

Imanishi Kinji's Natural Ethic: The Contribution of a Twentieth-Century Japanese Scientist to Ideas of "Being in the World"

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Introduction

Two goals of this essay can be stated briefly. One is to relate in what sense we can consider the Japanese scientist, Imanishi Kinji, to have provided in his biological research an ethic for humanity that is well beyond environmentalist movements, holism, or tracing our evolutionary past. The second, and more pertinent for the theme of this volume and the Nichibunken-based research project on historiography and Japanese values, is a call for a reassessment of the character of and influences on Imanishi's thinking based on the recent discovery of his personal papers and research notebooks. To wit, Imanishi has been described by both Japanese and foreign commentators as having been impelled by nationalistic concerns to support rightwing agendas and to contribute to the *nihonjinron* genre of writing. The major philosophical underpinnings to ideas about the natural world have also been attributed largely, though not necessarily relatedly, to the influence of Kyoto philosopher Nishida Kitarō. While those influences certainly appear to exist, they are by no means the only, or necessarily the main influences.

Since this is a "work in progress," and is in many ways historical research done by a nonhistorian, I shall be very grateful for the forbearance and advice that readers may be willing to provide.

Imanishi Kinji's Scientific Career

Imanishi Kinji's life spanned four eras in modern Japanese history. Born in the last decade of the Meiji era in 1902, his very active research career continued throughout the entire Showa and early Heisei periods until only a few years before his death in 1992. From my perspective as an anthropologist, Imanishi is *the* central figure behind studies of human and primate "sociality" (i.e., reasons for, and forms of, social grouping) in Japan. His doctoral research was in ecology and entomology, but he fashioned from it views of animal sociality that led him eventually to anthropology and primatology. He was the founder of Japanese primatology and he launched human ecology studies by Japanese anthropologists. He was professor of both social anthropology and physical anthropology at Kyoto University, professor of cultural anthropology in Okayama University, and in 1967 he became president of Gifu University. The students who worked most closely with him subsequently became heads of many of the major anthropological and primatological institutes in Japan, such as the Na-

tional Museum of Ethnology in Osaka; the Institute for Humanistic Studies, the Laboratory for Human Evolution Studies, and the Center for African Areas Studies in Kyoto, and the Primate Research Institute, affiliated with Kyoto University, in Inuyama (Aichi-ken).

Imanishi's extraordinarily broad and pioneering scholarly career was matched only by his professional mountaineering expeditions and exploration in Africa, the Himalayas and throughout Japan. His accomplishments and reports about these trips set an inspirational example that added to his recognition and popularity among the general public, beyond the scientific academy in Japan. His contributions were recognized twice by the Japanese government: in 1962 he received the award "Person of Cultural Merit" and in 1979 he was named to "The Second Order of the Sacred Treasure." Imanishi remained active in publishing and contributing to academic meetings well into his eighties. Only since about 1986, when his eyesight began to deteriorate seriously, did he curtail his public and scientific engagements. He went blind in 1988 and passed away on 15 June 1992. Fifteen hundred people attended his funeral, including an envoy from the Emperor.

Imanishi as Moral Philosopher

Why or how could we consider Imanishi to have contributed to moral philosophy, or ideas of "being in the world"? Why too would Kyoto University philosopher Ueyama Shunpei remark in his epilogue to the seventh printing in 1972 of Imanishi's first book, *Seibutsu no sekai*, published in 1941, that he judged Imanishi to be one of the few original thinkers in Japan since the Meiji Restoration?

The answer lies in the fact that Imanishi completed, at the age of 38, a self-described "personal view of the world," which was the wellspring of his scientific writings.¹ Thus, although he went on to write scientific articles and books in all the disciplines mentioned above, which eventually filled thirteen volumes,² he returned to the ideas contained in his first book when he announced his retirement from "science" in an English-language article published in 1984 (Imanishi 1984). In that article, written four decades after *Seibutsu no sekai*, Imanishi said that he felt that the ultimate concern and responsibility of a scientist should be to free contemporary people from their cultural fragmentation by making them more conscious of the way art, morality, religion and science have become specialized, censorial, and constrictive to the wholeness of our cultural experience.

This was an extension of his constant refrain that we should think of nature (including all organisms and non-living things) as part of a single fabric of life. This was more than advocating "holism." Imanishi wrote of the active interaction between individuals and their environments, of parallels in the structure of the lives of living and non-living things, and that the natural world exists, not as a resource for human life, but as a path by which we can understand our biological affinity with the living world, and that the roots of our behavior are in the world of living things. He wrote, essentially, an ethic of how to relate to and understand nature and, by extension, humankind's place in the world of living things. Since Imanishi was not constrained as were Western anthropologists with regard to belief in the "uniqueness" of the human mind or other characteristics, his explorations of what the natural world could tell us about humanity were much more probing than those of his Western contemporaries. Very recently there has been a call by one of the foremost scientists in comparative psychol-

ogy and primatology to recognize how far ahead Imanishi was in these explorations (de Waal forthcoming). Similarly, in fields as diverse as biology, ecology and semiotics, Imanishi's insights are now being recognized as relevant to current research initiatives (e.g., Ikeda and Sibatani 1995; Itō 1991; Kawade 1998, Kawade 1999).

In considering Imanishi as having contributed a moral philosophy, or natural ethic, I would like to set out the facts of what he wrote rather than to discuss the meaning and implications of its content for a moral philosophy. My main intent is to review the implications for our understanding of the history of modern Japanese values through his sources, not his ideas *per se*. Thus, I turn now to the new evidence.

The Imanishi Papers

The significant collection of Imanishi's personal papers was discovered in 2001 in Kyoto by his eldest son, Imanishi Buntarō (age seventy-two) in boxes in the family home that had remained unopened since his father's death. They span the years 1925-1980 and include Imanishi's undergraduate university lecture notebooks; field notes of his work in entomology, ethnology, primatology and mountaineering; drafts of scientific papers; study notebooks of various Western social historians and those doing what would now be called biosociology, sexology and anthropology, including such references as Arnold Toynbee, Alfred Espinas, Margaret Mead, General Smuts, Petr Kropotkin, and Frederic Clements; maps of his explorations in Africa; drafts of letters to foreign scientists and some of their replies; preserved collections of flora collected during research trips; photographs with foreign and Japanese scientists; and such minutiae as book order and hotel receipts. The collection is in English, German and Japanese.

In addition to the collection of scientific and field notes, Imanishi donated his considerable personal library of English and Japanese-language books, monographs and papers to Gifu University on his retirement as president of the university. I have visited this collection and found that Imanishi made clearly legible notes and emphases throughout many of the books. There are volumes in the collection, on topics as diverse as making the boundary between Alberta and British Columbia, instructional books on downhill and cross-country skiing (necessary in his mountaineering, and Imanishi became a ski instructor), anthropology texts, ecology texts, and so on.

Significance of Imanishi's Use of Western Resources

It is well known that Japanese studying science from the late 1800s to the 1930s drew heavily on Western, and particularly German, sources. His university notebooks from 1925 through 1928 list German texts in most of his science subjects. Beyond this, in his personal and scientific papers, he pursued the most arcane Western sources in all of his disciplinary pursuits. These sources provide insight into predominant themes in Western research that lost their central place in Western science (Mitman 1992), but which were developed by Imanishi over the next forty years, incorporating particularly German, British, and American findings in science over that time. His work thus provides a carefully thought out basis for current initiatives in a surprisingly broad range of disciplines in Western research.

Thus, whereas Western scientists abandoned some of the trajectories with the MES (modern evolutionary synthesis, when genetics could be added to explain the mechanism by which evolution worked), Imanishi continued on with them to their logical conclusions. These resonate strongly with recent work on various fronts, in evolutionary theory, in semiotics, in ecology (niche construction), and in views of environmental systems. The reason I call this ultimately ethics is that how we perceive humans to relate to the larger picture defines our degree of responsibility to ourselves and the world. It is more than ontology, it is ethics or moral philosophy.

Concluding Perspectives

Imanishi and his “anti-Darwinian” (that are actually anti-selectionist) views have been written about in terms of cultural, nationalist or *nihonjinron* genre writings. Some of his main *deshi*, such as Umesao Tadao, and others not directly related to him, have been “accused” of writing a history of civilization based on nationalistic and unrealistic views of the world (Morris-Suzuki 1998; Dale 1986; Kishi 1988). Imanishi was not, like Watsuji Tetsurō, restricting himself to Japan’s place in the world. He was, rather, considering nature as a whole and the human place in it. We should rethink the accuracy of how commentators such as Peter Dale, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, and Japanese such as Kishi, et al. portray this era’s writers and their ideas as contributing to *kokutai*, *nihonjinron*, anti-Western (e.g., Darwin) writing. Imanishi Kinji, at least, has provided a treasure trove of evidence, in the primary data of the basis for his intellectual journey and insights, to the contrary.

I think that others have appropriated his writings to make their own political points. Those who fear right wing tendencies, see them in Imanishi’s work; those who embrace these tendencies also claim to see them in Imanishi. What the Imanishi papers reveal is that he was, at least, a real and careful scholar who drew on all possible sources tested them against his own observations, and thus lent more credence than most to his views of the human condition.

It is well known that there are trajectories in modern Japanese thought stemming from earlier or more recent *kokutai* ideology, and its offshoot *nihonjinron* or theories of Japanese-ness. The latter has spilled over into science as well as the humanities and social sciences. The former not only colors but also informs histories and counter-histories of modern Japan. Imanishi has been the brunt of much representation in this manner. Some of it occurred in response to his copious writings on evolution (known, mistakenly, as anti-Darwinian views—in fact, they were anti-selectionist views). He agreed with the idea of evolution, or descent with modification, but not with the mechanism proposed by Darwin, simply because he saw, as had so many Western scientists and nonscientists before him, ample evidence of forces at work in nature other than competition among individual members of a species.

British geologist Beverly Halstead (1985) published in a major Western scientific journal, *Nature*, that Imanishi, indeed all of Japanese society, was delusional in thinking that its own harmonious populace reflected principles in nature and that anti-Darwinism had fertile ground in Japan. Halstead also wrote a diary of his short, three-month stay in Japan. Although English reviewers of the manuscript castigated this diary, and it remains unpublished in English, a translation appeared in Japanese. A review of it by Kishi Yūji (1988) attributed the popularity of Imanishi’s books to the Japanese people’s nationalism, which seeks some

proof of national cultural creativity that can be opposed to the oppressive globalism of Anglo culture. It was an implicit expression of the cultural nationalism of the people who feel they are defeated by Anglo culture. Kawata Masakado, an evolutionary biologist born in 1958, wrote in 1990 in "An Introduction to Evolutionary Theory" that Imanishi's idea of peaceful coexistence was based on a single view. The main reason why the animal world seemed to be a harmonious society is only because the *shu* (species) governs the *kotai* (individual). He continued, "It is almost impossible that the individual exists for the continuation and preservation of the species, from the point of view of zoology. This idea is clearly reminiscent of cultural values regarding human behavior in society. Kawata goes on to discuss the risk of Imanishi's theory. His theory, he says, seems to belong to the same lineage of those who justified the idea of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and idealized the Pacific War.

Among Western commentators on, for instance, the resurgence of civilization theory, Australian Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1998) discusses the influence of Imanishi on Kawakatsu Heita, and does not mention his influence on Ueyama Shunpei, though that was considerable, in her discussion of these writers positing Japan as being in a prime alternative position to Eurocentric models of civilization. Peter Dale (1986) attributes Imanishi's work as the basis for several nihonjinron-linked theories of the nature of society. Such attributions are, I submit, simply wrong in face of the evidence from the Imanishi papers. Imanishi's views were instead based on careful observation of the natural world and extraordinary digging into Western scientific and social historical writings on his subjects of interest. They were, in other words, ideas well come by.

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NOTES

¹ English (Asquith 2002) and German (Wuthenow and Kurahara 2002) translations of the book have appeared.

² A fourteenth volume is a list of his publications, mountaineering and other activities (Imanishi Kinji, *Imanishi Kinji zenshū* [The Collected Works of Imanishi Kinji], 14 vols. Kodansha, 1974-75, 1993).