

# Mediating Japanese a tale of two cultures

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# **Mediating Japanese: A Tale of Two Cultures**

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We live lives based upon selected fictions. Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in space and time – not by our personalities as we like to think. Thus every interpretation of reality is based upon a unique position. Two paces east or west and the whole picture is changed.

Lawrence Durrell, *Balthazar*

## **Preamble**

A public commentator is a mediator who, in order to be able to mediate and make sense to her public of what s/he is commenting upon, is – in one way or another – obliged to transgress social and/or cultural categories. In this respect, a fundamental role of the public commentator is to negate, at least partially, the classificatory system used by her audience (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney 1987: 155). An anthropologist who acts as public commentator, therefore, mediates between and implicitly or explicitly negates *two* classificatory systems: one of her public, the other of the people whose society and culture s/he interprets.

This paper is about how, as public commentator, I tried, with mixed success, to mediate between two cultures – Japanese and British. It will show how I came to be treated as mediator, on the one hand, and as trickster-scapegoat, on the other. It is this ‘betwixt and between’ status that I came to occupy as an Anglo-Irishman (West Brit) writing in Japanese about British academics for a Japanese audience, which will form the focus of the commentary that concludes this paper.

Let me start with a few background details. Following an early career as a television comedian in Japan, I have as an anthropologist been involved in three different kinds of public commentary.

⇒ *Pottery* (1982-1987): The firsthand knowledge of the worlds of Japanese folk art pottery and ceramics that I gained during two periods of fieldwork before and after gaining my Ph.D. in social anthropology led to my writing fairly extensively for ceramics magazines whose readers were professional potters, apprentices and others in the U.S.A. and Europe. Freed from such academic constraints as theoretical positioning, literature review and referencing, these writings outlined

the workings of the art worlds that I had studied and became preliminary attempts to organise my fieldwork material for publication in scholarly journals. They may be seen as a form of applied anthropology.

- ⇒ *Whaling* (1987-1995): A second kind of applied anthropology that I have carried out involved joint and group research on small-type coastal whaling in Japan. Some of this work was commissioned and paid for by the Japanese Institute of Cetacean Research (which never questioned or criticised anything that we wrote). The results of this research were published in four books and two articles in an academic journal. At least three of the books were used by the Institute of Cetacean Research to support the Japanese Government's negotiating position on continued 'scientific' whaling with the International Whaling Commission. I was also asked to attend, and present the results of particular studies, at two sub-committee meetings or workshops under the aegis of the IWC (in Glasgow 1992 and Sendai 1995).
- ⇒ *Media* (1986-90): I have also been more generally involved in various activities of the media in both England and Japan.
- *British media*: In 1987, as Chair Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of London, I (together with colleagues at Oxford, Cambridge and Sheffield) was approached by the BBC and asked to submit a plan for a series of programmes that it intended to make in a language and culture series. Given 24 hours to respond, I took up the challenge and had my entire programme outline accepted, adopted and later put into effect. In due course, I was obliged to help in providing contacts, finding shooting locations and even suitable subjects to be filmed. I also contributed to the accompanying textbook, *Japanese Language and People*, in which I used my general cultural and anthropological understanding of the Japanese to explain their language, society and culture to English-speaking foreigners.
  - *Japanese media*: At about the same time, because of my position as Professor of Japanese Studies at London University, I also found myself being asked to write for Japanese media. Some of the articles that I contributed were written and published in English (like my regular commentaries on art and cultural production in *The Daily Mainichi* in 198#). Others were written in English and translated into Japanese (like the long-running series "News From Abroad" published by the *Hokkaidō Shimbun* to which I contributed three times a year). Yet others were written and published in Japanese (like my articles for *Mirai* on Japanese images in British advertisements, which was later developed into an academic article for *Theory, Culture & Society*). All of this work came about through personal networks; most of it was commissioned (or made acceptable for publication) because of my role as a full chair professor in Japan-related matters at a prestigious British university.

### ***London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka***

Almost all of the different kinds of public commentary in which I have been involved and briefly outlined here was directed at *either* Japanese *or* English-speaking audiences. The BBC television series and accompanying book, for example, was

clearly aimed at foreigners wishing to learn (about the) Japanese. The articles in *Mirai* were read by primarily intellectual (I am told) Japanese. Moreover, different outputs tended to make different uses of my scholarly expertise. My pottery articles, for example, were clearly anthropological in the way that they outlined the social world of potters, critics, dealers, department stores and so on. The articles that I wrote for the *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, however, tended to make use of my regional expertise and emphasise my cultural understandings of Japan and the Japanese (although they also made use of some rather crass cross-cultural comparisons as part of their argument). The latter thus appealed to a frequently noted cultural disposition of the Japanese to be interested in what is written about themselves and their (ideally different) language, culture and race (a point to which I shall return in my final commentary).

One particular publication that I wrote in Japanese – a book somewhat provocatively titled *London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka*, or *Department of Japanese, University of London* – rather obviously made use of both my disciplinary and regional expertise, and was read by both Japanese *and* British audiences. These audiences were rather different. In Japan, the book sold as many as 10,000 copies to an ‘ordinary’ general reading public; in England, it was probably read by only one, possibly two, dozen academics, diplomats and businessmen who could read Japanese (although its contents – or presumed contents – were discussed by two or three dozen more. It is the differing reactions to the contents of *London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka* that I wish to consider here, as I pursue what Clifford Geertz (1988: 130) once referred to as ‘the gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren’t.’

The book was published in the summer of 1988 by a slightly offbeat, but commercially successful, medium-sized Tokyo publisher whose owner had published one or two books by a very close Japanese friend of my then wife. He was persuaded by this friend to buy the translation rights of an ethnographic diary, *Okubo Diary: portrait of a Japanese valley*, which I had published with Stanford University Press in 1985.

I met the owner a couple of times to discuss and go through the Japanese translation (which, in the end, never came out). As we got to know each other a little better over lunch one day in the autumn of 1986, he asked me about my new job as Chair Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of London. After listening to a few of the things I told him, he suddenly said: “You should write about all this, you know. It’s really fascinating. A lot of people would like to read about your experiences. Provided you write about them in Japanese, of course.”

To someone not fully conversant with the Japanese book market, this seemed possible, though a little unlikely. After initial skepticism, however, I decided to give the idea a try. There were three factors influencing this decision.

Firstly, I was the first social scientist ever appointed to head a Japanese language and literature programme at a British university. Within my own institution (the School of Oriental & African Studies) and in the academic world more generally, especially among those in the humanities who taught Japanese language and literature, my appointment had raised a lot of skeptical eyebrows. I was readily dismissed as someone who did not know Japanese ‘properly’ (that is, who did not have a perfect grasp of grammar, use of honorific language, or the finer points of classical Japanese), even though I had lived in Japan for nine years, been through the undergraduate course in Japanese at the University of London and graduated with a

first class honours degree. Since none of those who were skeptical about my appointment had themselves written a book in Japanese, I felt that, by doing so myself, I might at least show them what I was capable of and, perhaps, put paid to some of the gossip questioning my credentials.

Secondly, although Japanese had been taught at the University of London far longer and – if I may say so – more effectively than at any other university in England, in Japan itself the only universities to hold sway in the public imagination were Oxford and Cambridge. I hoped, therefore, that by writing this book, I would make the School of Oriental & African Studies better known in Japan and thereby, perhaps, attract much needed funds from Japanese corporations that were at the time seeking to convert their economic into cultural capital.

Thirdly, and not unrelated to my second point, it so happened that I had taken up my appointment at an active and interesting period in relations between England and Japan generally, and in the world of Japanese Studies in particular. In 1986, Sir Peter Parker, an eminent British businessman, with excellent knowledge of Japanese and the Japanese, had chaired an inquiry into the current state of British universities' Asian language and studies programmes. In the early autumn, his committee had published a report flagging an urgent need for increased funding of Arabic, Chinese and Japanese programmes, and the Thatcher Government had agreed to inject some money as proposed. The main question discussed by academics was *which* institutions should be the beneficiaries of the new lectureships made available, and *how many* posts each institution might usefully or rightfully lay claim to. The decision, however, was not theirs to make and, from the autumn of 1986, many academics found themselves sitting on committees of various sorts, and generally consorting, with businessmen, diplomats and the occasional politician, as they jockeyed for negotiating positions.

It was these two social worlds – one academic, one an unlikely combination of academics, businessmen and diplomats – that I set out to describe and analyse in *London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka*. At the same time, however, in the tradition of Japanese literature, I made the book into a diary of a professor (its original title), and placed myself very clearly as an active player in the worlds that I described. As a result, the finished book, which covered a year in the life of a newly appointed professor, was part diary, part social analysis, and part reflection upon the meaning of 'education' under the Thatcher government. But it also contained first-hand accounts of conversations held between various other active players and myself, as well as a possibly injudicious measure of gossip, as I sought to lay bare the social mechanisms propelling academic politics. I named important people in senior positions, but not others (although some were, of course, recognizable to those concerned). I made it clear, though, that the opinions expressed were mine alone, and not necessarily shared by my colleagues or others depicted in the course of the book.

### **Structure and Contents**

In tune with its authorial intention of being an academic diary, *London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka* followed the academic calendar and was divided into six parts – each depicting events during one of the three terms and the vacation that followed it. Each of these parts focused on particular aspects of my daily work as it developed over the

year, moving from particular problems and their attempted resolution within the Department of Japanese (Far East) to more general issues concerning Japanese Studies in the United Kingdom.

Thus part One, *Autumn Term*, provided an account of the book's setting: the School of Oriental and African Studies, its history of teaching Japanese at university level, the Japanese Section and my initial attempts to 'update' what I knew from my own experience as a student to be a fairly irrelevant degree course that did not properly prepare undergraduates for life in Japan.

Part Two, *Winter Vacation*, took me to Japan where, as part of this updating process, I embarked upon preliminary negotiations in Kanazawa and Sapporo (Hokkaido) for an exchange student programme. Their outcome was followed up in Part Three, *Spring Term*, which also introduced the Parker Report and the academic world's reactions to its proposals. This broadening of actors and issues led to commentary on how the British tended to view the Japanese and to remarks on what I perceived to be 'colonial' or 'imperialistic practices among some of those I was now meeting in diplomatic and business circles.

Part Four, *Spring Vacation*, focussed on the third JAWS (Japan Anthropology Workshop) gathering in Jerusalem, and was a kind of interlude before Part Five, *Summer Term*, returned to the activities of the academic world of Japanese Studies in Britain. It included a sharp attack on what I perceived as British elitism in the way certain politicians and diplomats tried to use their influence both to get Japanese institutions to fund positions at British universities and to successfully manoeuvre at least one (in my opinion, totally unqualified) colleague into a professorial position. In this part of the book, I also reflected on who and what kinds of scholars would be most appropriate for the new positions opened up by the Parker Report. Here my interest was in what kinds of knowledge would be most useful and appropriate for undergraduates to learn before devoting their lives to 'things Japanese'.

The final part, *Summer Vacation*, took me to Japan once more (on my way to a conference and fellowship in Australia) as I accompanied the first group of London University students to Kanazawa where they were to study Japanese and live with Japanese families for a month in order to get firsthand experience of conversational Japanese.

## **Publication and Reactions**

I delivered the completed handwritten manuscript of *London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka* to the publisher in the early autumn of 1987. He read it, was enthusiastic about its contents, and suggested that he do some editing. He also told me later that he intended to make the text's Japanese a bit 'foreign' to attract more readers, but I put my foot down and insisted that there be no grammatical mistakes of any kind. I was, after all, trying to impress my academic colleagues! The book came out in June 1988 and its first print run was 10,000 copies. To my surprise (and, rather promptly, concern), it was advertised at the bottom of the first page of the prestigious *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper and was readily recognizable in bookshops because of its union jack cover.

By the time I returned from my summer vacation, therefore, the existence of my book was already known to a handful of people in England. Word soon spread among participants at a conference of European specialists in Japanese studies in September. “Ah! The famous author!” Laughed Ron Dore, as we passed each other outside Durham University’s main building, and I realised then that my book was going to have more of an audience in Britain than I had anticipated.

All in all, reactions to the book were varied and intriguing (as well as frustrating and upsetting).

⇒ In the first place, and most immediately important, many of my colleagues in the Japanese Section at S.O.A.S. were upset by the book’s title. There was general agreement among them that it should not have borne a title that suggested that my opinions were those of the department as a whole. This struck me as fair enough. My original title had been *Diary of a Professor*, but just twelve days before publication, as the book went to the printer, the publisher telephoned me in London and said that he wished to change the title to *Department of Japanese Studies, London University*. I had agreed to this change without thinking through its consequences. Mistake number one.

Mistake number two was that, during the course of writing the book, I had singled out two members of my department as being somewhat uncooperative. Although I had not named them, it was clear who they were to all those who knew anything about the Department and, since they were Japanese and women, I was accused both of racism and gender prejudice by these two colleagues. They both spent some time (one a longer time than the other) closeted in the office of my Director, demanding some form of reprimand or action against me. In general, however, so far as I can gather, there was no overall agreement among members of my Department about the contents of the book, since some agreed with one or other thing I had written, while others did not. In the end, it seemed best to apologise to members of my Department, not for what I had written, but for having caused them to be so upset. (I am not sure that all of them picked up this fine distinction in my phraseology.) Since I had clearly failed them as a leader, I resolved quietly to resign once the hoo-hah had died down.

⇒ The second form of public reaction to my book came from those involved in one way or another in Japanese studies in the United Kingdom. At the time, there seemed to me to be an immense amount of, primarily negative, comment on the book. A lot of it was based on gossip, rather than on a (careful) reading of its contents. One diplomat and one politician exerted pressure on my Director to have me fired from my position. The latter, to his credit, defended my right to academic freedom, told me he thought I had been “a bit of a fool” (he was a mild mannered man), but accepted my counter defence that at least I had succeeded in getting S.O.A.S. better known in Japan itself. The overall trepidation shown by most of my colleagues in Japanese Studies in the U.K., coupled with their negative criticisms (although two of them a few years later kindly wrote to tell me that I had been right and justified in my critique), made me quickly decide that I would prefer to be among anthropologists (although I recognise that their reactions to a similar work by one of their colleagues would probably lead to similar problems to those I experienced in the world of Japanese studies).

The two sets of reactions described here were, I think, prompted, firstly, by dismay on the part of my colleagues that one of their number should have

'betrayed' them by making public the inner, backstage workings of a part of academia. Secondly, there was a general feeling, I think, that I had sought to gain personal advantage that was not in everyone's, or even one institution's, general interest. And thirdly, the fact that I had dared to write such a book seemed to 'confirm' in some way people's original prejudice that a social scientist should not be appointed to a professorial chair in the humanities.

- ⇒ The first of these reactions was also rather obvious in another set of public reactions – this time among some Japanese. As I have mentioned, my negotiations over an undergraduate exchange programme for students at S.O.A.S. took me to Kanazawa, where I found myself talking to members of a volunteer association running a Japanese language programme, and to the Director of Prefectural Education in Kanazawa. Although I am not fully conversant with what happened following publication of my book, it seems that it was brandished in the prefectural council at some stage when there were discussions about whether Kanazawa City and its volunteer association should, or should not, be allowed to continue its activities.
- ⇒ In spite of these negative reactions to *London Daigaku Nihongo Gakka*, there was also an enormous and positive response to its contents on the part of the general reader in Japan. This was reflected in sales of the book, which quickly surpassed 7,000 before I requested that it be withdrawn (I do not know if it actually was), as well as in the fan mail that reached me either directly or via my publisher. At the same time as I was facing flack from my colleagues and others in England, therefore, I found myself receiving three or four letters a week from Japanese readers who thanked me, firstly, for my concern with the development of an up-to-date and appropriate undergraduate programme in Japanese studies; secondly, for taking the trouble to arrange an exchange programme to facilitate this; thirdly, for explaining clearly how the academic world functioned in the U.K. and for my thoughts about the meaning of education; fourthly, for my frankness in criticising British 'colonialist' practices; and, finally, for my obvious sympathy for, and understanding of, Japanese people, language and culture.

## **Commentary**

What, then, can we learn from this description of my various activities in mediating Japanese, as well as of the reception of one particular book discussed here?

- ⇒ Firstly, as a general rule, I have used opportunities for public commentary as occasions to develop ideas. Unlike many scholars who are often called upon by the media to act as commentators because of what they have *already* published in their academic fields, I have used such occasions to sort out fieldwork data as a preliminary step towards scholarly publication and the establishment of an academic reputation.
- ⇒ As a result, secondly, much of what I have been called on to do by the media has in fact stemmed from the fact that – let us face it, somewhat fortuitously – I occupied a particular position at a particular university at a particular time (when there was considerable business, political and, thus, media interest in what was going on in Japan and the United Kingdom in the mid- to late-1980s). My being



asked to act as public commentator, therefore, depended upon my social role more than on my scholarly knowledge (which was virtually unknown in Japan, since none of my work had been translated into Japanese). From this it seems clear that those who hold important positions in prestigious universities are – for better or for worse – more likely to become public commentators than those who do not. Who gets into these positions, therefore, and what kind of personalities they have (introverted, or outgoing and media-friendly) has important consequences for the academic concerned, the institution in which s/he works and the discipline and/or area that s/he studies.

⇒ Thirdly, this paper has shown how, as public commentator, I entered into a world, or economy, of *names*. These names were both individual (Sir Peter Parker, Sir Hugh Cortazzi, Patrick Jenkyn and so on) and institutional (the Daiwa Foundation, Chatham House, Oxbridge Universities and so forth). They also existed at the level of things produced by these individuals and institutions (like the ‘Parker Report’). In this respect, names operated at the same levels of the creolised diplomatic-business-academic world as branding does in marketing.

Now, of course, as an academic, an anthropologist operates in her own name economy, but this social world – as the example of my experiences in *London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka* show – is by no means integrated into the broader field of names sustained by the media and entertainment industries. The problem that we face as would-be public commentators is how to make ourselves into acceptable and accepted names in fields in which we are not known. This issue is one that faces every anthropologist who seeks to broaden her work so that it is of interest to, for example, sociologists, cultural studyists, and psychologists. To make one’s name known in different, though related, fields usually requires careful selection of publication outlets, participation in conferences, and networking. It is adroit use of these social mechanisms rather than what one has to say, I suggest, that these days often enables such disciplinary crossovers to take place and a name to extent into a broader social world.

⇒ This issue of the anthropologist-as-public commentator’s integration into a name economy dominated by the media and entertainment industries is inextricably tied up with Bourdieu’s notions of economic, social and cultural capital. As mentioned earlier, one of the primary objectives of my book had been to make my own academic institution into a ‘name’ in Japan, where the only British universities to achieve nation-wide respect are Oxford and Cambridge. The cultural capital accruing to the name of S.O.A.S. I then hoped to convert into economic capital by having large corporations (or their foundations) endow a professorial chair or make some other donation towards the betterment of Japanese studies in the U.K.

I soon realised that I was not the only one playing this game of capitalism, since *all* those with whom I found myself interacting in the late 1980s seemed to be intent on similar ends. Thus, while connections to individual names in the business and diplomatic worlds (like Sir Peter Parker or Sir Hugh Cortazzi) seemed, and to some extent were, important to academics involved, the former were not primarily interested in academics, but in *other* – in particular Japanese – businessmen and diplomats whom they wished themselves to persuade to give money to this or that academic (or other social) institution. By so doing, they would enhance their own names as businessmen and/or diplomats in both the U.K. and Japan, on the one hand (since their success was with *Japanese business*), and,

on the other, as cultural experts who, by helping a British university to obtain money from a Japanese source, enhanced their cultural capital at home. They just converted economic capital into cultural capital twice.

Thus, while academics were trying to create, or possibly sustain and enhance, their institutional cultural capital in such a way that it might be converted into economic capital through the establishment of an endowed Chair or Centre of Japanese Studies, those in the business world were doing the opposite (converting economic capital into cultural capital), while diplomats seemed to be converting cultural capital into more and greater cultural capital.

None of this is very new or surprising. What *does* seem to be worth noting here, however, is the fact that – as I discovered to my cost – none of those concerned enjoyed having these conversion stratagems and processes brought out into the open and made public. For my non-involved readers, on the other hand – as for an objective scholar like Pierre Bourdieu studying the art or literary world in Paris – such revelations were interesting and thought-provoking. The implications of this onion-peeling technique are, perhaps, a little frightening for the anthropologist who would be public commentator. S/he seems bound to alienate in some way those whom s/he analyses.

⇒ Which brings me nicely to my fourth point. This paper has hinted at the relationship between an anthropologist and ‘his’ people, and how this may affect his role as public commentator. As will have become obvious, the Japanese are interested in *hearing* what non-Japanese have to say about them (although they may not in fact – and understandably – *listen* to their opinions). There is a certain, let us call it, exoticism at work in this relationship with strangers who, like *marebito* deities, have a kind of dual nature. Both far and near, both belonging and not belonging to the community in which s/he is in a position to exercise power, the stranger can bring good luck at the same time as being potentially dangerous (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987: 129). This kind of relationship, whereby certain kinds of foreigners are identified with stranger-deities, permits Japanese to assign to foreigners ‘dual – both beneficial and destructive – natures and power’ (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987: 145). (It does not seem to exist so much in Europe or America, although Greek *philoxenia* may be a partial exception. Current Australian aboriginal and New Zealand Maori interest in and censoring of strangers’ pronouncements provide a negative instance.) Its very existence in Japan suggests a rather special relationship between Japanese and those foreigners who act as public commentators on their language, society and culture.

As a general rule, then, we may say that the Japanese ‘seem to find themselves as puzzling as does everyone else’ (Geertz 1988: 120) and, as a result perhaps, like to hear what foreigners have to say about their language, society and culture, especially when such pronouncements confirm their own cultural understandings or stereotypes. In illustration, let me just say that *London Daigaku no Nihongo Gakka* was published at a time when there was considerable political and diplomatic acrimony over Japan’s economic success. Led by the American Government’s trade negotiators, a number of foreigners were beginning to criticise various aspects of Japanese business and socio-cultural practices. At the time, this was known as ‘Japan bashing’, and within Japan foreigners (strangers) were being classified as either ‘pro’ or ‘ante’ Japanese, depending on the viewpoints that they expressed. Although my own book was not intended in any

way to be part of this political discourse, precisely because it *did* portray British diplomats, businessmen and politicians and precisely because it commented critically on several of their practices, I could quite easily be classified as ‘pro-Japanese’. I was, after all, supporting the national (local) view that Japanese were often unfairly criticised, taken advantage of and penalised on issues for which not they, but ‘Westerners’, were in their opinion primarily responsible. It was precisely my refusal to enter into ‘Japan bashing’ that – I suspect – made my book popular among Japanese readers and simultaneously alienated those three or four British diplomats and businessmen who actually managed to read it.

- ⇒ This issue of cultural reception is not new to either media or, indeed, to anthropology. How often these days do we witness television stations, in the stated interests of ‘objectivity’ and ‘impartiality’, interviewing spokespersons for both sides in a dispute: Israeli government and the PLO; the Ulster Unionists and the IRA (Are the ‘baddies’ always reduced to acronyms?). How well, too, do we know our own reactions to what each says, depending on the particular stance we adopt towards the resolution of the dispute in question. Such reactions are motivated not so much by the particular public commentaries that we hear (or read), but by a complex cultural baggage that we have developed during the course of our (ever lengthening) lives.

So, too, with anthropology. From time to time, we may hear a colleague express surprise or dismay at the reception of a particular book among the people about whom s/he has been writing – usually because of the negative reaction that it has caused. But, from time to time, things work the other way. Take Ruth Benedict’s well-known book about the Japanese, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, for example, and its effect among educated Japanese, on the anthropology of Japan and on anthropology in general. Do we have here an anthropologist’s attempt to make sense of the ‘Impossible Object’ and its oriental mysteries, or a deconstruction of occidental (read, American) clarities (Geertz 1988: 121)? A book that thus encourages a kind of cultural revolution – or, at least, revisionism – at home in the United States of America ends up supporting cultural conservatism abroad in Japan.

- ⇒ One upshot of all this is that, by becoming a public commentator, an anthropologist *obliges* those whom s/he addresses to take sides. By the very act of speaking, whether s/he likes it or not, s/he finds her audience divided into those who agree and those who disagree with what s/he has to say. This goes against the anthropological grain. Rather than showing how the Red Sea links two continents, s/he merely divides it firmly down the middle.
- ⇒ Another way of looking at the foreign public commentator in Japan is to see her position as akin to that of the fool in a medieval court. On the one hand, as a ‘fool’ he is a kind of stranger. As such, he is able to see through social appearances and, as a result, make pronouncements that only he can make. On the other hand, although the fool may say what others cannot say, the latter may dismiss what they do not wish to hear precisely because it is spoken by a ‘fool’. As part of his role, the fool can also make outrageous comments that contain the necessary kernel of truth to make them acceptable to his public. (There was a similar institutional position in each of the houses of the public school that I attended many years ago.)

The problem with the first part of this analogy is that, if the court jester is the only one allowed or able to speak the truth, then the anthropologist as public commentator is seen suddenly as someone with privileged knowledge and understanding that neither those outside nor within the field (the anthropologist's court) have access to. This may be an attractive idea to the anthropologist concerned and to others in her profession, but the privileging of knowledge and social analysis is – to put it mildly – problematic.

Should we then rule out the analogy between public commentator, anthropologist and fool? Perhaps not entirely – at least, not in the case of an anthropologist's interaction with the Japanese, who have a history of relating the mediator to both scapegoat and clown (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987:149-159) and are quite happy to place foreigners in the position of 'fools'. (FN This I know full well from my youthful 'career' as a television comedian in Japan when, every Friday afternoon, I was placed in any number of silly clothes or situations (I still have one photograph of my being pushed to and fro in a baby swing by a dwarf) to enable my partner (an enchanting and extremely able *rakugo* storyteller by profession) to make me the butt of his fast-talking Osaka humour. The fact, however, that I was able to answer back in such situations was what made us work as a 'team' and what made the programme extremely popular among urban housewives and young people.) There is, then, a certain ambiguity about being an anthropologist and public commentator in Japan. As mediator, one moves across cultural categories. As scapegoat, one is assigned to the margin of a social structure. And as clown, one is funny, not-quite-normal, but has the liberty to chide cherished cultural assumptions (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987: 154).