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Advertising an Advertising Agency: Tales from Japan

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Introduction

This is a study of the way in which people employed by a large advertising agency in Japan talk about their organisation, the people who work there, the jobs that they do, and all the people and institutions (corporate clients, publishing houses, television networks, production shops, celebrities, and so on) that constitute an ‘advertising world’ in Japan. In academic phrasing, this is a tale of the organising processes out of which actors’ sense of organisation emerges and is acted out (Schwartzman 1993: 36). In terms of the more specialised work in which such actors engaged, it is a tale about how an advertising agency advertises itself – both to people employed within the Agency and to those with whom it has business dealings of one sort or another in the outside world.

But the tale that I have to tell is also a story about my own involvement. What I have to relate here is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted over the period of one year in a large advertising agency located in the heart of Tokyo. During this time I was placed in a number of different divisions within the Agency – from the President’s Office to Special Promotions, by way of Media Buying, Account Services, Marketing, Merchandising, Creative and Personnel divisions. I was given introductory lectures by members of each division about the work that they did; attended department, sales, client and account team meetings regularly; followed one advertising campaign from start to finish as a case study; sat in on the new recruits’ spring training programme; helped prepare competitive presentations (even ‘pitching’ for one account); and came up with creative ideas that helped the Agency win some business.¹ I was thus able to practise both observation and participation during my fieldwork, and – thanks to a combination of good luck, perseverance and ‘attitude’ – to make an active contribution to the Agency’s welfare during the course of the year I was there.

Precisely because I was a Japanese-speaking social anthropologist asking a lot of – often rather basic – questions, my ‘informants’ used to tell me stories to illustrate the points that they wished to make. Thus, the difficulty a senior account manager had in discovering whether his clients preferred a peculiarly ‘Japanese’ or ‘American’ style of doing business was told as a story about a golfing weekend during which he totally misread what he had thought was a successful business deal struck on the 18th green. Similarly, the perseverance demanded of Agency employees in their dealings with potential clients emerged in the story of a seasoned advertising man in a different agency who

¹ My monograph, *A Japanese Advertising Agency* (Moeran 1996), thus consists of both ‘window’ and ‘case’ studies, hopefully in the best tradition of each type of organisational research (Czarniawska 1997: 64-6).

had pounded the streets and stalked one particular advertising manager continuously for six years before finally being given the opportunity to make a formal presentation to the manager in question and, two years later, being awarded a lucrative account.

At the same time, people used to talk among themselves, in both official and unofficial situations, so that I gradually began to put together my understanding of what it was like to work in a large Japanese advertising agency. The stories that I heard tended to converge around three main themes:

1. The history of the advertising agency as an emergent corporation in Japan's advertising industry (what I shall here call *Tales of the Past*);²
2. Networking and the sharing of information and gossip as part of the agency employees' everyday work routines (*Tales of the Now*); and
3. The Agency's successes and failures with regard to the winning, maintenance and losing of accounts – the sums of money paid to agencies by advertisers to enable them to plan, create and market advertising campaigns (*Tales of Reproduction*).

It is these three slightly different, but frequently overlapping sets of stories that I shall try to tell you now. And, of course, they are presented in far more coherent form – with beginning, delineation and denouement appropriate to Western narrative form – than they ever were when first encountered. It is, perhaps, important to remember this – especially since Japanese literary forms are notoriously vague when trying to incorporate 'narrative'. This is partly to do with the structure of the Japanese language, which often fails to distinguish between narrator and character (for example, by not making use of personal pronouns).³ If anything, then, advertising campaigns in the life of an agency might be compared with the travel diaries of Ki no Tsurayuki, Matsuo Bashō and others who interlace short passages of prose with 17 syllable *haiku* (or slightly longer *waka*) poems. The latter act as links between sets of observations that in themselves do not tell a story as such, but which – when combined into a 'book' – give off an 'air' or some kind of 'atmospheric emotion' with which a (Japanese) reader readily identifies. Working lives are, I think, very much like Japanese travel diaries and the stories that people tell are the prosaic observations that punctuate the poetic (in the sense of 'heightened experience') events of everyday life.

The Agency

It is less than 50 years since the Agency in which I conducted my participant observation was founded by the then CEO (now Company Chairman), and – rather remarkably – it has shown continuous growth every year of its corporate existence.⁴ It now ranks among the top six agencies in Japan, and among the top 30 largest agencies in the world. From inauspicious beginnings, when the present Chairman gave up his job in a leading and prestigious publishing company to start acting as intermediary in the placement of advertisements for companies in that publisher's numerous

² The classificatory scheme proposed here is hardly satisfactory. As we shall soon have occasion to note, 'there are perennial dangers in the application of any classification scheme' (Van Maanen 1988: 8), but I need a peg, at least provisionally, on which to hang my Kawakubo-like ethnographic material.

³ In some respects the person-less showing sentence with psychological predicate in Japanese literary language is close to the monologue style of James Joyce (cf. Murakami 1996: 74).

⁴ As has often been noted, 'continuous success is a constant ingredient in the autobiography of organisations' (Czarniawska 1997: 52), and is especially so in accounts of advertising (see, for example, Ogilvy 1987 among many others).

magazines (thereby fulfilling the original role of advertising ‘agent’ as ‘space jobber’), the Agency has grown by leaps and bounds as it has expanded its services in all above-the-line, as well as moving into below-the-line,⁵ advertising accounts that now include everything from the planning, creation and follow-up research for multi-media advertising campaigns to the arrangement of an annual sales meeting for a prestigious client, the organisation of an Italian opera company’s visit to Japan, and the planning and making of children’s television cartoon films (plus the associated merchandising rights that usually go with them) (see Moeran 2001). It is, in short, a ‘total intelligence agency’.

During the half century since its foundation, the Agency has grown in terms of both employees and organisational structure. Initially consisting of four men, it now employs well over 1,000 people, of whom the majority are men.⁶ From an initial organisation that included only account services, media buying and finance departments, it now has a broad hierarchical structure of divisions, departments and sections in all areas of its activities (strategic planning, finance, the handling of domestic and international accounts, marketing, merchandising, promotions, media buying, computers, and creative work – in that order).⁷ The Agency has branch offices in six other major cities of Japan (Sapporo, Sendai, Nagoya, Osaka, Hiroshima and Fukuoka), as well as overseas (Pacific coast of the USA, east and south east Asia, and representative offices in north Europe).⁸ It has also set up a number of subsidiary companies. These include a publishing company, an ‘international’ advertising agency which produces English-language advertising campaigns only, and various smaller companies connected with its merchandising activities. In the mid-1980s, the Agency was listed on the Tokyo stock exchange and entered into partnership with a major American worldwide advertising group. In the late 1990s, it bought up another advertising agency in an attempt to compete with the two giants of the industry in Japan: Dentsu and Hakuhodo.

Tales of the Past

The Agency’s history, as related here, is very much a part of the stories that those employed there will tell an inquisitive newspaper reporter or visiting social anthropologist. In summary form it is usually presented on slides to potential clients when they ask the Agency to prepare an advertising campaign presentation (often in competition with other agencies). A slightly more detailed history is printed in the Handbook that the Agency provides for all those it recruits to the company every April. This lists the Agency’s different divisions, growth (in terms of annual turnover and number of staff employed), and branch-office expansion. It also outlines its most famous success stories –

⁵ Above-the-line advertising refers to all advertising placed in the four main media of television, newspapers, magazines and radio. Below-the-line advertising accounts for transport ads, multi-media, retail, sales and merchandising, as well as promotional, activities.

⁶ As in many companies in Japan, women employees tend to be restricted to routine jobs that do not bring them into contact with client companies. There was, at the time of my research, only one woman who had been appointed to a senior managerial position and who was thus on the Agency’s Board of Directors. No other woman had even been appointed to Section Manager (although the situation has changed considerably for the better). The stories that are told here, therefore, are in very large part *masculine* tales, associated with Japan’s ‘corporate warriors’.

⁷ As I have outlined elsewhere (Moeran 2000), the Agency has also established a horizontal, cross-cutting structure of account teams that bring individual members of different divisions together to work on the preparation and execution of clients’ advertising campaigns.

⁸ As is the case with most advertising agencies worldwide, the Agency started setting up branch offices abroad soon after its major clients moved out of Japan to establish manufacturing and retail outlets in other parts of east and south-east Asia, the United States and so on.

its breakthrough into television advertising through the marketing of animation films, a two-page inside front cover tie-up in a women's magazine, and the introduction of its marketing computer system, for example – which it links to the broader advertising and media world in which it operates. The Handbook is supplemented by a company profile that includes colour prints of some of its 'best' work in animation and creative advertising.

Such tales of the past are by no means all written down, however, and members of the Agency who have been there for 20, 30, even 40 years like to reminisce – again to the visiting social anthropologist, but also among themselves, or in a more formal situation as part of a lecture to the new recruits – about how the Agency used to be and what it was that drove it ever onward to its present success. In general, these tales focus on three main themes.

1. Firstly, they extol the charismatic virtues of the founding CEO and present Chairman of the Agency, Tanabata Shūhei, who in spite of his increasing age (he is well over 70 years old) is still actively involved in the strategic planning of the Agency's business. Tanabata is widely respected not only by his employees, but also by those working in the advertising world as a whole. He is regarded as being a Japanese businessman of the best possible kind – combining intellectual acumen, tough negotiating practice and an ethical integrity that are virtually unmatched among his peers. Tales about Tanabata thus emphasise his personality, energy and strategic vision – qualities that are, it is made clear by those talking about him, absolutely essential prerequisites for any advertising executive who wishes to make a success of his career. New recruits are advised from the very first day of their induction (when they hear Tanabata lecture energetically to them for two hours with hardly a pause for breath) that they should learn to cultivate such qualities and practise them at all times, since it is these that ultimately set them apart as 'different' from advertising executives in other major organisations like Dentsu and Hakuhodo. In other words, this type of tale of the past provides those working in the Agency with a sense of corporate identity and organisational philosophy. It provides them with a sense of what it means to be an 'Agency man' and so links personal and organisational identity (cf. Czarniawska 1997: 46).
2. Secondly, and as practical support to the above, those in senior and middle management positions often recount cases of the Agency's successes (and occasional failures) in the advertising business. Here stories will stress, for example, a particular account manager's perseverance against all odds; a marketing executive's ability to come up with a creative idea that transformed the whole market in which a client's product was sold; the beads of perspiration that visibly transformed an account executive's face during an important presentation to a 'blue chip' client; an account team's refusal to give a slapdash presentation, even though informal sources made it clear that the Agency would not retain a particular account and thus did not need to spend much time or energy in preparing materials; and so on. Such tales of the past, which are also tales of reproduction (see below), are designed to support by actual examples the philosophical principles underpinning the Agency's organisation. In particular, they stress the kinds of principles characteristic of Japanese corporate organisation: hard work, perseverance, trust, doing one's best, working together, long-term relationships. But, somewhat differently, they also highlight notions of creativity, personality and individual judgement.
3. Thirdly, as CEO, Tanabata has developed his own 'management philosophy' over the years. This includes an emphasis on learning (in order to enable his employees to come up with creative ideas), on personality (since advertising success depends very much on good personal inter-relations) and on individual judgement. With regard to the last he has

promulgated a particular attitude towards his subordinates' decision-making processes that flies in the face of virtually everything that has ever been written about 'Japanese management style'. Rather than insist on business-related matters being referred back to management for authorisation of action, Tanabata has advocated what he has called a 'total management system' (*zen'in keieishugi*), which permits any employee at any level to take decisions while negotiating with clients. The fact that even the most junior employee can, in theory, make a decision instantly without having to worry (too much) about what his immediate department head or divisional chief might have to say about it, is often used as a tale of the past to 'explain' the Agency's historical success. Without such a rapid decision-making process, it is said, the Agency would never have been able to win certain accounts or to make such headway in the advertising world. Only with this kind of decision-making process are employees allowed to develop and give full rein to their individual judgement.

These tales of the past can also be tales of the now *and* tales of reproduction, for they are used to link organisational philosophy with corporate practices, on the one hand, and enable the future of the organisation to unfold as the Agency continues its travel (*tabi*) into uncharted territories in the advertising world, on the other.⁹ In serving these two overall purposes, tales of the past aim:

1. Firstly, to help employees differentiate their Agency from other advertising agencies; they are thus concerned with *corporate branding*.
2. Secondly, they incorporate the Agency into a 'family' of major Japanese corporations which practise particularly 'Japanese' styles of (lifetime) employment and 'Confucian' management practices (including an emphasis on learning). At the same time, they distinguish the Agency from such corporations by *not* adhering strictly to seniority promotion and by *not* permitting any kind of (enterprise) union.
3. Thirdly, they promulgate the Agency's business practices as the 'best' and most 'ethical' in the Japanese advertising industry. This is a necessary element in these stories because advertising relies to a very large extent upon interpersonal relations among people employed in agencies, clients and media organisations, and because these can as a result become involved in such questionable practices as bribery, corporate blackmail, and the 'doctoring' of media information.

Tales of the Now

These different but complementary tales of the past are clearly designed to create and sustain organisational cohesion. Given the extensive literature on Japanese corporate organisation and its 'family' ideology (see, among others, Dore 1973; Rohlen 1974; Clarke 1979), it is not surprising to find that such stories are given considerable attention in Agency employees' everyday working

⁹ As mentioned earlier, classical and medieval Japanese literature has made comparatively frequent use of travel metaphors and travel diaries as a form in which to explore the relation of individual to society, country to city, meditation to action, isolation to gregariousness, and so on. In some respects, Japan's 'corporate warriors' see the world in the kinds of terms outlined by literary forebears like Matsuo Bashō. In advertising, they see themselves as 'travelling' (from the fixed point of the Agency's foundation) by means of a series of 'haiku-like' business successes and failures towards an immediate goal (to reach the Top 10 advertising agencies in Japan) that, on achievement, becomes immediately extendable (to become Number 5). The search for the Holy Grail currently ends when the Agency overhauls, first, Hakuhodo and then Dentsu to become Number 1 in Japan. (But by then, it will doubtless be aiming to become Number 1 in the world).

lives. It is this theme that also lies at the heart of tales of the now. Once again, these tales take place in three different, but overlapping, ways:

1. Firstly, there are the formal internal weekly meetings of the Agency's organisational units. All employees attend their section meeting, to hear the latest Agency news, as well as other matters to do with business, personnel, finance (salaries, bonuses), and so on. They are also given information filtered down from other divisions and from the Board of Directors, and are permitted – indeed, are expected and expect – to air their views. These may be passed on for consideration at a higher level by the section head who represents his colleagues at a department meeting, where the same kind of information process takes place. Department heads then attend a divisional meeting, and each divisional chief is on the Board of Directors which has its weekly meeting every Thursday evening. In this way, information is passed smoothly up and down the organisational hierarchy, more or less in the space of ten working days.¹⁰

In addition, some divisions or departments – especially those in media buying and special promotions – hold regular meetings to keep Agency employees abreast of advertising opportunities that have unexpectedly arisen. These tend to be attended by managers of one sort or another who then relay relevant information to their colleagues in their division, department or section.

All employees may also attend their chairman's monthly address to everyone in the Agency. At 8.30 a.m. on the first Monday of the month, Tanabata Shūhei stands up in the Agency's largest meeting room and, in the presence of some 500 or more employees, proceeds to give a succinct summary of trends in the world economy over the previous month: how – for example – a recent rise in the price of crude oil will impact upon international trade; what effect this will have on certain sectors of the Japanese economy; how such effects will in turn influence clients' advertising expenditures; and what the Agency may expect to gain or lose as a result. Here the aim once again is to help employees think strategically about how to position the Agency in a competitive niche that will ensure future growth and prosperity for all concerned.¹¹

2. Secondly, at the level of everyday interaction, employees from different divisions of the agency (account planning, marketing, creative, promotions, international, media buying, SP and so on) share information, relay gossip and rumour, and maintain carefully massaged networks of contacts in the advertising, media and entertainment worlds, as well as among (potential) clients. The tales that are told focus very much on day-to-day events and are used as an integral part of the Agency's strategic positioning both vis-à-vis (potential) advertising clients and the media organisations with which it works.

The importance of information (*jōhō*), stories pertaining to information (*hanashi*), and gossip (*ura-banashi*) in the advertising world cannot be underestimated. Every afternoon, from about five o'clock, the internal telephone lines of the Agency are in constant use as people come back from their meetings with clients, media organisations, production houses, and so on and proceed to let their relevant colleagues know everything that has happened

¹⁰ Schwartzman (1989) has used meetings as a means of learning how staff at a community mental health centre perceive and make sense of the organisation to which they belong and of their participation therein.

¹¹ Attendance is voluntary. Given that between one and two hundred employees may be away from the Agency's head office on business on the first Monday of any month, the fact that more than two thirds of the remaining workforce regularly attended Tanabata's lectures shows the high level of corporate identity felt by those employed in the Agency.

during the working day. At the same time, they relay pieces of information, stories or gossip that they may have picked up: a potential client's sales manager is unhappy with a rival agency's handling of an advertising campaign; a television company is worried about the ratings of one of its prime-time programmes and is on the look-out for a replacement programme that will satisfy the sponsoring corporation; a client pharmaceutical company is (hush hush) said to be developing a new sports drink; a government commission is likely to lay down more regulations limited television advertising by tobacco companies; an automobile company is annoyed with a celebrity endorsing one of its cars for having a traffic accident while under the influence of alcohol; and so on. Such information is important because it can affect overall Agency planning: senior management can target the unhappy sales manager, in the hope that the Agency will be asked to participate in a competitive presentation and take over the account in question; the television department can bring off the back burner a programme idea that didn't quite make the cut when the television network concerned was deciding at the beginning of the season which new programme proposals to use and which not; a smart account manager can get to work on a sports drink brand name and sales concept which he can then propose to his client in a speculative presentation; a marketing executive will have to think of creative ways to re-channel his tobacco company client's advertising money effectively; a creative director will drop his plan to use the same celebrity in a forthcoming beer campaign; and so on and so forth. If successful, such plans that stem from tales of the now are transformed into tales of the past that stress opportunities perceived and taken, creative thinking, smart initiatives, the value of interpersonal networking, and so on.

3. Thirdly, once a year in April, tales of the past and tales of the now are selected and brought together in a 'special edition' for the new employee cohort recruited to the Agency from universities throughout the country. Like new employees all over Japan, these recruits are given an – in this case, three-week – training programme, during which they are drilled in all aspects of the Agency's business. In the beginning, they are given lectures (as I myself was lectured) on the advertising industry, accounts, marketing, media buying, promotions and creative activities. Then, gradually, they are given tasks that oblige them to work together in small groups to achieve particular goals, finalising in a week during which they have to adopt different parts (as account executive, market analyst, and so on) and prepare an advertising campaign on the basis of an 'orientation' provided by the Personnel Division of the Agency. They are also drilled and groomed in matters of business etiquette – from learning how to use the appropriate language on the phone (and with which hand to hold the apparatus) to knowing who should sit where in a meeting room, restaurant or taxi when visited by clients, by way of practising (multiple) name card exchange, and timing different levels of formal and less formal bowing.¹²

This period of training has three main purposes: one is to give recruits a crash course in the advertising industry, so that they can be allocated to a department¹³ and start their on-the-job training with minimal disruption to the work of their future colleagues; another is to

¹² Women recruits are taught how to serve tea to visitors and how to sit in such a way that they show their legs to good effect (the phrasing is the Agency's, not mine).

¹³ Although new recruits are asked what kind of work they would like to do in the Agency, they have no say in, and cannot object to, where they are actually placed. It may thus take several years of patience before a junior member of staff is able to persuade his or her management that s/he should be allocated to another job. The only exception to this general rule is in the Creative Division, where art directors and designers tend to be recruited directly, and in the Finance Division which employs graduates with recognised mathematical skills.

teach them to get to know and work together with their fellow recruits – a crucial aspect of the advertising industry (as it is indeed of the film and fashion industries, as well as many other forms of cultural production that are based on a complicated division of specialised labour); a third is to ‘sell’ the Agency to these graduating young men and women as an organisation of which they should, and soon will, be proud and in which they will therefore want to work for the rest of their lives. The overall aim of this combination of tales of the now and tales of the past, therefore, is to ensure that those entering the Agency will read, mark, learn and inwardly digest its principles during the three-week long training programme, and its practices in the months that follow as they start learning their new jobs. And, of course, the training programme itself provides the new recruits with their own story that can itself become a tale of reproduction in years to come if they are called upon to address other new employees during *their* training programme in the Agency.

Tales of Reproduction

Finally, let us turn to tales of reproduction. Tales of reproduction are designed to bring together both tales of the past and tales of the now and so allow those working in the Agency to ‘reproduce’ their working environment, the organisation to which they belong and the other organisations with which they come into daily contact, by means of ongoing stories that they can relate to the past.

As implied by their designation, tales of reproduction recycle particular issues and keep them at the forefront of employees’ collective consciousness. As such, they are part of the category, tales of the now, and contribute to a ‘discourse’ that helps people normally working on numerous disparate activities with all kinds of different colleagues to create and sustain the Agency as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983). The focal points of this discourse are advertising accounts – the sums of money distributed by advertisers to the advertising agencies for the purpose of selling a particular brand or product group, sometimes through a selected medium.

Here a slight explanatory detour is necessary to enable us to understand the significance of these tales of reproduction. It is every agency’s job to persuade an advertiser that it is best suited to take on a particular account. To this end it will embark on active solicitation with the aim of being asked to participate in a competitive presentation or ‘pitch’ in which, together with other agencies, it will present marketing and creative strategies based on the advertiser’s initial orientation of its needs. If successful, the Agency will be asked to take on an account, usually for a fixed period, and will then enter into partnership with its new client.

The relationship between Agency and client is ideally a professional one, involving a considerable exchange of confidential information that may include, for example, plans for new products or marketing strategies. This means that in most countries, when awarding an account, an advertiser will not usually permit its agency to handle companies or products with which it is in direct competition. This is known as the *competing account rule*. One of its consequences is that, whenever an agency wins a new account which conflicts with one already being handled, it has to decide which of the two accounts it wishes to keep. So far as the organization of the advertising industry is concerned, the competing account rule ensures two things: firstly, that there is a continuous circulation of accounts among agencies; and secondly, that no agency ever becomes excessively large. As a result, by comparison with other industries, the organizations that make up the advertising industry are quite small.

Although the competing account rule is the norm in almost all countries of the world, Japanese advertisers have adopted an alternative system of distributing advertising appropriations, preferring

to split their accounts by product, media, or a combination of product and media. As a result, they do not object in principle to the same agency handling a number of competing accounts. What is known as the *split account system* has advantages for both agencies and advertisers. Precisely because the overall advertising appropriation is divided, accounts in Japan are not nearly as large as they are elsewhere. This is to an agency's financial advantage when it loses an account, since the sheer number of accounts in circulation¹⁴ means that it can usually make up the financial shortfall and is not obliged, as it might be in the United States or Europe, to lay off staff. In this respect, the split account system contributes to the overall stability of the advertising agency, and of the industry of which it is a part.

For their part, advertisers are able to use the split account system to play off one agency against another since they alone have full knowledge of their overall marketing strategy. This not only enables advertisers to minimize the problem of confidentiality that so worries those working in advertising industries elsewhere. They can use their knowledge strategically to operate a system of divide-and-rule that obliges agencies to keep in constant touch with client personnel, as well as with other agencies and media organizations, in order to gain as much information as possible about their clients' overall plans and activities. In other words, the split account system encourages much closer interaction among the three main players – agencies, advertisers and media organizations – in the advertising industry (Moeran 2000). It is on these players and the ways they play the advertising game that most tales of reproduction focus.

How such accounts are won and lost is clearly of crucial concern to the Agency, since one agency's gain will be another's loss, and vice versa. In other words, accounts are always on the move, always circulating among agencies. In this respect, they become *more than* just sums of money since, ultimately, they contribute to the cohesion of the advertising industry as a whole and, like works of art and literature, take on certain attributes – including a provenance – over and above their actual contents. Tales of reproduction tend to contribute to such 'added value'. They provide accounts with 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984: 114-20).

As an example of how tales of reproduction circled round a particular account, let me briefly talk about a 'failure' (rather than the customary success) – a blue chip account with a prestigious European automobile manufacturer (which I shall call by a pseudonym, PKW) that the Agency won ... and lost. When I joined the Agency's Accounts Services Division a few months into my research, I soon heard about PKW. It seemed that all was not well and that the client had called for a competitive presentation, involving the Agency along with two of its main rivals, Dentsu and Hakuhodo. The stories that were told during the next weeks were various, but focused on two themes in particular.

1. One recounted how the Agency against all odds had originally won the account – how it had never previously secured the business of such an important foreign advertiser in Japan; how the account team had impressed PKW by the sheer energy, willingness to try hard and overall 'Japaneseness' of its members; how Tanabata had ordered gold screens to be set up along one wall of the lift lobby on the floor of his office so that his European visitors would not be able to see straight into the toilets as they stepped out of the elevator; and how the CEO had been obliged to purchase a PKW car when his Agency won the account, even though he had a perfectly good chauffeur-driven Japanese car owned by his company, and how he had kept the car – virtually unused – to show his goodwill to his client. These were

¹⁴ To give an idea of this number, let me add here that the Agency handled more than 600 accounts at the time of my research. An agency of equivalent size in the U.S.A. would probably have handled around 30 – certainly no more than 50 – accounts.

tales from the past that were designed to remind myself, and others, of the quality of the Agency's staff, of its managerial philosophy and corporate branding, as well as of its leader's absolute integrity.

2. The second theme concerned what had gone wrong and why the Agency had been ordered to participate in a competitive presentation together with its main rivals. Here two story strands emerged: one focused on the fact that PKW was a hard taskmaster and did not really understand or appreciate all the time and trouble that the Agency's account team had been taking on its behalf; the other homed in on the account manager and his perceived failure to target the right person (that is, the person with real power) in the European automobile manufacturer's Japanese office. The first strand highlighted the 'special' nature of the Japanese market and Japan's advertising industry, and foreigners' presumed failure to come to terms with or accept 'cultural difference' (PKW was said to continually harp on about the Agency's handling several accounts for a Japanese automobile manufacturer, even though the latter was in fact engaged in certain sales and technology development tie-ups with PKW, and even though the Agency kept the two clients' businesses in different, well-separated buildings). The second strand picked on the fact that the account manager concerned was not by training an 'ad man', but had been recruited to the Agency from its Japanese automobile manufacturer client company when it first won the PKW account and thought that perhaps it should employ somebody who really knew all there was to know about car production, sales and distribution in Japan.

This part of the tale of reproduction thus highlighted what an 'ad man' ought to be (in particular, by emphasizing the crucial mistake the account manager had made in confusing authority for power when he targeted a Japanese vice president of PKW Japan, instead of the European sales manager who had a direct line to his head office in central Europe). It also brought out Agency staff's sub-conscious preference for 'Japanese' employment practices ('permanent' employment rather than job hopping), and by implication notions of trust and corporate loyalty that such practices are seen to encourage. In this respect, the two story strands became united.

This tale of reproduction (in various versions) was produced and reproduced throughout the hectic five weeks during which the Agency prepared for the presentation, in the full knowledge that it did not stand a chance of winning its client's approval (see Moeran 1996: 71-98). Not only did it emphasize the perceived importance of the 'ad man'; it provided crucial ideological back-up to senior management's decision to spare no effort or expense in its preparations for the competitive presentation, so that the client might eventually come to realise just how hard-working, how business-like and how ethically steadfast the Agency was. In this way, the account itself became a source of pride for all those working in the Agency – especially when PKW, clearly impressed by the Agency's presentation, found itself unable to award the account to either of the Agency's rivals without ordering the other agencies to compete again. Thus, what it may have lost in financial terms, the Agency recouped in corporate pride and public relations, because word of what was going on became the talking point of other agencies and media organisations alike. This is what tales of reproduction are all about.

Story Telling, Cultural Performance and Social Drama

According to the narrative tradition of academic papers, after the ethnography some kind of theoretical conclusion is expected. But what more is there to say? Fortunately, as Van Maanen (1988:66) wickedly notes, 'fieldworkers are notorious analytic bricoleurs, sniffing out and sifting

through current theory for leads as to how fieldwork materials might be conceptualized'. As both occasions and audiences change, so do theories come to be revised and fieldwork data reframed and reinterpreted. Things will be no different here. Ethnographers are often theoretical chameleons, melting into the environment created by other scholars' current thoughts.¹⁵

Let me begin with an obvious recapitulation of this paper's aims. In her short book on doing ethnography in organisations, Helen Schwartzman (1993: 44) points out that 'ethnographers can learn a great deal about the structure and culture of an organization by paying attention to the stories that organizational members relate to one another as well as to researchers'. It has been my intention here to pass on what I learned about the culture and organisation of a Japanese advertising agency through such stories during the course of my fieldwork there. The fact that the organisation discussed is, on the one hand, neither American nor European but Japanese and, on the other, a vital player and cultural intermediary in the world of media has, I hope, made this study of interest in itself.

Secondly, my limited knowledge of who has written what about 'narrating organisations' tells me only that, even though the ethnographic example presented here comes from Japan and is concerned with cultural production, what actually went on in the Agency is for the most part characteristic of what is known about organisations and story-telling elsewhere. In short, tales of the now, of the past and of reproduction confirm Schwartzman's summary of stories as important for:

(a) communicating historical experiences and providing individuals with a way to weave this experience into discussions of current activities; (b) distinguishing one's organization as the best and/or worst and also for stereotyping other organizations; (c) socializing new members into an organization; (d) documenting successes and failures and drawing conclusions (morals) from these examples; (e) indirectly communicating information to individuals about a range of issues that may be too sensitive or threatening to discuss directly; and, finally, (f) stories may be most important because they shape and sustain individuals' images of the organization in which they work.

(Schwartzman 1993: 44)

I have, however, noted some additional purposes of the stories that I heard during my fieldwork in the Agency. In short, we have seen here how tales of the now, of the past and of reproduction help employees to:

1. Develop a sense of what it means as an individual to be a member of a profession and a *professional*;
2. Think strategically and participate in their organisation's *strategic development*;
3. Situate their organisation within the broader *business context* of the *industry* in which it functions, as well as within
4. A broader *cultural context* that includes other *national* corporate organisations.

¹⁵ In such august company as that to which I present this paper, then, it should come as no surprise that my true theoretical colours will probably not be revealed unless I am in some way provoked. My diffidence here stems primarily from the fact that this is the first time I have dared to step out of the comparatively safe context of conferences in my discipline or area study into the murky waters of what my colleagues at the Copenhagen Business School refer to as 'organisation studies'. In truth, I am anxious to learn what it is that separates this recently carved out field from that long inhabited by sociologists and (social) anthropologists, and thus look forward to our meeting in Lyon with a mixture of trepidation and curiosity.

In this respect, thirdly, it may be appropriate to add to my original *emic* temporal classification of tales an *etic* sociological classification that focuses on the relationships between an organisation and:

1. Individual employees who are members of that organisation;
2. The industry ('world' [Becker 1982] or 'field' [Bourdieu 1993] in which it operates; and
3. A society of other organisations (or 'society of industry' [Clarke 1979]) that shares a set of cultural (national, racial) assumptions about how corporate, management, employment and other practices should be put into effect.

At the same time, however, we should recognise that this new schema may well be as inadequate as the last and that, as a result, it might be advisable to dispense with all such attempts at classification.

Fourthly, I have here used the word 'tale' to describe my classificatory scheme imposed on stories that came to my attention during fieldwork. There is a dual purpose in this conscious avoidance of the word 'narrative'. On the one hand, I realise that my own 'story' of the kinds of tales told in the Agency and the significance that I ascribe to them is problematic. By describing some of what went on in the everyday lives of people working in the Agency, I have tried to lay bare and impose order on certain cultural practices and organisational principles. And although the 'culture' of the advertising world that I experienced has in some respects controlled my writing, it has also to some extent been invented by it (Wagner 1981). So I use the term 'tales' to:

Highlight the presentational or, more properly, representational qualities of all fieldwork writing. It is a term meant to draw attention to the inherent story-like character of fieldwork accounts, as well as to the inevitable choices made by an author when composing an ethnographic work... There is no direct correspondence between the world as experienced and the world as conveyed in a text, any more than there is a direct correspondence between the observer and the observed.

(Van Maanen 1988:8)

On the other hand, fifthly, I have problems with imposing the category of 'narrative' (or its verb form, 'narrate') onto my fieldwork data. If we accept Culler's (1981: 171) definition of narrative as 'the representation of a *series* of events' (my italics), by no means all the tales that I heard told in the Agency constituted narrative as such, for they did not necessarily form a series or sequence of events at the time they were originally told. Rather, everyday life consisted of numerous tales, none of which necessarily cohered into a narrative whole, since there were often partial, incomplete, contradictory or variant stories in circulation at any one time. These tales consisted, quite simply, of people telling other people that something or other had happened (and what we social anthropologists study is 'how people in other communities construct their world by conversing about it' [Czarniawska 1997: 71]). There was never any single story in the Agency, but a potentially unlimited number of them circulating around an event. They could be quickly added to or contradicted, and they tended to be told with particular purposes or interests in mind, varying according to audience and context as individual actors (re)positioned themselves vis-à-vis one another. Stories always had their alternative versions organised around different plots (Czarniawska 1997: 18).

For example, among the stories circulating about the Agency's difficulties with PKW, one version claimed that the client was looking for a way to get out of its business arrangement with the Agency because of the latter's handling of a rival Japanese car manufacturer's account. Thus, it didn't matter whether the PKW account manager had or had not failed to target the right person in

the client company. The result would still have been the same: an end to the Agency's involvement in the PKW account. The forms taken by such stories and the functions they had (foreign versus Japanese business methods; group harmony versus individual culpability; advertising versus other professions) were as varied, therefore, as the particular interests and functions they were designed to serve. In this respect, we might say that an unlimited number of *relations* exist among the tales of the past, tales of the now and tales of reproduction that I have outlined here (cf. Herrnstein Smith 1981). It is only in the desire to make sense of these relations that stories are transformed into narrative (with beginning, middle and end, punctuated by causes and effects).

Finally, to overcome the potentially great divide between fieldwork and ethnography (or 'ergonography'), Barbara Czarniawska (1997) – drawing on the work of Burke, MacIntyre, Goffman and others – makes use of drama and theatricality as metaphors for her narratives about how social preferences are created and sustained. Slightly surprisingly, perhaps, given the focus of her interesting account of crisis situations, on the one hand, and her anthropological bent, on the other, she does not mention the work of Victor Turner who devoted a large portion of his academic life to examining what he called 'social drama' and 'cultural performance'.¹⁶ These two analytical terms might, I think, be useful in furthering our discussion of narratives and organisations.

1. Let us start with *cultural performance*. Turner (1987: 27) argues that there is a peculiar reflexive and reciprocal relationship between mundane, everyday socio-cultural processes and dominant genres of cultural performance found in all societies. Such cultural performances are central and recurrent events in the social lives of the people among whom they take place. They do not merely 'reflect' a social system or cultural configuration, but are often a (veiled or otherwise) critique and evaluation of the social life out of which they arise. They can thus become agents of change.

In the context of the advertising industry one such cultural performance can be said to be the competitive presentation, which arises out of a client's specified or unspecified dissatisfaction with its agency (or, very occasionally, vice versa). The reasons for such dissatisfaction may be various, but the fact that there is dissatisfaction in the first place usually generates stories, discussions and re-assessments within each of the organisations concerned (and we have seen briefly what kinds of stories were generated with what results by PKW's call for a competitive presentation from the Agency).

Another kind of cultural performance is the three-week training period for new recruits to the Agency. This involves a considerable amount of retrospection on the Agency's history and (past) practices by those called upon to talk to the recruits and, in the talks that they give, provides a blueprint for the future. This cultural performance combines fact and commentary, as well as what Turner (1987: 41, 101) calls 'indicative' (what *is*) and 'subjunctive' (what *should be*) cultural moods.

2. Let us now turn to *social drama*. In a series of articles and chapters in books, Turner (1987: 33) has analysed 'an objectively isolable sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type'. This he calls a social drama, which occurs 'within groups of persons who share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history. The main actors are persons for whom the group has a high value priority' (Turner 1980: 145). He argues, furthermore, that every social drama, regardless of its cultural content or context, exhibits the same processual structure involving successive phases of public action – first

¹⁶ This sentence may sound overly critical, but is not intended to be so. After all, none of us has ever read anything like everything that has been written on a particular subject or subject area. I am merely looking for an excuse to build into the paper a different piece of theoretical bricolage with which I happen to have become slightly familiar.

breach, then crisis, then redressive or remedial procedures and, finally, either reintegration or recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism (Turner 1987: 34-5).

In every social drama, factional struggles within the group are revealed during the period of crisis, while during the redressive stage various mechanisms are employed (ranging from informal advice to formal arbitration or the performance of public ritual) to bring things back to normal. Almost invariably, a victim or scapegoat is pinpointed and 'sacrificed' to make up for the group's 'sin' of redressive violence (Turner 1980: 147).

It is clear that this analysis is applicable not just to tensions arising out of matrilineal succession among the Ndembu (the African people among whom Turner did his fieldwork), but to Czarniawska's (1997: 98 in particular) discussion of the dramatic value of paradoxes in the Swedish public sector, as well as to my own account of the Agency's problematic relations with PKW and its consequent preparations for a competitive presentation. We are here concerned with political processes involving competition for scarce ends by particular means.

And where does narrative come into all this? So far as Turner (1980: 38-9) is concerned, the phase structure of social drama itself contains narrative because in the redressive stage in particular people reconstruct what has gone wrong and start reconstructing a narrative that 'makes sense' of what has happened. In this respect, every social drama provides the social ground from which narratives develop, being used both by those upholding and by those questioning the *status quo*, by those seeking change and by those resisting it. But such stories tend to take place (or reach their narrational formulation) *after* an event – explaining it, extolling it, ethicising it, excusing it, deprecating it, repudiating it, naming it as 'a significant marker of collective life-experience, as a model for future behavior' (Turner 1987: 33), as well as distorting it and covering it up (cf. Kermode 1981:82).

If this is so, narratives – in the sense of completed stories – will always be part of an organisation's (or faction's) 'impression management' and thus of its 'front region' (Goffman 1969). In order to be able to analyse such narratives, however, we need to see the many stories behind them *in the making*. This means that we have no choice but to get into and familiarise ourselves with the 'back region' of an organization – which is where the participant-observer kind of anthropological fieldwork can be so helpful.

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