LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Notes on “the Techniques of the Body”
among West African peoples

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“The techniques of the body” (*les techniques du corps*), as they were defined by the French sociologist Marcel MAUSS (1950 [1936]), designate the uses of the human body practised in common among the members of a society. They are determined not only by physical and physiological conditions, but also largely by ecological and cultural factors, and are different from society to society (KAWADA, 1988a, with full bibliography on this subject).

Many of them, especially in pre-industrial societies, have fundamental functions to assure the efficiency of handiworks and labor in a given technological condition (KAWADA, 1990, for the case study of farming and pottery making in West Africa). As “motor habits”, the techniques of the body even influence the style of art and craft of a society (BOAS, 1927).

Among these techniques, some are more strongly delimited by physical factors or by their virtual purposes, for example, those used in excretion or in coitus (even in these cases cultural factors are no less negligible), while others are more free from these constraints and open to variable cultural choices, such as the use of the body in greeting or in dancing. But even in the domains where the physical and material constraints and utilitarian efficiency seem to prevail, such as tilling the soil, carrying a load or a baby,

washing clothes, shaping earthenware, or in taking a rest, we can observe quite a large variety in the use of the human body. For example, the traditional posture of women in washing clothes: squatting in Japan, kneeling down in Europe, and bending the upper body deeply in a standing posture in West Africa. The variety may derive from ecological and cultural factors found in a given society, but establishing exactly which factors are important and to what extent is a difficult subject that has not yet been studied.

Among the Negroid people of West Africa, where the author has carried out field research in cultural anthropology for over eight years in total since 1963, the author has realized that the following characteristics in the techniques of the body are shared in common. (See also KAWADA, 1988C)

(1) Standing posture with the upper body deeply bent forward, legs being extended straight or slightly flexed at the knee. This posture is used by both men and women, especially in various farming activities with a short-handled hoe (sowing, weeding, mud-mounting, *etc.*) (Fig. 1), in some craftwork (Fig. 2), in washing clothes, in sweeping the ground with a very short broom, and in other daily domestic activities (Fig. 3).

This posture is characterized in appearance by the following traits: (a) the deep flexion occurs

mainly at the lumbar and the pelvic region; (b) the kyphosis of the back is not remarkable; (c) the lordosis of the cervical part of the spine is frequently observed because of the lifted position of the head for the work. Often, especially among young men, protuberance of the erector spinae muscles is observed on both sides of the lumbar vertebrae.

(2) Sitting posture with the buttocks set on the ground and both legs extended straight forward. Sometimes the legs are crossed lightly, or opened largely in "V" shape to put an object for work between the two legs. This posture is used for rest and for several kinds of handiwork (Fig. 4). The author observed people of the areas in question maintaining this posture for one or two hours without leaning their backs against a wall or other support.

In this posture, the hip is put either directly on the ground – covered or not – or on a very low wooden stool. In rain forest areas of the Guinea Coast, where the ground is often wet and where wood is easily obtainable, the use of stools or chairs, in a sitting posture with flexed legs, is more common (Fig. 5), while in the interior savannah area, where the dry season lasts for about 8 months a year, and where timber suitable for making stools is difficult to obtain, the support put under the hip is smaller and lower in general and is less frequently used.

(3) Carrying a load on the head, practised by both men and women, from early childhood to fairly old age, to carry various objects: a log of several meters, piled pots, a large metallic basin filled with water, or just a small object like a book. Sometimes a coiled piece of cloth is put on the head as support (Fig. 6). This carrying posture is characterized by the following: in general, the feet are externally rotated, the stride length is large, and the cadence is rapid. The vertical movement of the head is minimal, being absorbed seemingly by the coordinative move-

ments of the vertebrae and the pelvis, and the knees are not much flexed.

As these people have been used to walking barefoot on rough ground since early childhood, their soles are very hard, and often the plantar tissues are developed to fill the plantar arch. If they use footwear in the country, in most cases it is flat rubber or leather sandals of local fabrication, in which the toes are attached to the footwear while the heel is free. Nevertheless, their way of walking is quite different from that of the Japanese, who traditionally use the same type of footwear (some of it made of wood) but walk with flexed knees and lightly kick the ground with the heel of the footwear, so that it produces some agreeable sounds. The walking posture of the West African peoples can be described as a stable forward displacement of the straight upper body, which is always placed under the center of gravity of the load supported by the head, so that the carrying posture, observed from the lateral side, gives the impression that the horizontal advance of the upright body leaves behind it alternately one of the two legs, which is extended as the result of the fairly large stride length.

Probably because of the general custom of carrying a load on the head from childhood, a bent waist in aged persons is rare. The way of carrying a baby is an appropriate one for the physical characteristics of these peoples. The baby is fastened with a piece of cloth on the hip, the protrusion of which is accentuated both by the lordosis of the lumbar spine and the fairly large pelvic inclination angle. Being attached tightly to the back of the mother, in a posture with the legs flexed to an extreme and for a long period (most of the daylight hours, until weaning, which comes late, at 2–3 years old, in these societies), the child may be inured during its early years to a profoundly bent posture (Fig. 7).

(4) The vigorous and various ways of using the arms in everyday life, in contrast with the

scarcity of the skillful use of the foot, apart from the long but monotonous use in walking. This phenomenon is mostly due, in the author's opinion, to the absence, in Sub-Saharan Africa, of tools working by application of the principle of rotation and of the lever. Even the *kop*, a type of large spade used by the Baga (Guinea) for tilling the paddy, is thrust into the soil solely through the force of the arms of the farmer, without putting the foot on the spade, which has no foot support. In effect, in weaving with a loom with two heddles suspended by strings from a small pulley fixed on the upper side of the frame, the skillful movement of both feet is required in pedalling to pull down one of the two heddles alternately although the pulley makes but a semi-rotary movement (Fig. 8). This type of loom is the only example of an instrument with the application of the rotary or semi-rotary principle found in Sub-Saharan Africa, and it is supposed to have originated in West Asia, being introduced through North Africa (KAWADA, 1988b).

These characteristics of the techniques of the body can be observed in common among many West African peoples studied by the author, such as the Mossi, the Bisa, the Kassena, the Samo, the Lobi, the Gwan, the Bambara etc. of the inland savannah area (group A), as well as among those of the rain forest area on the Guinea Coast, such as the Baule, the Attie, the Fanti, the Yoruba, the Igbo, etc. (group B), despite the obvious differences between these two groups (A and B) in their ecological conditions and in their physical traits (Sudan sub-race for group A and Guinea sub-race for group B, according to VALLOIS, 1967).

Nevertheless, the techniques of the body of these two groups as a whole are again quite different from those of other countries and of other civilizations, such as those of the French and of the Japanese. Tentative remarks on a

general comparison of the techniques of the body among the West Africans, the French and the Japanese were made by the author (KAWADA, 1988a) in connection with the respective ecological and cultural factors, in particular with the material culture, which represents in the concrete not only the ecological conditions but also the ethical and esthetic value system of each people.

The techniques of the body, which have a bearing on both natural and cultural spheres, is an interesting field for joint research by physical and cultural anthropologists. It is difficult, but interesting, to clarify to what extent physical factors, especially racial differences in physical constitution and in kinesiological ability, play a role in determining differences in the techniques of the body. As yet, we have no reliable somatometrical data, which is the basic prerequisite for a study of this kind, on the above-mentioned West African peoples. The author, trained as a cultural anthropologist, is trying to carry out a preliminary somatometrical and kinesiological study in West Africa in collaboration with physical anthropologists as part of a long-range multidisciplinary research project in West Africa ("Multidisciplinary Research into the Societies of the Niger Bend: Their Ecological Bases and Their Symbiotic Relations", sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture since 1986). The result of the first research will be published in the 3rd volume of the report of this project in 1992. But the theme is large; the author hopes that close collaboration in physical anthropology and cultural anthropology will be long-lasting.

Acknowledgments

The author became aware of these characteristics of West African peoples in their techniques of the body during his field research on traditional technology in Burkina Faso and some other neighbouring countries (KAWADA,

1975, 1979) and reported on them on his return to Japan in 1976 at several meetings of Japanese physical anthropologists. Since that time the author has greatly benefited from useful suggestions given by some physical anthropologists, such as Prof. Yukinari KOHARA, Prof. Banri ENDO, Prof. Morihiko OKADA, Prof. Kumi ASHIZAWA, and Prof. Harumi MORISHITA, among others. In 1989, the author was invited to deliver a lecture on this theme at Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes of the University of Paris, and on that occasion received useful comments from many French anthropologists, including Prof. François SIGAUT, Prof. Bernard KOECHLIN and Prof. Blandine BRIL, all eminent specialists in this field. Dr. Kazutaka ADACHI and Prof. Morihiko OKADA kindly revised anatomical and kinesiological terms in the present paper, although the author is fully responsible for the content as well as the terminology of the text.

抄 録

西アフリカ諸民族の身体技法についての覚え書き

川田順造

身体の使い方は、生物的要因に規定されると同時に、生態学的・文化的に条件づけられており、ある社会の成員に共通し、他の社会の成員とは異なるものも多い。身体技法のかかなりのものは、特に労働が機械化されていない技術的状况では、作業の効率を高める役割を果たしてきた。筆者は、多年熱帯西アフリカで文化人類学の調査を行ううち、この地域の黒人諸民族に、次のような身体技法が共通して認められることに気付いた。(1)立位で、膝を伸ばしあるいは軽く曲げたまま、上体を深く前屈（というより腰の部分から前倒）させた姿勢での作業、(2)背中をもた

せかけない投げ足（足はそろえて前へのばす、交差させる、またはハの字形に開く）姿勢での、長く持続する軽作業や休息、(3)子供からかなりの年配の成人にいたる広範囲の男女によって、極めて多様な物体について行われる頭上運搬、(4)腕の酷使と対照的な、歩行以外の足の多少とも技巧的な使用の稀少。これらの身体技法には、生態学的・文化的条件から理解できる面もあるが、西アフリカ黒人の身体の形態上・機能上の特徴がどのように関与しているか、自然人類学と文化人類学の共同研究によって解明されるべき問題であろう。

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Legend of Figures 1~8

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- Fig. 1(b).** Mossi women weeding (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 1(c).** Mossi women sowing (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 1(d).** Yoruba man weeding (Nigeria), rain forest.
- Fig. 2.** Bambara woman shaping earthenware (Mali), savannah.
- Fig. 3(a).** Bambara woman washing (Mali), savannah.
- Fig. 3(b).** Bambara woman washing (Mali), savannah.
- Fig. 3(c).** Mossi woman sweeping (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 3(d).** Mossi man drying abode (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 3(e).** Bisa woman spreading haricot (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(a).** Bambara man winding rope (Mali), savannah.
- Fig. 4(b).** Bisa woman twisting rope (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(c).** Bisa woman peeling vegetable (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(d).** Gwan woman shaping earthenware (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(e).** Gwan woman shaping earthenware (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(f).** Bambara woman shaping earthenware (Mali), savannah.
- Fig. 4(g).** Bisa woman pounding condiment (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(h).** Bisa woman and girl cracking shea butter seeds (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(i).** Mossi pregnant woman selecting grains (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(j).** Women at market, Tenkodogo (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 4(k).** Mossi girls dressing their hair (Burkina Faso), savannah.
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- Fig. 5(a).** Igbo woman shaping earthenware (Nigeria), rain forest.
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- Fig. 6(a).** Igbo man carrying logs (Nigeria), rain forest.
- Fig. 6(b).** Bambara women carrying a large pot (Mali), savannah.
- Fig. 6(c).** Woman carrying a basket, Segou (Mali), savannah.
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- Fig. 6(e).** Boy carrying rolled mats, Benin City (Nigeria), rain forest.
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- Fig. 7(a).** Mossi woman carrying a fagot of millet stem (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 7(b).** Mossi woman selecting grains (Burkina Faso), savannah.
- Fig. 8.** Fulani man weaving (Mali), savannah.

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Fig. 1(a)

Fig. 1(b)

Fig. 1(c)

Fig. 1(d)

Fig. 2

Fig. 3(a)

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Fig. 6(f)

Fig. 7(a)

Fig. 7(b)

Fig. 8