

Conjuring Up Prehistory

Landscape and the Archaic in Japanese Nationalism

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Access Archaeology





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Barley ripening at Kanzaki, Saga, Japan. In the distance is Yoshinogari, a large Yayoi-period town with reconstructed watchtowers and other defensive features. (Photo by M. Hudson). Inset: A Yayoi warrior incised on a ceramic bell-shaped object from Kawayori-yoshihara, Kanzaki. (Drawn by J. Uchiyama).

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents
Jean Mary Hudson (1938-2004) and William James Hudson (1933-2019).*

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Conventions

Modified Hepburn is used for Japanese. Macrons are omitted for words now common in English. McCune-Reischauer is used for Korean. For Chinese, pinyin is used except for words commonly found in English in Wade-Giles (for example, Taoism) and for people and places in Taiwan. Japanese personal names are given in the European order with family name last. 'Nature' is capitalised to make it seem less natural. Footnotes give the short form of references, which can be found in full at the end of the volume. An English translation of Japanese titles is included in the final reference list. All Japanese books are published in Tokyo unless otherwise noted.

Introduction. Modernity, the archaic and Japanese Nature

Our notions of place are retroactive fantasy constructs determined precisely by the corrosive effects of modernity.
Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*.

Walter Benjamin observed that it is ‘precisely the modern which always conjures up prehistory.’¹ Building on this insight, the present book looks at how Japanese nationalist writings have used landscape and cultures of the archaic as ‘firewalls’ against the Anthropocene, emphatic rejections of the queer mess which, since at least Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, has replaced what used to be known as Nature. While various definitions of the Anthropocene exist, the Japanese writings discussed here have attempted to build firewalls around them all. Aside from the emperor, long-selling firewall programmes in Japanese thought have included Shinto, animism, the ‘ecotopia’ of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, and even ‘civilisation’—a Victorian concept resuscitated for its ability to divide and rule human history. Japanese eco-nationalist firewalls have not been built as conscious critiques of the Anthropocene, a concept which assumes a shared, global position vis-à-vis climate catastrophe. Instead, they serve as reflex reactions to the disturbing turning points of human history such as the Neolithic, agriculture, urbanisation, the nation-state, industrialisation and globalisation in its various forms.²

What I mean by ‘Japanese eco-nationalism’ is explained below and contextualised in the first chapter. My use of the term ‘firewall’ is suggested by Timothy Morton’s concept of a ‘Neolithic firewall’ which, he argues, developed when agriculture led to hierarchical religions that attempted to police inclusion and exclusion. Neolithic elites liked strict boundaries between ‘my field and yours, Heaven and Earth, God and Man, human and nonhuman (otherwise known as Nature), king and peasant’.³ The term ‘firewall’ seems appropriate because the policing of difference in Japanese nationalist writings is invariably conducted in a highly conscious and often obsessive manner, beginning at least from Moto’ori Norinaga (1730-1801) who attempted to wipe away the ‘dust’ or ‘veil’ of the ‘Chinese spirit’ from the ‘clear mirror’ of Japaneseness.⁴ The writings explored here have proposed an inventive range of firewalls whereby Japan is reified and separated from the Other, an approach which is continually upgraded from the flash memory of Japanese culture. As a literary device, this approach draws on Western works such as *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*—Patient X of this genre in the post war era—yet it goes much further in its increasingly desperate dyadic comparisons. Morton’s ideas of agrilogistics and Neolithic firewalls help us to expose a deep irony at the centre of Japanese nationalist writings: in developing their critiques of Western civilisation as a destructive force that damages Nature, these writings use the exact same logic to imagine their own binary structures of inside and outside. The claim that ‘my god is bigger and better than your god’ is a basic symptom of agrilogistics.⁵ In arguing that European monotheistic/ meat-eating civilisation is ‘bad’, Japanese eco-nationalism simply retweets the same Neolithic logic with its proposal that the polytheistic/rice-and-fish-eating Japanese hard disc is ‘good’.

Several of the writers discussed in this book, including philosopher Takeshi Umehara (1925-2019) and archaeologist Yoshinori Yasuda (b. 1946), have launched a frenzied series of ever-excessive claims to

¹ Benjamin, ‘Paris’, p. 170.

² For these transitions, see Uekoetter, *The Turning Points of Environmental History*.

³ Morton, *Being Ecological*, pp. 107, 147.

⁴ Matsumoto, *Motoori Norinaga*, p. 80.

⁵ Timothy Morton, interview with Verso books (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AEy2KmHwh0>), published 27 September, 2017.

a Real Japanese Nature, imagined not through actual content but through symbolic *oppositions* to what they perceive as non-Japanese Nature. These oppositions include ‘civilisations which make enemies’ *versus* ‘civilisations which make harmony’, ‘civilisations which protect forests’ *versus* ‘civilisations which dominate forests’, ‘dragon civilisations’ *versus* ‘sun civilisations’, and even ‘civilisations which drink milk’ *versus* those which do not.⁶ As we shall see, Japanese eco-nationalism spends a great deal of time writing about the landscape of the Other, especially the desert and the pastures whose forests have been destroyed by Christianity and its sheep and goats. But—like Žižek’s Big Other—the actual natural environment found in the Japanese archipelago is missing. Except for some superficial and often historically inaccurate platitudes about trees and rice paddies, Japan’s natural environment is rarely discussed. However, the symbolic significance of Nature is clear to readers of these works; there is no need to complicate things by mentioning that, for example, over 40 per cent of forests in Japan are artificial plantations begun in the 1950s but never harvested because it has been cheaper to import timber from overseas. Real Japanese Nature is an idea best left imagined.⁷

Japanese Eco-Nationalism: Some Orientations

A number of labels have been applied to the thought and writings of Japanese nationalism since the eighteenth century, including National Learning (*Kokugaku*), nativism, exceptionalism, and *Nihonjinron*. Japanese nationalism attained its peak social and political impact in the 1930s through a totalitarian Shinto ideology which emphasised Japan as an ethnic nation begun by the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and characterised by a total fusion between emperor and nation. Writers of the time debated how certain ‘negative’ cultural impacts such as Buddhism and Confucianism had affected the unique natural form of the national polity.⁸ After the Second World War, these ideas were continued through the incorporation of concepts from the human and social sciences, most notably archaeology and physical anthropology. A key group in this respect has been scholars associated with the so-called ‘New Kyoto school’. In the 1980s and ‘90s, a number of New Kyoto School figures worked at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (known colloquially in Japanese as the *Nichibunken*) and I have coined the term ‘Alt-Nichibunken’ for a core group of especially reactionary figures.⁹ Notwithstanding the different names for these nationalisms, an essential continuity is often assumed with respect to the tendency to engage in highly polemical critiques of non-Japanese cultures and to insist that the ‘uniqueness’ of Japanese culture makes it superior. Many of these writings are founded on three assumptions or ‘analytical motivations’.¹⁰ The first is that ‘the Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogenous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from prehistorical times down to the present day.’ The second is that ‘the Japanese differ radically from all other known peoples.’ Finally, the writings are ‘consciously nationalistic, displaying a conceptual and procedural hostility to any mode of analysis which might be seen to derive from external, non-Japanese sources.’

Despite its roots in the National Learning movement of the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), nationalist discourse underwent a major operating system upgrade in the late nineteenth century in the context of Japanese responses to industrial capitalism. The writers discussed in this book begin with figures who attempted to respond to the first wave of capitalism and the cultures of modernity, notably folklorist

⁶ Umehara, *Nihon bunkaron*; Kawakatsu and Yasuda, *Teki o tsukuru bunmei*; Yasuda, *Mori o mamoru bunmei*, *Tatsu no bunmei* and *Miruku o nomanai bunmei*.

⁷ Yasuda is nevertheless keen to emphasise the history of secondary forest plantations *outside* Japan, claiming (without any citations) that since 90 per cent of forests in Switzerland had been ‘destroyed’ by the seventeenth century, ‘if you go to Switzerland today you can see rich forests but those trees have all been planted by human hands since the eighteenth century’: Yasuda, *Kankyō bunmeiron*, p. 441.

⁸ The best introduction to the ideas of this period is Skya, *Japan’s Holy War*.

⁹ See Hudson, ‘Review of Yoneyama, *Animism in Contemporary Japan*’.

¹⁰ These three characteristics are taken from the unpaginated introduction of Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*. See also McCormack, ‘Kokusaika’.

Kunio Yanagita (1875-1962) and philosopher/cultural historian Tetsurō Watsuji (1889-1960). Post war exponents of the genre include religious studies scholar Tetsuo Yamaori (b. 1931) and economic historian-turned-politician Heita Kawakatsu (b. 1948), as well as the previously mentioned Umehara and Yasuda. Beginning with Yanagita, all of these writers have ‘attempted to overcome the problems caused by the direct importation of European ideas into Japan by focusing upon the unique features of Japanese life.’¹¹ Yanagita questioned and critiqued modernity through an emphasis on heritage and tradition, and aimed for ‘the realization of a harmonious co-existence between man and nature and the banishment of alienation by communal rebirth.’¹² This approach was instrumentalised by Watsuji through a focus on landscape and his influential concept of *fūdo*, variously translated as ‘climate and culture’, ‘human environments’ or *milieu*.¹³

Watsuji’s explicitly anti-Marxist and anti-Christian thinking followed the standard nationalistic perspective of the time, yet has been adopted and expanded by post war writers, notably Umehara and Yasuda.¹⁴ Both Christianity and Marxism are what sociologist Michael Mann calls *transcendent* sources of social power and were in clear conflict with the immanent *morale* of State Shinto.¹⁵ Together with Buddhism and Confucianism, such ideologies ‘postulated the individual as a moral being with a *raison d’être* outside the *völkisch* state.’ For ultranationalist State Shinto, the ‘existence of a private morality provided to the individual by a universal religion or any system of thought that had at its core universal principles as opposed to ethnic religion constituted a rebellion against the state.’¹⁶ In premodern times, it was argued, Japan had managed to neutralise the influences of Buddhism and Confucianism through the continuing vitality of native ‘Shinto’ beliefs. As discussed later in this book, Umehara continued this argument with his claims of an integrated synthesis between native and outside aspects of Japanese culture.

After 1945, eco-nationalist writers also developed critiques of Christianity and Marxism based on environmental determinism. Yasuda, for instance, explains Marxism in the following way:

Karl Marx was someone who was born and raised in the landscape [*fūdo*] of Europe, which bases its economy on dry field farming and pastoralism. His view of history is smeared with the landscape of dry farming and pastoralism. Moreover, Marx’s ‘historical view of class struggle’ was born from the landscape in which, beginning with the ‘Hundred Years’ War’, endless conflicts were repeated by ethnic peoples who washed their blood in the blood of others.¹⁷

Japan, by contrast, is for Yasuda a place where—because of the monsoon landscape—conflict and violence cannot explain historical change, meaning that Marxism has no relevance there. This interpretation replaces but mirrors the pre-1945 belief that, since the Japanese nation was composed of the same ethnic group, there was no ethnic conflict in Japanese history. In a similar censorious vein, Yasuda uses the Book of Genesis to emphasise what he sees as the discriminatory concept of clean and unclean animals, insisting that ‘the basic philosophy of original sin can be said to continue to exist in contemporary Christianity through the discrimination of living things between clean and unclean, as seen, for example, in the apartheid of South Africa, the recent Neo-Nazi movement in Europe and

¹¹ Kawada, *The Origin of Ethnography in Japan*, p. 1.

¹² Kawada, *The Origin of Ethnography in Japan*, p. 2.

¹³ The translation ‘human environments’ is from Berque, ‘From Watsuji’s concept of “human” to beyond’, p. 139.

¹⁴ For this aspect of Watsuji’s work, see Befu, ‘Watsuji Tetsurō’s ecological approach’, p. 113. One of Yasuda’s many critiques of Christianity can be found in his *Hebi to jūjika*.

¹⁵ Cf. Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 1, pp. 23-24.

¹⁶ Skya, *Japan’s Holy War*, pp. 74, 73.

¹⁷ Yasuda, *Seimei bunmei no seiki e*, p. 65.

the discrimination against blacks and people of colour in America.’¹⁸ Needless to say, Judaic dietary restrictions were not followed in *Christian* Europe where ‘the designation of animals as unclean (especially the pig) in Judaism was actively rejected by early Christians, and would feature prominently in medieval anti-Semitism.’¹⁹ A further problem here is Yasuda’s assumption that similar ideas about Nature did not exist in the Japanese tradition. Of course, Japanese religions did not regard animals as unclean in exactly the same way as Judaism, yet the concept of pollution (*kegare*) resulting from death, childbirth or menstruation was central to the Japanese social and religious experience. Premodern Japan had very strong discriminatory beliefs about animals and the people who handled them, the latter sometimes being termed *hinin* or ‘non-humans’.²⁰ Julian Thomas argues that animals became members of human societies with the Neolithic and with domestication.²¹ In that sense, Umehara and Yasuda’s explanations for animal use in premodern Japan are very Neolithic. Over the medieval period, earlier barriers between humans and animals in European thought began to break down.²² In Japan, the opposite was true as discrimination became more entrenched in social roles.

From the 1980s, this type of polemic about Japanese culture, national identity, landscape and the archaic was expounded by a group of scholars working under Takeshi Umehara, the first director of the Nichibunken. Umehara also served as an advisor to the 1982-87 prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone with whom he wrote two books. In a speech given in 1985, Nakasone claimed that, ‘Forty years after the war and sixty years into the reign of his majesty the [Shōwa] emperor, it is time to reconsider Japanese identity. While various ideas have so far intruded from foreign countries, the time has come for us to clear away all those ideas and to form our own conclusions.’ Nakasone’s dream of studying Japanese identity without ‘intrusive’ ideas from foreign countries was realised with the establishment of the Nichibunken in 1987.²³ In response to critiques of his centre, Umehara at first played down or denied the influence of Nakasone. In one of his final publications, however, he made no attempt to hide the central role that Nakasone had played in the establishment of the Nichibunken.²⁴

In his thirties, while working as a university lecturer, Umehara became disillusioned with Western philosophy and began to study Japanese thought and letters, a move which he claims moved him even further from mainstream academia.²⁵ Reinventing himself as a representative of Japan’s colonised bourgeoisie, he attracted a large following with his popular writings. Umehara started to write about archaeology from the 1970s and began to argue that in order to understand the ‘basal culture’ (*kiso bunka*) of Japan, one needs to study the pre-agricultural Jōmon period. The terms ‘basic’ or ‘deep’ culture were frequently used by Umehara from the 1980s onwards to refer to this Jōmon heritage, which he used to Photoshop the archaic onto modern Japan. Umehara denied the role of agrilogistical Neolithic ideology and blamed *pastoralism* for the world’s ecological woes. Specifically, it was the nomadic pastoralism of the Jews and the piracy of ancient Greece which led directly to the anthropocentrism of modern scientific civilisation.²⁶ Umehara argued that, as a result, we have to return to the culture of hunter-gatherers who lived in harmony with Nature—a common enough dream in Romantic thought, yet here possessing a peculiar twist. In Japan, Umehara informs us, ‘Agricultural civilisation was established on top of hunter-gatherer civilisation. The rice cultivating culture that flourished in Japan continued the culture

¹⁸ Yasuda, *Hebi to jūjūjika*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁹ Pluskowski, ‘The zooarchaeology of medieval “Christendom”’, pp. 208-209.

²⁰ On pollution in general, see Namihara, *Kegare no kōzō*, Miyake, *Shūkyō minzokugaku* and Amino, *Rethinking Japanese History*. For animals, see Matsui, ‘The use of livestock carcasses in Japanese history’ and Hankins, *Working Skin*.

²¹ Thomas, ‘Commentary: what do we mean by “Neolithic societies”?’.

²² Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*; Ruhmann and Brieske, *Dying Gods*; Salisbury, *The Beast Within*.

²³ See Nakasone and Umehara, *Seiji to tetsugaku* and *Riidaa no rikiryō*.

²⁴ Umehara and Kawakatsu, *Nihon shisō no kosō*, pp. 78-87.

²⁵ Umehara, *Nihon bōken (jō)*, p. 24.

²⁶ Umehara and Kawakatsu, *Nihon shisō*, p. 74.

of the Jōmon [hunter-gatherers]. That Jōmon culture has penetrated deeply into Japanese Shinto and Buddhism. If we don't return to that philosophy, then ... the survival of humanity and the development of civilisation will be impossible.²⁷ These quite astonishing claims will be discussed further below, but the initial point is Umehara's belief that previously scorned 'traditional' or even 'primitive' elements of Japanese history—what Marxists used to call 'feudal hangovers'—are, in fact, of great relevance for *global* futures. 'Today', Umehara insisted, 'Japan's goal should be to create another amalgamation [of old and new]—a new civilization—that blends the industrial civilization introduced from Europe with the Japanese native culture of the forest.'²⁸

These claims draw on earlier nationalist understandings that, while outside cultures introduced into Japan in antiquity had been successfully contained with the frame of the 'national polity' (*kokutai*) centred on the emperor, 'modern' or 'Western' ideas based on individualism were fundamentally incompatible with that polity.²⁹ After 1945, the idea that 'traditional' Japanese culture has the power to save the world is found in the writings of several scholars and critics. Philosopher Shunpei Ueyama (1921–2012) argued that, 'modern industrial civilization, based on the principles of "science" and "freedom", has produced great benefits for humanity, but has also produced negative social and spiritual consequences: "poisons" to which it is necessary to seek an antidote.'³⁰ Ueyama's term 'poison' is still used to refer to European influences on Japanese thought by writers who assume that, due to its close 'harmony' with Nature, Japanese civilisation has the potential—and indeed the *obligation*—to provide an 'antidote' to the poison of the West and modern industrial culture.³¹ The comparative historian Shuntarō Itō (b. 1930) provides a further example of this world-saviour ideology with his proposal that 'it is we Japanese who must assume the responsibility of pioneering the sixth revolution in civilization.' After the human, agricultural, urban, spiritual and scientific revolutions, Itō's sixth stage is a 'new human revolution' or a 'bio-world revolution'.³²

Umehara's ideas about ecology and the archaic have been enormously influential and continue to impact environmental understandings and policy in Japan.³³ However, such eco-nationalism is sometimes played down for foreign audiences. One example is the English translation of politician Ichirō Ozawa's book *Blueprint for a New Japan*.³⁴ Most controversy over this book centred on its call for Japan to change the pacifist Article 9 of its Constitution. The claim in the original version that an 'eastern' ecological value system was most evident in Jōmon Japan and that Jōmon values should now replace Western exploitation was probably one of the least controversial parts of the book for Japanese readers. Nevertheless, in the English translation the discussion of the Jōmon is strangely omitted.³⁵ This may have been a decision by the 'editor' of the translation designed to increase 'readability', but given that the book represents a carefully crafted political statement it is possible that the omission of the Jōmon was directed by the

²⁷ Umehara and Kawakatsu, *Nihon shisō*, p. 76.

²⁸ Umehara 'The civilization of the forest', p. 47.

²⁹ This point was argued in the *Kokutai no hongī*, a propaganda text issued by the Ministry of Education in 1937. See Skya, *Japan's Holy War*, pp. 275–277.

³⁰ Cited in Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*, p. 144.

³¹ Kawakatsu and Yasuda, *Teki o tsukuru bunmei*, p. 114.

³² See Morris-Suzuki, 'Rewriting history'.

³³ While a number of studies have investigated aspects of this issue, there has not been a full analysis of the impact on policy. See Knight, 'The discourse of "encultured nature" in Japan'; Reitan, 'Ecology and Japanese history'; and Rots, *Shinto, Nature and Ideology*.

³⁴ Ozawa, *Blueprint for a New Japan*. The dust jacket of this book claims that it was first translated by the CIA. According to Chalmers Johnson, the first translation was by the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Service: see Johnson's review of *Blueprint* in *Monumenta Nipponica* 49 (1994): 379–381.

³⁵ See Hudson, 'Archaeology as Japanology'.

author.³⁶ Ivan Hall has noted how ‘many Japanese intellectuals and spokesmen for Japan manipulate their dialogue with the outside world to “deflect scrutiny, put down criticism, and raise false hopes of intellectual decartelization.”’³⁷

Within the Alt-Nichibunken group, three of Umehara’s ideas remain especially influential. The first is that although Japan’s rise to modernity owed a great deal to the West, Western modernity ‘seems to have exhausted itself in nihilism, the obsessive pursuit of pleasure through economic growth and the destruction of nature.’³⁸ This is pure Nietzsche but Umehara uses this to propose a second idea that, in order to overcome the crisis of modernity, Japan should re-examine its traditional cultures and religious beliefs—including those of prehistoric hunter-gatherers—which, he argues, were characterised by a ‘harmonious’ relationship with Nature. A third point, which Umehara takes from Arnold Toynbee, is an understanding of world history as the rise and fall of different civilisations. Again following Toynbee, Umehara argues that religion lies at the centre of a civilisation and proposes that three principles inherent in ‘European civilisation’—individualism, the conquest of Nature and the denial of life after death—are largely responsible for the current global crisis. Umehara’s conclusion is that the ‘forest civilisation’ of Japan, based on a suite of religious ideas derived from animism, Shinto and Buddhism, should be considered as an alternative to ‘European civilisation’. Yasuda uncritically adopts this framework from Umehara yet goes further in expressing these ideas through landscape history and Watsuji’s concept of *fūdo*.

The first chapter of this book will attempt to define Japanese eco-nationalism and provide some historical context for what remains an influential way of looking at the world in contemporary Japan. I argue that, despite its superficial concern with Nature, this approach is profoundly *non-ecological* because it attempts to deny the connectivity of living things. Japanese eco-nationalism is, however, clearly nationalistic, and I suggest that it possesses many features of Umberto Eco’s definition of *Ur-fascism*. Chapter 2 looks at landscape and Watsuji’s role in generating a determinist approach to the relationship between climate and culture. I explore the influence of Watsuji’s work in a Gothic genre of nationalist landscape writing in post war Japan, exemplified in texts by Yamaori and Yasuda. In Chapter 3, I examine Watsuji’s concept of *jūsōsei* or ‘stratigraphic layering’, an approach which continues to influence how Japanese archaeologists and anthropologists understand the relationship between Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures in the archipelago. Chapter 4 argues that the eco-nationalist project in modern Japan has been mirrored and encouraged by the influence of broader Romantic ideas in Japanese archaeology. This argument is illustrated through a close reading of a recent book on the Jōmon by Tatsuo Kobayashi titled *Jōmon bunka ga Nihonjin no mirai o hiraku* or ‘Jōmon culture opens up the future of the Japanese’. A concluding chapter summarises the main arguments of the present volume.

³⁶ The 1994 English version was translated by Louisia Rubinfiem and edited by Eric Gower. Chalmers Johnson’s review explains that, according to the Japanese press, *Blueprint* was a result of around one hundred meetings by bureaucrats and scholars. Ozawa is said to have attended only eighty of those meetings, nevertheless implying that the work reflects a broader political consensus in the early 1990s.

³⁷ Skya, *Japan’s Holy War*, p. 28, citing Hall, *Cartels of the Mind*, p. 150.

³⁸ Umehara ‘The civilization of the forest’, p. 41