

# **Crossing Cultural Boundaries in the Context of Marriage: Australian-Japanese Marriages and the Profession of Japanese Studies**

Alison TOKITA

School of Asian Languages and Studies, Monash University, Australia

"How can one study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective?" (Said 1978: 24).

"How might we come to know and simultaneously respect the 'Other'?" (Said, in Williams & Chrisman 1994: 8)

"The student of another culture who travels there goes thinking: I will watch how those people live, or work, or write, and then bring their lessons home. But he goes abroad as a man, or woman, and so with his intellectual intents goes too a sexual body. His desire for knowledge is easily confused with his desire to possess or be possessed by other things: passion. The body becomes his methodology, and his desire for union an epistemology. Many of us, if male and heterosexual, will bring back wives, the souvenirs of a place where we also left a part of ourselves. Others might return home alone, but we were all in those distant lands lovers of a kind" (Treat 1999).

## **INTRODUCTION**

My normal area of research is in the performing arts of Japan, particularly sung narratives. In this paper, I turn to scrutinizing the position from which I have been studying Japan and Japanese for nearly thirty years, as ethnomusicologist and Japanologist. This position is both professional and personal, since I am married to a Japanese man. This is consistent with an intellectual trend to include the observer, not just the observed, to acknowledge one's dependency on the information of the insider or the informant, regardless of one's linguistic competence.

I sense that there is a lot of latent interest in the topic of international marriage or intermarriage, but that few people are keen to openly discuss the experience from the inside. Having now survived over twenty years of such a marriage, I am less reluctant to talk about it than before. I often feel that the interest of others is not purely intellectual, but somewhat prurient; to talk about the experience is to undergo some

kind of intervention or a violation by being exposed to a public gaze, but I believe it is incumbent on me to talk.

The broad context of this paper is Australia with Japan as its Other. This begins in the prewar period with the White Australia Policy, when there were active trade relations, and when the cultural and intellectual elite in Australia embraced a fascination with *japonisme*. In the wartime period, it encompasses the experiences of Australians in Japanese POW camps, then in the postwar period, the Allied Occupation, the encounter with Japanese "war brides" and the dismantling of the White Australia Policy. The post White Australia Period saw economic promise from Japan in the 1970s, stimulating the Japanese language boom, the Learn from Japan boom, and the growth of Japanese studies in universities. (See Meaney 1999 for a highly readable and beautifully illustrated overview of Australia-Japan relations.)

The focus of this paper is on "international marriage" between Australian woman and Japanese men, and the specific context of such marriages in the Japanese studies profession. Prewar cases of this gender combination are not absent: see Oliver's study of Hirokichi Nakamura and Bessie in Australia (Oliver 2000); Gwen Terasaki's autobiographical account in *Bridge to the Sun* (1957). More recently, there are several memoir accounts, such as Ann Nakano's *Kokusai kekkon, tsukareru ne* (1985). Two principal issues will be addressed: the power dynamic between the partners (exposing an ethical dimension of exploitation, sacrifice, suffering); and the implications for learning about other cultures (considering international marriage as a research methodology). I will also discuss aspects of the evolving identity of the partners in an international marriage.

It must be acknowledged that I have not conducted a rigorous sociological survey. Rather, this can be called an unconventional anthropological project of participant observation, a case study approach, with myself as the main informant, as well as the main mediator and narrator. Validity is therefore minimal in the usual sense. I have no guarantee that any others share my experience. This methodological dilemma has however been justified in much recent feminist anthropology, for experience is seen as a valid means of research (Reinharz 1992). The position of the researcher has tended to be foregrounded, with an emphasis on the complicit nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Leve 1998). Reinharz (ibid: 240) finds that feminist research frequently includes the researcher as a person, in an almost confessional mode; it typically "start[s] from one's own experience," leading to an "epistemology of insiderness." She warns that one should be careful to differentiate one's "own experience" from the experience of the "other woman," and not regard it as normative. She encourages feminist researchers to "be

reflexive about the nature of the relation between experience and research" (Reinharz: 258-63).

### **Terminology and Attitudes**

The experience of international marriage is nothing if not multifaceted, and invites a multitude of reactions from others, as well as multiple interpretations by the partners themselves. This is reflected in the multiplicity of names given in English to such marriages and the gradual change in nomenclature. (Further, terminology is a sure reflection of attitudes.)

A survey of titles of books on the subject showed changing terminology (and thus presumably changing attitudes) towards such marriages, starting from "miscegenation" in one 1931 publication. In more recent decades, books have appeared about mixed marriages, intermarriage, marital assimilation, marriage across frontiers, transatlantic marriages (a geographical referent), and multiracial couples.

Popular terminology for the children of these relationships includes half-caste, half-breed, mixed blood, Eurasian, Afro-American, biracial Americans, biracial Japanese/whites, children of mixed parentage, mixed race children, and recently the attempt to positively evaluate has led to the word "double" instead of "half." This chapter however focuses on the couple not the progeny of the union. I have not come across any current terms apart from *kokusai kekkon* (international marriage), and *konketsuji* (mixed blood child) and "half" for the children. Derogatory terms such as *rashamen* and *panpan* once referred to Japanese women who associated with foreign men. They were thought of as prostitutes.

There is a need to problematize the first part of the prefixes 'inter,' 'cross,' 'trans,' 'bi,' 'mixed') to find which is most appropriate:

'INTER':

interracial marriage, intercultural marriage, intercultural romances/love, interethnic marriage, international marriage, interfaith marriage, inter-communal marriage

'CROSS':

cross-cultural marriage/relationships

'TRANS':

trans-cultural, trans-Atlantic

'BI':

bilingual, bicultural

It is even more important to problematize the second part of the word. Race, nation, culture, faith, language, blood, parentage, marriage / relationships, sex and ethnicity are all concepts whose boundaries have become increasingly less stable.

While there is a lot of literature on inter-faith marriages, this is now barely remarked on any more in multicultural Australia. Up till the 1960s, it used to be a scandal in Australia if a Protestant married a Catholic (my father used to be told as a young man that "there was a good Presbyterian girl for every Presbyterian boy"). This is still the case in some countries such as Ireland. Issues of marriage between Jew and Gentile are still significant where Orthodox Judaism is strong, particularly in the state of Israel.

Far more significant is the problematization of the terms 'nation' and consequently of 'nationality' or 'citizenship,' 'ethnicity' and 'culture.' These categories have been destabilized, and their polarity weakened in the postmodern condition of global international culture. Nation implies the place of birth and language spoken, and is concretely reflected in the citizenship shown in one's passport, though dual nationality is sometimes possible for those born in one country and emigrated to another.

The concept of ethnicity or race may seem irrelevant in personal relationships. Culture on the other hand is more difficult for marriage partners to discount; it tends to become excessively concretized. The difficulty is that although academics may have deconstructed these concepts, and many others have experienced their destabilization, the reality is that they are still "common sense" to the bulk of people (Moore 1999: 16). The fact that a disproportionately large number of international marriages end in divorce is largely because the partners perceive culture as something solid. One's own culture may be felt to be superior, more refined, more hygienic etc. than that of the other partner. At the other end of the spectrum, especially in the Japanese studies case, it may be the goal of the Japanophile non-Japanese partner to totally assimilate to the Japanese partner's culture in an attempt to become "near-native." (This is a variation of Cold War era espionage training in which a person was trained through simulation to "pass" as the citizen of another country.)

Attitudes, while expressed in terminology, are most often unexpressed in polite society, even while being discriminatory and causing suffering, or inducing an experience of negativity for not conforming to the norm. Negative and positive clusters of attitudes towards intercultural marriage can be identified. The common perception traditionally has been that international marriage involves the violation of a taboo, a transgression of social norms. The colonial imbalance of the situation of Japanese war brides was experienced as largely negative. More recently, this is coming to be viewed

more positively in terms such as "crossing boundaries." At certain periods or for certain classes, the taboo becomes irrelevant; mixed marriage may be acceptable, even desirable for wealthy and privileged elites. Japanese women who have married into social and economic elites are positively evaluated (Yasuko Myer, Toshiko Marks, Nobuko Albery, Devi Sukarno); the marriage can in these circumstances become a source of pride. On the negative side, it might be a source of embarrassment, something which one tends to keep secret, in order to hide one's dependence on the native informant. I have experienced attitudes of pity, disdain, a belittling of one's ability because of my marriage partner, but have also been viewed with envy by colleagues because of having a built-in research assistant and letter writer. At times one feels marginalized in both Australian and Japanese societies, while at other times one experiences the pleasure of being lionized as an expert.

The one who marries an "Oriental" has experienced the attraction towards the exotic Other, whereas the normal reaction is to feel repulsion towards an Outsider; this creates a basic tension between one's own action and position and that of one's relatives and the community as a whole.

Differences between Japanese attitudes and Australian attitudes are as yet to be explored. I would like to just mention the annoyance I feel at possessing a Japanese surname but being compelled to write it in katakana by Japanese immigration and educational authorities, not in the Chinese characters used by my husband.

### **The Power Dynamic Between the Partners**

In this section I point to an ethical dimension of the Australia-Japan intercultural marriage, by suggesting that there is a danger of exploitation, and consequent sacrifice and suffering experienced by one or both partners.

Why do people marry outside their national, cultural, linguistic or faith group? It is one of the "ways of escape" available for people who are not at ease in their own society. Just as "marrying above one's station" (*tama no koshi ni noru*) provides a way out of certain hierarchies within one's own society; "[o]ne reason for studying other cultures and groups is to circumvent one's discomfort as a woman in one's own culture" (Reinharz 1992: 73; also quoted in Leve 1998:18). It adds an ethnic dimension to the hierarchies to be overcome. It is likely however, that one will thereby enter a different kind of gendered hierarchy which is compounded with a racial element. A marriage between an Australian woman and a Frenchman (white-white) is less problematic than an Australian-Japanese marriage; the hierarchy in the latter again is probably less racially imbalanced than the marriage of an Australian woman and a Solomon Islander

(analyzed in Leve 1998). The fact that Japan is an advanced post-industrial nation and an economic world superpower means that there are many aspects of equality and Japanese superiority vis-a-vis Australia. It is Australia who is the "South" in economic development if not in social infrastructure.

Let us remember some of the quintessential paradigms of European relations with various Others. The Orientalist paradigm as defined by Said (1978) posits the West as masculine and the East as feminine. The fictional trope of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* captured this and continues to enthrall operatic fans, even in Japan. In a contemporary sequel, the play *M. Butterfly*, Henry Whang rewrites the theme with a homosexual caste (Kondo 1990). John Whittier Treat has recently given expression in depth to this aspect of Orientalism in his *Great Mirrors Shattered: Homosexuality, Orientalism, and Japan* (1999).

The racialized / ethnicized hierarchies are also gendered ones. No one is really surprised when a Western male has a sexual relationship with, or even marries an "Oriental" woman. Such relationships are endlessly played out in film and popular fiction (cleverly parodied in the video *Picturing Oriental Girls*). The Oriental Woman is depicted as willing slave to the (Western) man's wishes. In real life how does the story go?

The following section will probably be offensive to some who could be outraged by my description. I am pointing out some common abuses of the situation that are almost structural. I am not arguing that such relationships are intrinsically bad, just that the dominant (usually the male) partner should be aware of the inherent unequal power relationship.

If the Japanese partner is a woman, the marriage easily reenacts the Orientalist (Madam Butterfly) paradigm. It is quite obvious that a large proportion of male Japanese studies scholars in the US, Australia and Europe have Japanese wives. Such a relationship can be seen as reproducing the colonial relationship, in which SHE provides the raw materials, while HE has sophisticated tools for analysis, for interpreting, by providing a Western theoretical perspective. SHE is not credited with any intelligent input, but functions as (at best) an unpaid informant, a translator, a secretary, and a research assistant. The Western male who marries a Japanese woman (a male-male marriage no doubt would bring forth a different type of dynamic in the relation to Japan itself, and between the partners), often simplistically assumes the worst aspects of Japanese masculinity, the assumed privileges of maleness, far more than their Japanese counterparts. They can fall into a time warp (not seeing change), indulging in wishful thinking about the superficial superiority of the Japanese male.

When (as in my case) the Western partner is a woman, does this insidious power

imbalance disappear? It is difficult for me to answer the question. The most common reaction which I have experienced to such a partnership is disbelief, at least surprise, almost pity, often with the expectation that one must be forced to submit to an oriental male authority. It is impossible to tell whether a Japanese man behaves differently married to a Western woman because of the difficulty of providing a control situation. (Who does have the upper hand? Is it the Japanese MALE, or the WESTERN female?) I think that overall the gender hierarchy is prevalent over the "west-east" hierarchy.

### **The Aspect of Language**

The question of who can choose which language is used for daily communication (and why) is an unavoidable part of the power relationship in the marriage. The choice of which language is used for daily communication between the couple goes a long way to determining who is "at home," or, put in another way, who is "in control." It is also paradoxical. If the area studies researcher (the Orientalist) does not know the language of the country, in daily use he speaks his Western language, and colonizes her. If the area studies wife wishes to develop and maintain her ability in the foreign language, she thereby colonizes her husband and insists on herself as the one who is clever enough to speak the language and deprives him of the opportunity to develop and maintain his English. There is something comical and tyrannical about situations where the foreign speaker of Japanese is in a position of authority over Japanese in work, diplomatic and also domestic situations. The intercultural workplace is an area where language can define power relationships. This can be observed at Nichibunken, and in a Department of Japanese Studies such as the one I work in at Monash University. It can be observed in the Australian and Japanese staff at the Australian Embassy in Tokyo, among Japanese diplomatic officers and their interaction with Australian staff and clientele in Melbourne, among the Japanese Section of Radio Australia in Melbourne. Yet if indiscriminate "code switching" is practiced in the domestic situation, mixing Japanese and English constantly, there are misgivings, insecurities, and anxieties that children will not be able to speak either language properly. The determination to achieve bilingualism in the children can be a governing factor.

At the level of the private life of the couple, there are many factors which will determine the choice of language used for daily communication, far too complex for me to go into in detail here. In my case, it has been an issue with outcomes that have changed many times, before and after marriage, with the birth of children, as the children grow up, depending on whether the family is in Australia or in Japan, and on

the presence of various people. It must be mentioned that certain modes of communication can be maintained regardless of which language is being used. I am thinking specifically of the requirement of Japanese communication to continuously do *aizuchi* ("back-channeling"), acknowledging the fact that one is paying attention by saying 'hai, soo, mm,' and so on. I find that extremely tiring, and experience it as a kind of control threatening my autonomy. It is something I have attempted to rebel against, without success.

### **The Implications for Learning About Other Cultures: Crossing Cultural Boundaries**

Let us consider the unlikely scenario of deliberately using international marriage as a research methodology. We encourage our students of Japanese language to experience short-term home stays in Japan, in order to become a temporary member of a Japanese family. Is marrying into the target culture qualitatively different from this "method," or other forms of participant observation, or is it just further along the continuum of involvement? How does it compare with a casual romantic relationship with a short-term boyfriend (discussed in depth in Ma 1996)? The latter typically brings a sense of achievement or pride in a Japanese language student.

Area studies scholars and anthropologists often marry someone from the "target culture," usually their "native informant." A famous early example in Japanese studies was Lafcadio Hearn. Researchers have a vested interest in marrying; it gives them a privileged access to knowledge about the culture, and the opportunity for language services and the chance to become near native in speaking the language. The acquisition by men of women's language of course is an amusing stereotype in languages such as Russian and Japanese. (Is my language colored by male speech perhaps?) A detailed study would probably show that the large proportion of Japanese studies scholars with Japanese spouses had some influence on the nature of Japanese studies which is taught in universities, perhaps an extra close identification with Japan.

There are many ways to explain why marriages of this kind should occur frequently. The researcher is likely to be at a marriageable age when doing (perhaps extended) fieldwork. It is easy to develop a close relationship with the interpreter (if one does not know the local language) or with one's informant. If, on the other hand, one does know the local language opportunities for normal socialization naturally occur. It would seem that the researcher often marries an informant who has limited marriage prospects in her/his own society; a foreign partner is not according to common sense the most desirable match, not the first choice as ideal partner.



Other less obvious reasons for marriage might be a fascination with the Other who is the object of research and a desire to identify with that Other (expressed in the quotation from Treat at the head of this paper). An intimate relationship can be a way of bridging the cultural gap; marriage can be perceived as a way into the society, enabling one to become an insider. Not only a way to gain insight into the culture, and to improve one's language in the short term (with ever available free language tuition and help with writing letters), marriage can represent a complete identification with the target culture; it is a sign of sincerity and commitment (rather than a calculating strategy).

Marriage is however different from fieldwork; one does not necessarily leave it once the initial goals have been achieved. A high degree of involvement brings a high degree of commitment beyond the professional level.

A further problem (which can also be called the anthropologist's dilemma) is that the "knowledge" acquired in the site of intercultural marriage brings one to a point of no return (like the anthropologist or explorer who has "gone native"). The quality of the knowledge (wisdom, experience) is arguably such that it cannot be conveyed to others who have not experienced it anyway. (This is similar to religious experience, or being in love, or dying, or to the experience of discrimination.) After sweating at the coalface of cross-cultural experience and of intercultural relations, one acquires knowledge and experience, which cannot be communicated to those of the culture one came from. The strange becomes too familiar. The knowledge is in effect "lost in translation." What is acquired is close to indigenous knowledge, insider's knowledge, an emic view, and yet one feels let down because one's expertise is not acknowledged. There is suffering for the researcher, and guilt towards the target culture because the knowledge provided as a privilege by the informant cannot be conveyed to one's own culture. In fact, the person changes unalterably because of the experience.

We know that the researcher / anthropologist has a need to tell lies or distort her experience in reporting in order to get a degree, to sell the book, or to get a job. The knowledge acquired at high cost, at the expense of considerable suffering may become a burden, or more than one bargained for. In addition, one creates a debt to the other "native" culture. Can it be repaid? Is this learning or appropriation?

The cultural differences in an international marriage are to a large degree imagined, constructed ones. In the early stage, cultural differences can look large, and "cultural friction" is experienced daily, even if one had thought one was committed to absorbing the culture of the other. One gradually acquires familiarity with different ways of doing things, and over a long period of time, one learns to move between cultures. Food tastes can change and develop. People in an intercultural marriage or

other intercultural situation learn to create their own particular interculture and interlanguage, to negotiate a way of doing things which is different from the home culture of each. This takes place in diet, and the general way of life such as the taking off of shoes and bathing. Marriage deconstructs alterity / Otherness --- the exotic becomes the humdrum.

The nature of the interculture is to a large degree specific to each couple; it changes according to the stage of the relationship and with the children's growth stages and consequent variation in intensity of contact with the surrounding host society. Often a buffer zone is created, a demilitarized zone, such as the *Gaikokujin Nihonjin tsuma no kai* (an association in Tokyo for the foreign wives of Japanese men). Language however remains a significant issue. Community attitudes may however force the partners to identify with one side or another: which "side" is one on any way? One may be forced to choose one identity over another in certain situations, such as when war breaks out or a diplomatic crisis occurs between the two countries represented. The Japanese studies scholar tends to develop a powerful identification with the object of study, a lifelong commitment to Japan. I suspect that this is intensified where a marriage relationship exists.

### **Cost-benefit Analysis**

It is difficult to quantify what has been gained from this marriage for the purpose of the Japanese studies project. How much is attributable to the Japanese partner, and how much to one's own research? As least I can say that it has been a process of being continually stretched (on a rack, like torture at times); being opened wider beyond one's existing comfort zone. Before I had heard of the term, I was exposed to a postcolonial perspective on the world, being made painfully aware of the imperialist stance of European (British and hence Australia) countries, and myself as a member of that. This has changed my attitudes to groups such as Aborigines, Jews, Bosnia/Serbia, Timorese, as well as the Japanese. This is perhaps learning to see the world from a Japanese perspective (albeit filtered through the lens of one particular Japanese person) by gaining access to more information than can be obtained in books.

At the same time, there has been a price to pay for me personally, in terms of gradually being left off the social networks I had taken for granted in Melbourne. My way of life became very Japanese, but never fully and "authentically" so, because it was a kind of interculture. One could never grumble to Mother about the home situation because one had "brought it on oneself," one risked being told, "Why did you marry him?" I am inclined to think that the price paid by my husband was greater, but how can

one weight up such factors? Do I have to feel guilty for having married him?

There are significant negatives/ costs for each partner. On the other hand (bearing in mind that no marriage is knowable from the outside), how do such partnerships survive? I would like to posit some binding factors, which work towards the survival of the intercultural marriage. It helps if the couple has a significant amount of shared values, such as both coming from middle class in their respective societies, or having a similar level of education; if each has a sense of their own traditional values, possess a touch of social conservatism after radical student culture, and an interest in stretching beyond boundaries.

Another binding factor is the existence of clear mutual benefits beyond mutual attraction, so that the gains of the marriage situation for each outweigh the losses/ costs. For the Japanese Studies professional, the advantage is the existence of a built-in informant, an intellectual companion, a bridge between one and the "target culture." This professional benefit is there if the Japanese partner is able to function as an adequate informant and facilitator at an appropriate intellectual level. For the Japanese informant who does not have an independent career but is the "house ridden" partner, the marriage can be a source of material support and security, providing an intellectual freedom of sorts, a small domestic enclave of Japaneseness, the opportunity to create a small Japanese colony in the domestic sphere. The advantage can be retaining contact with one's own culture (in contrast to the war brides who had to assimilate to their host society). They can impose their values on the family, and create strong identification with Japan through educational influence. There is a high mutual interdependence. Here the requirements of Japanese literacy play a part in imposing a constraining framework on the children's activities in the interests of bi-literacy. The strains of this regime take their toll on all members of the family. It makes the family linguistic life artificial.

Here is an ethical test (like the Golden Rule) to try for size: Would I recommend this situation as a "methodology" to my students, like a home stay? Do I always acknowledge the input of my Japanese partner, his role as translator, finder of materials for consideration (e.g. book reviews), discussant, mentor, tutor, as (unpaid) research assistant? Do I acknowledge the greater sacrifice paid? (I note that some Japanese studies researchers DO publish with their spouse as co-researcher.)

## Conclusion

The experience of the foreign wife of a Japanese man can be compared to that of the stranger or the guest. The model of the *marebito* makes a lot of sense for the

experience of the "gaijin" wife. The *marebito* is the marginalized entertainer or traveler who visited a village at certain times such as New Year and was welcomed as a harbinger of spiritual blessings and good fortune; she was required to perform rituals and songs, entertained lavishly and then sent on her way (Hori 1963). The *marebito* could never belong in the regular community, but was always an outsider even when made welcome for a while. In the Japanese drive for internationalization (*kokusaika*), Japanese society welcomes the international, but only if it can first be domesticated (masticated, predigested) (Tobin 1992). Those who are actually *nama*, unadulterated foreigners, or Japanese returnee children (*kikoku shijo*) who have acquired too much of the foreign are required to re-naturalize. I am sure there are many very successful and happy women living in Japan married to Japanese men; I have never really had the opportunity to do this for an extended period. I have had the privilege of living in my own country and culture, with several brief and extended stays in Japan with the family and solo. I have experienced the alienation from my own community and culture through this, and a resulting identity change.

The issue of identity is partly one of which side one feels one belongs to. There is also the congruent question: which side will recognize and accept one as a fellow member of society? Increasingly these days, there are those who belong properly to neither culture: such as the children of mixed marriages and also I think the partners of a mixed marriage. We should add people like Edward Said who has said in his recently published memoir that as a child he always wished he was only one thing, not several (Said 1999).

For a conclusion, I can only raise further questions with few answers. What is the border between me and my husband, between Australia and Japan (in a time when "boat people" are often trying to land in isolated coastlines of Australia)? While most people would maintain the boundaries between Japan and Australia, in our marriage these boundaries are continually being deconstructed. The relative hierarchies are continually seesawing, never static, but always forming and reforming.

What is my identity compared with his? Should I try to tell his story for him? Or should I protect his anonymity? What right do I have to write about his culture and commodify it? Do I share the freedom and mobility of the anthropologist/ ethnographer (physical, cultural) to transgress boundaries? Do I have a duty to build bridges over the fault lines of domination and subordination? To what degree am I accepted by Japan?

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