

| Forum |



Anthropology as critique of reality A Japanese turn

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The impetus for this forum was the recent publication in Japan of the volume *Genjitsu Hihan no Jinruigaku* (*Anthropology as critique of reality*) edited by Professor Naoki Kasuga. In the Japanese context, this volume represents the emergent interest in what has come to be called the “the ontological turn” in Euro-American anthropology. This forum offers a depiction of the anthropological genealogies that led to the Japanese interest in “ontological matters,” and it offers an entry point for understanding Japanese interpretations of, and responses to, this set of issues and concerns. The forum comprises an introductory piece by Casper Bruun Jensen and Atsuro Morita, outlining the histories within Japanese anthropology that led to *Genjitsu Hihan no Jinruigaku*, an interview conducted by Jensen with Professor Kasuga on his intellectual genealogy in the context of Japanese anthropology, and a translated and edited chapter from *Anthropology as critique of reality*, Miho Ishii’s “Acting with things: Self-poiesis, actuality, and contingency in the formation of divine worlds.” These pieces are followed by commentaries from Marilyn Strathern, whose work provides a key source of inspiration for the Japanese turn to ontology, and Annelise Riles, who has had long-standing relations with Japanese anthropology, including Professor Kasuga.

Keywords: Japanese anthropology, ontology, practice, materiality, genealogy

Introduction

This forum introduces certain contemporary developments in Japanese anthropology, centering in particular on the Japanese response to what some have called an “ontological turn” in anthropology (Henare et al. 2007: 7–16). In 2011, Professor Naoki Kasuga published an edited volume entitled *Anthropology as critique of reality* (*Genjitsu Hihan no Jinruigaku*), which explicitly aimed to

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ISSN 2049-1115 (Online)

introduce ontological considerations into Japanese anthropology.¹ Interestingly, however, this volume also gave to those considerations particular inflections, some of which are quite different from the concerns that have guided Anglophone discussions. Here, we publish one chapter from *Anthropology as critique of reality*, Miho Ishii's "Acting with things: Self-poiesis, actuality, and contingency in the formation of divine worlds," along with an interview with the editor, Professor Naoki Kasuga. These pieces are followed by responses from Annelise Riles and Marilyn Strathern.

To provide a context for these engagements, this introduction outlines some central aspects of the development of recent Japanese anthropology, focusing in particular on tendencies that led to the emerging interest in ontological matters. As we show, we are witness to a particular conjunction where an increasingly vibrant Japanese anthropology of science and technology,² originating in a distinct version of practice theory, has encountered and attempted to come to terms with certain "experimental" forms of postmodern cultural anthropology.

What is particularly noteworthy is the increasing Japanese interest in scholars such as Bruno Latour, Annemarie Mol, Helen Verran, Marilyn Strathern, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, all of whom are closely affiliated with the Euro-American interest in ontology. We thus seem to be witnessing the emergence of a new orientation among Japanese anthropologists, neither committed to "classical" forms of anthropology, nor to post-*Writing culture* epistemological explorations.

Redefining anthropology: From holism to culture to practice

It will take us too far astray to attempt to characterize the entire rich field of Japanese anthropology. But in the barest outline, we can point to some pivotal schools of thought that have been highly influential. After World War II, Japanese anthropology became closely allied with British social anthropology through influential figures trained in the United Kingdom, such as Chie Nakane. Meanwhile, important indigenous traditions of anthropology were developed, including prominently the Kyoto school of ecological anthropology founded by Kinji Imanishi and Tadao Umesao. Both of these scholars criticized the reliance of Western anthropology on a dichotomy between nature and culture and proposed to integrate anthropology and ecology in a single, nondualist science (Imanishi 2002; Umesao 2003). Imanishi's work from the 1930s was strongly allied with ecology, primatology, and agricultural sciences, and these fields have remained in close contact up to the present day.

During the 1980s, in an experience shared with researchers elsewhere, many Japanese anthropologists began feeling uncomfortable with the traditional disciplinary focus on small communities. Not least, Southeast Asia's rapid industrialization and changing political landscape brought home to Japanese

1. The official English title of the volume (which is not translated) is *Anthropology as reality critique*, a title that mimics George Marcus and Michael Fischer's *Anthropology as cultural critique* (1999). Here, we take the liberty of using the more idiomatic translation *Anthropology as critique of reality*.
2. For a more detailed discussion, focusing especially on Japanese anthropology of science and technology see Morita (n.d.).

anthropologists the inadequacy of traditional frameworks for the analysis of contemporary societies. In particular, these changes seemed to create increasing social complexity and differentiation that made a naïve anthropological holism impossible to sustain (Fukushima 1998; Tanabe 2010).³ In the early 1990s, leading anthropologists started exploring alternative frameworks. In this context, the form of practice theory developed by Marxist anthropologist Shigeharu Tanabe and further developed by Masato Fukushima gained central importance (Fukushima 1995; Tanabe 2003).

Tanabe organized several large projects focusing on the relation between bodily practices, learning, and identity formation in communities of practice (Tanabe 2008a; Tanabe and Matsuda 2002). During the same period, inspired by the Marxist philosopher and historian of technology Tetsuro Nakaoka (Nakaoka 1971), Fukushima began working with Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's model of learning in studies of high-tech settings, and came to argue that small accidents and irregular events are central for inducing learning in complex systems.⁴ He further contended that learning in such settings is vulnerable because of its costs, an argument that led to his interest in the "experimental margins for learning" (Fukushima 2010). Gradually, Fukushima began conceptualizing experimentation as an integral part of practice in general. Accordingly, he advocated the necessity of studying multiple layers of practical experimentation: from the level of routines, to accidents that stimulate organizational learning, to the distribution of experimental activities in wider society.

It is important to emphasize the extent to which the turn to practice emerged as a response to the crisis of anthropological holism (Fukushima 1998). Due to the strong influence of British structural-functionalism and Marxism, as well as the development of an "indigenous" Japanese ecological anthropology (known colloquially as the "Kyoto school"), Japanese anthropology tended to focus on ethnographies of small-scale societies, centering analysis on the interdependencies of institutions, beliefs, and ecological processes. In contrast, American cultural anthropology was relatively uninfluential until the 1980s.

Not least due to the effects of urbanization and industrialization, in the 1980s and 1990s Japanese anthropology began emphasizing "cultural" phenomena such as subculture and ethnicity. Doing so, it drew increasingly on American cultural anthropology, including studies of urban culture, globalization, and the world system. Yet, Tanabe and Fukushima saw this changing emphasis as deeply problematic. In their view, it not only avoided holism, but seemed to shrink the field of anthropology as such: it rendered the anthropologist not as a generalist, but as a specialist in minuscule aspects of the world that could be designated as cultural. For these scholars, then, the tendency of modern society to differentiate into autonomous subsystems inevitably undermined the original holistic ambition of

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3. Japanese publications are given English translations in the bibliography. We cite English translations wherever possible.
 4. Long before the catastrophic event at the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear plant on March 11, 2011, Masato Fukushima (2010) argued that established and relatively stabilized complex technical systems with long histories tend to become dangerous, because operators often lack the expertise to deal with irregular situations.

anthropology. In turn, this reduced anthropology to a form of cultural studies of increasingly narrow scope (Fukushima 1998). The turn to practice was meant to counter this tendency: it promised to reestablish an anthropological identity and broaden its scope anew. As we shall see, these developments had a direct bearing on the later Japanese uptake of the “ontological turn.”

Ecology of practices and the pursuit of life

Tanabe and Fukushima’s practice theory has inspired a current generation of Japanese anthropologists, primarily those working on topics of science and technology. They offered a kind of “doubled” ecological view on practice: at the microlevel they saw practice as characterized by constant interaction and mutual modification between human actors and the socio-material environment; while at the mesolevel they conceptualized wider social processes in which divergent practices interact with each other (Fukushima 2010; Tanabe 2003). Under the general rubric of practice-oriented anthropology in Japan, we can pinpoint two currents of research especially relevant to the ontological concerns addressed in *Anthropology as critique of reality*.

The first thread can be characterized as studies of *ecologies of practices*, a term used informally by Fukushima (but see Fukushima 2010) to designate an approach centering on the elucidation of how complex, technologized societies emerge through a dynamics of interacting practices.⁵ The other current within practice theory can be designated as an *anthropology in pursuit of life*, since its ethnographic emphasis is centered specifically on the boundaries where life sciences, medicine, and subjectivities become entangled (Tanabe 2010). In conjunction, these bodies of work form a bridge between the early practice studies that focused on the microprocesses of learning bodily skills and the recent work on ontology presented in *Anthropology as critique of reality*.

In tandem with the technologization of society, the centrality of material artifacts in social practices became increasingly obvious to anthropologists in Japan as elsewhere. Accordingly, research on “ecologies of practices” began paying sustained attention to the role of technology in social practice. For example, Atsuro Morita, a student of Fukushima at Tokyo University, worked on indigenous engineering in the Thai informal manufacturing sector and focused on the role of circulating, life-size models that embody design information, and both connect and divide networks of Thai manufacturing practice (Morita 2012). In another case, Keiichi Omura explored the intersection between global networks of technoscience and relationships between the Inuit and their game animals. In spite of the use of modern technology such as snowmobiles, motorboats, and high-powered rifles, Inuit still see game animals (i.e., seals and whales) as donors of

5. From a quite different angle, Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers (2005) also proposes an analytical focus on “ecologies of practice.” Briefly put, Stengers focuses on internal differentiations among practices, which leads her to consider the intersection of different practices primarily from the point of view of the preservation of the autonomy and “divergence” of each practice. In contrast, Fukushima’s primary focus is the exploration and characterization of organizational problems due to the complexities of coordinating widely different practices engaged in industry, medicine, and science.

their lives. The fact that animals offer their life to sustain human life obliges the Inuit, in exchange, to share the meat of their game with others in order to ensure the reincarnation of the animals. Thus, Omura shows the contours of material networks with different qualities and other forms than those characterizing modern technoscience (Omura 2010). On the one hand, Omura's work is thus closely related to Fukushima's "ecologies of practice" approach. On the other hand, it also explores the specific ways in which Inuit lives are mediated by relationships with humans and nonhuman entities. In this sense, this work bridges the concerns of studies of ecologies of practices with those focusing on the anthropology "in pursuit of life"—to which we now turn.

This second group of practice theorists has predominantly conducted ethnographies in the context of the life sciences. For example, Shigeharu Tanabe ambitiously aimed to characterize the "totality of life" by examining power relations in the biological, material, and social conditions of a people's life. In a study of self-help groups of HIV carriers in Northern Thailand, Tanabe elucidated their "techniques of self-government," which include herbal and dietary treatments, massage, counseling, antiretroviral medication, and social activism (Tanabe 2008b). Tanabe's case is, of course, specific, but as Goro Yamazaki (2011) has emphasized, the struggles he illuminates are in fact widely encountered in contemporary medical settings. An array of medical sciences and technologies are basic to the lives of people with various diseases, and new forms of politics and sociality often emerge where bodies meet science and technology. This hybridity provides a far from stable ontological ground, because scientific facts about diseases and the institutional frameworks that deal with them can change in unpredictable ways (cf. Yamazaki forthcoming), and because technological interventions create ontologically different or even incommensurable "versions" of diseases and bodies (Mol 2002).

In this vein, Gergely Mohacsi has shown diabetes to be variably enacted in multiple Japanese settings, such as obligatory medical check-ups of employees, epidemiological research projects exploring the impact of life style factors, and genetic research laboratories in search of genes affecting the susceptibilities of different ethnic groups to the disease. Following the flow of medical data from patients' daily measurements of blood sugar levels to laboratories of epidemiology and genetics, Mohacsi shows the ontology of diabetes to be variable and constantly moving (Mohacsi 2008, 2011).

Despite the diversity of topics, these practice studies commonly share an aspiration to treat nature and culture symmetrically. In the aforementioned article, Omura clearly articulates this ambition, and dubs the approach "nature-culture relativism." To a significant extent this resonates with the "ontological turn" in anthropology (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Henare et al. 2007), which refuses to contrast the study of cultures and people with that of nature and things, and calls for the expansion of anthropology into the latter (Latour 1993). In spite of their affinities, however, Bruno Latour's program for a symmetrical anthropology is also in important ways different from Viveiros de Castro's ontologized anthropology centering on the specificities of indigenous conceptualization (cf. Jensen 2012). In the Japanese context, too, which has so far been more inspired by Latour than Viveiros de Castro, these endeavors are not "turning" in altogether the same direction.

The ontological turn and ethnographic experimentation

The ontological turn in anthropology originated with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's 1998 lecture series at Cambridge on "Cosmological perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere," which called for the exploration of indigenous ontologies of non-Western peoples (Viveiros de Castro 2012). Viveiros de Castro argued that conventional anthropological analysis, which takes the statements of Amerindians about their bodies as cultural representations of the biological body, results in imposing the Western dichotomy of nature-culture on an Amerindian cosmology to which it is foreign. Viveiros de Castro thus argues strongly for the importance of using indigenous ontologies to shed critical light on Western ontology (Viveiros de Castro 1998).

The impact of Viveiros de Castro's argument is vivid in *Thinking through things* (Henare et al. 2007), which offers something like a manifesto for an ontological turn in anthropology.⁶ The argument appears rather simple at first glance: it entails taking informants' statements about things seriously in their own right, rather than taking them as a cultural perspective on real material reality. In this sense, indigenous conceptualizations can be used to challenge the dominant Western ontology.

This argument has provoked debate both in Europe and Japan, but in the latter it has played out somewhat differently.⁷ In Europe, criticism has centered on the question of whether ontology entails an argument about absolute difference, or incommensurability, between worlds. Thus, critics have suggested that *Thinking through things* presents indigenous ontologies as bounded and internally coherent, with the consequence that the notion of ontology looks suspiciously similar to the classic notion of culture (Carrithers et al. 2010). However, the Japanese critical response has been quite different. Rather than focusing on the question of essentialism, it is related to the practice-orientation previously outlined, and centers on the question of how "ontologists" actually approach things.

In 2011, for example, Fabio Gigi, who did his doctoral work at UCL and now works at Doshisha University in Kyoto, outlined the ontological argument presented in *Thinking through things* at Kyoto University. This presentation generated heated discussion precisely because of the perceived deficiency of the treatment given to materiality, seen by critical respondents to be subsumed by an idealist focus on indigenous conceptualizations. Notably, the most critical reaction came from Akira Adachi, one of the first anthropologists to introduce Latour's actor-network theory to Japan. As a representative of Japanese anthropologists working on practice, Adachi was particularly concerned with what he saw as a complete absence of attentiveness to bodily and material aspects of practice in

6. We focus in particular on the edited volume *Thinking through things* (Henare et al. 2007) because it has been widely read by Japanese anthropologists, causing vigorous debate among them.
7. For further discussion, see Gad, Jensen, and Winthereik's (forthcoming) discussion of "worlds" and "ontology" in anthropology and STS. The paper is forthcoming in *NatureCulture*, an open access online journal edited by Naoki Kasuga. <http://natureculture.sakura.ne.jp/>.

Thinking through things. Thus, he insisted that the volume, in spite of its stated ambition, could not help but fail to tackle *things* adequately due to its overemphasis on linguistic representation and conceptualization.

One might say that while many European anthropologists inspired by Viveiros de Castro's ontological approach aim to elucidate how people conceptualize the cosmos by thinking through things, Japanese anthropologists, not least inspired by Bruno Latour, have aimed rather to show how natural entities, artifacts, and personhood are constituted by and through heterogeneous entanglement in practice. These differences have made the Japanese reception of ontology somewhat ambivalent and tempered the response even of those Japanese anthropologists who support "the turn" (Kasuga 2011).

Japanese advocates of ontology, in particular Naoki Kasuga, came to see a particular connection between the ontological turn and experimental attempts in ethnography. Of course, the ontological turn itself is not averse to ethnographic experimentation because of its roots in the work of Marilyn Strathern, a figure who has also exerted significant influence on the thinking of Kasuga. Among other things, Strathern is famous for her work on the nature-culture relation in Melanesia (Strathern 1988). Here Strathern simultaneously describes Melanesian indigenous notions and articulates the epistemological ground assumed by the very viewpoint through which she describes them. Often, her argument involves experimental juxtapositions of Melanesian and Euro-American materials, which not only elucidate the radical difference between the two but also elicit the basic assumptions of Western conceptualization.

Indeed, Japanese anthropologists sympathetic to the ontological turn have come to see it as a part of a wider movement that presses forward with ethnographic experimentation. In this context, it has been related to experimental anthropological works such as those of Annelise Riles, Hirokazu Miyazaki, and Bill Maurer, though none of these authors themselves speak of ontology. This is the point where practice theory and experimental post-*Writing culture* anthropology converges in the Japanese context. And this convergence is precisely what is exhibited in *Anthropology as critique of reality*.

Anthropology as critique of reality

Although the American postmodern critique of ethnography significantly impacted Japanese anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese practice theorists rarely engaged in reflexive modes of writing or other forms of textual experimentation. Indeed, they were generally critical of such efforts because of their emphasis on discourse. For Tanabe (2010) and Fukushima (1998), the postmodern critique confused the urgent issue of developing a new conceptual framework to explore the complexity of contemporary society with the limited problem of textual expression, and thus trivialized what they saw as the truly important problems for anthropology. This response sharply contrasts with that of Marilyn Strathern, who developed her own position in a continued dialogue with the postmodern critique (e.g., Strathern 1987). *Anthropology as critique of reality*, however, puts those two modes of anthropological engagement into direct conversation. This is no accident; Kasuga himself was one of the Japanese translators of *Writing culture* and a long-standing advocate of experimental work in Japanese anthropology.

For example, Kasuga's historical anthropological work on a Fijian cargo cult movement (Kasuga 2001) took particular interest in the perplexing temporality of the millenarian movement, where the future and the past seemed to coexist. In the early 2000s, Kasuga turned to Strathern and science and technology studies in order to come to terms with such swirling temporalities, which, he argued, are not limited to the world of Fijian cargo cults but are also omnipresent in the "late capitalist world" (Kasuga 2007). Kasuga came to argue that such temporalities could not be characterized using the conventional expository modes of ethnographic realism, and consequently began experimenting with different textual strategies. Subsequently he came to argue that these descriptive and analytical challenges required a reorientation of the scope of anthropology from representation to ontology.

Kasuga's interest in experimental work aligned well with Japanese ethnographers working on modern knowledge practice, including science and technology, though their problems were different. As Annelise Riles (2000) has shown, these researchers encountered conceptually and methodologically problematic affinities between anthropology and their informants' practices.⁸ For instance, Osamu Nakagawa (2007), one of the contributors to *Anthropology as critique of reality*, discusses how the anthropological notion of the Maussian "gift" has influenced regional currency movements in rural France.⁹ Indeed, members of the movement viewed the exchanges mediated by the alternative currency precisely as gifts that strengthen social bonds. Given the longstanding relationship between French social movements and social thought, the design and the discourse of the alternative currency movement were already inspired by *The gift*.

One of the leitmotivs of *Anthropology as critique of reality* is, therefore, precisely the resonance and interference between ethnographic analytical forms and the object of study. Shuhei Kimura, for example, analyzes the impact of earthquakes in Turkey to show how these "natural" phenomena not only materially shake buildings and infrastructures but also metaphorically "shake" existing institutions (see also Kimura 2010). In a more explicitly experimental endeavor, Morita's chapter elucidates the distinctive Strathernian interest in the ethnographic elicitation of the "internal comparisons" of the field, by juxtaposing her analytic strategy with the way in which Thai agricultural machines operate as comparative devices that enable mechanics to evoke differences between Japanese and Thai environments. Drawing on definitions of the machine found in classic mechanical engineering, Morita thus offers an analogy between ethnography and agricultural machines, in which both generate effects through the relative motion between their parts.¹⁰

However, not all chapters in *Anthropology as critique of reality* focus on relations between analytical forms and the objects of study. Other contributions aim to illuminate the plurality of indigenous ontological forms themselves, and to

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8. Fukushima (2010) also argues for the partial adherence between analytical and indigenous categories in his review of ethnographic studies on asylums.
 9. Thus, Nakagawa was led to a conclusion similar to that of Bill Maurer (2005) though working completely independently.
 10. For an English version, see Morita (forthcoming).

elucidate gaps between these forms, which both destabilize and expand the practices under study. For instance, in his explorations of the self-monitoring practices of diabetic patients, Mohacsy traces the intricate relationships between patient bodies, epidemiological research, and the developing pathology of diabetes. This interplay, he argues, entails that each site has functioned as a “critique” of the others, with the result that both the biological and social complexity of the disease has expanded.

Similarly, Juntarō Fukada describes plural forms of indigenous shell money, or *tabu*, in Tolai society. Tolai people use *tabu* not only for transactions but they also collect them to make enormous bundles that are displayed in funerals. Fukada argues that these plural forms of *tabu* correspond to an ontology of the Tolai self that oscillates between forms of relational personhood, well known from Melanesian ethnographies, and an ephemeral, self-contained, individual existence. The latter is expressed at funerals, where bundles of the *tabu*, which become the deceased person herself, are cut into small pieces and distributed among participants. He argues that the form of personhood emerging in funerals acts as a critique of the relational basis of personhood in everyday transactions, and thus reveals an internal dynamism in Tolai society.

A similar move is made by Naoki Kasuga in a chapter based on his ethnography in a Fijian nursing home. Here elders are completely deprived of the exchange relations that usually are said to characterize Melanesian personhood. Drawing on Strathern’s argument concerning the exchange of perspectives in gift exchange, he argues that this total deprivation of sociality creates the condition for the emergence of an otherworldly orientation that draws deeply on Fijian Christianity (for an English version, see Kasuga 2012).

As these examples suggest, *Anthropology as critique of reality* elucidates the alterity of a variety of non-Western ontologies. Moreover, contributors delineate the complex interplays through which different ontologies are *often busily interfering with each other*. Thus, ontologies are never hermetically sealed but always part of multiple engagements. They offer not only discursive or conceptual but also practical commentary and critique of other realities.

Readers might fruitfully consider the translated version of Miho Ishii’s article on “divine worlds” in this light. In this article she describes the constitution of other, divine realities—worlds—not as a matter of cultural experience but rather as emergent realities generated in a complex interplay between human bodies and artifacts. While engaging with a variety of interlocutors, ranging from Viktor von Weizsäcker and Bin Kimura to Hideo Kawamoto and Alfred Gell, Ishii’s work exemplifies a strong materialist tendency in Japanese anthropology, which sees bodily actions, physical and mechanical realities, and forms of conceptualization and categorization as inseparable; continuously multiplying and diverging through mutual entanglements.

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L'anthropologie comme critique de la réalité : un tournant japonais

Résumé : L'impulsion de ce forum a été la publication récente au Japon du volume *Genjitsu Hihan no Jinruigaku (Anthropologie comme critique de la réalité)*, édité par le professeur Naoki Kasuga. Dans le contexte japonais, ce volume représente l'intérêt émergent pour ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler le « tournant ontologique » au sein de l'anthropologie euro-américaine. Ce forum offre une description des généalogies anthropologiques qui ont conduit à l'intérêt des Japonais pour les « questions ontologiques », et un point d'entrée pour comprendre les interprétations et les réponses japonaises à cet ensemble de questions et de préoccupations. Le forum comprend une introduction de Casper Bruun Jensen et Atsuro Morita décrivant la genèse de *Genjitsu Hihan no Jinruigaku* au sein de l'anthropologie japonaise ; une interview réalisée par Jensen avec le professeur Kasuga sur sa généalogie intellectuelle dans le contexte de l'anthropologie japonaise ; et une traduction éditée d'un chapitre de Miho Ishii, « Agir avec les choses : auto-poïésis, actualité et contingence dans la formation des mondes divins », extrait du volume *Anthropologie comme critique de la réalité*. Ces différentes parties sont suivies par des commentaires de Marilyn Strathern, dont le travail est une source d'inspiration clé pour le tournant ontologique au Japon, et Annelise Riles, qui entretient une longue relation avec l'anthropologie japonaise, et notamment avec le professeur Kasuga.

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