Introduction

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Anthropologists do fieldwork and write about the people they have studied, hence the importance of ethnography. It is, however, not the only form of anthropological writing because research results are frequently reported in journal articles, often filled with dense theoretical argumentation. Furthermore, with the development of recording technologies, it has become possible to audio-visually represent other peoples’ worlds. It remains true, however, that ethnography lies at the heart of our discipline. The strong impact Writing Culture has made on the anthropological community throughout the world derives from this fact. As the book subtitle shows, “The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography” (Clifford and Marcus 1986), it revealed the hitherto hidden dimensions of ethnographic writing, particularly the power inequalities between the describer and the described in colonial or post-colonial settings.

Yet, overlooked in the so-called “Writing Culture shock” is the importance of readership, or more generally, that of audience. For we write/speak differently for different kinds of readers/listeners. Even research topics tend to be selected on the basis of anticipated reactions among the people who will evaluate our work. Thus, together with the writer and the people described, the reader constitutes what may be called “the ethnographic triad” (Kuwayama 2004a, 2012).

Just one example from Japan – miso (soybean paste) soup – should be sufficient to illustrate the critical role played by the audience in ethnographic accounts. For Japanese readers, at least for those born and raised in Japan, there is no need to explain what miso soup is because it is an indispensable item in Japanese cuisine. The question meaningful to them is whether the miso is aka (reddish) or shiro (whitish) or what kinds of vegetables are put in the soup. For non-Japanese people, however, if they are unfamiliar with Japanese food, explanations are

required. In such a situation, a least effective explanation would be a gastronomical one like this: “miso is made by fermenting soybeans with salt and a special kind of fungus. You make miso soup by putting a proper amount of miso into boiling water with tofu, negi, age, and so on.” Although accurate, the problems with this description are, first, that people who have never eaten miso cannot imagine what kind of soup it really is – miso in fact looks like chocolate paste to some people – and second, that they would be further puzzled by such foreign food names as tofu (soybean curd), negi (leek), and age (deep fried bean curd).

Some 25 years ago, when I taught an undergraduate course on Japanese culture at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, I had exactly the same problems. One explanation called for another, and I was at a loss what to do, when an intelligent student helped me by saying, “Maybe miso soup is comparable to apple pie in the U.S.” At first, I was surprised, almost stunned, because the former is liquid, and the latter, solid. But I soon realized that his description was cultural, a very good one at that, because miso soup symbolizes mother’s cooking in Japan as does apple pie in the U.S. No wonder the student’s words touched the heartstrings of the whole class. In terms of the substances contained, then, the comparison made no sense, but culturally speaking, it skillfully conveyed the atmosphere when the foods were served on the family dining table.

We should remember, though, that this kind of explanation works well with Americans, but not with Japanese people unfamiliar with American culture, let alone with people in other parts of the world where apple pie is unknown. Cultural representation is therefore culture-specific: explanations convincing in one place can be confusing in another. If anthropologists wish to write good ethnographies, they should first know who they are writing for and then predict what the readers want to hear. The success of ethnographic writing depends more on how well the writer can read his/her readers’ minds than on what s/he knows about the people being described.

Once this point is understood, it is not difficult to see why there are only a few Japanese names on the list of required readings in many Japanese culture courses taught at universities in the English-speaking world. It is not simply due to the language barrier that Japanese authors, however renowned within Japan, are only infrequently cited: rather, Japanese writings on Japan tend to be sidelined because the kinds of wishes and expectations among non-Japanese readers, including the selection of topics for discussion, are different. The fact that more Japanese works are available in English than is commonly thought, whether in translation or because they were written in English from the outset, supports this observation.

Unfortunately, among Japanese readers, just the same happens to the writings of non-Japanese scholars on Japan. To wit, none of Hendry’s books has been translated into Japanese, except her introductory textbook on social anthropology (Hendry 1999). It might seem as though her ideas are irrelevant to Japanese understandings of themselves. The fact is, however, that Hendry’s thesis of “wrapping” (Hendry 1993), to give only one example, which was derived from her observations of the Japanese use of language in maneuvering interpersonal relationships, is useful in analyzing a wide range of Japanese behaviors from the
almost artistic wrapping of commodities to the wearing of twelve-layered robes among ancient court ladies. It is indeed a shame that such brilliant ideas remain almost unexplored among Japanese scholars.

The mutual ignorance discussed above, if not intentional neglect, needs to be examined from another perspective. In my earlier works (Kuwayama 2004a, 2004b), I contended that there is in anthropology a knowledge structure that may best be called “a world system,” in which the U.S., the U.K., and France occupy the center and dominate other countries or regions which have been more or less pushed toward the periphery. From this standpoint, Japanese writings on Japan are underestimated in the central countries not because they are intellectually unstimulating, but because of the power inequality between the center and the periphery: in the academic world system, the worth of a scholarly work is determined by the standards at the center, regardless of its significance in local knowledge.

Regarding the Japanese indifference to non-Japanese writings on Japan, there are of course many exceptions. This is obvious when we recall names such as Edward Morse, Basil Chamberlain, and Lafcadio Hearn from Meiji times, and, more recently, Ruth Benedict and Ronald Dore. Generally speaking, however, there is insufficient attention paid to the works by non-Japanese scholars, and this is particularly true with the anthropology of Japan. Some of the major factors responsible for this situation are, firstly, the definition of anthropology as a discipline that mainly studies other peoples, which has made Japanese specialists unsympathetic to the study of their own country; secondly, the importance of language training in anthropology, which has spawned contempt for, if not outright rejection of, foreign scholars with imperfect language competence; and thirdly, the persisting belief among the Japanese that they know their country best.

Brief remarks are in order on each of these factors. The first has been challenged by the emergence of Chinese anthropologists on the world stage who mainly study their own people. This is indeed a distinctive characteristic of Chinese anthropology in both the mainland and Hong Kong. Their further growth will eventually pose questions about the identity of our discipline. The second factor fails to consider how a person’s capabilities can develop in unexpected ways when put in difficult situations. For instance, when doing fieldwork among an alien people, failure to speak the local language well often makes us astute observers of the people’s actual behavior. This is because, figuratively speaking, when the acoustic sense ceases to function properly, the visual sense, among other senses, will develop in ways that compensate for the hearing impairment. And the third factor, namely, the dubious belief in the superiority of Japanese researchers in the study of Japan is nothing more than the obverse of the sense of inferiority many of them feel toward the world’s academic center.

Anthropology is practiced today by diverse groups of people from around the world, including

1 My thesis of “the world system of anthropology” has recently been expanded on by the Malaysian anthropologist Zawawi Ibrahim (in press) in his paper on “social science knowledge ‘scape.’” See also Social Science and Knowledge in a Globalising World, edited by Zawawi Ibrahim (2012), for emerging Asian voices on knowledge production.
those groups which used to be objects of research by scholars from suzerain states. We should firmly keep in mind that anthropology is no longer a Western monopoly. Nor does it belong exclusively to technologically advanced countries in the First World. As a result of this change, readers or audiences too have diversified. Among them are local anthropologists or "professional Others," if you will, who can be partners or rivals or both. The question of "when they read what we write" (Brettell 1993) should be carefully attended to because it is no longer possible to write about other peoples without considering their reactions to what we write about them.

Under these new circumstances, it is very important for different communities of anthropologists, whether national or regional or linguistic, to work together in order to produce good scholarship. A major objective of the round-table discussion in the second part of the JASCA international symposium was to raise members' awareness of these problems and to think together how to overcome them, including the question of whether there is truly a divide between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars. For that purpose, three anthropologists were invited as panelists – Sachiko Horiguchi, Etsuko Kato, and James E. Roberson. Both academically and personally, their backgrounds are different, but they all traverse the Japanese and English-speaking worlds daily. The following pages show the views expressed during the symposium on bridging the anthropology of Japan inside and outside Japan.

Round-table discussion: (from left to right) James. E. Roberson, Etsuko Kato, Sachiko Horiguchi, and Joy Hendry.
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2012 Social Science and Knowledge in a Globalising World. Selangor, Malaysia: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia (PSSM) and Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD).

Zawawi Ibrahim