

Nelly Naumann's 'Japanese Prehistory: The Material and Spiritual Culture of the Jōmon Period' – a Review

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Fig. 1
Upper Part of a Figurine
Final Jōmon Period
Earthenware
UEA 975.

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Introduction

Before addressing the theoretical and methodological position Naumann adopts in her book on Japanese prehistory, it is interesting to contextualise her work. Although ‘Japanese Prehistory: The Material and Spiritual Culture of the Jōmon Period’, was published in 2000, Naumann died the same year in Germany on the 29th of September (Antoni and Blümmel, 2001: 136) shortly before the publication date of December 31st.¹ As the text is largely concerned with questions of Jōmon spiritual symbolism, and particularly the philosophy of rebirth after death, it is interesting to note that Naumann was preoccupied with such themes in her last work. Moreover, as other reviewers have observed, Naumann was fearless in criticising the work of her contemporaries. These include Japanese scholars such as Harunari Hideji, Kanaseki Hiroshi, and Mizuno Masayoshi. In contrast, Naumann maintained that the Jōmon worldview was more vivid than her contemporaries suggested, and religious practice much more complex than previously believed (Hudson, 2002: 466).

As a folklorist and proponent of an interdisciplinary framework, as well as a comparative methodology, Naumann remained unappreciated by followers of the founding father of Japanese folklore, Yanagita Kunio. Yanagita favoured a Japan-centric approach that confined periods of time into compartmentalised boundaries with corresponding disciplines. Jōmon through to Kofun broadly belonged to the realm of Archaeology; Nara and Heian periods to the study of historical literature; with periods beyond this divided between folklore and ethnology (Matsumura, 2006: 164). Naumann heavily contested Yanagita’s methods as well as the conclusion of his first work, ‘*Nochi no Karikotoba no Ki*’ (A History of Hunting terms), a study of oral literature from Shiiba village, Miyazaki prefecture. In this study Yanagita proposed that a deity descended from the mountain to manifest as the divinity of the rice fields during the agricultural cycle. According to Matsumura, this was later endorsed by his student (Yoshio Hotta, 1966), who further explored the phenomenon, and concluded that the deity of the mountain and rice field was indeed the dual deity Yanagita had suggested.

In contrast to this, by comparing geographical regions outside Japan, Naumann developed a conceptualisation whereby an older, mythic-cultic layer of mountain divinity existed in the form of a ‘mistress of animals’ – and deity of the hunt. Such figures had powers of fertility:

¹ Date sourced from ‘Book Depository’, accessed 30/10/19: <https://www.bookdepository.com/Japanese-Prehistory-Nelly-Naumann/9783447043298>.

as ‘goddesses’ who were not only hunting deities but also ‘divine midwives’, ensuring reproductive powers in humans. This conception was comparable to ‘forest divinities’ in existence among hunters of Northern Eurasia. Comparisons were also drawn between the Greek Artemis/Diana: mistress of animals and important in girls’ initiation rites, as well as midwifery. Additionally, Naumann surmised that the model of a deity alternating between the mountains and the rice paddies, as suggested by Yanagita, was formed when slash and burn cultivators adopted the earlier ‘goddess’ deity from the hunters. Naumann argued that a biographical element further developed as the deity was later adopted by cultivators of the plains from mountain rice paddy farmers. This view is now considered to be more comprehensive than the initial model offered by Yanagita (Matsumura, 2006: 164). Indeed, Japanese folklorists have not only left comparative regional parallels outside of Japan unacknowledged, but also missed the complex biography of the deity and its movements, thereby lacking both the depth and breadth of scope demonstrated in Naumann’s analysis (Matsumura, 2006: 164).

Accordingly, Naumann’s comparative approach served as a vehicle to debate the ‘originality’ of Japanese culture, a dominant theme of the time. This became formalised in the discourse of *nihonjinron* 「日本人論」 (theories of Japanese uniqueness), popularised in the 1980s and 1990s – and partly an attempt to explain the reasons associated with Japan’s economic prowess post WWII. By seeking commonalities across cultures, her work fell outside the dominant narrative of *nihonjinron*, a discourse largely uninterested in a: ‘complex and complicated historical truth whose only constant factor is continuous change’ (Antoni and Blümmel, 2001: 142). Naumann’s research, in contrast, was suitable for a modern Japanology, beyond the confines of functionalism and the ethnocentrism of Japan-focused foundations (Matsumura 2006: 142). Accordingly, ‘scholars today and in the future will be able to learn much from her rigorous critique of the sources and from her comparative approach, in which she succeeded in reconciling philological hermeneutics with ethnological comparison’ (Antoni and Blümmel, 2001: 142). Indeed, the comparative aspects of her work – which seek commonalities across cultures – culminates in reconnecting Japan to a more interconnected global arena, and away from a vacuum of isolation inherent in *nihonjinron*. The consequence of this method results in the greatest strength of her work.

Perhaps due to her innovative approach and lack of conformity to Japan-centric scholarship, it could be argued that Naumann was unappreciated largely because she was ahead of, or

‘outside of’ her time. Alternatively, it could be regarded that Naumann was following the traditions of her own context: a European-based model unknown to native Japanologists due to a lack of translated materials. Perhaps conscious of her marginal position within the dominant discourse, throughout the text Naumann is scathing of scholarship she disagrees with, often dismissing it without meaningful engagement. On the other hand, writers whose iconographic models she comparatively implements – such as her dependence upon the work of Carl Hentze, writing in a Chinese context from 1932 onwards – are drawn upon extensively due to his, ‘immense knowledge... keen faculty of observation... and the necessary intuition’ (Naumann, 2000: 113). While she notes that Chinese scholars have been speculative of Hentze’s approach, which heavily depends upon the ‘*seen and perceived*’, she does little to defend their shared position except by adding that it requires: ‘the capability of symbolic perception in order to follow his argumentation’, and the implementation of ‘visual thinking’ over ‘word thinking’ (Naumann, 2000: 113-4). Additionally, her use of comparisons with very different socio-cultural contexts (rice-cultivating Japan with Ancient Greece, for example) are fascinating, but also lack any proviso that this approach is not value-free and requires careful consideration and rigorous justification, especially when implementing such broad regional analogies which include differentials in time as well as space.

Theoretical Methodology

Naumann’s analysis relies heavily on the visual: the comparison between symbols rendered upon the surface of objects which she ‘reads’ and classifies as if the artefacts were texts appears to be her main technique. Within this methodology she ‘decodes’ the language of objects, and their grammar of signs including serpents, frogs, the significance of the number three,² skin placed on top of skin, the ‘water of life/death’, and secretions of the moon embodied in tears depicted on the figurines – to name a few dominant themes. She analyses commonalities between these visual motifs en masse in order to postulate the existence of an ancient ‘moon cult’ symbolic of death and rebirth, embodied in the lunar waxing and waning, ‘that month by month visibly enacts the drama of its own death and revival’ (Naumann, 2000: 223). This event was ‘fundamental to Jōmon symbolism’, and significant due to the

² Multiples of three are significant in many objects including the ‘three fingered hand’ appearing on the figurine from the Imonoshiya site, Yamanashi prefecture. This is understood to reflect the symbolism of three moon-less nights in the lunar cycle when the old moon dies and is ‘reborn’ anew, a symbol found both in the Pacific and Pre-Columbian America (Naumann, 2000:156-8).

understanding that: ‘The cosmic event serves as the very image of and as guarantor for the events on the human plane’ (Naumann, 2000: 214). A compelling argument.

However, it is also important to note that because one object’s decoration and adornment visually looks like another, or evokes similar imagery, does not mean there is a shared understanding of these symbols across time and space. Yet her method draws heavily on shared similar imagery from as far away as Peru to closer geographical proximities, such as China. Furthermore, she does not seem to consider that what appears to the modern eye as an easily recognisable object could possibly have had very different connotations or have performed different functions at an earlier stage: for Naumann, symbols are universal, transcending time and socio-cultural context. This is evident in her discussion of what makes an object ‘symbolic’ as she evokes the writings of Mircea Eliade and endorses the view that the world, ‘speaks and reveals itself through symbols’ (Eliade, M. 1962: 296-305 in Naumann, 2000: 112). These are dependent upon six contingencies which she explains in detail before applying theoretically to artefacts in the Japanese context in order to demonstrate their fulfilment of Eliade’s criteria.

Naumann pursues her analysis of symbolism in the continuation of prehistoric ‘moon cult’ motifs in later myths recorded in the *Nihon Shoki* 「日本書紀」 (Chronicle of Japan, AD 720) and *Kojiki* 「古事記」 (Records of Ancient Matters, AD 712). Her evidence for this depends principally in evoking the god Susano-o as embodying the characteristics of the moon. Yet this line of analysis is fraught with problems: crucially that within the mythic-historical texts Susano-o is a storm god, not a moon god. Naumann circumvents this issue by arguing that Susano-o has ‘lunar traits’ befitting of a moon god, which include secretions embodying the ‘water of life/death’. She also argues that the actual moon god Tsukiyomi (who plays a minor role), alongside Susano-o’s ‘original nature’ were obscured and compromised historically through the compilation of different traditions and sources into one mythic narrative (Naumann, 2000: 133). However, Naumann does not account for the fact that is the Sun goddess, Amaterasu, and not any form of moon god (in name or characteristic), who is the main focus in the recorded mythological narratives, and head of the Japanese pantheon. This oversight also remains unaddressed in Naumann’s theory of a dominant prehistoric ‘moon cult’, in which the sun appears marginalised in favour of a lunar deity. If there was shift from lunar imagery and symbolism in the artefacts to a solar mythic-narrative in the texts, under what circumstances did this transpire?

In another example, Naumann supports an analysis by Barber she finds, ‘very sober and convincing’, that the Paleolithic ‘Venus’ figurines are sometimes depicted wearing a ‘skirt’ (fig. 2). This item of clothing is, ‘... too skimpy and breezy to be of any real use in keeping warm... It must have served as a non-linguistic statement of sexual capacity or availability on the part of the female wearer’, due to the visual appearance of ‘framing’ the area or ‘by making it the object of an intriguing game of peekaboo’ (Barber, 1992: 256f. in Naumann, 2000: 85). Labelling the item as a skirt – problematic to begin with, as modern skirts cover skin from the waist downwards in varying lengths, and this item is worn underneath the buttocks (fig. 2a) and belts the waist (fig. 2b) – before regarding it as a thinly-veiled Palaeolithic version of a 1960s style mini-skirt advertising ‘sexual availability’ perhaps reveals more about our contemporary shared understandings and connotations suggested by items of clothing, rather than creating a useful analogy across time.

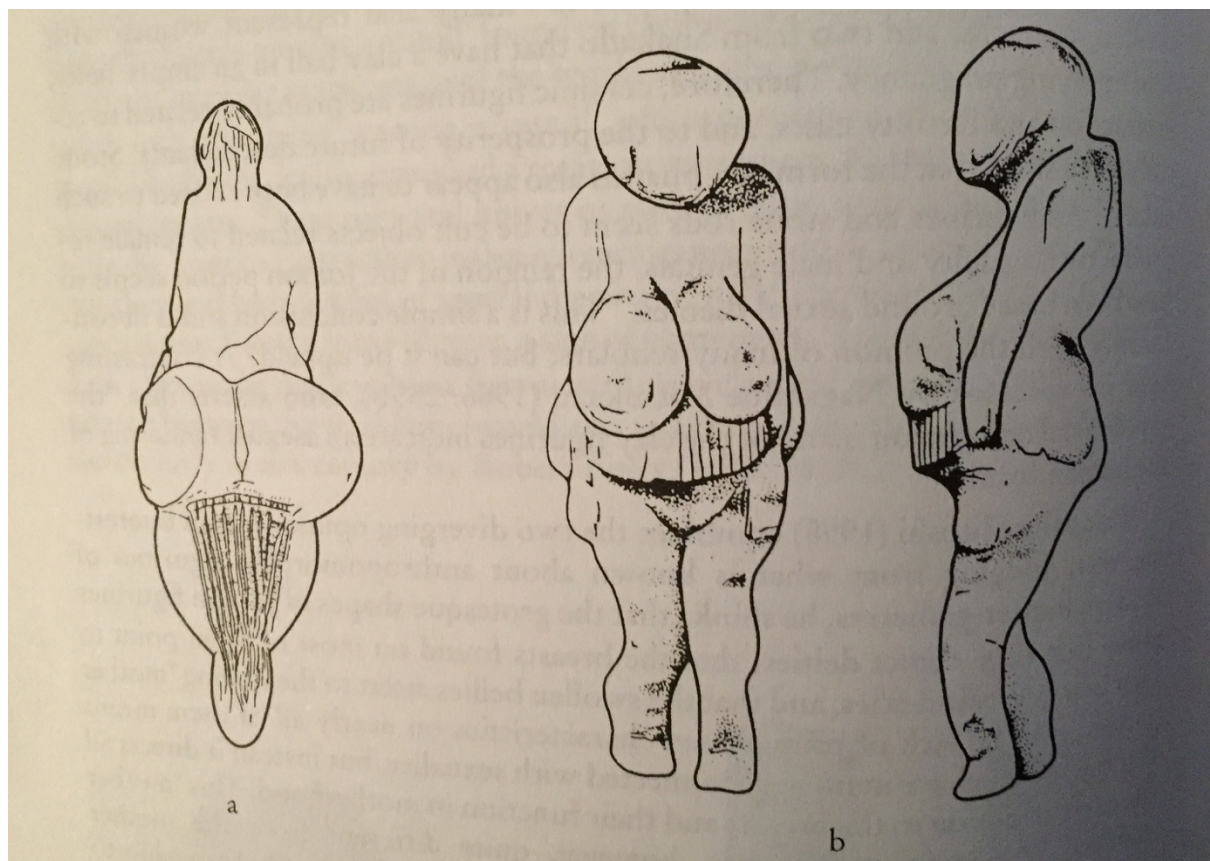


Fig. 2 Paleolithic ‘Venus’ figurines (a. France, b. Russia).

However, if we adopt Naumann’s comparative approach and look further afield to the Pacific at the *liku*, we can see that sexualised depictions of female bodies associated with nakedness have obscured the situated meaning of these adornments. Known commonly as ‘grass skirts’,

an ethnographic, historical and museological study by Jacobs (2019), has argued that these items were lifetime companions for women, serving as markers of numerous social functions and adapted at times of initiation, marriage and maternity. Perhaps contemporary and more recent historical ethnographic analogies such as these, although they span both time and region, may develop further a framework of cross-cultural reference which Naumann advocates. As Naumann herself queries:

‘Did they represent a divine female, a goddess, wearing such a skirt and protecting nubile girls or women in general? Were they used by them as amulets? Or simply as an advertisement that there were marriageable girls in the family? All these questions must remain open’.

(Naumann, 2000: 85).

In order to probe these questions more convincingly, it appears important to primarily acknowledge our own cultural and contemporary biases in order to arrive at a more balanced starting point, rather than allowing them to inform opinions, as unconscious baggage operating ‘backstage’ – which, I would argue, appears to be the case in the discussion of the ‘skirts’ depicted in the Palaeolithic figurines.

Another issue is the lack of references to both primary and secondary archaeological sources informing understanding throughout the text, meaning that the reader often has to take Naumann’s suppositions as received opinion. For example, in a section on ‘Figurines – General Observations’ (2000: 90), she writes: ‘There can be no doubt that the features which transcend human appearance must be the symbolic expression of certain superhuman, divine qualities, or of general religious ideas’ (fig. 1),³ without offering any contextual evidence or intellectual reasoning to justify this claim; or in lieu of these, offering alternative views which could then be disregarded in light of her more convincing argument. However, this criticism should be regarded in relation to the context of her writing: Naumann states initially that there is little research on religious culture in prehistoric Japan, other than in terms of a ‘fertility cult’ (2000: XI). Furthermore, she notes the inherent problems with a lack of interest on the part of archaeologists in religion, who ascribe everything considered ‘non-practical’ as ‘ritual’, ‘cultic’ or ‘ceremonial’, and additionally, report difficulties in reconstructing a

³ See Figure 1 for an example of a ‘Kamegaoka figurine’ currently displayed at the Sainsbury Centre UEA. Named after a regional category of figures excavated in the North East of Japan in the final stage of the Jōmon tradition, they are recognisable for ‘bulging eyes’ (Naumann, 2000: 47), also referred to as ‘snow goggles’.

‘spiritual life’ (*seishin seikatsu*) via material remains of the past (Kanaseki Hiroshi, 1983: 274 in Naumann, 2000: 63).

Practice and Belief

When discussing stone arrangements for burial Naumann notes the resemblance to stone circles but claims a lack of possibility in exploring the practices of ceremonial or cultic acts; instead she proposes a symbolic analysis. Thus, she notes the significance of stone/wood circles found in their collective shape, which may be indicative of hidden, symbolic meaning, perhaps of the cosmos as a whole.

‘This arrangement, consisting of an upright, slender stone in the center in conjunction with four prominent boulders within the enclosing circle, which point to the four cardinal points, can only be a symbolic representation of the world as it also appears in Japanese mythology, the ‘Heavenly Pillar’, and the world axis, at its center’.

(Naumann, 2000: 77).

Conversely, she decides that: ‘The individual small stone arrangements which together make up the larger circles seem rather meaningless, simple recognition marks’ (Naumann, 2000: 77). However, she fails to justify any evidence which makes her certain of these claims.

These ideas are later drawn into an overarching framework of a ‘death cult’ symbolised by the moon, serpent and frog imagery embodied and depicted in material artefacts and configurations. Yet despite her initial critique, she repeats the same flaws of those she criticises: the words ‘cult’ and ritual are left undefined, as indeed, are satisfying explanations of the differences presupposed between the possible existence of a ‘death cult’ (and absence of) an ‘ancestor cult’. Naumann claims there is little evidence for an ‘ancestor cult’ due to: ‘the dwindling respect for those buried long ago, but not remembered any longer’ (Naumann, 2000: 76). Presumably, as Naumann identifies the importance of life after death in the evidence of ‘jar’ and ‘flexed’ burial practices,⁴ concepts relating to the communal dead (ancestors) therefore have less relevance, as theoretically individuals are ‘reborn’. Yet she leaves these factors wholly unexplained.

⁴ Naumann notes the theories concerning the flexed burial position, understood to mirror an embryo and thus supporting a ‘rebirth’ theory, while observing that binding prevents a return to harm the living. She notes that archaeology is unable to produce evidence of these concepts, as ‘rebirth’ or an afterlife could happen in another world ‘of which archaeology can tell us nothing’ (Naumann, 2000: 73).

How should Naumann's usage of the term 'cult' be understood? In the Pacific context, the archaeologist Esen-Baur defines the concept as having a consolidating function between religion and the wellbeing of society, relying on 'widespread social consensus' (Esen-Baur, 1993:150). However, how is it possible to judge if there was indeed consensus, as there are differentials in power and status of actors within every society. Furthermore is 'cult' with its negative associations of brainwashing and excess (connoted when used in everyday vocabulary in the West) a useful unit of categorisation – however concisely it is defined? Further problems with definitions are found in her discussion of 'superstitious' practices concerning the burial of the placenta in 'Chinese custom'. Her use of the terms 'superstition', 'magic', and 'female idols' (Naumann, 2000: 86) echoes the premise inherent within modernity: of the separation between practice and 'belief', with the latter emphasised in Western religiosity, in terms of following an established religion associated with written doctrine, and the prejudice against the performance of practices falling outside the biblical canon as 'superstitions', 'magic' and idolatry.

At the most basic level, what is the difference between a religion and a 'cult'; a Christian God and an 'idol'? The answer appears to lie in the informed understanding of the dominant culture undertaking the analysis. In this vein, once more, Western cultural assumptions inform writing which culminate in a subjective starting point for the discussion of Japanese prehistory. A more objective focus would concentrate upon how people practice – rather than what they may or may not report to 'believe' as informed by religious doctrine (Hooper, 2014: 189-191). While this may not be fully realisable in the archaeological context, it is possible to leave preconceptions to one side when using the words 'cult, superstitions, magic and idol', and instead refer to particular, specific, bounded practices contextualised by their locality and time. This would help to resolve the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular which is a hallmark of Judaeo-Christianity in the modern period, but redundant elsewhere due to the fact that the sacred was/is part and parcel of daily life.

There are similar issues with geographical regions and historical time frames. While Naumann consistently references distinctive Jōmon periods, specifically referring to continental influences in the Late and Final period (Naumann, 2000: 53), her overarching conclusions suggests there is still a sense of a discrete, geographically shared 'Jōmon culture' that can be quantified. Yet even though Naumann notes the inability to establish language pre-Chinese contact and the adoption of a writing system (2000: xiii), she does not seem to

fully consider the differences inherent in a population spread over an archipelago with presumably very different climactic, geographical and local conditions in her quest to record underlying commonalities.

How do we know they shared a language, mode of thought (visual or linguistic) and thus, a worldview? Are symbols which she suggests are ‘waiting to be decoded’, and ‘related to ritual use’ (2000: xii) universal? How should we approach the very tangible regional and periodical variations which are embodied in the form, size, shape, and symbolic elements of the figures? Should we assume a simplistic ‘evolution’ in skill and consciousness, shared across vast geographic areas, which has culminated in contemporary Japan, seamlessly from the past to the present? Or were there in fact great differences in locality, language and worldview – alongside continuity and change – that are depicted in the figures, and indicative of a myriad of ‘ritual’ practices throughout the archipelago, which should be considered first, as a preliminary observation. Indeed, while the geographical land mass remains more or less constant, the modern nation state of ‘Japan’ only came into being several thousand years after the ‘prehistory’ of which Naumann is writing. Given this fact, is it even possible to write a ‘Japanese Prehistory’, assuming a society and culture not yet in existence?

Such issues only come to the fore when we consider that what Naumann is offering is a definitive account of the ‘material and spiritual culture of the Jōmon period’ – a project which is ambitious, as well as flawed. Despite this, her work does suggest a bold confidence, supported by an unapologetic methodological approach of comparative symbolic analysis. Alongside this, Naumann sustains her scepticism of a simple ‘fertility cult’, first mentioned in the introduction, noting the, ‘gender-transcending qualities of Jōmon figurines, which may not necessarily be female’ (2000: 96). She refutes the simple comparison of figurines to the ‘Great Mother Goddess’, important in agrarian societies and prominent in the conception of figurines in the Ancient Near East (the dominant theory of her time), and argues that: ‘Fixation on the single idea of ‘fertility’ is simply an obstacle in our way...’ (Naumann, 2000: 97).

However, while I agree with her rejection of an overly simplistic analysis, Naumann can be accused of over-simplicity herself. In one section where she discusses the Aristotelian emphasis upon the umbilical cord in relation to the triangular clay tablets depicting breasts and navel (fig. 3), she writes: ‘Of course we cannot expect such sophisticated thinking among Jōmon people, but they necessarily must have been well acquainted with the simple facts of

birth' (2000: 115). Yet it is Naumann who lacks sophistication in this statement, as there is nothing simplistic, formulaic, or assured about the act of parturition. Furthermore, alongside death, birth is one of the greatest mysteries for human beings. If we consider for a moment more prosaic, rather than symbolic and philosophical aspects, for Jōmon people existing in a pre-medical context the proposed function of the figurines – which might have offered protection for both mother and child during pregnancy and the vagaries of childbirth⁵ – may have been crucial.

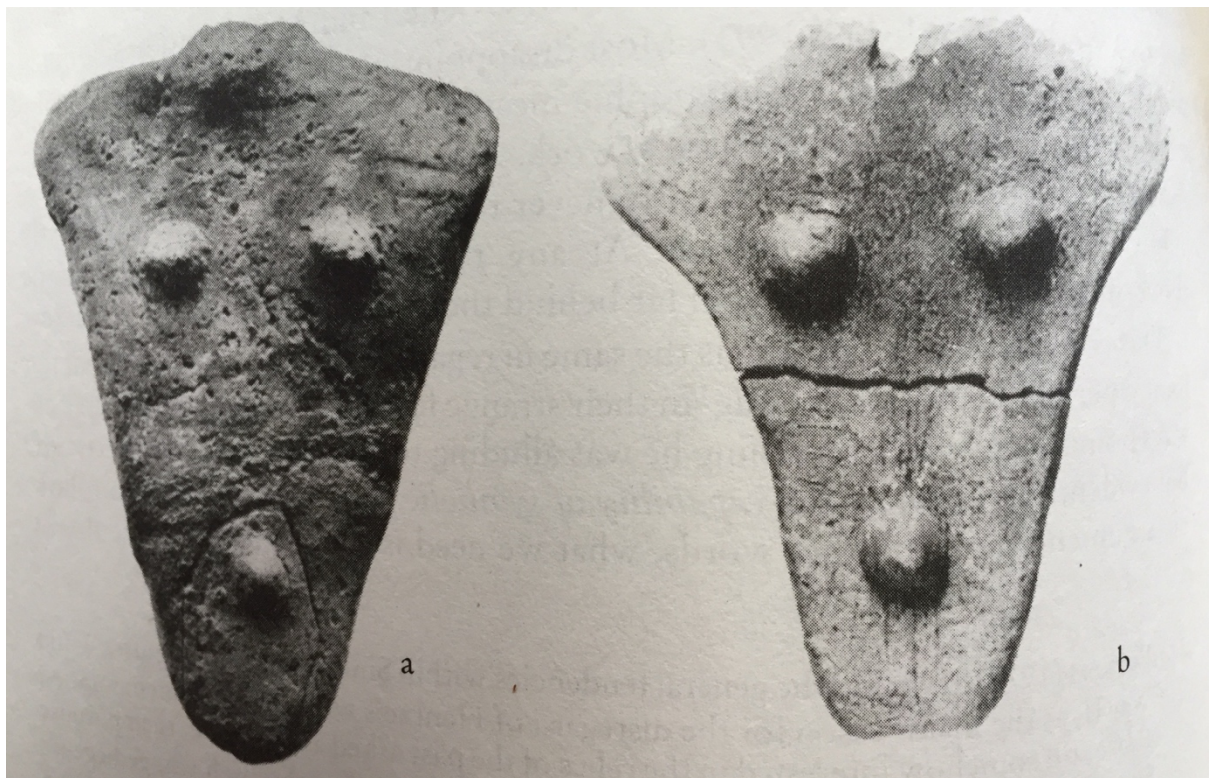


Fig. 3 Clay tablets.

Yet despite this, in other ways Naumann is insightful. Observing the skill of the Jōmon potter, she notes their ability to create both naturalistic and figurative works. She believes this indicates the differentiation between symbolic representation of religious ideas and more ordinary representation, while refuting the dominant idea that Jōmon figurines belonged to an earlier thought stage where decorative and realistic were undifferentiated (Kidder, 1965: 11b in Naumann, 2000: 97). In this way, she demonstrates a respect for, and attempt to understand Jōmon peoples. Discussing a naturalistic depiction of a face found in the Middle

⁵ The concept that the figurines had natural powers to influence pregnancy and birth was proposed by Mizuno Masayoshi in 1964, as noted by Naumann (2000: 95).

Jōmon grave pit in Narita, she writes: ‘The face impresses us with its utmost simplicity and sincerity: this is the face of a real human being’ (Naumann, 2000: 98).

Ethnographic Aspects

Alongside the strength of applying perhaps more relevant cultural analogies from continental coastal areas – particularly in terms of the practice of dolphin, seal and wild boar skull burials, a custom evidenced in the European Late Palaeolithic (still found today among North American hunting peoples) – is an attempt to connect past and present. In this vein she observes how fear, reverence and respect was demonstrated by hunters and fishermen (later incorporated into an agrarian society) in animal burial practices evidenced in Japan until recently (Naumann, 2000: 70). In exploring the relationship between man and animals and the shapeshifting potentiality between the two, she references commonalities between European fairy tales and Inuit and Japanese folktales (Naumann, 2000: 70-72).

Naumann also notes the differences between the European model which she describes as: Man (magic) – Animal – (disenchantment) Man, while emphasising the reverse in Japanese folktales where animals transform at will to human beings and back into animals (Naumann, 2000: 70). However, in emphasising these different models, she does not take into account the Scottish mythology of selkies, or ‘seal folk’, in which animals (seals) have the ability to transform into women by therianthropy: changing from seal to human form (and later back to animal form) by shedding their skin. The ambiguous mythological figure of selkies – alongside mermaids (half woman, half fish) and sirens (half woman, half bird, capable of luring passing sailors to their islands) – are associated with both the sea and the land as hybrid forms. These examples transcend the models Naumann prescribes, are well known in the European context, and the subject of numerous classical paintings (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 ‘The Fishermen and the Siren’, by Knut Ekwall (1843–1912).

On the other hand, Naumann emphasises commonalities between the Japanese and Inuit model, whereby man and animals could freely change into each other (Naumann, 2000: 70-1). However, in this analysis, she overlooks the foundational premise of this ontology: that in the South (and also North) American conception, all life is originally human, and that animals are ‘ex-humans’ and can therefore shapeshift back, a paradigm which may not be found in the Japanese case.

For Amazonian peoples, the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity. The great separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature as nature distancing itself from culture: the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans. Humans are those who continue as they have always been. Animals are ex-humans (rather than humans, ex-animals). In some cases, humankind is the substance of the primordial plenum or the original form of virtually everything, not just animals... If we conceive of humans as somehow composed of a cultural clothing that hides and controls an essentially animal nature, Amazonians have it the other way around: animals have a human, sociocultural inner aspect that is “disguised” by an ostensibly bestial bodily form. (Viveiros de Castro, 2004: 465).

In another ethnographic analogy she notes the correspondence between basic beliefs regarding game animals and fish⁶ in customs of present-day North Eurasian hunting people, and Early Jōmon hunters and fishers. Maintaining that concepts surrounding game animals and fish represent, ‘one of the oldest layers of religious ideas which we can clearly identify and which are at the same time confirmed by archaeological evidence’ (2000: 66), she extends these ideas further by weaving concepts into an ethnographic analogy with the Japanese past and present.

It may be first somewhat surprising, but it is for all that true that certain customs and beliefs connected with hunting and fishing as practiced in some remote regions of Japan, in part until the first decades of this century, show astonishing parallels – even if deformed and/or disguised in Buddhist garb.

(Naumann, 2000: 66-7).

Additionally, she observes how all hunting peoples, including those in Japan, say prayers and offerings to the deity who is ‘owner’ or ‘lord’ of the animals. In the Japanese context specifically, this is supplemented by taboos of sexual abstinence, purity, distribution of the kill, revered ‘mountain language’ when addressing the game, ‘magical formulas’, ‘pure’ fires, and prohibitions against killing sleeping animals. The dead animal is sent off in the direction of the mountain shrine as a manifestation of the deity, the skinned animal covered with its reversed skin as a reference to death as the ‘reversal’ of life and this world, and a recitation of ‘magical formulas’ ensuring the dead bear is reborn as a Buddha are: ‘clearly a transformation of the original wish for the rebirth of the animal...’ (Naumann, 2000: 67). She follows on to observe that in whaling coastal areas of Japan cemeteries contain memorial stones dedicated to the hunt inscribed with the *nenbutsu*⁷ 「念仏」: ‘*Namu Amida Butsu* 「南無阿弥陀仏」 or ‘other Buddhist formulas which seek the rebirth of the whale as a Buddha’ (Naumann, 2000: 68). Buddhist prayers for the dead are also offered and the fishermen who witnessed the death were ethnographically observed as reciting the *nenbutsu* three times in chorus to ‘pacify its soul’ (Naumann, 2000: 68).

⁶ Naumann notes possible problems when comparing bears and sea-mammals yet notes commonalities in the treatment of the Alaskan whale with the Japanese bear in returning the whale’s spirit to the sea (as explored by Lantis 1938: 446 in the Chukchee and Koryak context) (Naumann, 2000: 68).

⁷ A central tenet of the Jōdo Shinshū Pure Land Buddhist sect (the most widely practiced branch of Buddhism in Japan) is the repetition of the *nenbutsu*. It originally meant to contemplate on the Buddha, but within the sect means to recite the sacred name: ‘*Namo Amida Butsu*’ (I take refuge in the Buddha of Immeasurable Light and Life) that embodies the essence of Amida or Oneness, as expression of profound gratitude (Tanaka, K. 1997, 246-7). It also ensures rebirth in the Pure Land after death.

The treatment of the hunt, both in terms of the practices alluding to a deity (associated with the shrine in the example of the bear), as well as themes of Buddhist rebirth (seen in the case of the whale), reflects the contemporary practices of syncretic religiosity in Japan. In the described cases there is a dual division of labour in terms of the ‘mountain deity’ or *kami* (indicative of Shinto-based practices, including the importance of ritual purity and pollution) and Buddhist-informed practices (indicating interconnectivity between man and animal) with an emphasis upon the recitation of the *nenbutsu* sutra crucial in memorial practices for human beings when assisting the dead into a position of ancestorhood and assuring rebirth in the Pure Land. Subsequently, the dead animal is treated both as sacred, as an embodiment of a deity, and as a person who requires the assistance of those with whom they are in relationship with (the fishermen) to assume ancestorhood.

Conclusion

It is in this way, connecting regions and historical periods with bold analogies which work across both time and space, that Naumann is at her most inspiring and finest; and which paradoxically, could generate the most criticism. While her theoretical position can be judged positively or negatively, depending on point of view, or even disciplinary bias, I agree with Hudson (2002: 465) that the final ‘conclusions’ – where she states her main argument – should be read first. As Hudson (2002: 466) maintains, the use of ritual objects and contextual approach is central to most archaeological approaches of prehistoric religion, and that iconographic analyses are most effective when combined with a discussion of this context. Yet perhaps it is the scope of the book itself – the ambition with which she concludes a theory for the whole Jōmon worldview of Japanese prehistory, alongside a comparative analysis sweeping across time and space – which requires a gradual unfolding; rather than asserting from the beginning an argument relying upon the context of a singular assemblage of artefacts, or regional site.

Even while taking this into account, from a reader’s perspective basic issues such as lack of chapters and heavily-laden dense descriptions – which become confused by the considerable disjunction between the numerous figures and the text – means that the writing often renders a fascinating subject prone to a dry delivery which requires labour to comprehend and digest. Ultimately, however, this cannot detract from the sheer quantity of information, sustained method, and innovation in approach, which will require subsequent and engaged re-reading and consideration in order to apply to my own research. In doing so, I hope to build upon her

culturally comparative approach and use of contemporary ethnographic analogy, while remaining aware of the problems inherent in both.

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