

Aboriginal culture in contemporary Japanese literature¹

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Distinct themes from indigenous Australian culture can be found in the texture of modern Japanese literature. My investigation into how widely and deeply Aboriginal culture has emerged in Japanese literature has two objectives: one is to see its relevance in Japanese texts and the other is to identify its role. In other words, is Aboriginal culture reproducible in another country's culture? If so, does it lose its authenticity? My theoretical analyses are based on Walter Benjamin's theories of "reproduction" and "reversibility" in the arts, particularly in storytelling. Also relevant, is Mircea Eliade's *Birth and Rebirth*², published in 1958 and in Japanese translation in 1971, in which among other indigenous peoples' customs and rituals, Aboriginal initiation rites were analysed with their religious meanings.

As background I would like to comment briefly on the exposure of Aboriginal culture in Japan. In the last five to ten years, Aboriginal culture has emerged as having a distinct impact on the world scene. The most promoted aspect was seen at the time of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games where an Aboriginal theme in dance was featured. Aboriginal dance companies, *Bangara*, Aboriginal films, *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) Aboriginal plays, such as *Stolen* (2002), together with music and exhibitions of Aboriginal art have now been shown overseas and taken their place as being exportable from Australia, representing one section of the diversity in Australian culture.

Takemitsu Tôru (1930-1990), a composer of world stature, went to Groote Island in 1981 to study Aboriginal music. He subsequently composed a symphony, *Dreamtime*, which has been highly

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acclaimed, and in his book of essays, *Tôï sakebigoe no kanata he*³ (Towards the distant cry, 1992) Takemitsu wrote about the unique qualities of Aboriginal music. In an essay, “Sound of East, Sound of West”⁴, he discussed the uniqueness of Aboriginal music and how it is inseparable from the land and its environment, whereas Western music is transportable from one culture to another. Also of interest is the poem, *Uluru*⁵, written by Shiraishi Kazuko in 1988, in which she recognizes an eternal Aboriginal vision: “There lies a desert/The figures of the Aborigines cannot be seen but they are there.”

The introduction of Aboriginal culture to Japan, however, was made long before our present time. Japanese anthropologists, such as Koyama Shûzô and Kubota Sachiko, made a significant contribution from the 1970s onward. The National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, founded in 1974, is a major research centre, where indigenous cultures worldwide are exhibited. In 1985 the Kobe City Museum held an exhibition “*Kariudo no yume: Ôsutoraria aborijini no sekaï*” (Hunters’ dreaming: the world of Australian Aborigines) in conjunction with the National Museum of Ethnology. In 1992 the exhibition of “*Ôsutoraria aborijini: kariudo to seirei no 5 mannen*” (Australian Aborigines: fifty thousand years of hunters and spirits) was held in the National Museum of Ethnology. These exhibitions, however, heavily emphasise Aboriginal history, anthropological artefacts, life styles, social issues and education. On the other hand, in 2003 the Guntner Myer Collection, *Australian Aborigines contemporary Arts: home of spirits* toured worldwide and came to Japan.

While, naturally, a knowledge of Aboriginal culture and people has been generally known in Japan, the diversity and individuality of living Aboriginal culture is not widely understood. Aboriginal culture is indisputably part of Australian life. I would like in this paper to concentrate on Aboriginal influence incorporated into Japanese literature. Artistic expression is entirely different from scientific research. I believe that the arts have a significant place, relevant to the consciousness of our times across all borders. This field has been long neglected, but an understanding of Aboriginal culture, particularly as it is expressed through legends and the

² Eliade, Mircea, *Birth and Rebirth*, trans. from the French by William R. Trask, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1958. *Sei to Saisei*, trans. by Ichirô Hori, Tokyo University Press, 1971.

³ Takemitsu, Tôru, *Tôï sakebigoe no kanata he*, Shinchôsha, Tokyo, 1992.

⁴ Takemitsu, Tôru, *Confronting Silence*, trans and ed. by Yoshiko Kakudo and Glenn Glasow, Fallen Leaf Press, Berkeley, California, 1995, pp. 59-67. See also Alison Tokita’s article, “Australia as Takemitsu’s ‘Other’” in *A Way a Lone, Writings on Tôru Takemitsu*, eds. Hugh de Ferranti and Yôko Narazaki, Academia Music, Tokyo, 2002, pp. 9-19.

Aboriginal arts, has had a stimulating effect in some areas of the arts of Japan, although at a national level this cannot be said to be great.

My research so far has identified three distinct levels of Aboriginal influence in Japanese literature. Firstly, the conceptual use of Aboriginal mythology by Ôe Kenzaburô, who became a Nobel laureate in 1994; secondly, an image of the Aborigine as a human rights fighter by Inoue Hisashi (b. 1934), who was a resident writer at the Australian National University in 1975-76, and published a novel in 1977, entitled *Kiiron nezumi*⁶ (Yellow Rats); and thirdly, a typical suburban Aboriginal family was depicted in Yamamoto Michiko's novella, "Beti-san no niwa"⁷ (Betty's garden), in 1972, which won the Akutagawa Literary Prize.

Let me discuss briefly how these writers have conceptualised the Aboriginal in their fiction. To begin with, Ôe Kenzaburô had actually visited Groote Island in March 1968 after participating in the Adelaide Arts Festival⁸ as a guest. He stayed there with the Aboriginal people. In his essay, "Kotoba ga kyozetsu suru"⁹ (The language itself refuses [to accept the reality of other languages]) in 1969, Ôe recalls how congenial he felt towards the Aboriginal people on the island¹⁰. They came to shake hands with him in friendship when the lights of an open-air film theatre were switched off and they no longer were worried about the white audience there. Ôe felt convinced that he was a descendant from those who had run away from the forest in earlier times as a form of protest against the ruler's oppression. The word he uses is "*chôsan*" (run away), which appears frequently in his writings to this day, symbolising his standing as an anti-authoritarian individual. He felt close to the Aborigines in this regard. Particularly he claims that those who have run away have the opportunity to start anew with fresh directions in life. The essay as a whole designates the author's conviction that he himself can live the life of "*chôsan*". With this kind of congeniality with the Aborigines and his own conviction, Ôe later took up the Eternal Dreamtime as an aspect in his fiction.

⁵ Morton, Leith, ed. & trans. *An Anthology of Contemporary Japanese Poetry*, Garland Publishing, New York & London, 1993, p. 230.

⁶ Inoue, Hisashi, *Kiiron nezumi*, Bungei Shunjû, Tokyo, 1977.

⁷ *Collected works of Akutagawa Prize winning stories*, Vol. 9, Bungei Shunjû, Tokyo, 1983, pp. 293-344.

⁸ The 1968 Adelaide Arts Festival showed a strong interest in Aboriginal art. For example, Ainslie Roberts exhibited the series of his paintings, based on Aboriginal mythology. The entire collection was sold out in one day. (Paintings by Ainslie Roberts and text by Charles P. Mountford, *The Dreamtime Book*, Rigby, Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, 1979 at the back of the front jacket.)

⁹ Ôe, Kenzaburô, *Kowaremono to shiteno nin'gen*, Kôdansha bungei bunko, Tokyo, 1994, pp. 33-60.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 37-38.

I must mention that Aboriginal myths comprise an infinite variety of tales concerning the creation of their Universe as well as before the time of creation. The myths also establish the rules of human behaviour that all must follow. Their precise meaning is difficult to define or categorise, the Eternal Dreamtime being also highly imaginative and abstract. Ôe, therefore, relies on a book¹¹ he read, and interprets it in his novels, for example, *Natsukashii toshi e no tegami* (Letters to my nostalgic years) in 1992:

I have come to understand the beliefs of my own village people in the forest, having read this book that describes the great age of “the Eternal Dreamtime” as an archetype of the supreme way of life. The people thought that the most desirable form of life existed in the foundation period of the village in the forest. We know this old story, don’t we? Here I think that a parallel exists between the Aborigines and my village people. In our village belief the soul resting at the foot of one’s own tree after leaving the dead body must be the soul that returned to “the Eternal Dreamtime”. Your soul and my soul eventually will leave the body, return to the foot of a respective tree in the forest, and find out again the view of “the Eternal Dreamtime”¹².

This novel is said to be autobiographical including not only the author’s life experiences but also his own published works, but it is extremely complex in its structure and imaginative plots. Ôe is, however, revealing the hidden source of his imagination from “the Eternal Dreamtime”, enabling him to construct a transcendental vision of perpetuity in human history.

The Dreamtime has strong links with his own village mythology. The succession of his village-nation-cosmos stories, based on the forest, emerged in the 1980s. In Chapter Two of this novel with the subheading “*Mekishiko no [doreemutaimu]*” ([The Eternal Dreamtime] experienced while living in Mexico), the narrator was able to find strength and encouragement through the letters sent by his alter ego, Brother Gii from his village in Shikoku. While living in Mexico the narrator becomes absorbed in a time beyond actual time – a dreamtime. His grandmother had once said quietly to him in a voice close to singing: “Whenever a person died in this village, the soul of that person would climb up through the forest, flying, and then would settle at the foot of

¹¹ Ôe refers to a book published by “A. H. & A. W. Reed Pty Ltd” without mentioning the exact title. The publisher is well known with its series of books entitled Reed Books About the Aboriginal including *Aboriginal Myths: Tales of the Dreamtime*, 1978. However, I could not find which book he refers to.

¹² Ôe, Kenzaburô, *Natsukashii toshi e no tegami*, Kôdansha bungei bunko, Tokyo, 1992, pp. 77-79

a tree. There it would wait until it could revert back to life again". Here the familiar Ôe theme of spiritual rejuvenescence was born. The idea of rebirth in village folklore has its parallel in "the Eternal Dreamtime". Brother Gii defines "the Eternal Dreamtime" as the period in which the archetype of supreme human life existed, as in the period when the village was established. Brother Gii is in fact the same prototype and has the same characteristics as Takashi in the *Silent Cry*, published earlier in 1967. Here through repetition we can see traces of "the Eternal Dreamtime", transcending time and merging similar figures and events in timelessness.

Adding to the Eternal Dreamtime, Ôe makes use of the powers of penetration demonstrated in the x-ray methods of Aboriginal paintings, for which Groote Island is famous. In the story entitled "Grûto tô no rentogen gahô"¹³(The x-ray method of paintings on Groote Island, 1984) the narrator feels his own vulnerability, sensing that a group of Aborigines are able to penetrate into his character as if he were being x-rayed. Here, as if it were an incident evocative of the Dreamtime, the x-ray method of Aboriginal paintings is successfully utilised. The connections that Ôe is making in these stories invite us to realise the common bond existing in all cultures with their uniqueness remaining intact. The narrator towards the end of the story expressed his desire to take the Aboriginal concept of "the Eternal Dreamtime" as one of the main themes in his literature.

Inoue Hisashi (b. 1934) depicts a rather idealised Aboriginal elder as being wise and totally familiar with the detail of the land and climate in the Outback. His story, *Yellow Rats*, deals with Japanese POW escapees in Australia. It is meant to be mock-heroic with a tone of humour and bitterness combined. The words 'yellow rats' refer to Japanese POWs as well as the prison building where they lived. The Japanese escapees led by the Aboriginal elder perished in the desert of the Outback. The nature descriptions in the novel are convincingly beautiful and have their own force when compared to the facile human preoccupations of the POWs, such as "we are the race closest to the gods", or "in the name of Emperor". One Japanese POW, Satô, seems to have survived. In order to survive he was made a witchdoctor by the wisdom and sympathy of the Aboriginal elder. His re-appearance is only hinted at in the epilogue. One interesting fact is that the narrator recognized Japanese characteristics in the picture of an Aboriginal human rights fighter photographed in front of the Parliament House in the *Canberra Times*, 1977. This Aboriginal leader Sayû Bannip responded to an interview by saying, "my favourite word is freedom, food is emu's dry meat, drink is the frog water, flower is cherry blossom and what I

most desire to have is the return of our lost rights and the letters describing Aboriginal phonetic sounds”¹⁴. Satô is a mine engineer and independent individual. Inoue depicts successfully the wisdom and profundity of Aboriginal beliefs in the context of this Japanese POW story, particularly demonstrating how Aboriginal culture is linked to the land. This story deals with the cultural diversity existing in Australian society at a time just before the end of the War, particularly the way in which the Aborigines were living as an underclass, yet remaining true to their cultural inheritance and beliefs. Inoue’s sympathy and respect for the dignity of the Aboriginal people are evident. He has incorporated these elements in this novel, showing how they are parallel to his character Satô’s independent way of life, separate from the majority of Japanese people. Both Satô and the Aborigines are portrayed as oppressed by the society they live in.

Yamamoto Michiko in her story, “*Betty’s garden*”, describes a Japanese war bride’s lonely life in the city of D, most likely Darwin, where Aboriginal people are almost the lost people. The war bride, Betty, also lost her own identity, love and trust towards her husband. The relationship with her children is of comfort to her, but it also is ambiguous because they are neither Japanese nor Australian. Betty could feel the presence of threat in the vacant looks of Aboriginal people’s eyes, yet she couldn’t understand why. Her sense of alienation, isolation and disappointment that has resulted in her life are realistic and helpless, with equally lost Aboriginal people as background. There is no communication between Betty and her Aboriginal neighbour, an old man sitting on the ground and drawing paintings all day long. Yamamoto focused on reactions to her life, not on bringing out Aboriginal issues. Yet the total lack of interaction obviously reflects Betty’s fate.

The three authors we have looked at are all relevant to Japanese readership, as we can see in Ôe’s “the Eternal Dreamtime”, Inoue’s “the Japanese-Aboriginal human rights fighter” and Yamamoto’s “the lost people”. The role of the Aboriginal differs in each of the stories, showing the diversity and wealth of Aboriginal culture that can be taken up or shared with writers and readers. In these stories Aboriginal culture and attitudes have retained their own authenticity, without being absorbed or reproduced in Japanese culture. Perhaps anthropologists could argue over the correctness of detail. But imaginative work such as these stories can adapt foreign ideas and in that adaptation give voice to new meanings. In Benjamin’s word, *the aura* of the original

¹³ Ôe, Kenzaburô, *Collected novels of Ôe Kenzaburô*, Shinchôsha, Tokyo, 1997, pp. 83-105.

¹⁴ *Kiiroi nezumi*, p.251.

work of art may be lost, but it is re-motivated in new aesthetic expression¹⁵. As for the adaptation of Aboriginal culture by our three authors, the ability for cultural relevance to be modified can be clearly seen in their stories. What is original in them is the authors' artistic creativity, adapting, extending and integrating themes into their fiction.

Stories like the Aboriginal Dreamtime or legends and folklore, which are indigenous to a cultural society are transmitted from generation to generation, which Benjamin saw as the foundation of a tradition. Whoever first tells a story never survives, but the story that remains in one's memory does survive. Then, the story becomes the 'afterlife' of the people. In Ôe's case, he regards himself as a self-appointed village storyteller which he has expressed in *Dôjidai gêmu*¹⁶ (The Game of Contemporaneity, 1979). A reversal role in which the listener becomes the storyteller has a direct relationship with story and memory. Memory can also be latent in one's subconsciousness. Ôe's use of the Aboriginal Dreamtime thus becomes his own memory.

I must also add Ôe's interest in spiritual regeneration which is apparent in his later works. The "Eternal Dreamtime" can be a stepping stone in the creation of timelessness in mythological form. In 1971 the Japanese translation of Mircea Eliade's book, *Birth and Rebirth*, was published, in which Aboriginal rituals are detailed. It is quite likely that Ôe read this book and found in it further inspiration for his theme of spiritual regeneration. Ôe's adoption of "the Eternal Dreamtime" allows him to extend the horizon of a literary genre to its full extent. He created village mythology within the realm of "the Eternal Dreamtime", which conveys most effectively his commitment to literature as a means of salvation for troubled humanity. The Eternal Dreamtime is not by any means the only imaginative source which he uses, but certainly it is a fundamental way of providing him with a concept of spiritual regeneration.

¹⁵ Lechte, John, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp. 203-206.

¹⁶ Ôe, Kenzaburô, *Dôjidai gêmu*, Sinchôbunko, Tokyo, 1984. See, pp. 7-9.