Are mountain gods vindictive? Competing images of the Japanese alpine landscape

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This article underscores the importance of folk religious concepts in understanding the way in which people interact with the environment that envelops and sustains them. Images of rural Japan have drawn almost exclusively on the tradition of irrigated rice cultivation combined with ancestor worship. Alternative concepts have been overlooked or ignored, fostering the sense of a uniform heritage. The author highlights one such alternative, which derives from the tradition of hunting, gathering, and slash-and-burn cultivation within a spirit-imbued landscape. The contrast between perspectives is illustrated by a historical encounter between a British mountaineer and the residents of two communities located at different elevations within the same watershed.

Nearly forty years have passed since Roy Rappaport (1968: 237-40; 1979) first introduced the term 'cognized model' in referring to the way in which people conceptualize the natural environment and their interactions with it. This he contrasted with the so-called 'operational model' – the kind employed by the Western scientific community to describe the same set of conditions and interactions, but solely in terms of empirically verifiable phenomena.[1] In pre-industrial societies, the landscape was imbued with spirits and deities, who required veneration to ensure their goodwill and the continuing provision of life-sustaining resources. Ecological anthropologists had been inclined to dismiss such beliefs as 'epiphenomena' – interesting as folklore, perhaps, but of limited value in understanding the material exchanges that define the relationship between a human population and its natural surroundings (Basso 1996: 66; Flannery 1972: 400; Rappaport 1967: 29). Rappaport, however, acknowledged the importance of the cognized model as a symbolic expression of material dependencies – one that not only *reflected* the attitudes and activities of its human adherents, but *directed* them as well (1979: 98). Thus he appears to have been ascribing a more active influence to metaphysical concepts like spirits and deities. Perhaps more significantly, his work hinted at an eventual synthesis of the materialist-explanatory and symbolic-interpretative approaches within anthropology.

For the discipline as a whole, however, little has changed in the intervening decades. Anthropologists are still divided into what Wolf (1999: 20) has described as

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the 'scientists' and the 'poets', and ecological analyses are almost invariably associated with the former category. Despite a few notable exceptions (e.g. Anderson 1996; Basso 1996; Berkes 1999; Descola & Pálsson 1996), the emphasis remains on the material bases of human existence. Hunter-gatherers, for example, are typically characterized as people who subsist by utilizing a wide array of plant and animal species, who fashion simple tools, clothing, and shelter from the materials immediately available to them, and who invest little time or effort in altering the landscape to suit their own needs. Cultivators, on the other hand, are seen as devoting themselves to the propagation of a few favoured species; their tools are more sophisticated and their dwellings more substantial, and they engage in radical alteration of the surrounding landscape.

In reality, of course, people do not conform so precisely to these discrete heuristic categories. Hunter-gatherers dabble in plant and animal domestication, and cultivators supplement their crops by hunting and gathering. Furthermore, it is now widely recognized that both forms of subsistence involve restructuring the landscape (see, e.g., Anderson 1996; Blackburn & Anderson 1993; Denevan 1992; Rose 2001), though the impact of cultivators is admittedly more severe. Is the distinction between them only a matter of degree in emphasis, or, by focusing so heavily on the material aspects, are we perhaps overlooking a more important qualitative difference?

Bird-David (1990; 1992) has suggested that hunter-gatherers are distinguishable from cultivators based not on subsistence technology *per se*, but on their perceived relationship with the natural environment as expressed through root metaphors. The Nayaka, for example, a community of 'hunter-gatherers' in South India, relate to the forest as a nurturing parent, who may sometimes punish its children for misbehaving but would never deny them food. The Kurumba, on the other hand, neighbouring 'cultivators' (who also hunt and gather), view nature in more threatening terms as a reciprocating ancestor, 'providing food in return for appropriate conduct. When the descendants make offerings and follow the customary code of behaviour, the ancestors bless them with success in their hunting and in cultivation. If the descendants fail to satisfy the ancestors, harvests and hunts fail' (Bird-David 1990: 190).

Though Bird-David does not make the point specifically, it might also be suggested that, as cultivators, the Kurumba relationship with nature is inherently more 'distant' (in the sense of having created an artificial environment for promoting the growth of certain species), and that this is reflected in their concept of nature as a more distantly related ancestor. The Nayaka, on the other hand, as hunter-gatherers, have not imposed this artificial distinction between themselves and the forest – at least, not to the same degree. It is understandable, then, that they should perceive their association with nature as being more 'intimate'.

I will draw on these ideas in considering alternative images of the Japanese alpine landscape, with special reference to a historical encounter between British mountain climber Walter Weston and the residents of two neighbouring communities located at different elevations within the same watershed. In so doing I will underscore the importance of cognition and metaphor as conscious models that influence the way in which people interact both with the environment that envelops and sustains them and with outsiders who intrude upon their territory. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate the utility of incorporating folk religious concepts into ecologically orientated research.

Mountain gods and ancestral spirits

Any mention of the Japanese rural landscape is likely to evoke images of flooded rice paddies. This is somewhat ironic in that the vast majority of Japan's surface area consists of forested mountains where the slopes are too steep for rice cultivation to be practical. And while the mountains have been populated for thousands of years by hunter-gatherers, slash-and-burn cultivators, and timber-cutters, it is irrigated rice cultivation, confined largely to the coastal plains and narrow river basins, that has come to epitomize the traditional Japanese lifestyle.

This is not to say that the forested mountains have been undervalued or ignored, but rather that images of the mountains have been dominated by a single perspective – that of the lowland rice cultivator. Indeed, mountains are widely revered as sources of irrigation water. Densely covered by trees and other vegetation, they absorb and retain precipitation throughout the winter for slow release into streams and reservoirs during the spring thaw. The flowing water is channelled into the fields prior to transplanting the rice seedlings and is continually added throughout the growing season to maintain a shallow pool. This pool is the medium from which the plants absorb most of their nutrients, both as dissolved minerals and as nitrogen fixed by blue-green algae. Water from the mountains may thus be considered the ultimate source of the rice crop's vitality.

In the pre-industrial past, this important material relationship was symbolically acknowledged through the medium of folk religion. In spring, as the fields were being flooded prior to transplanting, the *yama no kami*, a spirit or god of the mountains (*kami* meaning 'spirit', 'god', or 'deity'), was ritually invited to descend into the paddies. In the process it was transformed into the *ta no kami*, or rice field god, remaining there for the duration of the growing season to invigorate the plants and ensure a successful crop. At harvest time it was given thanks and sent back into the mountains, becoming the *yama no kami* once more. There it remained until the following spring, when the cycle was repeated (Averbuch 1995: 17; Blacker 1975: 40, 256; Gilday 1990: 273; Grapard 1982: 200; Hirayama 1963: 60; Hori 1968: 150-1). Ritual thus provided a symbolic complement to the hydrologic cycle, a definitive example of Rappaport's 'cognized model'.

The transaction between (wild) mountain and (domestic) village is further expressed, though in the opposite direction, through the veneration of ancestral spirits. Rice cultivation is traditionally conducted as a household enterprise, with the fate of the household being largely determined from year to year by the success of the harvest. The spirits of deceased members are thought to maintain an interest in the household. Through the medium of the *butsudan*, a domestic Buddhist altar, they are kept abreast of household affairs. Moreover, when a household member dies, the surviving members are obliged to perform memorial services on his or her behalf. As Smith explains:

> The death of a person sets in motion a series of rites and ceremonies that culminates in the observance of a final memorial service, most commonly on the thirty-third or fiftieth anniversary of death. Between a person's last breath and the final prayers said on his behalf, his spirit is ritually and symbolically purified and elevated; it passes gradually from the stage of immediate association with the corpse, which is thought to be both dangerous and polluting, to the moment when it loses its individual identity and enters the realm of the generalized ancestral spirits, essentially purified and benign (1974: 69).

It is the intermediate phases of this transformational process that most conform to Bird-David's example of the Kurumba, where the ancestors assume a more threatening demeanour. According to Blacker in her classic work on Japanese folk religion:

> If the ancestral dead are not correctly treated by their descendants, if the offerings or the obsequies necessary to their nourishment are neglected, then with frightening suddenness their nature will change. The kindly old grandfather, the sympathetic father, the loving mother will turn in an instant into a vicious and capricious tyrant, punishing the neglectful family with curses (1975: 47-8).

The ultimate ancestral resting place is conceptually located in the mountains nearby. Ritual purification of the spirits is envisioned as a gradual ascent into the upper reaches, suggesting an affinity with the mountain god. Indeed, Yanagita Kunio (1962 [1946]), the revered founder of folklore studies as an academic discipline in Japan, drew upon his extensive research into localized folk belief in proposing a clever synthesis of the two concepts. Hori and Ooms summarize his argument as follows:

> [T]he souls climb the mountain at the foot of which the dead are often buried and in the process, which takes several decades, they are gradually purified till they become ancestral spirits when reaching the top. These ancestral spirits who thus were thought of as residing on the mountain top have then somehow lost their ancestral character while keeping their protective function. Thus they continued, as mountain gods, to watch over the welfare not only of their offspring but of the villagers below. Every spring these gods are ritually welcomed in the valley to reside in the fields, and they thus become gods of the fields. In autumn after the harvest, they again are accompanied back to the mountain. This periodical coming and going of the ancestors and the gods is a central structural element in Japanese agricultural rituals (1970: 7).

A look at Yanagita's original, however, reveals little more than a working hypothesis, one that he himself did not have the data to substantiate (Yanagita 1962 [1946]: 54; for the English translation, see Yanagita 1970 [1946]: 74-5). Indeed, a few scholars later pointed out that the 'transhumant' *yama no kami* represented only one of several alternative viewpoints; specifically, that of lowland rice cultivators.[2] Most prominent in this regard was Nelly Naumann (1963; 1964), a German ethnologist whose meticulous study of Japanese myth and folklore revealed that people's concept of the mountain god varied widely with their occupation. The *yama no kami* recognized by hunters and timber-cutters, for example, was a kind of nature spirit that inhabited the mountains all year round. It was the custodian of the forest and the animals that lived therein, and for this reason was treated with special deference. Hunters were careful to thank the spirit after killing an animal, perhaps offering the heart or liver as an expression of their gratitude. Timber-cutters asked the spirit's permission before felling a tree, and afterwards conducted a ritual that symbolized and/or actively promoted the tree's regeneration. And while lowland villagers tended to see their *yama no kami/ta no kami* composite as male, the mountain folk perceived their own version of the *yama no kami* as female. In fact, since this female version controlled the proliferation of plants and animals, she was also seen as a facilitator of childbirth, and was called upon by women in labour to ease their deliveries.

Naumann's work inspired a number of Japanese ethnologists to reconsider past assumptions about the ubiquity of rice cultivation and its attendant view of nature (see, e.g., Chiba 1975*a*; 1975*b*; Sasaki 1997; Tsuboi 1982). However, due to Yanagita's far-reaching influence and the esteem in which he is held (see Dundes 1990: ix-x), combined with an ongoing popular obsession for defining a Japanese 'mainstream' (Morris-Suzuki 1995: 766-7), such voices have been largely overshadowed. There is also a problem in obtaining corroborative evidence. The post-war period witnessed the depopulation of rural areas and rapid erosion of local folk beliefs, so there have

been fewer opportunities to test the hypothesis with each passing decade. And since Yanagita's ideas have been so thoroughly disseminated through books, television, and other forms of mass media, there can now be no guarantee that local informants themselves are not tainted by his influence. Working hypotheses like the *yama no kami/ta no kami* composite have become the standard explanations and are accepted uncritically, presenting a far more uniform depiction of Japanese folk religion than has actually been the case (see, e.g., Grapard 1982: 201; Ivy 1995: 108; Miyake 2001: 186, 194). To regain a sense of the diversity and dynamism in folk religious concepts, we are left with little recourse but to search back into the past for eyewitness accounts, supplemented where possible by ethnographic cross-checking.

A tale of two settlements

As a concrete example of these competing images, I shall draw upon the memoirs of Walter Weston (1861–1940), a British missionary who was stationed in Japan for several years during the late 1800s. Weston was fond of mountain-climbing, and used his holidays to conduct a systematic exploration of the 'Japanese Alps', the range of lofty peaks that form the border between Nagano prefecture to the east and Gifu and Toyama prefectures to the west.[3] Upon returning to England, Weston published an account of his experiences entitled *Mountaineering and exploration in the Japanese Alps* (Weston 1896*a*). His colourful narrative provides detailed descriptions not only of his climbing adventures, but also of his interactions with the people whom he encountered along the way. Being a member of the clergy, he was particularly interested in local religious concepts, though he tended to trivialize them as quaint superstitions (see, e.g., Weston 1897).

Though the mountain peaks were readily visible from the surrounding countryside, reaching their summits required an intimate knowledge of the intervening terrain; Weston was obliged to rely on local guides. In those days, the only people who possessed such knowledge were the hunters and timber-cutters who made their living higher up and deeper in the mountains than most people needed or wanted to venture. It is clear from Weston's various accounts that hunters in particular had assumed a distinctive occupational identity. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from a paper Weston read before the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1895:

> Amongst the most interesting classes of people dwelling in or near the mountains are the hunters of big game. They are sturdy fellows, inured to hardship and capable of tremendous exertion. It is they alone who know anything of the wild valleys and the great peaks, for there they roam when chasing the bear, the boar, or the chamois in their haunts, and it is from amongst them I have always got my guides (Weston 1896*b*: 139).

Weston goes on to provide a detailed description of the hunters' clothing, weapons, and other equipment, again suggesting that these were quite distinct from those of the 'ordinary' peasant (1896*b*: 139; see also 1896*a*: 252).

A recurring theme in Weston's narrative is his ongoing effort to climb Kasagatake,[4] a majestic peak that towers over the Gamada River valley in northeastern Gifu prefecture. This mountain has long been the object of religious veneration, owing in part to its importance as a source of irrigation water. One day in the summer of 1892, Weston and a physician friend named Miller arrive in Gamada, a small farming village located along the banks of the river and notable for its sulphurous hot spring bath. From here

they intend to launch their ascent of Kasagatake, and they appeal immediately to the local 'headman' for help in enlisting guides.

The headman of Gamada is hospitable but somewhat dubious about his visitors' objective. 'The appearance of a couple of foreigners was in itself a sufficiently astonishing event, but why they should want to climb a mountain where neither silver mines nor crystals were to be found was quite unintelligible to him' (1896*a*: 81-2). After some discussion he regretfully informs them that a recent spate of storms has swollen the mountain stream that intersects their route along the way, making for hazardous crossings. He assures them that 'no hunters could be found willing to attempt the ascent' (1896*a*: 82). Disappointed, they are obliged to move on in pursuit of other adventures.

Weston returns to Gamada the following summer in hopes of making the climb he had had to forgo the previous year. Again, however, his plans are thwarted by the village headman. This time the problem is not an excess of rain but rather the opposite condition; a drought has been afflicting the valley for several weeks and is now threatening to destroy the crops. In fact the situation has become so serious that the hunters have been enlisted to perform *amagoi*, a ritual prayer for rain, which is most effectively accomplished on the lofty mountain summits. Thus the hunters, who, again, 'are the only men that venture on the higher peaks', are all away praying for rain on behalf of the villagers (1896*a*: 160).

Weston makes a brief digression at this point in his narrative to describe what *amagoi* entails, based on his own inquiries a few days later at Jōnendake, another prominent mountain in neighbouring Nagano prefecture:

> A party of hunters, selected for their activity and power of lung, as the representatives of the suffering villagers, make their way to the little shrine of the *tengu*, the *genius loci*, on the summit of the peak. With branches of the *haimatsu* (creeping pine), brought up from below, they make a bonfire before the shrine, and then proceed to give a mimic representation of the storm they have come to pray for. Primed with *saké* (rice beer), they fire off their guns, and, with unearthly yells, roll down from the topmost ridge great blocks of andesite. As these go crashing down the cliffs the hunters loudly invoke the attention of the *tengu* to their prayers (1896*a*: 161).[5]

This passage suggests that hunters also acted as intermediaries, communicating with the spirits on behalf of the villagers.

A later chapter has Weston returning yet again to Gamada the following summer of 1894. This time he is accompanied by two friends, a Canadian named Hamilton and a Japanese named Uraguchi, the latter being identified as an archaeologist (1896*a*: 219-20).[6] Weston's objective, he reminds us, is to attain the summit of Kasagatake, 'from which I had on each previous attempt been repulsed through the inexplicable objection of the villagers to lend me their aid' (1896*a*: 241). His wording here suggests that, while begrudgingly accepting the headman's past excuses, he has not taken them at face value. The villagers prove no more co-operative on this occasion than before. Weston is told first of all that his customary lodgings have been reserved for another patron. Moreover, the hunters and timber-cutters (the terms being virtually synonymous in this region) are at the moment all engrossed in 'their annual festivities', so once again there is no one available to serve as his guide (1896*a*: 244).

Disconsolate, Weston and his companions adjourn to the local hot spring bath. Along the way, however, they happen to meet a sturdy-looking young fellow 'whose get-up betokened him to be a *ryoshi* (a hunter of big game)' (1896*a*: 244). Weston

explains their predicament, and to his pleasant surprise the young man readily offers to guide them himself. Returning that afternoon to finalize the arrangements, the young man brings with him a somewhat older fellow named Nakashima, whom Weston describes as 'the chieftain of the band of hunters to which he [the younger man] belonged' (1896*a*: 245).

As deliberations proceed, the 'hunter chieftain' is able to shed light upon the puzzling behaviour of the villagers for three years in succession:

> 'The Gamada folk', said Nakashima, 'are incurably superstitious. In the lonely cliffs and ravines of Kasadake [*sic*] they maintain that a mighty spirit roams. Should any of the dwellers in the valley venture to conduct a stranger within the precincts of the mountain during the ripening of the grain, &c., a destructive storm would be bound to follow. This they would lay at the door of those who had assisted in the sacrilege, and condign punishment would follow without delay'. I wondered no longer at my former lack of success, and promising to keep the visit of Nakashima and his follower a secret, we set ourselves about the preparations for the climb (1896*a*: 245).[7]

In the meantime, a friendly bystander has offered Weston and his companions a place to stay, so their prospects seem to have improved considerably. After a hearty meal they retire for the evening in anticipation of their venture the next day. At midnight, however, they are awakened by a sudden rattling at the door of their lodgings:

> Nakashima had come to tell us that [the headman] and the rest had got wind of our plans, and threats of vengeance were freely made if we should persist in the attempt. He begged us to postpone the climb until a later date, but as this was impossible we were obliged to refuse. It was a case of 'now or never', and to our delight the younger hunter, who laughed at the fears and threats of the villagers, backed us up with reassuring boldness. So the pair departed, Nakashima first exhorting us to leave Gamada before the inhabitants were astir, and to join him at the châlet where, higher up the valley, he lived surrounded by the huts of his followers (1896*a*: 245-6).

Note that the reaction of the younger hunter suggests no fear of retribution, divine or otherwise. Nakashima, too, seems far more concerned with maintaining harmonious social relations with the villagers than incurring the wrath of the mountain spirit. Neither of them, in other words, exhibits the kind of 'superstitious' anxiety attributed to the people of Gamada.

And so before dawn the next day Weston and his companions sneak out of the village, led by the younger hunter and another of his comrades. They proceed up the valley for a rendezvous with Nakashima at a place called Nakao, which Weston describes as a 'clearing in the forest, where the hunter's settlement shelters by the side of a rustic shrine' (1896*a*: 246). From here they begin their ascent of the mountain, their plan being to reach the summit and return the same day. The party is led by the two younger hunters; Nakashima himself stays behind, bidding them a safe return.

There follows a detailed account of the climb itself, which involves hours of struggling through dense brush, then over streams, rocks, and patches of snow.[8] Finally at mid-afternoon they arrive atop a sharp ridge leading directly to the summit. Here Weston makes an interesting observation: 'At this point our hunters halted, took off their packs, and proceeded to stick some *rosoku* (native candles) in a niche in the rocks. These they lighted, and then bowed their heads, and, with hands reverently folded, offered their supplications to the Spirit of the Mountain' (1896*a*: 248–9). Likewise upon attaining the summit itself, 'we found a tiny cairn, erected by the hunters on some former visit' (1896*a*: 249).

Thus it is clear that the hunters also recognized a sacred presence in the mountains, though in their case it seems to have inspired familiarity and trust rather than uncertainty and fear. While no clue is given as to the intent of their prayer, it was likely meant to acknowledge the spirit and ask for permission to enter its realm (Iwashina 1968: 154). Also evident is that the hunters had been to the summit before, perhaps on a fairly regular basis (see also Uraguchi 1934: 270; Yasukawa 1969: 82), and that such degree of access had been theirs alone to share with others. Weston notes that, '[e]xcepting themselves – or some of their comrades – they told us we were the first climbers, European or Japanese, to set foot on the top' (1896*a*: 249).[9]

With only a limited amount of daylight remaining, the party soon begin their descent. Along the way, Weston remarks admiringly of the skill and knowledge of his hunter-guides as they lead the group by torchlight through the dark forest. 'By 10 P.M.', he concludes, 'we were back at the chieftain's house, receiving warm congratulations at the successful issue of the most arduous expedition I had ever undertaken in the whole of my Japanese wanderings' (1896*a*: 251).

Unlike the anxious villagers, the hunters appear to have actually revelled in Weston's accomplishment. This is indicated by the 'warm congratulations' he receives upon his safe return. Nor does the congeniality end with the climb itself. 'We were in no hurry, the following day, to leave our kind host betimes, and several hours passed pleasantly in interesting chat before we could tear ourselves away' (1896*a*: 251-2). When Weston and his companions finally do take their leave of the 'hospitable chieftain's home', their two hunter-guides continue with them up and over the pass that leads into the neighbouring valley (Kamikōchi in Nagano prefecture). Significantly, this alternate route also allows them 'to avoid exciting the curiosity and fears of the Gamada people, ... and so it came to pass that the superstitious peasants down the valley saw our faces no more' (1896*a*: 254).[10]

It is obvious that Weston sees the two communities as being qualitatively different. He refers to Gamada as either a 'village' or a 'hamlet'. It is led by a 'headman' (the Japanese term is *kuchō*, which implies a formally established office). The people who live there are described as 'villagers' or 'farmers', and on one occasion 'peasants'. Weston alludes to 'the wide veranda of the house' where he stays on his first two visits, suggesting a fairly substantial building. On his second visit an adjoining room is occupied by another visitor, a schoolteacher from Takayama (the region's major town, about 52 kilometres away), who has apparently come seeking relaxation and to avail himself of the hot spring waters. The hot spring was widely recognized for its medicinal properties and had been drawing visitors (and their revenue) since at least the late 1600s (Shimonaka 1989: 1042). All of this implies a level of relative prosperity. Indeed, a photograph of Gamada taken in 1916 shows a row of five quite substantial-looking houses, with a citizen's hall (*kōminkan*) and the hot spring building located in their midst (see Figure 1). The overall impression is of a fairly prosperous, if not wealthy, community.

As for the people of Nakao, Weston consistently refers to them as 'hunters'. Together they comprise a 'band' and are led by a 'chieftain' (i.e. Nakashima). Their 'settlement' (*not* 'village' or 'hamlet') occupies 'a clearing in the woods', and their homes are mere 'huts'. Weston's book includes a photograph of Nakashima (taken by Weston's colleague Hamilton) decked out in his hunting gear and standing in front of a rather ramshackle dwelling (see Figure 2). This is Nakashima's own house, and thus would likely have been the most substantial building in the settlement.[11]

Figure 1. The village of Gamada in 1916. (Photo courtesy of the Kamitakara branch office of Takayama City Hall.)

The contrast between the two settlements is further reinforced by a systematic survey of local economic and cultural resources that was compiled between 1870 and 1874, roughly twenty years prior to Weston's arrival (see Tomita 1968 [1874]: 91–6). Though the results are presented village-by-village, Gamada has been lumped together with Kanzaka, the adjoining downstream settlement.[12] Kanzaka-Gamada is shown as consisting of nine households and a total population of 'a little over sixty',[13] while Nakao is attributed with twelve households and a population of 'a little over thirty'. Therefore, the farm village had twice the number of residents per household as the hunter settlement.

One confusing aspect of this survey is that it lists a comparable range of agricultural products for both communities, suggesting that their subsistence base was similar (though hunting and timber products are excluded from the tally). A truly striking difference appears, however, in the production of mulberry leaves. The significance of this requires some explanation. Mulberry leaves were used solely for feeding silkworms – they had no other purpose; and silkworms feed on nothing else. Therefore the production of mulberry leaves is unmistakable evidence for the manufacture of raw silk. Silk is an exchange (rather than subsistence) commodity and thus generates income. But the production process requires a spacious house with an upper level to accommodate the silkworms in their feeding bins, and is therefore limited to the more prominent households. Consequently, the amount of mulberry leaves being produced serves as a rough indication of relative wealth. The survey reveals that Kanzaka-Gamada was producing nearly ten times the amount of mulberry leaves per household as Nakao (no figures are given for the silk itself).

In short, Weston presents us with two distinct communities, located only a few kilometres apart but of significantly different character. In terms of subsistence base alone, however, the categorical boundary between the 'farmers' of Gamada and the 'hunters' of Nakao is not so clear-cut. While the 'hunters' ranged further afield, even up

Figure 2. Hamilton's photograph of Nakashima Ichiemon, the 'hunter chieftain of Nakao', from Weston's (1896*a*) *Mountaineering and exploration in the Japanese Alps.*

and over the mountain passes into neighbouring valleys, they nevertheless engaged in cultivation. By the same token, while the 'farmers' relied more heavily on cultivation, supplemented by silk production and the hot spring revenue, they undoubtedly participated, as people do today, in gathering wild mountain resources (including edible plants and fungi) and perhaps some occasional hunting as well. What, then, explains their difference in attitude, towards both the spirit that animated the surrounding landscape and the prospect of foreigners intruding on its sacred realm?

Bird-David, with her emphasis on root metaphors, offers one possible answer: it may be that the most meaningful distinction is conceptual, having more to do with the way in which the two communities envisioned the natural environment than with the material aspects of their productive activities. My own fieldwork, however, added yet another dimension to the problem – one that blurred the distinction between material and conceptual aspects altogether.

Are mountain gods vindictive?

A visit to the Gamada River valley in the present day reveals both consistencies and discrepancies with Weston's account. The village of Gamada is located along the northwest bank of the river at an elevation of around 820 metres. Nakao, where the hunters lived, is further upstream at around 1,100 metres, perched well above the river on a kind of sloping plateau between two tributaries. To walk from one community to the other takes about an hour. Kasagatake looms just to the north overlooking the narrow valley, and though its summit reaches to only 2,897 metres (compared with Mont Blanc in the French Alps, for example, at 4,807 metres), its proximity makes it appear impressively high.

Nakao, however, is no longer the collection of ramshackle huts that Weston described. The community was transformed, beginning in the mid-1960s when new drilling technology made it possible to bore through the underlying bedrock to greater depths, thereby tapping into previously inaccessible sources of hot spring water. The little settlement has subsequently been drawn into a wider development project that incorporates several communities of this and the converging valley into a tourist resort area, offering a combination of skiing, hiking, mountain viewing, and outdoor bathing. Though smaller and more rustic than the term 'resort' implies, and still somewhat isolated due to its distance from major urban areas and limited routes of access, Nakao has nevertheless enjoyed newfound prosperity owing to the tourist industry. Practically all the current residents own or are employed by hot spring lodges.

Walter Weston is widely celebrated throughout the northern Alps, having been credited with 'opening' the area to mountain climbing as a recreational activity. Consequently, Nakashima Ichiemon, the 'hunter chieftain of Nakao', has become something of a local folk hero for his role in aiding Weston's efforts. A small museum at the visitor centre located just upstream contains a display case in which Nakashima's various hunting accoutrements, the very ones appearing in Hamilton's photograph, are prominently displayed.

One of my informants turned out to be none other than Nakashima's grand-nephew (a grandson of Nakashima's younger brother), the direct line from Nakashima having long since died out. This man told me that most of the people who lived in Nakao had at one time been hunters; indeed, this is what distinguished their community from the people of Gamada, who were predominantly farmers. When I pointed out that there seemed to be some overlap between the two categories, he allowed that this was true, but insisted that Gamada was *satoyama* – a 'domesticated mountain' area – as opposed to a community of true mountain-dwellers like his own had been.

Long-term residents of Nakao still identify with this hunting tradition. But, again, 'hunters' engaged in a wide range of subsistence activities, including trapping, fishing, and gathering edible plants, as well as cutting timber and making charcoal as sources of cash income. As indicated in the aforementioned inventory of agricultural products from the early 1870s, they also cultivated crops. In Nakao, however, the favoured technique was slash and burn (known in Japanese as *yakihata*, or 'burned field'), and the closest they had to a staple grain was millet. Here then is a distinct departure from the Yanagita archetype, as Nakao's position at higher elevation on a northwest-facing slope precluded growing rice. Millet is a hardy plant that can tolerate lower temperatures and (unlike rice) survive without irrigation or meticulous daily care. In other words, people could plant the seedlings and then leave to engage in other activities, returning later to harvest the crop. Equally significant is the fact that the slash-and-burn technique involves shifting regularly from one location to another over land that

is held communally – it is an *extensive* form of cultivation as opposed to the intensive use of permanent, privately owned fields. All of these factors together suggest a generally more diversified and mobile lifestyle, less rigidly tied to place.

The theme of greater mobility emerges also in the area of social relations. I was surprised to find that many of the older women in Nakao had originally married in from Kamikōchi, located just beyond a row of high mountains in neighbouring Nagano prefecture. Consequently there had been considerable movement back and forth due to people visiting and assisting their relatives. This required a steep hike of about three hours up to the pass, then another two hours down into the adjacent valley, following the same trail used by Weston and his comrades on the day they left the region. In other words, Nakao people ranged further afield, their movements unrestricted by the drainage divide.

As for Gamada, I was initially puzzled by what seemed a major discrepancy with Weston's account. Weston describes a farm village, implying the presence of arable land, but Gamada today comprises only two rows of buildings, mostly inns and restaurants, lining opposite sides of a narrow road that skirts a broad and rocky riverbed. On one side the houses cling precariously to the edge of the riverbank; on the other side they are squeezed between the road and a steep slope rising into the mountains. There is hardly any level land to build upon, let alone cultivate.

I asked the older residents if they could shed light on this mystery. What they told me was riveting. There had indeed been crop land, both dry fields and rice paddies, lying just upstream from the houses and on both sides of the river. But on 28 June 1920, after several days of unrelenting rain, a huge mass of rock and mud slipped away from a nearby slope and came pouring down into the riverbed. The rain-swollen river began shifting its course, trying to dig a new channel. For several days it pitched back and forth, eating further into the embankment on either side. The people of Gamada were helpless to intervene as, bit by bit, they watched their village slough off into the raging water. In the end the entire village was washed away – houses, fields, and even the hot spring were destroyed. Those who chose to remain in the wake of the devastation moved the village about 500 metres downstream to its present location. There they managed to eke out a living until decades later, when the expansion of tourism, combined with the new drilling technology, brought some degree of prosperity back into their lives.

Am I suggesting that the mountain god was indeed angered by Weston's intrusion and exacted its vengeance by sending violent storms to wipe out the village? Not quite. After all, the calamity occurred some twenty-five years after the fact, and the hunters themselves – the ones who had actually facilitated the intrusion – were left unscathed. Rather, what the mudslide confirms is that, in a sense, the villagers' fears were justified; it demonstrates that agriculture is an inherently risky enterprise that is highly susceptible to the vagaries of nature. This is especially true if one's fields happen to be located along a rather temperamental river and are walled in by steep slopes.

Freud (1953 [1901]: 258) famously proclaimed that religion 'is nothing but psychology projected into the external world'. In this case, the villagers' anxieties were projected onto the environment in the image of a vengeful mountain spirit. The spirit, in other words, was nature personified. It was fearful because of its unpredictability – one never knew when its disposition would change, sending flood, drought, or pestilence to threaten one's livelihood. This threat would have been far more serious to the farmers, who were heavily invested in fewer and less resilient (though potentially higher-yielding) crops, than to the hunters, who occupied higher ground and could shift their efforts from place to place.

It is true that the availability of game animals is also unpredictable, but, as mentioned above, the hunters did not rely on this resource exclusively for their survival. And while people working in the mountains can slip and fall, be mauled by bears, or be swept under an avalanche, they have more control over such contingencies (by remaining attentive, following precautions, and using sound judgement) than a farmer has over the weather. This perhaps explains their lack of 'superstition'.[14]

The hunters held their own beliefs (as is obvious from their candle-lighting ritual near the summit of Kasagatake), but theirs were of a different quality. This returns us to the aforementioned notion of distance. Hunters make their living in the largely undomesticated realm of the forested mountains. Agriculture, on the other hand, involves wresting an area from nature, domesticating that area, then continually struggling to prevent nature from breaking back in and reclaiming it; in other words, nature and humans are placed in opposition.[15] In a sense, ecological distance coincides with social distance, not between human and human, but between human and nature personified as spirit or god. The villagers viewed the spirit with fear and uncertainty, which the hunters (at least according to Weston) dismissed as superstitious. The hunters, for their part, seem to have enjoyed a more intimate relationship both with the mountains that afforded them their livelihood and with the spirit that dwelt therein. I do not mean to suggest that they had no fear of the mountain god and its capacity to punish, but that they were confident in their ability to gain its favour by drawing on this special intimacy.[16]

Significant in this regard is that hunters were customarily enlisted to climb the lofty peaks and pray for rain on behalf of the villagers, when the villagers themselves were most in need. The hunters were apparently recognized as having greater influence with the spirits, such that they were chosen to serve as intermediaries. This coincides with their physical movement back and forth between the two realms – that of the spirits (the mountain highlands) and that of the villagers (the domesticated landscape of fields and households).

Conclusion

The Gamada villagers would likely concur with Blacker's depiction of the *yama no kami*, which she identifies here as male:

> His nature is ambivalent; it is neither good nor bad, but can manifest itself as benign or destructive to human interests according to the treatment it receives. Treat him correctly with the proper worship and cult attention and with the right and appropriate offerings, and the *kami* can reasonably be expected to bless, protect and succour the village, to see that the harvest ripens, to ward off flood and drought, to forestall fire and pest. Offend him, on the other hand, either by neglect or by exposure to the pollutions of blood and death, and at once his benevolence will turn to rage which will smite with fire, sterility and sickness (1975: 41).

Note how closely this resembles Blacker's earlier characterization of the ancestral spirits (see p. 866) *and* the Kurumba concept of nature as a vindictive ancestor as reported by Bird-David (see p. 864).

By the same token, the people of Nakao appear to conform to Bird-David's Nayaka, who saw the forest as a nurturing parent rather than a potentially vindictive ancestor. In Japan, however, the metaphorical relationship between hunters and the forested mountains may draw more heavily on an affinal rather than a filial archetype – namely that of husband and wife. As mentioned earlier, hunters and timber-cutters typically characterize the mountain god as female, placing themselves in the role of her minions. It is interesting to

note that Japanese men sometimes refer to their wives as 'my mountain god' (*uchi no yama no kami*), especially when implying that the referent is the real authority within their purportedly patriarchal households, or is prone to jealousy and petulance. Chiba (1975*b*) traces the derivation of this euphemism to a tradition among hunters in the insular mountain regions. At the time of a young hunter's coming of age he was ritually made a *deshi*, a steward or apprentice, of the mountain god through the symbolic enactment of a conjugal bond. The commitment, like marriage, was intended to be lifelong. As with the metaphorical relationship between parent and child, this, too, suggests a special intimacy, though one that is not without inherent tensions.

As to whether the conceptual aspects are more significant than mode of production in defining the way a particular group of people interacts with its environment, the case presented here suggests that the two are so closely interwoven as to be indistinguishable. It would be hard to deny that religious attitudes in each community were rooted in its particular ecological and economic circumstances. It is equally clear, however, that these attitudes influenced, or at the very least were used to justify, the inhabitants' reaction to Weston's appearance. This demonstrates the utility of Rappaport's cognized model, which treats knowledge and belief as a unitary programme.

Folk belief possesses an epitomizing quality – it condenses an array of interacting variables into the evocative image of a spirit or god. In a sense, the image is a personification of nature as variously construed by human beings. Thus while the 'operational model' conforms to the old adage that 'seeing is believing', based as it is on empirical observation, the cognized model reverses the equation through an acknowledgement that 'believing is seeing' – a way of comprehending the world. As such it offers insight into people's attitudes and concerns, which a strictly operational description cannot do. And in cases where operational categories appear to overlap, such as 'farmers' who forage or 'hunters' who cultivate, belief offers insight into the subtle qualitative differences between them.

At base, however, I suspect that these differing attitudes have less to do with subsistence activities *per se* than with the anxieties that accompany the accumulation of wealth and property. Modernist thinking tends to equate 'superstition' with ignorance and lack of progress. An article in a special interest magazine for mountaineering enthusiasts in Japan, for example, praises Weston's hunter-guides (Nakashima and his two companions) for their open-mindedness and progressive thinking. The author refers to them as 'international benefactors', as 'people who could laugh at and oppose, and thereby abolish, feudalistic superstitions' (Katō 1971: 172, 176). Another commentator, ironically writing at the height of the Second World War, celebrates the young hunters as representatives of a new generation who are willing to reject the outdated prejudices of their forebears (Tanabe 1943: 245).

The assumption here is that 'superstition' and 'progress' are antithetical. But by most standards the people of Gamada, with their substantial houses, intensively cultivated crops, and vaunted hot spring bath, would have appeared far more 'progressive' than the rustic hunters of Nakao. I suggest that 'superstition' (seen by the outsider as an irrational attribution of cause and effect) derives not from ignorance so much as fear of losing one's possessions. The more one has, in other words, the more threatening is the prospect that it might be taken away or destroyed. Thus the farmers of Gamada had more at stake, as reflected in their anxiety about mountain spirit vindictiveness. By the same token, the hunters' lack of anxiety reflects the fact that, in a material sense, they had little or nothing to lose.

The same might be said of their attitudes towards Weston himself. For people with little or nothing to lose, an encounter with a foreigner might just as easily bring opportunity as impending threat or danger. After all, a hunter's livelihood depends largely on chance encounters. And while Weston does not mention it in his memoirs, he undoubtedly paid them to serve as his guides.

This leads to one final possibility – that the 'superstition' exhibited by the people of Gamada veiled more pragmatic concerns about the economic impact of outside incursion. It is true that Weston's example helped to inspire a wave of interest in recreational mountaineering (Ireland 1993: 20), though the villagers could hardly have foreseen this at the time. A more likely concern was the expansion of mining activity. A British metallurgist named William Gowland had conducted his own explorations of the region nearly twenty years earlier.[17] Weston recalls that Gowland had gone there 'as the representative of the [Japanese] Government Departments to report on the mineral character of certain districts' (1896*b*: 126). Weston himself, on his way to Gamada during his initial visit, passes through Hirayū, another hot spring village located in the adjoining valley. He observes that '[u]ntil the last few years the hot mineral springs ... formed the chief attraction of the isolated little spot, but recently other sources of prosperity have been opened up in the [silver and copper] mines', which are located further up-slope (1896*a*: 70). In fact here at Hirayū he and his companion Miller encounter a government official engaged in surveying the area. The official asks them to pass along any information they might obtain from their exploration of the upper reaches, though Weston does not indicate whether or not they complied (1896*a*: 72-3). Later, while staying at a lodge in nearby Ōmachi, he is questioned by the other guests: ' "Have you come to search for silver mines?" "No; then it must be crystals?" That I was simply climbing for pleasure I found it very hard to persuade them' (1896*a*: 128).

Thus it appears to have been a common assumption that Weston was associated with the mining industry. This perhaps sheds new light on the Gamada headman's 'confusion' about the ultimate purpose of the Weston party's visit; again, 'why they should want to climb a mountain *where neither silver mines nor crystals were to be found* was quite unintelligible to him' (1896*a*: 81-2, emphasis added). Was the headman advising Weston not to waste his time, or trying to divert his attention from the local area? It is important to recall that the villagers issued their warning of supernatural sanction not to Weston directly, but to the hunters of a neighbouring community – the latter being in better position to profit (as mountain guides and porters) from development opportunities at higher elevations. Indeed, the Gamada case may represent a fairly widespread tactic, found not only in rural Japan but in the rest of the world as well: that is, a group of people defending their own interests by invoking an angry god.

NOTES

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[1] Rappaport (1963: 159-60) had employed the term 'cognized environment' a few years earlier in referring to the way a population orders its world into meaningful categories, a concept not unlike the 'folk taxonomies' of ethnoscience. In subsequent years he expanded upon the concept to include non-empirical entities like ancestral spirits (1967: 22), eventually applying the term 'cognized model' (1968: 238; 1971: 247).

[2] Yanagita himself admits a few sentences later that 'the tradition of [the mountain god] and its divine attributes differed according to the occupational groups of its worshippers, such as hunters, woodcutters, or sailors' (1962 [1946]: 54-5; 1970 [1946]: 74).

[3] The official name for this range is 'Hida Sammyaku', though it is hardly ever used in the Japanese vernacular. Hida is the name of a former province, now comprising the northern portion of Gifu prefecture.

[4] The mountain is so named because its summit is shaped like a *kasa* – the peasant's umbrella-like hat made of interwoven sedge or yew leaves.

[5] See similar accounts in Weston (1896*b*: 143; and 1897: 30). *Tengu* is used in referring to mountain spirits, sometimes interchangeably with *yama no kami*, though *tengu* often implies a more malevolent presence.

[6] Uraguchi was only 22 years old at the time. In 1934 he recounted his experiences climbing mountains with Weston in an address before the Japanese Alpine Club (Nihon Sangaku Kai). The address was later expanded into a lengthy article that appeared in the climbing magazine *Sangaku* (see Uraguchi 1934). While largely corroborating Weston's account, Uraguchi states emphatically that he had never done any archaeology. He speculates that Weston had described him as an archaeologist due to their mutual interest in local customs and beliefs (1934: 241). See also note 10.

[7] An abbreviated version of this same episode appears in a paper Weston read before the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1895 (see Weston 1896*b*).

[8] The route they used is known locally as Anage-dani, named after the ravine it follows for most of its length.

[9] Weston was misinformed on this particular issue. There is evidence that religious ascetics had been climbing Kasagadake intermittently from as early as the 1260s. In fact, in 1823 a Buddhist priest named Banryū established a devotional route to the summit, complete with Buddhist statuary placed at intervals along the way so that climbers could mark their progress (see Hokari & Hokari 1997: 28-9, 35-6, 51-6). The route has since been lost, however, and was not the same as that followed by Weston and his party in the summer of 1894.

[10] All of this is corroborated by Uraguchi's later account (see note 6), with two minor discrepancies: (1) Uraguchi plays a more active role as interpreter (Weston apparently not having been fluent in Japanese), and (2) the Weston party, after leaving Gamada at midnight, hike up to Nakao, where they bed down at Nakashima's home for two or three more hours.

[11] This was confirmed for me by one of the current residents of Nakao, whose household has long occupied an adjacent plot of land.

[12] According to local residents, Gamada and Kanzaka are often identified together, even sharing a single tutelary shrine and annual shrine festival.

[13] Gamada alone would have accounted for five of these households (T. Shimoke, pers. comm., 5 August 2004).

[14] Moran's (2006: 97–9) distinction between risk and uncertainty in the decision-making process may be applicable here. Risk is based on an assessment of the probability for achieving a specific outcome, while uncertainty derives from the fact that the outcome itself is unknown. Therefore 'uncertainty tends to immobilize people, as they have no idea of how to assess what might be the consequences of a given course of action' (2006: 99). In this sense it may be said that hunters take calculable risks, such as crossing a stream swollen by the rain, while farmers face uncertainties, such as the persistence of a drought or the occurrence of flooding.

[15] Dwyer has argued that the very concept of nature as a separate domain, distinct from culture, emerges only with the transition to more highly intensive systems of food production, or what he refers to as 'the centralization of the productive domain' (1996: 176).

[16] One of my informants noted that hunters could simply pray to the *yama no kami* beforehand, asking permission to do whatever they wanted, then proceed under the assumption that they had gained the spirit's blessing.

[17] Gowland first coined the appellation 'the Japanese Alps' (Fujioka 2002: 282).

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Les dieux des montagnes sont-ils rancuniers ? Images concurrentes du paysage alpin japonais

Résumé

L'auteur souligne l'importance des concepts religieux populaires dans la compréhension des interactions entre les gens et l'environnement qui les entoure et assure leur subsistance. Les images du Japon rural ont tourné presque exclusivement autour de la tradition de la culture irriguée du riz et du culte des ancêtres. Les concepts alternatifs ont été méconnus ou ignorés, favorisant ainsi la perception d'un patrimoine culturel uniforme. L'auteur met en évidence une de ces alternatives, issue de la tradition de la chasse, de la cueillette et de la culture sur brûlis, dans un paysage habité par les esprits. Le contraste entre les points de vue est illustré par une rencontre historique entre un alpiniste britannique et les habitants de deux villages situés à des altitudes différentes dans un même bassin versant.

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