This brief essay has been drafted for the panel, "Towards an Anthropological Imagination," at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, December 8, 1985, Washington, DC. A revised version was later published in French in

Coming to Terms with Modernity: Ethnography and Everyday Life on a Japanese Rice Plain

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> "*What then is modernity? In part, it is to ask the question, for self-consciousness about time and the character of our moment in it seems to be central to modern consciousness. Where the ancients asked, 'How can we live with others in tranquil perpetuity?' and made justice the foundation of their morals, we moderns ask, 'How can we live with ourselves today?' and make therapy the foundation of ours. Self-consciousness turns out to be a deadly form of evolution, because individuals who reflect on their origins, query their place in time, dissect their associations, question their convictions, impugn their natural authorities, and analyze their moral principles ultimately make the discovery that their alienating intelligence can win the victory of liberation (the absence of constraints and limits) only at the price of decracination (the absence of roots and meaning). This, the irony of the species' maturation, is the dilemma of modernity. The liberation the race has sought from traditional societies weighted down with the gravity of custom, hierarchy, and bondage to nature and natural purpose, turns out when won to entail homelessness, arbitrariness, and the impossibility of creating meaningful lives in the absence of natural purpose. Free finally to make our own lives, we peevishly wish that God had never tossed us out of Eden and then crept off like an ailing animal to die in some corner of the cosmos, conspicuously indifferent to our plight, leaving us with the paltry freedom we thought would make us like him.*" (Barber 1982:28)

Ethnography and everyday life

Writing in the 1950s, a Cold War decade of political persecution and public apathy, C. Wright Mills imagined a sociology that would both animate the structures of society and reveal the forces through which and against which individuals lived their lives. He wrote at a time, too, when an original vision of a theoretically committed and historically informed sociology had given way to lifeless Parsonian models and mindless narrative histories. His vision, fortunately, proved to be a tocsin to an ailing, moribund enterprise and not an epitaph for a brain-dead

discipline. Since then, a true "historical sociology" has been revived in the works of such disparate thinkers as Philip Abrams, Norbert Elias, Anthony Giddens, Eric Hobsbawm, Arthur Stinchcombe, E. P. Thompson, and Charles Tilly.

In Mills' time, anthropology also was divided schizophrenically against itself, between structural mechanics and ethnographic particularities. Yet it too has recovered an integrating conception of social life as it has refined its understandings of 'process' and returned to formulations of culture as meaning. In so doing, it has provided a fuller dimension to the Millsian reading of the links between biography and society. A properly historical sociology demonstrates how "social systems [are] historically produced figurations of interdependent individuals" (Abrams 1982:234), and accordingly, how social action is the product of fettered choice. A fully historical anthropology elucidates the ways in which this dialectic of choice and constraint is as culturally mediated as it is historically constituted. The cultural mediation of agency and structure is at the core of an anthropological imagination. It is the common denominator of such general pronouncements as Bourdieu (1977), Cohn (1980), Comaroff (1982), Ortner (1984), and Smith (1984), and such particular studies as Austin (1984), Comaroff (1985), Hirschfeld (1977), Rosaldo (1980), and Sider (1985).

It is not my aim here to add further ethnographic color to this anthropological vision, but rather to underscore its double significance at the present moment. This is a time when the human sciences and creative arts are divided between and dominated by a modernism that flatly rejects the past as a ground for inspiration and a post-modernism that blithely scavenges the past as the junk yard for its fabrications. Anthropology's insistence on the necessary mutualism of cultural analysis and historical understanding is an essential countervailing voice. Moreover, these are not mere intellectual flutterings, but are part of the larger force field of modernity that exerts enormous pressures on everyday life: particularly and variously, pressures that disengage the past and the present. The actions and structures of everyday life are shaped within and against these pressures. Thus, ethnography, by enacting the claims of anthropology and representing the forms of everyday life, has become both a promising and perilous challenge to those same pressures.

Lest these ruminations dissolve in cryptic ellipsis, I would like to defend them in terms of a particular intersection of ethnography and everyday life in a small region of contemporary Japan. Here we shall see that the enticements and entrapments of modernity are phrased in the idioms of rationality and nostalgia.

Rationality and nostalgia in New Middle Class Japan

For the last thirty years, it has been widely reported in the Japanese media and repeated in Japanese and Western scholarship that 90% of the Japanese are middle class. This characterization turns out to signify both more and less than it initially appears. Since the 1950s, a powerful typification of personal growth has popularized a narrow pattern of the meanings of support in family, success in school, and satisfaction in work. The discredited prewar ideology of the "family system" (kazoku seido) has been replaced by a new, glossy projection of a socially and physically nuclear unit of ricewinner husband, homemaker-housewife, and two samurai-student children. Fulltime, lifetime, large-organization employment (sarariiman) has become the workplace norm. And mass public education, relentlessly meritocratic, now links home and work, child and adult. This triad has become the model organization of New Middle Class Japan. For many, it represents a cultural model of mutually confirming aspirations that orient behavior and judgment. For others, it presents

difficult, paradoxical pressures. However, it is the wide appeal, not universal attainment or logical consistency, of this ideal life-trajectory that lies behind the poll readings of "90% middle class." By many conceivable measures, life-chances continue to vary widely, but a Japanese-inflected middle class consciousness has, for the present moment, given a pervasive homogeneity to standards of achievement and designs for living.

A central problem in understanding 20th-century Japan is to show how these New Middle Class typifications have captured the societal imagination and become the dominant, ordering vision of the present moment. While not often phrased in these terms, it is nevertheless the theme underlying most studies of postwar Japanese society, beginning with the seminal works of Dore (1958), Vogel (1963), and Plath (1964). It is a problem which anthropologists with a theoretical concern for culture as meaning and a methodological commitment to ethnography are well-positioned to study. For these typifications of modern life are cultural constructs, which "serve less to regulate conduct than to provide the terms within which action becomes intelligible" (Rosaldo 1980:153). That is, they are not a set of binding strictures that will stand as a normative summation of contemporary Japanese society. They form but a loose pattern of expectations that require active interpretation to be realized. Their enactment is never simple. It is fitful, and it is conflictful, because the interpretations that people choose to make or are forced to accept will depend on their positions in a field of differential influence. Ethnography is essential to our appreciation of everyday life because it can represent it as dramas of the enactment of meaning.

My own present research seeks to understand how the people of one small region of Japan have come to terms with these idealizations of modern life -- how they have been conditioned by them and in turn how they have charged them with meanings from their own past experiences. This region, the small plain of Shônai, lies away from the great metropolitan corridors, along the northwest coast of Japan's main island. Its flat, fertile expanse is protected from the sea by low sand dunes and watered by the rivers that fall out of the mountains which enclose it on its other three sides. Its several hundred thousand residents now fill two cities, a number of smaller towns, and hundreds of village settlements. One hundred and fifty years ago, the people of Shônai were peasant cultivators, town merchants, and samurai retainers of the lord to whom the plain was enfoeffed as a domain in a faltering agrarian state. Fifty years ago, they were tenant farmers, shopkeepers, and laborers, as well as cautious soldier-citizens of an increasingly aggressive, militarized state. Today, a few remain fulltime farmers while many more combine parttime farming with jobs in small and large private companies and public agencies. They enjoy many of the amenities of metropolitan infrastructure on the more comfortable scale of a less densely populated region. They are, polls report and people themselves tell me, middle class. How they have come to make that claim is what I seek to represent in my ethnography of their changing patterns of work, family, and community.

Here, however, I wish to focus on a particular aspect of Shônai's engagement with the New Middle Class formations of the larger society. This is the effort by the authorities at society's center to reincorporate regions like Shônai into a national polity and mass culture through two primary idioms -- that of rationality and nostalgia. In Japan's postwar reconstruction, no term has proven as ideologically potent and semantically slippery as gōrika, "rationalization." It has been the broad rubric for reform of everything from town councils and school texts to kitchen design, traffic flow, and dietary habits. In regions like Shônai, where the ordering rhythm of life had been agrarian, the aftermath of the war brought denunciations of farm work, the farm family, and the farm community as "feudal" relics, antitheses of that which was "modern" and "democratic." Gōrika provided the basis for a thorough reevaluation of agriculture and its place in the local political economy.

Yet even as society's center aimed to transform Shônai life through its programs of rationalization, it sought to appropriate Shônai's past as a nostalgic reassurance of its own idealized past. By the late 1960s and 1970s, a "home place boom" (furusato būmu) fetishized "countrysides" like Shônai in travel posters, tourist itineraries, and television specials. Now it was the quaintness of farmhouses, the integrity of farm work, and the bonds of the village community that were celebrated rather than denigrated. The people of Shônai found themselves consigned to an imaginary past even as they were beckoned to a smug future, and they have had to learn to maneuver within and between these twin idioms of rationalization and nostalgia. These maneuverings frame both their efforts to refashion their life patterns and my own attempts to represent these efforts in ethnography. I offer two brief examples.

The rationalization of Shônai agriculture

Shônai emerged in the 20th century as one of Japan's few major rice producing regions. Farm work no longer directly engages a majority of its population, but it remains central to the identity of the region and to the activities of most public agencies and the local business community. Two changes in Shônai agriculture have been particularly striking: a rationalization of work routines and relations and a solidification of smallholder, proprietor consciousness. By the first, I mean the increasing detachment of work from household -- farming here has become the sole provenance of the young adult male -- and its embeddedness in a nexus of institutional expertise (agricultural cooperative, land improvement district, extension service, etc.). By the second, I mean the farmer as both manager and laborer, with a commitment to continuing his control over and contribution to the farm work process. These appear to be divergent directions of change: 'new middle class' versus 'old middle class' routines and consciousness. In fact, I believe that the first has enabled the second to persist, while the latter has mitigated some of the acute tensions caused by the former.

These changes in Shônai farm work are rather unanticipated results of two 20th-century Green Revolutions on the plain, two periods of radical reforms in technology and social organization that transformed rice growing and the paddy landscape. In the earlier of these periods, 1895-1920, large landlords adopted the rhetorical banner of "the improvement of agricultural affairs" (nōji kairyō) in an effort to standardize tenancy procedures, improve rice quality and yields, and enhance the profitability of their operations. Instead, their reforms stimulated forms of counter-organization that shifted leverage to smallholder owner-tenants. In the more recent period, 1965-80, national state ministries vigorously promoted a "rationalization of agriculture" (nōgyō gōrika) through mechanization; this was meant to encourage an exodus of labor from farming to industry and the consolidation of a small core of large-scale, fulltime operators. Instead, most households have held on to their land and used the new machinery and generous price supports to allow the young adult male to continue small-scale farming, while other members find non-farm jobs.

During both rice revolutions, cultural oppositions were constructed to pit the "rational" and the "modern" against the "customary" and the "feudal." Yet the social enactment of these potent terms produced surprising outcomes, as neither the large landlords nor the state ministries could fully control the significations of these terms. At both times, they were appropriated by smallholders, who were able to redefine and reassert their livelihood. And in both periods, complicating the course of reform and influencing the outcomes were tensions within as much as across these strata: among landlords, whose conception of "profit" varied; between state

ministries, especially those of finance, construction, and agriculture; and inside farm households, dividing generations and the sexes. For example, whether the thrust of the recent rice revolution has been to raise yields or reduce labor remained usefully ambiguous through the late 1960s and 1970s. Many parents were willing to purchase a full complement of rice machinery for their son to operate, expecting that rising yields would finance repayment. Many sons were willing to stay on in hopes that mechanized farming would now offer a "modern" occupation and that machines would allow them to farm independently, autonomous of their fathers, whose expertise was rendered obsolete and whose authority they might thus usurp. These two rice revolutions, then, have been struggles for and about the meanings of the "rational" and the "customary," and they have produced an occupation whose procedures and social relations may be the most "rational" on the plain.

The sentimentalization of Shônai culture

That the mutual imaginings of city and countryside oscillate between snobbish condescension and rhapsodizing sentimentality is a staple theme of all preindustrial and industrial states. Japan is certainly no exception. As I suggested above, in the 1950s, the countryside was denigrated as the bastion of residual "feudal" elements and superstitious custom. It was crude Hicksville (inaka), populated by toiling bumpkins (hyakusho), enduring the authoritarian patriarchs (kafuchō) of their families. By the 1970s, the chains of blind custom became the roots of authentic tradition, and the countryside was now upheld as the last reserve of noble virtues. In a flush of "rural nostalgia," the cultural institutions and authorities at the society's center now evoke an image of the countryside as a moral counterpoint to the industrial core of bureaucracy and corporation. Rural people, in Shônai as elsewhere, have responded variously and ambivalently to this reconstruction of the countryside in popular imagination and mass media -- sometimes by reshaping themselves in its image in their talk and actions, sometimes by dissimulation, sometimes by projecting counter-images of themselves and their lives.

In Shônai, efforts to define and reconstruct local community identity in this encounter with mass culture have turned on a novel and subtle juxtaposition of nōson ("farming village") as both furusato ("homeplace") and inaka ("the backward countryside"). Few of the hundreds of Shônai settlements have even a significant minority of fulltime farmers but nōson remains a common term of self-identity. It is a term that has become delicately nuanced. The 'backward' nōson is an eligible recipient and appropriate target for the state's generously funded rural development programs that include health centers, highways, and highrise town offices; the 'traditional' nōson provides a rhetorical defense against the felt excesses of the national society its residents seek to join.

These dialectics of community development and rural nostalgia are vividly illustrated in the Shônai village of Kurokawa, where for the last 400 years an elaborate nō drama program has been performed as the ritual centerpiece of the principal shrine festival. A complex organization of about 300 households supplies the actors, musicians, and chorus, and supports the festival cycle. This organization has proven a durable vehicle for political mobilization and economic change as well as cultural memory. By no coincidence, one of the two present heads of the nō group has also been director of the local agricultural cooperative and mayor of Kurokawa Village.

Six decades ago, in the manner of Oberammergau, this Kurokawa nō was 'discovered' by professional nō actors, scholars, and journalists from Tokyo. Their enthusiasm for what they

believed to be a primitive ur-nō, inflamed by the recent nostalgia boom, has elevated (or desecrated) this village ritual to a "designated prefectural treasure" and a national tourist attraction. Kurokawans themselves are appreciative and dubious in equal measure. They continue to embed their nō presentations in all-night midwinter festivities at the village shrine. Where these dramas were once offered to the mountain god that he might descend to bestow fertility, they are now offered to entertain and tame an equally potent and fickle audience that descends by train from the capital. In Tokyo itself, Kurokawans proudly appear on the stage of National Nō Theater, where they offer sophisticated performances of a most difficult dramatic art. But they also use their off-hours to lobby their Diet representative and ministry officials for government grants for rice equipment purchases and a municipal sewage system.

This nō festival cycle has been reworked symbolically and reorganized socially in the midst of these cultural politics of authenticity and agricultural politics of mechanization. In unusually stark terms, Kurokawa presents a drama that is played out much more privately and diffusely in the hundreds of other Shōnai villages -- how to formulate a community identity that builds constructively on the imagery of inaka and furusato.

Concluding thoughts

When it is true to its subject, ethnography can be a disciplined demonstration of two simple anthropological truths: that culture mediates the choices we make and the constraints we feel and that history is the dialectical ground of our acting and being acted upon. When it is true to its subjects, ethnography can be a principled account of everyday life as a dramatic struggle to work within and against cultural memory.

Reason and sentiment are hardly unique to Japan's modern moment, but they have more commonly opposed one another in earlier periods of its history. It is the distinctive modern dilemma that they now combine to detach the past from the present and deny the ways the past penetrates the present. Gōrika has meant many things in many contexts in postwar Japan, but it commonly projects a style of expertise that is empowered by its own formal characteristics: a professionalization of roles, a bureaucratization of institutions, and a systematization of procedures. Nostalgia equally subverts historical consciousness in its passion to recover and restore an elusive authenticity. The past is preserved as a frozen monument and not recognized as a living presence.

The people of Shōnai have wrestled against these powerfully converging tendencies. They have sought to transform their daily lives through a language of rationality without flatly denying the contours of the region's past, and they had tried to keep alive certain of those traditions without falling prey to a cloying sentimentality. To the degree that they are successful, they can hold to the narrow ground between liberation and deracination that is the challenge modern life presents to us all.

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