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## Japanese Encounters with Latin America and Iberian Catholicism (1549–1973)

*Some Thoughts on Language, Imperialism, Identity Formation,  
and Comparative Research*

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### PROLOGUE

Almost one century after Cortes had conquered Nueva España in 1519, the Japanese delegation on board the *San Juan Baptista* docked in Acapulco on January 28, 1614. Consisting of more than 100 Japanese members, this delegation was led by Hasekura Rokuzaemon Tsunenaga (1571–1622), a vassal of the Lord Date Masamune (1567–1636). The ship had set sail on October 28, 1613 from the port of Tsukinoura and took nearly three months to cross the Pacific Ocean. On board was Luis Sotelo (1574–1624), a Franciscan priest from Seville, who had accompanied the delegation. Upon his return to Europe, Sotelo dictated his experiences to an Italian archivist, Scipione Amati, who compiled the document *Historia del Regno de Voxu* in 1615.<sup>1</sup>

In this history, Luis Sotelo triumphantly reported that seventy-eight Japanese were baptized in Mexico City, although the extant church records, as noted by Van C. Gessel,<sup>2</sup> make no mention of such event. It was also reported that a group of twenty or so Japanese sailed from Veracruz on June 10, 1614. One may presume that they passed Puebla in 1614 on their way to the Gulf of Mexico. They were probably the first Japanese countrymen to make the journey across the Atlantic Ocean. On November 3, 1614 they met Pope Paul V, but this audience produced little in terms of concrete results. The Tokugawa Shogunate, founded by Ieyasu (1543–1616), had expelled the Christians in 1613, the year of Hasekura's departure. So, while the delegation was abroad, its goals had already been abandoned in Japan. On his way home, Hasekura received orders to stay in Manila for several years. It was only in 1620 that the Japanese authorities allowed him to return home. When Hasekura died two years later in 1622, his diary was confiscated and destroyed. The loss of this first-hand document makes it difficult to reconstruct this initial Japanese encounter with the new world. It was also in 1622 that Luis Sotelo disguised himself and made his way back to Japan. The priest was arrested and executed. His martyrdom took place on August 25, 1624.

This diplomatic mission fascinated Endō Shusaku (1923–1996), the Japanese

Catholic writer, and it became the inspiration for his novel *The Samurai* (1980; translated into English by Van C. Gessel in 1982).<sup>3</sup> The narrator of the novel, Velasco, is faithfully modeled after Luis Sotelo. In this book, Endō examines his own faith while, at the same time, his psyche while analyzing the mental and spiritual suffering of the Japanese people as a whole. Endō asks: why did all those who were involved in the mission have to suffer for the sake of Christianity? Was their suffering redeemed? Indeed, the writer's life-long concern was with human suffering and, in particular, the passion of Christ. Recent studies in comparative literature have re-examined Endō's novels from the post-colonial perspective. In this paper, I would like to briefly discuss three issues that are relevant to the historical and cross-cultural range of Endō's literary creation and place them within the larger context of our discipline.<sup>4</sup>

## I

Christian encounters with Japan challenged the notion of universality. Firstly, European exposure to the Japanese language raised fundamental questions concerning how to incorporate it into the pre-existing system of knowledge. It is well known that Saint Francois Xavier's (1506–1552) letters from Japan led Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) to believe that Japan was the Kingdom of Prester John. Postel believed that the Japanese language offered the key to solving the Christian mystery.<sup>5</sup> Half a century later, in 1606, the Jesuit Joan Rodriguez (1561?–1639), a famous interpreter who was based in Japan, compiled and published *Arte da lingua de Iapam* in Nagasaki. The book was the first grammar of Japanese ever written in a European language. Its description of Japanese grammatical structure was groundbreaking. Rodriguez regarded the particles of the Japanese language (the so-called te-ni-wo-ha) as equivalent to the inflections in European languages. Following the standard model of Luiz Alvarez's Latin grammar, Rodriguez then tried to put the particles into the form of the declension or conjugation tables of European languages. In the process, however, the Jesuit was faced with the challenge of comparing the incomparable and forced to abandon his effort. Rodriguez's task was to invent a new grammatical category that deviated from the Latin model so as to recognize the particles as a particular function of the native language.<sup>6</sup> The shift in his methodology dramatically demonstrates the emblematic failure of an attempt to absorb Otherness by reducing it to familiar classificatory categories. It also testifies to the moment when the putatively universal applicability of Latin grammar revealed its limit. The *lingua franca* had to acknowledge an incompatible grammatical system.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Rodriguez's edition was rediscovered. The appearance certainly contributed to the reconstruction of phonetics and semantics of the Japanese language as they were conceived in the

early seventeenth century, as Suzuki Tae has shown. However, the importance of the Rodriguez grammar does not end there. It is true that the newly discovered foreign language was annexed to the Western territory of knowledge. But, like a Trojan horse, it began to challenge the monolithic foundations of the Western epistemological paradigm and invalidated, at least in part, the norm of the Western science of language. This incident may be counted among the problematic paradigm splits (if not shifts) in human intellectual and linguistic history. Western superiority as the conquering/colonizing power was seriously put into question, at least on a symbolic level, by the indigestible gift (in the sense of Derridian *pharmakon*) offered by the indigenous people, who were destined to-be-conquered/colonized.

## II

We must also take into account the spiritual dimension involved in this cultural confrontation. In her recent doctoral dissertation, Orii Yoshimi has studied Luis de Granada's (1504–1588) impact on Japan.<sup>7</sup> Very early on, some of Luis de Granada's writings, including *Contemptus mundi* (1536) were well-received in Japan. *Guia de pecadores* (in Spanish), for example was translated as *Guia do Pecador* (singular in Portuguese) and published in movable wooden types in 1599. Previous studies of early Christian translations were mainly limited to the fields of lexicology, historical-linguistics, Christian bibliography, and missionary studies. The general lack of interest in these cross-cultural literary encounters stems from the false assumption that these translations had only limited impact on Japanese society, as Christianity was forbidden shortly after their publication. Indeed, within one century after Francis Xavier's arrival to the archipelago in 1549, Christianity in Japan was obliterated by violent persecution. According to Orii's hypothesis, however, the inter-religious dialogue that was initiated by these translations had a significant afterlife. Let us examine one instance of this cross-cultural encounter.

Orii demonstrates how the influential Sect of Pure Land, Jōdo-shinshū, initially placed secondary significance on the notion of retribution and salvation. It was not until the restoration movement initiated by Renyo (1415–1499), the eighth abbot of the Honganji temple during the Ōnin civil war, that emphasis on Buddhist notions of retribution became prominent. The passage to the Pure Land was promised as recompense for the fulfillment of human ethical obligations. This teaching was widely welcomed by the population and the sect developed its influence in the first half of the sixteenth century. According to Orii, the popularity of the Ikkō Sect served as a convenient seedbed for the reception of Christian ideas of redemption and heavenly salvation, as elaborated in Luis de Granada's interpretation of *ascetismo*. It was Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), the visitor-general of the missions, who chose Luis de Granada's works as convenient textbooks to

inspire Japanese conversions to Christianity. Valignano is known to have formed a basic strategy for Catholic proselytizing in Japan, commonly known as “adaptation.” He tried to avoid cultural friction by accommodating Christianity to Japanese customs.

It is not clear if Valignano was conscious of the affinity between these Christian ideas and those of the Rennyō Sect. Still the textual comparison proposed by Dr. Orii shows that crucial vocabularies of the Pure Land Sect were adapted in order to transmit Luis de Grananda’s ideas into Japanese. Instead of exacerbating mutual incompatibility, compromises were sought in order to propagate Christian belief. In this context, two terms deserve special attention. First, the term “hōsha” usually designates the idea of “infinite thanks” that human beings express to the Amitabha Buddha. In the Japanese translation of Christian catechism, however, the same term supports an additional meaning. Human beings express thanks to the grace of God, and God, in return, rewards human beings for their devotion and service. The reciprocity or complementary relation between human efforts at self-salvation (*jiriki*) and Buddha’s unconditional mercy (*tariki*) is attuned to the Christian notion of God’s blessing through the notion of “hōsha.” In addition, the notions of human redemption through the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the resulting adoration and praise for Jesus Christ that we exhibit are also crystallized in the same Buddhist term of “hōsha.” This specific term thus “transfigured” by its contact with Christianity, facilitating Japanese access to Christian notions of salvation.

Another crucial term is “jinen.” It denotes the opposite of God’s providence in a passage that explains how the universe and its creatures could not have been created by accident, but by divine providence. In this context, the term “jinen” transmits the idea of “*acaso*” (accident, hazard). But at the same time, the same Chinese characters can also be used to designate the idea of the “auto-genetic becoming” of nature. In this case, the term may be pronounced as “shizen.” “Jinen” as accident may not necessarily contradict God’s providence, but “shizen” as the auto-genetic nature of things inevitably contradicts the idea of God’s creation of the universe. The ambiguity of the term “jinen/shizen” in the translation shows the ambivalence of the Japanese, who had difficulty in understanding the notion of God-The-All-Mighty as creator of the universe. This difficulty still exists today, and prevents the majority of the Japanese from converting to Christianity (in sharp contrast to post-World War II Koreans). Needless to say, Endō, as a Japanese writer, struggled with this difficulty throughout his life and work.

### III

During the period of Japan’s first exposure to the Iberian West between 1549 and 1639, the Japanese experienced the conflict between universality and particularity.

More than 300 years later, this same conflict was to be articulated in the most paradoxical way by a self-made scholar in linguistics who lived in the Japanese Brazilian immigrant community in the mid-twentieth century. Questions regarding the universality of language and divine providence—two perennial problems come together in the work of Rokurō Kōyama (1886–1976), and lead to a new theory regarding the origin of the Japanese language.

A Japanese Brazilian immigrant and amateur scholar, Kōyama launched the audacious hypothesis that Japanese and the seemingly unrelated Amerindian language, Tupi, sprang from a common source. “Ikō,” for example, means “let’s go” both in Japanese and in Tupi. In the Tupi etymology that Kōyama proposes, “ikō” stems from the exclamation one makes upon discovering a much-coveted source of water. Strangely reminiscent of Christian “*vidi aquam*” (which Endō, if not Kōyama, mentions *en passant*), this etymology suggests a foundational and “catholic” link in phonetic associations. What looked like a mere coincidence at first sight becomes a conviction that both Japan and Brazil were linguistically connected with each other through a Polynesian language. Here we find an expression of Kōyama’s pan-Pacific vision.

Further, Kōyama was convinced that the Tupi language, because of its trait of assigning a single meaning to each sound, can provide us with an etymological key to decipher Japanese vocabulary. One typical case that he offers is that of “Kashiwara,” which is explained as stemming from “koshiara” [the past] in Tupi. “Koshiara” is etymologically composed of three Tupi syllables meaning holding (*ko*), light (*shi*), and sun (*ara*). Kōyama sees this term as referencing the Japanese ancestral Sun deity, the Goddess Amaterasu, to which the Kashiwara Shrine is dedicated (though, in fact, the Kashiwara Shrine is a modern invention and was founded only at the end of the nineteenth century). Kōyama also sets up ad hoc rules of phonetic transformation in order to rectify Tupi pronunciation from the putative phonetic corruption caused by Portuguese influences. Through his compilation of a Tupi-Japanese lexicon (1951), etymology (1970), and sound-semantic elucidation (1973), Kōyama provided the necessary documentation to make his case that the Tupi language was, in fact, Ur-Japanese. He thus offered a “paleo-semantic” dimension to the archaeological excavation of the onto-phonetic origin of the Japanese language.

Though apparently eccentric, nationalistic, and lacking in sound scholarship, Kōyama’s intellectual endeavour is worthy of our noting. The underlining subconscious motivation of his research is easily understood. The Japanese immigrants represented an ethnic minority that was linguistically isolated and socially alienated from the Portuguese-speaking Brazilian citizens. The establishment of a positive Japanese ethnic identity was sorely needed. The Tupi-Japanese connection that Kōyama claimed to have established allowed the Japanese to find roots in Brazilian soil as legitimate and authentic settlers. It provided them with a relevant founda-

tional narrative that could justify their presence as legitimate immigrants in Brazil. Indeed, Tupi-Japanese common ancestry, if positively proved, could ethnically connect the Japanese to the Brazilian natives. It could simultaneously rehabilitate the symbolic value of the marginalized vernacular Tupi language and contribute to the consolidation of Japanese settlers' social recognition and civil status.

The hypothesis of a Tupi-Japanese common ancestry represented a narrative. Instead of building a new counter-narrative to subvert the dominant Brazilian social order, this fictional Tupi-Japanese identity allowed Japanese immigrants, at least symbolically, to take part in the Brazilian social hierarchy. For Kōyama, the investigation into Tupi-Japanese language was part of his contribution to tupinology, in particular, and to the building of Brazil, in general, as an ideal human community. It was not in the name of ethnic separation but rather of social integration that Kōyama advocated the Brazilian racial democracy when he wrote: "It seems to me that it is Brazil that is realizing the universal ideal of the equality of human beings because this country does not discriminate against any immigrant from any place in the world."<sup>8</sup> Hosokawa Shūhei, an ethno-musicologist and migrant scholar who stayed in Brazil in his youth and helped rescue Kōyama's writing from oblivion, remarks: "For Kōyama, it is only when people around the world 'sense' the Tupi sound symbolism hidden in all the languages of the world that they will be able to communicate with each other. Like the Tupi of the past, the world will become truly peaceful." Hosokawa concludes: "Far from being the quirk of a blind recluse or a linguistic absurdity, Kōyama's Tupi-Japanese-Brazilian world articulates the socio-political, affective, and ideological conditions of the Nikkei (Japanese-Brazilian) community. It is [a] 'true fantasy' embedded in the mythico-historical consciousness of a minority group."<sup>9</sup>

#### EPILOGUE

These three cases of cross-cultural and trans-cultural contact bring me to my conclusion. However, before finishing, let me call your attention to the American Natural History Museum in New York. At the Entrance Hall, dedicated to the memory of President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1918), there are a series of huge mural paintings to which visitors no longer pay much attention. On the right side (the North wall) is the panel commemorating the building of the Panama Canal. On the left side (the South wall) is the panel representing the Treaty of Portsmouth, September 5, 1905. In front of the memorial hall, on the Western wall, flanked between the south and north walls, the scenes from Roosevelt's 1910 exploration in Africa are represented. The biblical legacy, recounting the separation between the Semitic and the Hamitic, is depicted along the top, reminding us of the logic used to justify slavery. Many of the beasts, like African elephants or Nubian Lions that

the President hunted during his safaris, have been generously donated to the Museum. These trophies were stuffed (i.e. “naturalized” in French) and still welcome the visitors to the Museum even today, almost one hundred years after their “naturalization” to the American Museum of Natural History.

The painting, commissioned by William Andrew Mackay (1878–1939), summarizes the typically American imperialistic world-view at the beginning of the twentieth century. No less than the “game” that Mr. President shot in Africa, the Panama Canal and Portsmouth Treaty were also part of the world “games” of which the President was an active and decisive player. In this representation of memorable incidents in the career of Theodore Roosevelt, Japan and Central America face each other as the entrance gate to Asia and South America, respectively. Both of the gates are put into the framework of the Americo-centric perspective. The juxtaposition of Japan and Central America can hardly be a mere coincidence, judging from the strategic and geo-political worldview at the dawn of the twentieth century. At the height of colonialism, the United States was taking the leading position to become a “master” of the so-called free-world.

In the ICLA Forum within the American Comparative Literature Association, Central America and Japan are summoned side by side in front of North America, more or less in the same manner as was the case in the Roosevelt Memorial Hall. The similarity between the two may account for, to a certain degree, the role of Japanese speakers here at this panel in Pueblo. However, it would hardly be justifiable if the power structure depicted in the painting almost ninety years ago were still present here in a duplicated form. Indeed, the mural paintings at the entrance of the American Natural History Museum epitomized the model of the imperial monopoly of knowledge.

Each of the three situations that I briefly examined shows a particular case of resistance to universal claims to the hegemony of cultural domination.<sup>10</sup> It was through the resistance to, and negotiation with, the globalizing and self-assertively universal value that vernacular cultures contributed to mold and enrich configurations of the world histories. My anecdotes must be multiplied by other no less important and crucial experiences, including examples from Meso-American geo-poetical events. Each configuration forms one particular elliptical orbit, an ellipse that is traced in a precarious balance between a universal center and local peripheries. Comparative Studies, which claim to be free from any hegemonic and centripetal world-view, have yet to make fundamental and foundational contributions to these rich and elliptical loci of transpacific human experiences.

We are now in the epoch of the internet and websites (even though we do not question who is able to access them). We are now witnessing the *Night at the Museum*-era. The huge and gigantic archives that have accumulated world knowledge are no longer relevant. The epoch of the museum as the modern hegemonic insti-

tution is coming to a close. I wonder if the owl of Minerva takes flight in the dusk of the evening; I also wonder if the discipline of Comparative Literature, far from being the “master,” takes the role of “surveillance” in the *Night at the Museum of Welt Literatur*.<sup>11</sup>

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#### NOTES

- 1 This short text owes its birth to Dorothy Figueira’s paper “Merchants, Missionaries, and Miscegenation,” read at the Department of Comparative Literature at the Komaba Campus of the University of Tokyo, in 2006. I thank Professor Figueira for putting her text at my disposal. Recently an international symposium was held in Colmar on the subject: *Les échanges entre le Japon et l’Europe lors de la diffusion du christianisme au Japon Durant le XVIe et le XVIIe siècle*, Centre européen des études japonaises à Alsace (CEEJA), du 16 au 18 mars 2007.
- 2 See Van C. Gessel’s “Postscript: Fact and Truth in *The Samurai*” found in the 1982 edition of Gessel’s translation of Endō’s book (see endnote 3).
- 3 遠藤周作『侍』新潮社、1980. Shusaku Endō. *The Samurai, A Novel*. Trans. Van C. Gessel. New York: Harper & Row and Kodansha International, 1982. See pp. 268–72. Professor Tatsushi Narita’s paper, “T.S. Eliot and Shusaku Endō: Transpacific Perspectives,” presented at the ACLA conference in Puebla 2007, was revealing in this aspect.
- 4 See Kazue Nakamura. “On Hearthen Crosses: Christian Frontiers in the Writings of Agnes Sam, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Edgard Mittelhölzer, Witi Ihimaera, Albert Wendt, E.J. Pratt and Endō Shūsaku.” *Hikaku Bungaku Kenkyū [Studies of Comparative Literature]* 88 (2006): 4–36. (Original in Japanese.)
- 5 長谷川光明「ギョーム・ポステル『世界の驚異』(1553) 研究-東西インドの発見と万物復元-」東京都立大学人文科学研究院博士論文。2004. (Haesgawa Mitsuaki. Essays on *La Merveille du Monde* by Guillaume Postel. Thesis. 2004.)
- 6 Suzuki Tae. “Joan Rodriguez et Arte da lingoa de Iapam: un regard sur la langue et la société japonaise du XVIe siècle.” Presented at “La Rencontre du Japon et de l’Europe: Images d’une Découverte,” held at L’Université Marc Bloch à Strasbourg, CEEJA, 2005 (à paraître). Curiously, the particles enable the Japanese language to absorb any foreign vocabulary, without being subordinated to the grammatical rules that the imported foreign language tends to inflict upon it.
- 7 Orii Yoshimi. *Fray Luis de Granada y Japon: Comparative Studies of Hispanic and Japanese Culture in the Christian Literature* [original in Japanese]. Ph.D. dissertation, 2005. My thanks go to Ms. Orri for her information.
- 8 Kōyama Rokurō. *Tupi Ongo Niemu no Gogen: Imide Jinrui Ongo Kōsei Ichion Ichion wo Imi Kansei Kenkyū* [Investigation of meaning-sense of each syllable in the composition of human verbal language through original meaning of the Tupi Language: Nhem]. Vol.2. Sao Paulo: private publication, 1973.
- 9 Shūhei Hosokawa. “Speaking in the Tongue of the Antipode: Japanese Brazilian Fan-



- tasy on the Origin of Language.” In *Searching for Home Abroad: Japanese Brazilians and Transnationalism*. Ed. Jeffery Lesser. Durham: Duke University, 2003. 21–45.
- 10 See, for example, Shigemi Inaga. “Is Art History Globalizable?” In *Is Art History Global?* Ed. James Elkins. New York: Routledge, 2007. 249–79. This article is part of my implicit response to David Damrosch. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- 11 The Hollywood film, *Night at the Museum* (2006) prompted a 20 percent increase in museum attendance between December 22, 2006 and January 2, 2007 (“Asian Art Takes Over NYC.” *Museums New York*. 13.1 [2007]: 11). For the idea of “surveillance,” see pages 34–35 in Roland Barthes. “Drame, poème, roman.” In *Théorie d'ensemble*. Ser. Tel Quel. Paris: Seuil, 1968. 25–40.