

## **A Western Anthropologist in the Looking-Glass Land: a note on Alan Macfarlane's book on Japan**

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It was in mid-1709 that Captain Gulliver landed in Japan after leaving Luggnagg . He went to Yedo (sic), the metropolis and he was admitted to an audience with the Emperor there. He pretended to be a Dutch merchant, and managed to avoid performing “the ceremony” of trampling upon the crucifix” (obviously fumie 踏み絵). Eventually Gulliver was conveyed safely to Nangasac (sic) on June 9, 1709. He left for Amsterdam in the Amboyna owned by the company of some Dutch sailors. He finally returned to England in April, 1710. Unfortunately, just as he himself admitted, Gulliver's stay in Japan was too short to produce detailed observations.<sup>1</sup>

Since the mid-16th century, a number of Westerners including fictional figures such as Gulliver have visited Japan. They have found “topsy-turvydom” there. Japan's radical difference from the West has bewildered, annoyed and irritated not a few Westerners such as Van Wolferen or Dale.

Nick, a cop from New York said, “I can't figure this place out” in the film *Black Rain* (dir. R. Scott. 1989) set in Osaka. Joyce, a kind of femme fatale who had spent many years in Japan explained to him about the ambiguity of Japan by quoting the contextuality of “yes” in Japanese.

An American actor said almost angrily on the phone from Japan to America, “It's not fun... it's very, very different!” As a result, Japan was demoted to a strange, eccentric backdrop of a brief encounter between him and a beautiful young American woman in the film '*Lost in Translation*' (dir. S. Coppola. 2003).

But it is also true that a certain number of Western visitors have been not only surprised but also fascinated by Japan as an upside-down world. They have left detailed observations and studies of Japan, from Luis Frois through Basil H. Chamberlain to Ezra F. Vogel, to quote just a few. Alan. Macfarlane is the last

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<sup>1</sup> J. Swift, 1994. *Gulliver's Travels*. Penguin Books: London. pp.235-239.

of the Westerners whose encounters with Japan have amazed them.

Macfarlane's surprise was, in a sense, even bigger than his predecessors' because his initial impression of Japan was "slight disappointment". The surface of the world he (and his wife) encountered was rather similar to his own. But just as Alice found the other side of the looking-glass "as different as possible" contrary to her initial impression that it was "quite common and uninteresting,"<sup>2</sup> a sense of otherness, of something unfamiliar and strange began to stir in the course of his stay in Japan and his interaction with it.

What this book of Macfarlane's reminds its readers of is the importance of creative experience of otherness as a cue to deeper understanding. The encounter with one sort of radical difference or another is always in danger of evoking mere disgust or ridicule and eventual rejection. Macfarlane's research started, as it were, where the (fictional) American actor just mentioned above abandoned his effort to understand Japan in despair.

In other words a strong sense of otherness led Macfarlane to a series of questions such as how far Japan fits within Western categories and what Japan's uniqueness is

and what the implications of Japan's uniqueness are for his self-reflection and so on.

In this book he has finally reached his answers to these questions after fifteen years' wandering in the Looking-Glass Land named Japan.<sup>3</sup>

In the Garden of Live Flowers, Alice addressed herself to a tiger-lily that was waving gracefully about in the wind,

'I wish you could talk!'

'We can talk,' said the Tiger-Lily: 'when there's anybody worth

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<sup>2</sup> L. Carroll, 1994. *Through the Looking-Glass*. Penguin Books: London. p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>e.g. A. Macfarlane, 1997. *The Savage Wars of Peace: England, Japan, and the Malthusian trap*. Oxford: Blackwell.

2000. *The Day the World Took Off* (a TV documentary series). C4 Television, UK.

2002. *The Making of the Modern World: Visions from the West and East*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

As for his series of articles on Japan, they can be read on his website (<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com.FILES/jap.html>).

talking to.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously Japan found Macfarlane worth talking to and his book is a product of their conversations.

Macfarlane's basic aim is to put Japan into perspective. He combines anthropological and historical studies, interweaving his own ethnographic sketches and the observations left by past Western visitors. His approach is a comparative one from a long-term viewpoint. Thus he tries to bring out what has made Japan what it is.

As is often said, an interesting anthropological book is consciously self-reflective. This is true of Macfarlane's book. His book on Japan is actually not just about Japan, but also about the West, and furthermore all the other civilizations on earth. In other words, the basic theme of this book is closely linked to the theme which Macfarlane has pursued throughout his academic life, i.e. Modernity and its origins.

Undeniably there are some residues of socio-cultural evolutionism in his book. For example, although he avoids calling it explicitly so, Japan is loosely equated with a ( huge) tribal society. But this book is, in a sense, an academic tour de force. Its readers will see Macfarlane's balancing act between cultural relativism and Western general framework (more or less influenced by evolutionism). Eventually he points out that Japan is an alternative way to Western modernization .

J. Boddy calls the anthropological experience "gnostic" in the sense that it is based on the conviction that knowledge is achieved through transcendence of the self in the other.<sup>5</sup> Following I. M. Lewis's lines,<sup>6</sup> she compares the anthropological experience to spirit possession. The "spirits" of anthropologists' informants and locations remain with them long after they have returned from their fields. The "voices" of these spirits or the anthropologists' experiences haunt their memories

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<sup>4</sup> Carrol, p.32

<sup>5</sup> J. Boddy, 1989. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and Zār Cult in Northern Sudan*. The University of Wisconsin Press: Wisconsin. pp.356-358.

<sup>6</sup> I. M. Lewis, 1996(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). *Religion in Context: Cults and charisma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.7-8.

and inform their everyday lives.

The haunting voices are often a mixture of sweetness and bitterness. In the case of Macfarlane's experience, a series of metaphors used by him such as Utopia, fairylands or Eden reveals his being embedded in Western tradition, namely nostalgia for Paradise (supposedly) Lost.

However, just as Boddy points out,<sup>7</sup> an anthropologist exorcises these possessive others, or at least symbolically placates them in writing his or her anthropological articles and monographs. Macfarlane's book on Japan is his earnest attempt to transform his experience of otherness into a cultural text which provides not only knowledge of an alien reality called Japan but also self-knowledge of the West. Its readers will see his academic trademark, namely the co-existence of readability and insightfulness in this book, too.

Macfarlane has left Japan as his field, quoting Prospero's epilogue. But as already implied, the anthropological experience is continuously interactive, however temporarily limited it may be.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps Joyce's comments on Japan in *Black Rain* might be interesting in light of the magician's words. Around the end of the film, Nick asked her how much longer she was going to stay in Japan. Joyce replied, "I don't know, but a love-and-hate relationship can last a very long time."

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<sup>7</sup> Boddy, loc.cit.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* loc.cit.

