapolated from the report itself. In what follows I will first analyze the dialogic style and content of the report in the section which deals with the cultural features of Japan, looking both at the English summary and at the full report in Japanese. Then, I will compare the style and contents of the report with those of an unofficial Japanese blog dealing with this crisis that I shall call Daiwa.

The executive summary in English of the Fukushima report offers to its readers what anthropologists may term a culturalistic, yet extremely clear message. The nuclear crisis and its inefficient management, it is suggested, have been produced by a concomitance of cultural factors that have caused 'a disaster Made in Japan'. The summary states: 'Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience, our reluctance to question authority, our devotion to 'sticking with the program', our groupism and our insularity' (Official Report 2012: 9). This statement contains all the cultural patterns that Ruth Benedict had included and developed in her *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*; it does so with such devotion that one might wonder whether its author actually re-read a copy of Benedict's book before writing it.

The model introduced by Benedict, and later developed by other famous anthropologists such as Chie Nakane (1972, 1977), Lebra Takie (1974), De Vos (1985), psychologist Doi Takeo (1977, 1985) and more recently challenged by Befu Harumi (1980), Dorinne Kondo (1990) and Joy Hendry (1989, 2012), is called relational model or verticalism of Japanese society. According to this model, Japanese society is structured on a vertical framework in which authority (the chrysanthemum, or the emperor, for Benedict) is not questioned, and is accepted in a hierarchical set of relationships through full obedience and

devotion (the sword). The model is, however, more complex than this: hierarchical societies need a strong degree of legitimacy to be enduring, and such legitimacy is achieved by introducing a set of tied and highly psychologically rewarding experiences with fellow people; those who constitute, according to Chie, the group and its place (*ba*). These relational experiences have been described in several ways, as sticky, as grounded on a peculiar combination of public (good and rewarding) and private (to be avoided) shame or as based on the idea of *amae*. According to Doi, *amae* is a particular emotional state to be found among Japanese people; a state that Benedict attributed to the development of the tight emotional dependence of children on their mothers, which helps to make people feel as part of a group by introducing a sophisticated, and to foreigners mostly invisible, emotional link through gestures, pauses of silence, blinks or simple body positioning. Hence, the extremely rich anthropological production on Japanese personality, culture and social structures have borne out all the main paradigms of the Made in Japan argument developed in the executive summary: the idea that final responsibility would lie in the cultural arrangements of the group, and the ideas of the verticalism of social structures and of the devotion to common conventions (Kuwayama 1999).

More evidence comes from the following words by Kurokawa: ‘At the time when Japan’s self confidence was soaring, a tightly-knit elite with enormous financial resources had diminished regard for anything “not invented here”’ (p.9). Rather than looking at the meaning of these words, it is worth considering its phrasing style: ‘tightly knit elite’, ‘self-confidence’ and ‘not invented here’ are extremely common cultural images that can be found in several works by anthropologists on Japan. They, again, tell us about a society in which confidence and satisfaction are build endogenously in small enclaves, and in which the relationship with the external world is, as the Shinto philosophy indicates, untrustworthy. However, this message is emphasized only in the Japanese text of the report. On page 16 the Commission concludes that ‘The accident was clearly “manmade”. We believe that the root causes were the organizational and regulatory systems that supported faulty rationales for decision and action, rather than issues relating to the competency of any specific individual’. It goes on to says that ‘the underlying issue is the social structure that results in “regulatory capture”, and the organizational, institutional and legal framework that allows individuals to justify their own actions, hide them when inconvenient, and leave no record in order to avoid responsibility’ (p. 21).

There are two analytical levels on which the citations given above need attention. The first concerns the stress on the apparent contradiction between a ‘manmade disaster’, in which human responsibility is clearly called for and the admission that ‘the competency of any specific individual’ is not at stake. This overt contradiction recalls that, well noted by scholars of Japan, between individual-centered empathy (*amae*) and the strong importance of group harmony (*wa*) and collective achievements. In the course of my ethnographic fieldwork in Mikazuki, a settlement founded in Tohoku in the immediate postwar period when Japan had to deal with the re-integration of a large number of repatriated families from the former Asian colonies, I tested the actual importance of collective achievement at ground level (Torsello 2002, 2009). Settlers were striving because they lacked two important assets: social networks within the local community (they were mostly repatriated families) and the shame of not being part of the territorial social texture. The first initial shortcoming was related to their condition of settlers and newcomers and could not be solved in the short term. The second was a product of their sense of being different; what anthropological literature on Japan has, perhaps unfortunately, defined ‘shame versus guilt culture’ (Lebra 1971 and for a general critique Creighton 1990). Mikazuki villagers sought to balance their lack of these two assets (respectively a social and a psychological condition) through consolidating what informants called *danketsu* (group cohesion). *Danketsu* became an easily transmittable and reproduced philosophy in the settlement, which under the generous provisions set by the Japanese Inner Colonization Plan (1946-1973) decided to invest in internal social harmonization mechanisms and collective economic achievements rather than shortening the gap with local society. These mechanisms included several agricultural cooperatives within the village (some of them sponsored through state aid programs), a number of village-level socio-cultural organizations, the institution of a village Shinto shrine and of a religious festival which, one of the few in the neighboring area, is still held and a shifting-term village leadership. Over time, the forced search for harmony has proved costly in the community; from an initial establishment of 45 households, today only 17 families remain and many (30%) do not own any farming land.

The second level concerns the image created by the ‘regulatory capture’ argument, describing the situation where a closely knit framework within which everything is allowed is contrasted with an outside space in which the degree of accountability dramatically collapses because it can not be controlled. This, again, mirrors some common cultural tropes, such as the *uchi/soto* (internal/external), and the *honne/tatemaie* (what is genuinely believed vs. what

is manifested ad hoc) dichotomies, often quoted as features of Japanese society (Hendry 2012). These ideas have informed the so-called ‘vertical model’ of Japanese society in an often uncritical fashion (see for instance the critiques by Befu 1980, Kondo 1993, Shimizu and Levine 2001) that looks at the basic distinction between an inner and an outer sphere, one of familiarity versus one of estrangement, one of true feelings versus one of performance. However, also these categories have often been over-emphasized without paying adequate attention to power strategies and different forms of checks and balances. In the village that I have studied, the emotionally overloaded emphasis on group harmony was contrasted on a daily basis with real differences among families who owned and farmed the land and families who, in the course of the tough history of the community, had abandoned agriculture. In most cases, community-level decision making was in the hands of the former group, which attempted to justify its privileged position pointing out the frequent absence from the village of many non-farmers who were away on seasonal migration labor. In this case, it became evident to me that the ‘group’ and everything which was inner to it compared to the outer (local villages) community, had itself an outer sphere within; a sphere grounded on differences that were constructed on land property and on the pride of having endured farming throughout the hardships of decades of poverty.

The differences between the English and the Japanese versions of the report/summary are few but intriguing. First, the ‘Made in Japan’ argument is absent in the Japanese version. Second, in the Japanese version the ‘regulatory trap’ has a less ambiguous explanation; its origin is traced in the ‘complex intertwining between politics, bureaucracy and finance that has developed by following a common project of government’. Moreover, it is suggested that the consolidation of the ‘mindset’ which support Japanese conforming to the regulatory trap is to be searched in the ‘50 years of mono-party rule, the employment-for-life system, the age-based career upgrading and the recruitment system before university graduation’. The most accurate cultural explanation in the Japanese text is that ‘following rapid economic growth, confidence has gradually turned into pride and self-conceit [...] in the mission of the élite that linked the economic and political world, the primary objective has become the protection of the interests of the system’ rather than maintaining the safety of citizens or following international standards (p.5, my translation).

The Responsibility Trap

Some of the aforementioned cultural explanations are present in the Daiwa blog, an unofficial virtual space started two months after the disaster in which information, media sources and forum discussion on the Fukushima case are updated daily. The general tone of this blog is of overt opposition to both the government and Tepco (the nuclear energy company managing the Fukushima plant). In particular, in a number of blog entries the writer suggests a psychological and cultural explanation for local people's choice to stay in Fukushima instead of evacuating.

A blog dated 22/4/2012 develops what seems a cultural explanation to this question. According to the Japanese author, Japanese people would not accept the idea of having to move out of contaminated lands on the basis of a shared sense of 'responsibility'. Responsibility is, according to the author, built in two ways: by avoiding to 'hurt others and to hurt oneself' (blog 22/4/2012). Here, the meaning of responsibility is very close to that given in the Commission's report; it is linked to the value of 'not causing any conflict' (harmony). The blog entry adds that culture 'has a smooth and responsible face for outsiders, but inside [people] are in agony and self-tortured. The Japanese mind-set is just like that of a person afflicted by self-injurious behavior'. These two aspects, responsibility towards the outer world and self-abusive behavior in the inner world, would be extremely well balanced in the Japanese psychological mindset, causing the one to affect the other in a directly proportional relation.

The responsibility trap, which has a slightly more accentuated psychological impact than the above mentioned 'regulatory capture', has similar cultural origins. Here is how Daiwa, in another blog entry, titled 'Self-hypnosis model' (14/3/2012) introduces these origins. In a simple but insightful diagram, the blogger introduces a four-dimensional explanatory model of Japanese behavior, again focusing on why local people would not leave the contaminated areas. The four dimensions are called: 'bias to underestimate the radiation risk', 'financial problem', 'faith in penance' and 'group mind'. The first two are contingent explanations, related to the good standards of living conditions of the average Japanese who do not want to envision a different life-style (or the need for it) or who would simply attribute financial reasons to the decision to evacuate. The latter two are overtly cultural explanations. 'Group mind' is the same as that given in the English executive summary and it is, as I have mentioned above, one of the most famous anthropological paradigms with reference to Japanese society. 'Faith in penance' is described as 'a unique sense of value for the Japanese

[...] they draw an imaginary reward for the penance and torture themselves somehow'. Furthermore, 'To make their virtual reality more concrete, they stick to their traditional customs' and eventually 'they set an imaginary reward for their painful ceremony'. The 'Imaginary reward is to remove the radiation risk by training their body to be stronger against radiation or by persuading god or heaven to clean up the contaminated world.' Ceremonies are held 'to measure radiation on thousands of items in a supermarket'. They 'hold these kinds of ceremony like group enchantment'. In the end: 'Through the ceremony, they end up overestimating their communal activity', which is the same conclusion reached in the report; the overestimation of the organizational (group) priorities and goals leads to the underestimation of the risk or of the damage to public health. Again, this cultural explanation draws on issues of group behavior, self-penance, excessive ritualization in social acts (see Kuwayama 1999) and biased perception of public vs. private goals and domains.

Conclusion

Whether or not Yanagita's point on the complexity of providing an emic explanation of Japanese cultural patterns is relevant for this case is less important than pointing out why cultural(istic) explanations have been found to be extremely relevant, both by those 'defending' and by those attacking the management of the Fukushima crisis. Anthropologists have provided abundant worldwide demonstration of the risks involved in using culture as an overarching explanatory paradigm. Yet, the task of anthropologists is to detect how cultural features work, and how they are internalized and externalized in daily practices. Unfortunately, the Fukushima case is one in which thick descriptions of culture are turned into politicized means in order to blame or to essentialize the responsibility of Japan in ways that are extremely evocative, and at times rather convincing, but confusing. Can this help to explain why Benedict's book was so successful? I believe that the answer lies in the ways in which the nuclear accident has been portrayed: using cultural stigmatizations carries the obvious advantage of dispensing with requiring more insightful analyses of social and political responsibilities. This point calls for attention from anthropologists, who are in the uncomfortable position of studying and describing culture not only in order to contribute to scholarship and science, but to investigate the use that cultural paradigms may have in justifying planet-scale failures, such as the management of the Fukushima accident.

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