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The Monkey as Self in Japanese Culture

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My concern in this article is the Japanese contemplation of the self via the metaphor of the monkey. I am interested in how the concept of self in Japanese culture has changed through time, and in pursuit of that question I attempt to trace the meaning of the monkey—a dominant metaphor for the self in Japanese culture—from the time of the first written records during the early part of the eighth century to the present.[1] Throughout history, the Japanese have used monkeys to deliberate about themselves. Culturally construed meanings assigned to the monkey in different historical periods, therefore, succinctly reveal the Japanese answer to the question, Who are we as humans vis-à-vis animals and as Japanese vis-à-vis foreigners? In short, the monkey has served as a mirror in which the Japanese have seen themselves, sometimes positively and other times negatively.

More specifically, the monkey has been a polysemic symbol, assigned the meanings of mediator, scapegoat, and clown, each occupying a significant place in the reflexive structure of the Japanese. Although all of these meanings have been present throughout history, the *dominant* meaning has gradually changed. Between the latter half of the Medieval period (1185–1603) and the outset of the Early Modern period (1603–1868), that is, from roughly the mid-thirteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth century, the dominant meaning of the monkey changed from mediator, represented in the belief that it was the messenger of the deities, to scapegoat, although during the transitional period the two meanings were equally dominant. The second shift in meaning is now taking place in contemporary Japan. Though the meaning of scapegoat still exists, another meaning—that

[1] For a discussion of metaphor within the context of trope theory, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1990.

of clown—is gradually emerging. These two changes in the meaning of the monkey coincide with the two major periods of transition in Japanese history.

Fully recognizing the weaknesses inherent in a macrostudy, I have ventured to consider the entire period of recorded history in Japan—from the beginning of the eighth century to the present—in order to accord my assessment of Japanese culture a sufficient duration of time. This seemingly impossible task is undertaken with the assumption that only by giving a structure of meaning enough time to work itself out through historical events can we assess the nature of transformation. Put another way, people's interpretation of a historical event is almost always mediated, at least partially, by the structure of meaning. But historical changes do not automatically reproduce that structure. The enduring nature of structure that emerges from the dialectic between structure and process must therefore be determined long after "vivid oscillations" caused by events and carried out by historical actors.

In this paper I show (1) how the structure of self and other has changed over a long period; (2) how the reflexive structure, central to Japanese cosmology, may be tapped by the cultural meanings assigned to the monkey, a seemingly insignificant animal; (3) how changes in the cosmological structure of self and other correlate with changes in socio-political structures; and most importantly, (4) how to identify the nature of *transformation*—a term we too often use as if it provides an answer to our perennial question of *plus ça change*.[2] By comparing and contrasting these two types of transformation that took place at two different periods in Japanese history, I attempt to show how transformation represents structural stability on the one hand and constitutes historical change on the other. I use the term *history* to refer to our interpretation of the past on its own terms, elucidated as best we can.

Why the Monkey?

The monkey is a unique animal in Japanese culture, in that no other nonhuman being in the Japanese universe has been as closely

[2] I am indebted to Edmund Leach, who raised a warning flag while I was still content with the term *transformation*. As I worked through my Japanese material, his warning continued to nag me.

involved in the Japanese people's deliberations about who they are as humans and as a people.[3] The unique role played by the monkey in Japanese culture comes from its dual meaning—the monkey is simultaneously similar to, and yet distinct from, humans. It is precisely the similarities that the Japanese see between the monkey and themselves that force them to create distance and difference.

Perhaps the most important basis for the affinity which the Japanese see between themselves and the monkey is the fact that the monkey is a social animal, like humans as defined by the Japanese. The self in Japanese culture is defined in interaction with others, and interdependence, rather than independence, is valued. People who fulfill their own potential and develop their selves, not in isolation from others, but in the company of others, are ideal human beings. Therefore, even such a phenomenon as someone's illness becomes a culturally sanctioned means for the members of a Japanese social group to relate to each other through the expression of concern for one another's well-being (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984). An elaborate system of gift exchange, developed, it seems, to an extreme, may not make sense for an Economic Person in a highly developed capitalistic society unless one understands that the interpersonal relationship is at the symbolic locus of Japanese culture and society. Gift exchange is both an expression of interpersonal relationship and a means to reinforce this cultural value. Thus, a human being in Japanese culture is both dialogically defined in relation to others and dialectically defined in relation to society. The Japanese self as processually defined in relation to others is at the same time the socially defined *personage* and the morally and psychologically defined *moi*.[4] Therefore, the monkey, a group animal *par excellence*, is indeed an apt metaphor for humans.[5]

[3] I thank Marshall Sahlins, whose question during my talk on this research at the Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, made me focus more precisely on the role of the monkey metaphor in the reflexive structure of the Japanese.

[4] For a recent treatment of interpretations of the category of the person in relation to the self, see Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985.

[5] The concept of the human being presented in this section derives from an interpretation of various cultural institutions, such as illness and health care, gift exchange, the use of speech levels, and so on. I wish to emphasize here that my interpretation does not depict the Japanese as being always oriented toward the group's goal and in harmonious relations with one another. This view is held by some proponents of the *nihonjinron* (theories about the Japanese), a semischolarly genre of writing in which scholars, journalists, and others debate the question of the identity of the Japanese and their culture and in which some promote their "uniqueness" in a highly patriotic sense.

The affinity that the Japanese perceive finds its expression in the dominant characterization of the monkey as a mimic of humans—the monkey is capable of carrying on human behavior. On the other hand, perceiving the affinity between humans and monkeys, the Japanese attempt to secure a comfortable distance between the two, as is evident in animal folktales. Unlike the fairy tales by the brothers Grimm, in which animals may put on human attire but seldom become humans, Japanese tales frequently portray the metamorphosis of animals into humans. Furthermore, when humans become animals, which happens less frequently, their metamorphosis is depicted as a form of transcendence. Yet the Japanese are not comfortable with metamorphoses between monkeys and humans. Teiri Nakamura (1984) analyzed 134 tales from early historical periods, and in only 3 of the 42 cases involving a human metamorphosis into an animal does a human become a monkey. In all three cases, humans are transformed into monkeys as a form of punishment. Of the 92 cases in which animals become humans, again the monkey is involved in only 3 cases. In tales from the Early Modern period, the monkey is involved in only 2 of 156 cases in which animals metamorphose into humans. The monkey is involved in only 1 of 60 cases in which humans metamorphose into animals. The monkey thus differs sharply from other animals, such as the fox and the snake, that are also considered messengers of the deities and that frequently metamorphose into humans.

The Japanese definition of monkeys as "human beings minus three pieces of hair" expresses both the perceived affinity between humans and monkeys and the Japanese effort to keep the animal below them. By dangerously threatening to cross the line between humans and animals, the monkey constantly challenges the cherished throne on which the Japanese seat themselves, thereby prompting the Japanese to contemplate their identity.[6]

Historical Changes in Monkey Symbolism

The monkey as mediator in the early and transitional periods. The dominant meaning of the monkey during the Ancient period (250–1185) and throughout the Medieval period (1185–1603) was

[6]For a detailed discussion of the metaphorical predication of the Japanese self by the monkey, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1990.

that of mediator between deities and humans. One of the oldest sources of evidence to link the monkey with the role of mediator is Saruta Biko, the Monkey Deity, who is featured prominently in both the *Kojiki*, published in 712, and the *Nihongi*, published in 720—the two oldest Japanese publications that contain accounts of mythical-historical events of the early periods. Saruta Biko appears in an episode in which Amaterasu Ōmikami, the Sun Goddess, considered to be the ancestress of the Japanese, decides to send her grandson to earth to govern there. When the grandson, accompanied by several other deities, is ready to descend, a scout, who has been sent earlier to clear their way, returns to report on his encounter with Saruta Biko at "the eight crossroads of Heaven." The scout describes Saruta Biko as a deity whose nose is seven hands long and whose back is more than seven fathoms long; his eyeballs glow like an eight-handed mirror, and a light shines from his mouth and from his anus (Sakamoto et al. 1967: 147–48). Saruta Biko explains to the scout that he has come to greet the heavenly grandson.[7] This episode reveals that in the Japanese myth-history, Saruta Biko serves as the mediator between deities and humans, and between heaven and earth. His location at the eight crossroads is a spatial symbol of his mediation role.

Various factors identify Saruta Biko as the Monkey Deity. First, the term *saru*, which forms a part of his name, means monkey. Also, the deity has red buttocks, a prominent characteristic of Japanese macaques (Shimonaka 1941: 118). Furthermore, in the *Kojiki* Saruta Biko is said to have had his hand caught in a shell while fishing (Kurano and Takeda 1958: 131; Philippi 1969: 142)—a behavioral characteristic of macaques, who gather shellfish at low tide. A monkey with its hand caught in a shell is a frequent theme of Japanese folktales (Inada and Ōshima 1977: 392). Saruta Biko's shellfish gathering and his physical characteristics are cited by Minakata (1972: 401) as evidence for the unquestionable identification of Saruta Biko as an old male macaque. Others have suggested that since Saruta Biko welcomes the Sun Goddess just as Japanese macaques welcome the rising sun with their loud morning calls, he must be a macaque (Matsumae 1960: 44; Minakata 1972: 410–11).[8]

[7] For descriptions of Saruta Biko, see also Kurano and Takeda 1958: 127; *Kojiki*, 1969: 138, 140, 142; Shimonaka 1941: 118.

[8] Some scholars disagree with the identification of Saruta Biko with the monkey. Noboru Miyata (personal communication), for example, believes that the deity should

The monkey's role as a sacred mediator continued to develop throughout the Medieval period. In fact, some of the most unambiguous expressions of this role took place during the long transition between the Medieval period and the Early Modern period. Leaving aside much evidence from art, folklore, and folk religions, I present here only a few examples of the monkey as mediator during this period. One is the belief in the Mountain Deity, Sannō Shinkō. According to this belief, the monkey is referred to as the "monkey deity," or *saru gami*, whose function is to serve as a messenger to humans from various other deities, particularly the powerful Mountain Deity (Origuchi 1965: 299, 324–25; Yanagita 1982a: 333–40, 1951: 240). The mountains, where deities are believed to reside, constitute the most sacred places in the universe, and consequently the Mountain Deity is an extremely important deity in the pantheon of Japanese folk religions (Blacker 1975; Yanagita 1951: 642–44).

The belief in the Mountain Deity was prevalent toward the end of the Medieval period and the beginning of the Early Modern period. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who in 1590 gained control over the entire nation, was nicknamed Kosaru (Small Monkey) or Saru (Monkey), not only because his face looked like a monkey's but also because he eagerly sought identification with the monkey in various ways (Ooms 1985: 285–87). Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first shogun, officially designated the Monkey Deity the guardian of peace in the nation, and the festival for the deity was elaborately observed in Edo (Tokyo) during his reign (1603–16) (Iida 1983: 65). Initially the festival procession was led by a monkey cart (*saru dashi*), although later a rooster cart came to take the lead.

Another conspicuous expression of the monkey as a sacred mediator is the monkey performance, during which a trained monkey performs to music that is either sung by the trainer or played on the three-stringed shamisen instrument or a drum (Ishii 1963: 39). Based on the belief that the monkey is the guardian of horses, the monkey performance originated as a ritual in the stables during which the monkey harnessed the sacred power of the Mountain Deity to heal sick horses and to maintain their welfare in general. Later it was performed in the streets and at the doorways of individual homes both

be identified as *tengu*, a mythical being of the mountains with a long nose. Yet another interpretation is that Saruta Biko represents a foreign people (*ijin*).

for entertainment and for religious reasons. Because the monkey is a messenger from the powerful Mountain Deity, the dance, wherever it was performed, symbolized the Mountain Deity's visit to the people to bless them with health and prosperity (see Oda 1980: 2).

While the *Ryōjin hishō* (1169–1179) is possibly the earliest description of the monkey performance, several sources from the mid-thirteenth century testify to the full development of the monkey performance by that time. The monkey danced and wore an *ebōshi*, the type of hat worn by aristocrats and warriors at the time, and which became a trademark for performing monkeys. The monkey also collected payment after each performance.[9]

Toward the very end of the Medieval period and the beginning of the Early Modern period we also see an additional role assigned to the monkey performance—the blessing of a new crop of rice. At this time a genre of paintings depicting rice harvesting emerged, and we find a dancing monkey in these scenes. The Mountain Deity is believed to become the Deity of the Rice Paddy in the spring; he descends to the rice paddies from the mountains, to which he returns in the fall. Therefore, the dancing by the monkey in harvesting scenes represents the blessing of the rice crop by the Mountain Deity. The monkey thus acts yet again as a sacred mediator between the Mountain Deity and humans.[10]

The monkey as scapegoat during the transitional period. The monkey's role as a scapegoat became dominant in the transitional period, while its role as a mediator gradually lost strength as the Early Modern period progressed. I use the term *scapegoat* broadly to refer to any innocent victim of ridicule or discrimination. The meaning assigned to the monkey as a scapegoat is most succinctly expressed in the Japanese saying that monkeys are "human beings minus three

[9] For an interpretation of the *Ryōjin Hishō* in regard to the monkey performance, see Yanagita 1982b: 336–37. The mid-thirteenth-century documents depicting the monkey performance include the *Nenjū gyōji emaki* (Kadokawa Shoten Henshūbu 1968; see also Fukuyama 1968); the *Azuma kagami*, dated 1245, and the *Kokon chomonshū*, dated 1254 (Tachibana 1966: 535–36); and the *Yūzūnenbutsu engi emaki*, dated 1391. For brief discussions of the monkey performance of this period, see also Miyamoto 1981: 82; Oda 1967: 49; Oda 1978: 15. A detailed historical development of the monkey performance is presented in Ohnuki-Tierney 198–.

[10] These paintings include those by Iwasa Katsumochi Matabei (1578–1650) and those by Kusumi Morikage (1620–90). For the relationship between the Mountain Deity and the Deity of the Rice Paddy, see Yanagita 1951: 642; Ouwehand 1964.

pieces of hair": The monkey lacks three pieces of hair—the essence of humanness—and yet unsuccessfully tries to be a human; it is a laughable creature.[11]

Perhaps the best-known expression of the monkey as a scapegoat is the three-monkey theme, which represents the self-portrayal of the common people during the Early Modern period. The people, who were deprived of any freedom and therefore resigned to neither seeing, hearing, nor speaking of societal evils, found a self-mocking expression in the three-monkey theme, which originally had a quite different meaning in Buddhism (Iida 1983; Ooms 1985).

Besides a number of folktales in which a monkey is depicted as a scapegoat, we see the expression in various genres of literature and art. One of the best-known examples is the proverb "*Tōrō ga ono, enkō ga tsuki*" (The forelegs ["axes"] of a praying mantis, a monkey and the moon). A praying mantis trying to chop the wheel of a cart with its forelegs is as ridiculous as a monkey that mistakes the reflection of the moon in the water for the moon itself and tries to capture it. Although the proverb originated in a Chinese story called *Sō-shiritsu*, its prevalence during the sixteenth century is signified by a famous painting entitled *Enkō sakugetsu* (Monkey capturing the moon) by Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539–1610).

Another expression of the same theme is found on a lacquerware stationery container made by an anonymous artist during the nineteenth century and now housed in the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution. On the cover of the box three macaques, all wearing glasses, are opening a scroll while night falcons hover over them. Although no written message accompanies the picture, it carries a moral message: "Do not attempt things beyond your capacity." The monkeys, of course, do not have the ability to read, an ability that, to the Japanese, distinguishes humans from animals. While the monkeys are attempting the impossible, they are risking their lives by letting their chief enemies, night falcons, approach them; "nightjar" (*yodaka*) is also a euphemism for a prostitute. Here we see an iconographic equation of monkeys with prostitutes. That is, the low status of "the monkey scholar" is placed in prominent relief through the metaphorical linkage between the two.

[11] Hair is a metonymic symbol of the person in Japanese culture. See Ohnuki-Tierney 1990 for a discussion of metonym.

During the late Medieval period and the beginning of the Early Modern period, the meaning of the monkey seems to have been extended from undesirable copycat to all types of undesirables. In *Shinchōki* (a biography of the warlord Oda Nobunaga [1534–82] by Oze Hōan), a beggar is referred to as a monkey (Minakata 1972: 415). Minakata interprets the use of the term for monkey to suggest that some *senmin* ("base people," "outcasts") who were physically disabled and who resorted to begging were referred to as monkeys. During the Early Modern period, the expression "the monkey in the kitchen" (*zensho no saru*) was commonly used to refer to beggars (Hirose 1978: 303). Minakata (1972: 407, 414–15) also cites a number of publications from the early eighteenth century in which prostitutes and various other undesirables were referred to as monkeys.

The monkey is also depicted, although less negatively, as a scapegoat in a well-known *ōtsu-e*, a genre of folk paintings by anonymous artists that flourished from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century. In the painting, a monkey tries to subdue a slippery catfish with an equally slippery gourd—a foolish endeavor. During this period, the catfish was said to cause earthquakes (Ouwehand 1964). Therefore, the painting can be read as a monkey trying to do the impossible job of controlling an earthquake. Either way, the monkey is depicted as a fool.[12]

An even more specific example of the monkey's role as a scapegoat is seen in another seventeenth-century belief and associated practice whereby the monkey became a scapegoat for a human victim of smallpox. It was believed that the monkeys kept at Sakamoto Sannō Shrine suffered from smallpox when the emperors fell victim to the disease. In one instance, when Emperor Gokōmei (r. 1648–64) died of smallpox, the monkeys recovered; in another instance, Emperor Higashiyama (r. 1688–1713) recovered from smallpox when the monkeys died from it (Minakata 1972: 378–79). The belief in the monkey as a scapegoat for a human victim of disease has persisted for centuries. For example, around 1900 it was reported that people with eye diseases would pray at Tennōji Shrine in the belief that if the monkeys in the compound suffered from eye diseases, the human patients would recover from them (Minakata 1972: 378–79).

[12] Herman Oom of the University of California, Los Angeles, kindly pointed out to me that the painting expresses the Zen teaching of the impossibility of achieving *satori* (enlightenment) if one makes a voluntary effort to achieve it.

The monkey's meaning as a scapegoat continues to be the dominant one in contemporary Japan. Until recently, newspaper editorials often reprimanded the Japanese who engaged in "monkey imitation" of the West. Thus, the monkey continues to project the negative side of humans, although the strong moral message, which existed in the Early Modern period and which was used by the government for social control, is no longer present. Rather than conveying the order "Thou shalt not," most contemporary sayings simply ridicule people by the use of the monkey metaphor.

New meanings of the monkey in contemporary Japan. Although the monkey continues to be a scapegoat in contemporary Japan, two new forms have emerged recently. The first is the appearance of *bunkazaru* (cultured monkeys) (Miyaji 1973). Sold as souvenirs at parks and elsewhere, these figurines are carved with exaggerated gestures of seeing, hearing, and speaking. Sometimes called Shōwa *sanzaru* (the three monkeys of the Shōwa era, the era of the late emperor's reign), or *sakasazaru* (inverted monkeys), they endorse the attitude that one should examine, listen, and speak out—the attitude considered to represent the modern, progressive stance of new Japan. Like the clowning monkey discussed below, the *bunkazaru* represents a reflexive figure.

In the second place, the monkey performance, once discontinued, has been revived in a new form. The trainers who perform in Tokyo have developed the performance into a clown act, jointly put on by the trainer and the monkey. Amid the laughter of spectators the two make satirical commentaries on human assumptions of human superiority over animals and on the principle of hierarchy in Japanese society. The highlight of one performance, for example, is a cleverly staged act of disobedience by the monkey. It takes place during the act of jumping from block to block. When the trainer shouts the order "Go!" the monkey jumps onto the first block and hangs onto it with a miserable face. The spectators inevitably break into laughter at the sight of an animal defying a human, on the one hand, and a boss being defied by a subordinate, on the other.

The powerful presence of the monkey in the contemporary conceptual world of the Japanese is impressive when we consider that most urban Japanese see monkeys only in zoos, not in nature. In fact, a monkey trainer who performs in Tokyo told me that a kindergartner asked if the performing monkey was a stuffed monkey with remote

control. It seems that the Japanese continue to be reflexive about themselves using the monkey as their means of deliberation.

Monkey as Mediator, Scapegoat, and Clown and Macrohistorical Changes

These historical materials indicate that the monkey has been assigned the meaning and power of a mediator, a scapegoat, and a clown. All of these meanings have been present since early times, but at any given time, just one meaning has been dominant, except during the two transitional periods, when two dominant meanings competed—mediator and scapegoat during the latter half of the Medieval period and scapegoat and clown in contemporary Japan.

In ethnographic literature, these meanings are assigned to so-called marginal or anomalous/ambiguous symbols and have received much attention from anthropologists. However, these studies have usually located a mediator here, a trickster there, and so on, either in separate contexts within a culture or even in different cultures. Ethnographic findings on these symbols, in short, have provided us with only a synchronic series of still photos, as it were, without systematically examining either ethnographic or conceptual relationships among them.

The data from Japanese culture demonstrate that all of these meanings are assigned to the monkey, which occupies a structurally marginal status. The very affinity that the Japanese recognize places the monkey on the periphery of their categorical schema. The monkey is a deity that is too close to humans to be a bona fide deity; hence, it is assigned a mediator role. In later history it is regarded as an animal that falls short of becoming human and thus is assigned the negative role of scapegoat (for different types of anomaly or marginality, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1981: 119–24).

Those categories of people, such as prostitutes and beggars, who were sometimes referred to as monkeys have also been assigned the same set of meanings; remarkably, their meanings have been transformed in exactly the same sequence and at the same time as those of the monkey. Most important, the same fate was shared by "the special-status people," who are at present called *hisabetsu-burakumin*. The special-status people constitute a heterogeneous group of people, including artistic and religious specialists, to whom

various values and meanings have been assigned in different periods of Japanese history. All of these people, and women in general, have occupied a structurally marginal place in Japanese society and culture.

In short, the findings from Japanese culture testify that the meanings assigned to these symbols derive from their conceptual marginality and that there is a close relationship among these meanings. These findings are ethnographic-historical facts, rather than logical possibilities of a universal nature postulated in the abstract by anthropologists. The first order of business, then, is to examine the relationships of these meanings within the context of Japanese culture, lest the familiar terms remain hollow skeletons in our structural exercise.

Mediator, scapegoat, and clown in Japanese culture. We can understand the specific meanings and roles assigned to the mediator, the scapegoat, and the clown in Japanese culture by locating them within the context of a reflexive structure in which deities play a significant role. Certain Japanese deities called *marebito* are believed to reside outside a community or over the horizon. They are thought to have a dual nature—the peaceful and constructive soul (*nigitama*) and the violent and destructive soul (*aratama*). The Japanese manipulate these stranger-deities through rituals, whose primary function is to ward off the negative powers of the deities and harness the positive ones. These stranger-deities from outside have provided the model for interpreting outside forces, including foreigners, whose positive powers, such as Western technology, have been eagerly sought but whose negative powers have always posed threats. I propose here that the deities represent a transcendental self of the Japanese, who also see a dual nature in themselves. The deities mirror a purified transcendental human self. For this reason, I believe, in Japanese culture a mirror symbolizes a deity. The Japanese attempt to harness the creative power of the deities in order to replenish their lives, which otherwise become impure with stagnation. This is facilitated by mediators, who are assigned the crucial role in the effort to maintain the purity of self.

In relation to the reflexive structure, the meaning and function of mediator and scapegoat are exactly the same in Japanese culture, except that one constitutes an inversion of the other. The mediator brings in purity to the people from outside, whereas the scapegoat draws impurity onto itself, thereby removing it from the lives and

selves of the people. Likewise, from the perspective of a classificatory system, the two carry the same function—facilitating the intercategorical traffic—but in different ways. The mediator is assigned the role of traversing the intercategorical boundaries, delivering to humans the message of blessing from the Japanese deities. The scapegoat facilitates intercategorical movements by being a "breakable taboo." I coin this term to refer to taboos that are breakable as long as offenders make amends by performing culturally prescribed rituals, formalized or nonformalized. If the system requires intercategorical transactions and yet must articulate boundary lines, it calls on breakable taboos and scapegoats to mark the boundary between purity and impurity. Taboos and scapegoats in fact highlight the boundary lines while facilitating traffic across them.

Whereas the mediator and the scapegoat work within the system, the clown is on the margin of or slightly outside it. Spectators laugh at the clown, unaware that they are mocking themselves or their culture and society. In the contemporary monkey performance, the trainer is offering himself and the monkey as a target of laughter—a sacrificial victim at the altar—while chiding the audience with his social commentary. The clown, too, derives its role from its structural marginality, but it is a positively reflexive figure, unlike the mediator and the scapegoat, which are not reflexive in themselves.

A closer look at the cultural representations of a monkey as mediator, scapegoat, and clown tells us of the intimate involvement of the monkey in the reflexive structure of the Japanese, as well as of the enormous complexity of the structure of meaning embodied in the symbolic representations of the monkey introduced earlier. We recall that the first appearance of the monkey in written sources is the Monkey Deity, Saruta Biko, who mediated between deities and humans at the time of the descent to earth of the grandson of the Sun Goddess. This deity's physical characteristics included eyeballs that glowed like mirrors and a mouth and an anus from which light shone. The symbolism of mirror and light clearly identifies the Monkey Deity as a reflexive agent. Yet the very same body part that symbolizes reflexivity, that is, the red rump, is selected as the symbol of the monkey's animality in Japanese culture; the association recurs again and again in songs and paintings in which the Japanese ridicule the monkey for its red buttocks.

According to some scholars, Saruta Biko represents shaman-

actors in ancient Japan (see Matsumura 1948: 6–7, 32–36; 1954; see also Takazaki 1956). They argue that the unusual description of the physical appearance of Saruta Biko—with a long nose, mirrorlike eyes, and so on—is a depiction of a shaman-actor donning a mask and a disguise. They consider the term *saru* to mean "to play" or "to perform a comic act causing laughter." In the view of these scholars, the scene in which Saruta Biko's hand is caught in a shell represents a comical performance that at the same time had magical power.

Whether we link Saruta Biko to a *saru* (monkey), whose primary characteristic in Japanese culture is its ability to imitate, an important element of performance in ancient Japan, or whether we interpret Saruta Biko to be a shaman-actor in disguise, there seems to be a definite performance element in the meaning assigned to this mediator-god. Seen in this light, Saruta Biko is a reflexive symbol *par excellence*, whose meaning is expressed through its various physical characteristics as well as through its role as an actor-scapegoat-clown who is also a mediator. Saruta Biko therefore provides a concrete ethnographic case illustrating that the mediator, scapegoat, and clown derive from the same structure of meaning.

Likewise, the monkey reaching for the moon depicts not only a silly monkey striving for the impossible but a human striving for a transcendental self, symbolized by the mirror, that is, the moon.

Thus both cultural representations of the monkey show that mediator and scapegoat are reflexive agents at a higher level of abstraction. All of these meanings are almost always present in the representations of a monkey, but one is more articulated and overshadows the others (for further discussion of these symbols' multiple structures of meaning, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1987).

Micro-macro linkage. The finding that the transformations of the meaning of the monkey express the changing structure of reflexivity must now be placed in the broader context of Japanese society to determine the nature of the relationship of this microphenomenon with the macroscene. Toward that end, we must examine the historical context. Significantly, the two periods in which the changes in meaning took place—the latter half of the Medieval period and the present—coincide with the two major transitional periods in Japanese history.

Although Japan has often been thought of as an isolated country, its history is a series of conjunctures in Braudel's sense. Its earlier his-

tory was frequently affected by developments in northeast Asia; the transition from the Ancient period to the beginning of the Medieval period was a part of the dramatic transformation of northeast Asia at large. Japanese society then underwent a series of fundamental changes with the introduction of various ideas from China, including cash economy (Amino 1986). The transformation of society and culture became especially dramatic around the mid-thirteenth century, when the forces for change pushed for greater flexibility in the sociocultural system and for an emphasis on achieved, rather than ascribed, status.

Throughout the late Medieval period, these forces rocked Japanese culture and society from the bottom, most turbulently during the Muromachi period (1338–1573). They were most clearly manifested in the concept of *gekokujō*, which literally means "the below conquering the above." This concept, derived from the dualistic cosmology of yin and yang and the five elements, does not recognize the absolute supremacy of any particular element in the universe (La Fleur 1983; see also Putzar 1963; Yokoi 1980). This metaphysical-ontological perspective gave rise to a genre of literature called the *gekokujō no bungaku* (literature of the *gekokujō*), which enjoyed much popularity among the common people (Satake 1970; Sugiura 1965). The theme of *gekokujō* appealed to many Japanese, who translated and transformed it into a pragmatic philosophy of life, making it possible for a person of low social status to surpass someone above him. Also available were several institutionalized means whereby people with talent in religion and art could renounce their ascribed low status. These institutions freed many capable people from low status and contributed to an efflorescence of all forms of art.[13]

The inner dynamics were expressed outwardly as well. The Japanese during this period were open to outsiders—they were curious about foreign lands and cultures. They reestablished trade and cultural contacts with China in about 1342 under the direction of Zen monks (Putzar 1963: 287). They visited foreign countries in their ships and even founded Japanese colonies. Through extensive trade with other peoples, they brought in foreign goods that were endowed with positive symbolic meanings.

[13] These people were often of *senmin* status, indicating that they were of the special-status group, which at the time did not constitute a clearly marked group. These institutions did not really place them within the normal hierarchy of the society.

On the other hand, forces opposed to change were also at work during the Medieval period. These opposing principles and forces were already present during the Ancient period, during which Japanese society was already stratified. Even the basic structure of values, characterized by the symbolic opposition of purity and impurity, which has been dominant throughout Japanese history, had been well formulated (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 35–38). During the first transitional period, an emphasis on ascribed status, hierarchy, and the system of meaning that included purity and impurity as moral values was gathering intensity. It is in this period that we see the emergence of impurity as radical negativity (see Kuroda 1972).

Dynamism and fluidity were terminated, indeed quite firmly, with the establishment of Tokugawa government at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Externally, the government enforced the closure of the nation by restricting trade and closing ports to most foreigners. It tried to eliminate influences from outside, as manifested in the effective proscription of Christianity. Internally, the Early Modern period witnessed Japan's full development into a feudal society, which became hierarchically divided into four groups (warriors, farmers, manufacturers, and merchants, in descending order), plus two social categories outside the system—the emperor at the top and the special-status people at the bottom. The special-status people became outcastes also in the sense that conceptually they were placed outside Japanese society and took on the burden of impurity, which received a negative moral value. In addition, they were denied social mobility. The inauguration of the Early Modern period may be interpreted as a result of the conjuncture of internal development and foreign pressure. Unlike in the Medieval period, Japan responded negatively to the worldwide historical developments of the time.

The historical transition in Japanese society from the Medieval to the Early Modern period coincided with the transformation of the monkey and the special-status people from mediators to scapegoats. The parallel transformations offer a good fit. Symbolically, as noted earlier, taboos and scapegoats simultaneously fulfill the need to facilitate cross-categorical traffic and the need to mark the boundaries by embodying impurity. Japanese society and culture after the later Medieval period and especially during the Early Modern period indeed needed both functions simultaneously.

Taboos and scapegoats also met another need. The closure of the

society to outsiders meant the elimination of foreigners, who, like the stranger-deities, supplied the vital energy of purity for the rejuvenation of the self. In their absence, another method of rejuvenation had to be found, hence the emphasis on scapegoats. In contrast to the rejuvenation accomplished by bringing in a positive element from outside, scapegoats provide a means for getting rid of negative elements (see Burke 1955 for an analysis of the Jews in Hitler's Germany). During this period, then, the increased rigidity within society and the elimination of outsiders paralleled the transformation of the meaning of the monkey, indicating that a significant change in the Japanese conception of self and other had taken place.

The end of the Early Modern period came with the Meiji restoration in 1868, which returned the emperor to the political center, at least nominally, and once again opened up the country. Again the major transformation signified by the Meiji restoration was a result of both internal forces and external pressures, exemplified by Commodore Matthew C. Perry's visit to Japan. Despite these dramatic changes and a strong push for more flexible structure(s), the basic character of the culture and society formed during the Early Modern period remained tenaciously intact. In particular, the Japanese conception of the self in relation to other peoples did not undergo a fundamental change. Just as the Japanese were awed by Chinese civilization during the fifth and sixth centuries, they were duly impressed by Western civilization when the country was reopened in 1868. The "others," represented by the Chinese and then by the Westerners, continued to represent the transcendental self of the Japanese.

An even more fundamental change in the reflexive structure did not take place until today, roughly since the 1970's. Although any assessment of change in contemporary Japan must be tentative, since waves and ripples have not settled yet for us to evaluate whether or not they are to have enduring impact upon the basic structure of the culture. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the present is a period of transition and significant changes.

World War II ended with the first and only defeat the nation has ever experienced. Drastic changes were brought about by the Occupation, but they were imposed from without. Perhaps for this reason we see indigenous changes emerging only now, five decades after the war.

In many ways the contemporary period is similar to the latter half

of the Medieval period. The fluidity of contemporary Japan is manifested both internally and externally. Internally, various opposing forces are at work. Externally, the Japanese public is exploring the outside. A phenomenal number of Japanese tourists travel all over the world, including the People's Republic of China—the country that provided the Japanese with a writing system, technology, a political structure, and a host of other vital cultural apparatus.

A particularly fundamental change, however, concerns the Japanese people's changing perception of the self as a result of their technological and economic successes in the world market. According to a survey conducted by the government in 1983 and reported in the November 17, 1984, *Asahi Shinbun*, the majority of Japanese then regarded themselves as superior to Westerners (Pyle 1987: 16). For the Japanese, science and technology had represented the superiority of the West. They symbolized the positive power of the stranger-deity. The Japanese had striven to excel in science and technology in their effort to emulate the transcendental order. Therefore, it is less economic success as such that has affected the concept of the collective self and more its symbolic nature—they have lost their transcendental self, which had supplied the psychological motivation to achieve in science and technology ever since the opening of the country at the end of the nineteenth century.

From the perspective of the structure of reflexivity, the present is a new era for the Japanese, who feel for the first time in their history that they have mastered the outside, the other, whose negative power devastated the country in 1945. Economic and technological success therefore requires a radical adjustment in their view of the self vis-à-vis the other. Therefore, while contemporary Japan is similar to the late Medieval period, from the perspective of the Japanese relationship to the *other* it constitutes an inversion of the traditional hierarchy between *self* and *other*. The inversion is a drastic change, happening for the first time in history. Again, this type of drastic change cannot be dismissed as simply a transformation.

The emergence of new meanings of the monkey—the three cultural monkeys and the clowning monkey—seems to reassure us of the central place that the monkey occupies in the Japanese structure of reflexivity. Since a clown in particular is a reflexive agent, the emergence of the monkey as a clown succinctly reflects the heightened sense of reflexivity of the contemporary Japanese.

Indeed, the monkey has sensitively expressed the thought processes of the Japanese throughout history. We can tap a significant part of the Japanese structure of meaning by examining the process of the transformation of the meaning of the monkey—a powerful metaphor for humans vis-à-vis animals and for the Japanese vis-à-vis foreigners.

Historical causality. Although there is no space to engage in an extensive discussion of historical causality, let me briefly introduce my basic perspective on mechanisms for historical changes insofar as they relate to the present discussion. My argument here is a subscription neither to assigning primacy to "external" factors nor to giving autonomy to the internal logic of the symbolic structure. Not only is there no simple historical causality, but neither social structure, political economy, nor any other single dimension of a culture holds primacy over the other dimensions (see the discussion of historical process in the Introduction to this book). Most important, causal agents of historical changes never work in monocausal fashion, as is illustrated by the changes in contemporary Japan. The concept of self and other had provided a model for Japanese economic behavior. To emulate the other, they strived in science, technology, and industry. Since they have succeeded in these areas, their concept of self is in turn undergoing changes. Thus, the conceptual realm and the economic realm are not separate, nor does one have primacy over the other. The meaning of economic behavior derives from the order of meaning in general, which in turn is affected by practice in the economic realm. Causal arrows always work in a reciprocal manner.

Japanese reflexivity has always involved other peoples, originally represented by the stranger-deities. It is in the interaction between the Japanese and other peoples that the transformations of the concepts of both self and society have taken place. Like the Hawaiians, the Chinese, and the Kwakiutl, all discussed by Sahlins (1989), the Japanese too have met the challenge of the world systems, economic and symbolic. At times they enthusiastically welcomed the other and used it to energize their collective self, but at other times they shunned it to protect and preserve their self. Or, a more accurate way of interpreting the phenomenon is that the Japanese attitude toward the other already had these two sides. At any rate, their reflexivity makes it a structural necessity to involve the other, as is defined in structure

and in practice. This is the reason why the metaphor of the self is a strategic choice for examining historical transformations in Japan.[14]

Historical actors. It is almost a truism to state that historical transformations cannot be understood in terms of the structure of thought and historical events alone. Transformations are always mediated by the actions of people, who experience the various cultural and social representations and their changes with feelings and thoughts.

The monkey metaphor has served as a vehicle of contemplation both for the politically powerful and the politically peripheral. Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, the most powerful political leaders at a crucial period in Japanese history, both recognized the positive power of the monkey and incorporated it in their political rituals. Hideyoshi even strived to identify himself with the monkey. I know of no record that verifies the precise nature of his motive. We might guess, however, that it was not simply the positive power of the monkey but its ambiguous nature that attracted him. Like the monkey, which emulates a nobleman by wearing his hat, Hideyoshi rose from a humble origin to become the first leader to unify Japan.

A similar motive perhaps underlies various representations of the monkey by anonymous artists, such as the monkey scholars on the lacquerware box. Artists in general during the Early Modern period were of ambiguous status, and the choice of the monkey as their motif might not have been purely coincidental. Interpretations about past historical actors, however, are highly speculative.[15]

We have more information with which to assess the role of contemporary monkey trainers as historical actors. It is they who revived the extinct art and developed the monkey performance into a clown act. Clowning has a long tradition in Japanese culture, and the con-

[14] It may be a matter of degree, but Chinese cosmology and Chinese structure of reflexivity seem to have been self-contained. They have been "the central flower of the universe," as the first two characters of the name of the People's Republic of China signify. Sahlins (1989) notes that the Chinese were indifferent to European goods that the Hawaiians were only too eager to obtain.

[15] We may also speculate about Hideyoshi. It was he who in 1582 placed the ambiguously defined special-status people into two legally codified categories (Ueda 1978: 100–101). One might think that his own ambivalent social position drew him to the ambiguous animal but that identifying himself with humans whose position and meaning in Japanese culture were ambiguous was personally too threatening. But this interpretation may be overdetermined by the structure of meaning as I see it.

temporary monkey performance is related to, if not born of, this tradition. In fact, Murasaki Tarō, who stages monkey performances in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo, told me that he consciously followed the tradition of *manzai*, a genre of comic performance, as he was developing his repertoire. Though the particular form and content of his clown act are his creation, he did not have to give the meaning described above to the monkey performance. His own identity as a member of the special-status group may be responsible for the focus of his clowning—juggling the social hierarchy and the hierarchy between humans and animals, rather than gender inequality, for example, which is the focus of clowning in many societies.

These historical actors, however, do not dictate the course of history or the choice of meaning of a polyseme. While we seldom have enough historical data to understand these processes of negotiation in the past, scenes from contemporary monkey performances are illustrative. Thus, Murasaki Tarō told me that when he referred to the posture of the monkey as a sumo wrestler's, the spectators refused to respond. Only when he referred to it as Takamiyama's, that of a very popular sumo wrestler who was originally from Hawaii, did they react with spontaneous laughter. Needless to say, he henceforth changed his narration.

This is the kind of historical process duing which the meaning of the monkey as mediator, scapegoat, and clown is negotiated; a dominant meaning emerges as a result of negotiation, while always leaving some ambiguity typical of any communication via symbols.

In turning to the question of the power of the historical actor upon the course of history, we can say that a monkey trainer as a historical actor is not the same as Toyotomi Hideyoshi as a historical actor: The former represents the politically peripheral; the latter, the politically central. Their positions often determine the effectiveness of their actions on society. Murasaki Tarō does not directly or immediately affect the course of history. He neither negotiates his social position nor provokes spectators into action. His power as a historical actor must be evaluated in terms of its long-range effect: In the atmosphere of play, he gently prods spectators to contemplate their society and its received categories. I think his impact is like raindrops, which almost invisibly but steadily transform a huge rock onto which they fall. Therefore, a subtle but potentially powerful historical event is pro-

duced at the scene of action—created by a brilliant performing artist who acts on the structure of thought and the structure of society in the process of creating a metaphysical masterpiece.

On the other hand, we cannot overestimate the role of historical actors in the course of history. In particular, we must distinguish the intentionality of historical actors from the actual effect they have. There are several reasons for this. First, historical actors, like other members of society, are seldom fully cognizant of the meaning of their behavior. Such is the case with Murasaki Tarō. When I commented on the social commentary in his performance and pointed to the clowning element, he told me that he was quite unaware of those aspects. His role and power as a historical actor do not completely derive from his intentions. Second, the ambiguity and indeterminacy of polysemes often create a gap in the reading of symbols by the historical actors who use them and the people who interpret them. As I detail elsewhere (Ohnuki-Tierney 1987), two people may ascribe different meanings to a monkey without realizing it. For example, during a monkey performance in 1981, the trainers and the spectators assigned different meanings to the monkey, while the performance continued as usual. In communications using symbols, including linguistic symbols, people often talk past each other without realizing it.

Third, what I call the routinization of meaning takes place: The meaning of a symbol, including a patterned behavior, becomes taken for granted. The routinization of meaning sustains a situation wherein historical actors go about using the symbol or carrying on a patterned behavior without ever scrutinizing what it stands for; sometimes they keep using a symbol when they no longer accept the relationship between its form and its meaning. The symbol becomes "symbolic" and the behavior becomes a "tradition" or a "custom" in the popular sense of these words. For example, women who customarily wear a veil or a hat in a Christian church have rarely articulated its original meaning and purpose—to prevent contamination by the impurity of women, embodied in their hair.

In short, although it is necessary to recognize the role of historical actors and their intentionality in the course of history, it is also important to recognize their limitations. Communication between people—the stage of praxis—always involves a complex process in which polysemic symbols are used and interpreted by actors from di-

verse perspectives. The behavior of an actor is not always fully a product of his or her articulated intentions; further, polysemes can play such tricks on our communication that we often do not recognize the absence of communication.

Transformation as Historical Change

The advantage of studying a culture over a very long time is that it enables us to see the total picture of the system of meaning, in both its stability and its changes (cf. Braudel 1980). Like polysemes, Japanese culture has multiple structures, consisting of tendencies toward conceptual flexibility and social egalitarianism on the one hand and rigid and hierarchical tendencies, on the other.[16] These principles, as conceptual as they are social, underlie Japanese culture and society. In practice, the structure of meaning and the social principle interact with historical events, many of which had to do with forces outside Japan, and historical actors. At some times, as during the latter half of the Medieval period, both become conspicuous, since the two compete with each other. At other times, such as during the Early Modern period, one claims absolute hegemony over the other. Had we looked at one particular period of history, we would have had a snapshot of one phase of the total structure and process.

To gain insight into this complex historical process, I chose to focus on the reflexive structure. The structure of the collective self and other must lie at the heart of historical process, which moves with forces internal and external, since the self of the Japanese has always been dialectically and dialogically defined with respect to other, outside forces. There are a number of ways to tap the structure of reflexivity. I chose the monkey as metaphor as a window, since the Japanese have throughout history engaged in dialogues with the monkey, as it were, in their deliberations about themselves—as humans vis-à-vis animals and as a people vis-à-vis other peoples.

As a historical study, this research has yielded two findings. First is the persistent internal logic in the meaning system, in that the three meanings assigned to the monkey are logically related. Second is the

[16] Egalitarianism and hierarchy in the Japanese context are quite different from egalitarian and hierarchical principles as conceived and practiced in some Western societies.

historical regularity in the timing of changes: The historical transformations parallel the set of meaning assigned to the monkey and the set assigned to the special-status group; further, these microtransformations parallel macrotransformations of Japanese society and culture. These two findings are closely related, and together they raise questions about historical change. What is the nature of change when a change in the form or the meaning of a symbol represents a transformation? Put another way, when does transformation represent historical stability, and when does it represent historical change?

Theoretically speaking, change can be of three types: reproduction, random change, or transformation. Whereas reproduction signifies no change in structure, random change entails basic changes that bear little relationship to the prior structure. These types of change rarely occur. Although the term *transformation* (see Needham 1979: 38–47; Yalman 1967: 77) has been used too often to retain a precise meaning, I continue to use it for the type of change that opposes both reproduction and random change. It represents a change that follows an internal logic in the structure. In this sense, the changes in the meaning assigned to the monkey and in the structure of reflexivity represent transformations.

If we view transformations as permutations of the basic structure, then, the symbolic structure of Japanese culture has undergone little change since the beginning of the eighth century. This is an astounding finding, since the past 1,000 years have seen catastrophic wars, famines, and earthquakes, the replacement of emperors by military governments both during the Early Modern period and during World War II, and even the conquest of other peoples and the conquest of the Japanese by the Allied forces. These are major historical events that rocked the very foundations of Japanese culture and society.

But to dismiss these changes in the meaning system of Japanese culture simply as transformations of an unchanging basic structure gives an illusion of a solution and thus discourages further scrutiny of the nature of what these transformations represent. The internal logic of the structure provides a range of possible directions for change, but it does not dictate the choice of a given direction or meaning. The transformation from mediator to scapegoat and that from scapegoat to clown both indicate profound shifts in the nature of the basic conceptual structure underlying society and culture.

I propose that these transformations constitute historical changes

in the following ways. First, a structure of thought that encourages mediation as a way of facilitating intercategorical traffic is of a radically different nature from a structure that must facilitate the traffic through breakable taboos and scapegoats. Such a change indeed signifies a basic historical change. Second, the monkey as mediator presupposes a belief in its supernatural power. People believed that the monkey had the power to maintain their health, cure illnesses in horses, and secure good crops of rice. A scapegoat figure, in contrast, is a secular figure, stripped of the sacred. The monkey as scapegoat is an object to be laughed at. It became a secular animal, that is, an animal inferior to humans. Thus the monkey's transformation from mediator to scapegoat represents a historical process of secularization.[17] Third, the changes in meaning from mediator to scapegoat to clown represent a change toward greater reflexivity, greater distancing, and greater self-awareness.[18] Although I do not espouse a unilinear cultural evolution of any kind, the particular development of Japanese reflexivity indicates a linear progression.[19]

In short, by shifting our attention away from a paradigm and its transformation, we are able to examine more closely the nature of transformation in order to understand historical change.

Acknowledgments

My theoretical arguments here are extensions of those in Ohnuki-Tierney 1987, which was a tripartite study concerned with the historical changes of the monkey metaphor, the special-status people (the so-called outcastes), and the monkey performance, which has been one of the traditional occupations of the special-status people.

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[17]Elsewhere (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984), I argue that contemporary Japan is full of what I call "urban magic," if not religion, and argue against modernization theories that see the "disenchantment of the world" and "rationalization" (Weber), the "decline of magic" (Keith V. Thomas), the "mechanization of the world picture" (E. J. Dijksterhuis), and the decline of symbolic dimensions of people's behavior in general. Although the Japanese have used magic extensively throughout history, they show a definite tendency toward secularization.

[18]I am indebted to Yi-Fu Tuan of the University of Wisconsin for this insight.

[19]My statement here about increased reflexivity does not imply any sense of progress.

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