

Are You Human? : A Narrative of a Japanese Islander on Field Researchers

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1. Introduction

This is a collection of narratives of an inhabitant of an anonymous island in southern Japan, and concentrates on ethical problems that she had experienced. Theoretically, the rule for field research is very simple. Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to yourself (the Golden Rule of Jesus Christ). But, in practice, there are so many problems. These problems are seldom published by anthropologists in a form of narratives presumably because a fieldworker must face the pain of victims suffering from so-called “field researches” for which he or she is on the side of people who caused such suffering. I put some exercises at the end of the paper to be of help in learning cultural anthropology.

During a short stay of one week (1990) in a small island of the southern Sea of Japan with my wife and six-year-old son, we met with a woman (at the end of her thirties) who told us of her mostly unhappy experience with fieldworkers and journalists who had visited the island for research. She was interested in the folklore and the plant world of her island, and began collecting oral traditions at the age of 11. One day, I was allowed to tape-record her conversation with her relative, who worked in the municipal office of the island. He was then in the education branch, and his work was, among others, to take care of the researchers who visit the island.

In the following text, the woman is referred to Ms. P. (P. for privacy) and her relative as Mr. Q.

2. Eccentric professors invade the island

Ankei : Please begin to narrate what you have experienced with researchers who visit this island.

Q : There are so many visitors in my office. I need at least 300 name cards to give in exchange for visitors each year. From whom shall we begin our narratives? Oh, Professor A of a national university who came to study dialects and folklore of this island! On his arrival, I was asked to accompany him to visit villagers. I drove him to one of the elders of a village. When we arrived, he was making baskets with bamboo. I introduced the professor to the old man, and asked him if he would talk with the visitor.

The old man then asked me,

“Dear Q, do you have a pair of eyes or not?”

I could not help replying, “Yes, I have.”

Then he continued,

“If so, tell me what I’m doing now.”

“You are making baskets.”

“Yes, yes, yes! I am supposed to finish this work today, and I cannot manage to speak with the gentleman today. I will be free tomorrow. Come tomorrow, and we’ll be able to talk

for as long as you wish.”

I told the professor,

“Did you hear the old man’s words? Let us visit him tomorrow.”

But the professor, saying, “Yes, yes, yes.” entered the salon of the house without permission, and began taking pictures of gaku (panels with shodo writings) which were decorated in the salon. The old man fiercely protested against the visitor and me. And we fled from his house.

I told the professor.

“I cannot put up with your attitude of research. I will no more accompany you to anywhere in this island. You will continue your research by yourself, but please never deceive people by mentioning my name or the name of my office. We will have nothing to do with whatever you do!”

Since then, I have never heard of him.

P: By chance, I also accompanied the professor. I was interested to be acquainted with so-called “academic researches of a university professor.” The case was such an extraordinary person. Do they think that they are allowed to do anything if it will help in their research?

Q: Now I am reminded of a student who came to stay for a working holiday to do archaeological excavation in this island very recently. After his job, he asked me to help his home task of linguistic research of the island. He was the student of that professor! He very hurriedly collected information from islanders and returned. I have reasons to believe that the professor compiles such awkward researches of his students and publishes as his papers.

P: Such papers pass for “scientific articles” in today’s academia!

Q: Do you remember a terrible group of researchers?

P: Of what? Of cultures?

Q: No, a dozen researchers who came to investigate our dialect with a national grant.

P: Don’t mention those pukes!

Q: The way they requested a research was a bit eccentric. A young professor of my acquaintance phoned me to ask if it was possible to ask many old men of the island to gather in a place to be investigated for a very long time. He added that it was a project directed by a very famous professor. I answered that such kind of research will burden the islanders, and I could not consent to such an attempt.

Then, the Mayor of the island, my boss, called me. I was made to realize, that the Governor of the prefecture phoned him to make the research possible. I talked with the young professor if it would be very bad for him, if I did not agree with the research. He said that I had a choice to refuse, but I was already made quite afraid, that if our island refused the research of the professor, not only the young professor who phoned me, but also the Mayor himself would be put in a politically awkward situation.

Thus, I could not help accepting the research. During the research, many old men and women of the islands were summoned to gather in the big gymnasium of a primary school. Professors and researchers investigated them from 8 o’clock in the morning until 6 in the evening.

P: The research was the height of madness! I was asked to participate in the research and attended them for the first day. I saw, for example, an old woman, unable to recollect her memory about the name of a thing in our dialect, began to narrate this way, obviously to put her memories in order.

“Well, when I was very young...”

Then the investigator interrupted,

“We have nothing to do with the days when you were very young. Tell me what it is called.”

I told the researcher,

“What a fool you are to ask the old woman this way!”

I got quite disappointed and angry at the research, and I refused to attend from the second day.

Q: I was obliged to continue to attend them because it was a part of my proper job. Anyway, we arrived at the end of the research. On the last day, I asked the famous professor, if he could give as gift a copy of the report to each of our quite few schools. The reply was that it would become a very thick and expensive volume, and hence that he could afford to send only one volume to the municipal office! Since then I do not feel like seeing even prints of his name or picture.

Near the end of the research, I invited some of the research group members who came from the local prefecture, since they seemed innocent. In a bar, I complained about the project to them.

“We have been treated in such an inhuman way during your research. Do you still insist that the research is fruitful? Are you not ashamed as members participating from the local prefecture?”

P: What were their answers?

Q: Everybody said,

“Yes, yes. We understand very well what you mean.”

P: All talk and no action. Just like Professor Ankei, who listened to what I had to say last night quite drunk. Today he says that he has forgotten the most important thing he promised last night. They are all liars these researchers.

Q: Mr. Ankei, it seems that the wind is blowing now against you. Isn't it time that you shut off your microphone of the tape-recorder?

I shut off the recorder as he advised me, and tried to recall the words of Ms. P from my head still aching from drinking too much.

3. Learning will save human beings if they are to be saved

P: What is your job? I suppose you are a person in the academic world.

I would talk to a person about my experience in detail if he or she has a human mind to listen to my words. My grandmother used to tell me,

“If human beings are to be saved, they will be saved by the art of learning. If they are to perish, they will perish because of it. So it is quite important that your children follow the right way of learning.”

Through more than 20 years of my encounters with researchers coming from outside of the island, I have so many complaints about their behavior that I could not understand nor allow. Do you feel like listening to my words?

Ankei: Yes, please.

P: Since you have said “yes,” I will narrate my story. Listen well to the words from my

heart.

4. Thieves and liars in the coat of research

P: There are some people whom we can never rely on even if we have an acquaintance for more than 30 years. They may be professors, journalists, or photographers, but they are all the same in that they take a lot of things from this island in exchange for giving only a little.

The most distinctive cases are those of theft. Many thieves disguised in students and professors came to take artifacts in tombs of our ancestors. In some old tombs of this island, there used to be armors of warriors *samurai*, but they have all disappeared. Once, an officer of the municipal office ordered to open a big luggage of a group of people at the airport, and revealed that it was filled with curios like antique ceramics they stole from tombs.

There was a professor who asked me to lend him all my manuscript that I had written for years on rituals and the spirituality of the islanders. He promised to send it back after he copied it. He even said that he would work to arrange the manuscript to form a consistent text if possible. Since then, fifteen years have passed without hearing from him. Someone told me that recently he moved to another university, which is far away, but he would not write to me to tell where he is now.

I once wrote a manuscript on child rearing, and showed it to a researcher who visited the island. He said that it was interesting and asked me to lend it to him. I asked him in exchange to give me some chance to study something. He agreed to provide me guidance on how to write a scientific paper, and I was so pleased to hand him the manuscript. Since then, nothing was heard from him.

One day, a friend of mine told me that my paper was published in a journal in its almost original form, but that it had a different author's name. Of course I was never informed of it beforehand, but I did not want to have a look at the journal. Instead I tried hard to forget about the scholar that committed such piracy.

I was once invited to narrate my personal life history including the results of my studies. I talked and talked to a professor from morning to night and he recorded it all. It was just after that I accidentally lost all my records and manuscript of my research, and I hoped that the record of my narratives could compensate the loss. That was why I narrated all the detailed of my privacy. I of course refrained from telling him the personal names if it was concerned with the privacy of others. All my family advised me not to do so, and blamed me saying that it would be good for nothing.

This professor was quite pleased with what he could hear from me, and said that when he could publish a text out of my narratives he would surely send a copy to me. After that, this very cunning person, sent me a postcard of greeting only without his address, and that was all. He would not tell us his address. All the family and I are sad and disgusted by him. I strongly wish if he can send me a copy of the tapes I narrated to him because I no more have the ability to tell those kind of stories.

I am reminded of a photographer. I met with her in the house of an old woman during a festival. Those days, foreigners were not treated as guests during festivals unless accompanied by an islander. With my assistance, she was accepted as a guest, and I invited her to take pictures of a very important ritual. While taking records of the words and songs of the ceremony with

a pinpoint microphone, I told her when she should take pictures. Since taking sounds and pictures all by myself was impossible, I thought that she would be of help to me. For her, my advice was quite important because foreigners could not anticipate the crucial points in long ceremonies that continue for days.

She was quite grateful for me. When I showed her the pictures I had taken during my researches, she advised me that negatives should be conserved in a container specially made against humidity and consequent molds that destroy pictures. She kindly proposed that she would put in order the negatives and would prepare albums of my work which would take 2 to 3 years. That was why I handed her all the negatives I had that time, amounting to more than two hundred or so films of folkloric importance to this island.

Since then, nothing has been heard from her. I was so silly that I did not ask her address or her family name. All I know is her first name. She seemed to be a sincere person with an honest heart. I am afraid she passed away from some accident or from sudden illness...

All these stories may sound very funny, don't they? I admit myself that I am quite good at losing important documents. I no longer have the time nor ability to conduct all those tedious works of investigation. I made it a rule to carefully estimate a researcher if he or she was reliable, and if my evaluation was positive, I handed parts of my work and data in hope of some help to recompile them. But in fact, nobody did what he or she promised me. Nobody wrote to me or phoned me afterwards.

5. Let us be prepared for investigation

P: Apart from thieves or liars, many people with reputable titles and professions also visit this island. They may introduce themselves by offering a name card, and say, that they are from so and so very famous and important institute. Self-introduction may be important, but we seldom know of those institutes, and we do not understand why we should cooperate with those researches. They must explain to islanders what they wish to do during their researches and for what good. Maybe some themes are too sophisticated to be easily explained to islanders, or simply they cannot manage to stop what they had begun. But as you imagine, the informed consent is also the most important factor for cooperating with researches. We will never be able to do what we are not convinced of its significance to us.

Islanders, especially old persons, are not accustomed to be investigated. Machines like tape recorders may frighten them. So researchers are advised to give us time to be mentally prepared for an interview. We should be asked of our schedule at least a day before an investigation. Otherwise, we can be easily at a loss.

Like all others, old people are accustomed to add some comments expressing their sentiments when they answer questions. Investigators are expected to listen carefully and accept such comments by replying, for example,

“Was it so, Grandma? How painful it must have been for you!”

Quite few researchers respond this way with their heartfelt expressions. Instead they very often hurriedly say:

“It's none of my business; please reply to my question only.”

Care for the mind of speakers first, and you will be able to listen to the precious words expressing the heart. There are many researchers who are not trained to conduct properly to the

end, so causes troubles to us.

6. Mental degradation caused by researchers

P: There are some holy women who work as divine persons or deities themselves during ceremonies and festivals. I heard that one of them complained this way :

“The more I talk to professors, the less divine I tend to feel. I think I understand the importance of their research and I am supposed to cooperate, but I cannot help feeling like this.”

I'll explain to you why she feels “becoming less divine” when talking with researchers. We islanders deeply respect these divine women. We do not dare to look straightly at their faces during ceremonies. Even in daily occasions, we can never imagine hitting a divine woman however angry we may be. We islanders never miss to behave any time with due politeness and respect to such divine people. It is natural and almost automatic to us. On the other hand, for investigators from outside, they are only some informants who can give information on rituals and social structure of the island. This is why one of them confessed that she feels less and less divine before investigators. All the difference comes from the mentality of islanders and investigators. More generally speaking, this may happen everywhere and every time when encounters between different peoples that do not respect each other take place.

Thus, the damage caused by scientific researches is not only theft or loss of cultural artifacts, but also includes some degradation in spiritual values and identities of local peoples.

7. A right way to compile a report

P: I also have complaints on the compilation of scientific reports. For example, we may explain to them some particular cases. They very quickly misunderstand as if the explanation could be applied to all the cases. Please do not confuse parts with the whole. Be aware of the limits of the stories told by local people. Even if a very old woman guarantees that a certain type of cloth is very very old and traditional, it only means that the cloth may have been more or less one hundred-years old and could never be 6 centuries old. Unconscious of such a matter of course, researchers often write absurd conclusion from our narratives. If only they come to check and to be checked several times, they could easily have avoided such errors. Isn't it elementary to visit a place several times before publishing something ?

Another thing is that during the narratives I often underlined that certain facts were quite important to us and repeatedly asked to remember to quote them in the final paper. In many cases researchers omit the most important and cling to trivial things. I cannot understand why such cases could occur. If only researchers had the basic attitude of respecting the livelihood of local people, such a thing could never have occurred. Only a few among them write reports of their research with respect to what we regard as important.

Researchers, so long as you once had human contacts with us, please do not abandon us completely even when your research is over. We feel quite neglected and disappointed when you stop having human contact with us. I repeat. Show us that you are as human as you seemed to be during your survey.

8. Send us reports and explain their importance

P: Send us reports and papers that are fruits of the survey you did among us. This is the minimum standard for researches, isn't it? Decades ago, they seldom sent us publications, and now it has become much better. But, it is still insufficient to send an academic article to us islanders, especially to aged persons. Please kindly explain this way:

“Your narratives were compiled in this paper. It has such an academic importance of which your contribution was indispensable. Thank you.”

Otherwise, a big volume may be hocus-pocus for us, and nobody among us has the patience of reading every page of it from cover to cover. Such are the standard we wish for researchers. You may say that it is too strict, but we cannot understand the importance of your research without such endeavors of researchers.

9. Dangers of applied sciences

P: Sometimes I am afraid of possible application of research results to our future. For example, I am totally against the program of a certain professor with whom the municipal town is working together for our development. His study may be based on scientific data and theory. But I think that he is experimenting with the big project of urbanization and economic development in this island. I feel as if he exploits us to test the correctness of his academic theory.

I mean that we should become wiser. It will be easy to depend on a scholar for our future. If the project fails, he will not take responsibility. He will be able to look for other grants to continue his studies. It is as if study is a hobby to him. Nowadays a baby in Japan is expected to live 80 years, so please take your responsibility to future generations of 80 years to come, when you start a development project.

I hear that you, Mr. Ankei, are now trying hard to commercialize ecologically cultivated rice in a certain island. What you should do is to train islanders to be able to do the commercialization for themselves, and not to do it yourself. Are you so arrogant that you believe that your way of leading the project will last long? It is as if you are dragging a heavy boat along a rough mountain path covered with rocks. What good is your study if repeated troubles and difficulties of your project end in the tears of your family?

Do reflect well and realize that an area could never really survive with the aid of ideas or cultures introduced from outside.

10. Good but few examples

P: Data and manuscripts of my earlier field surveys are all lost in the way I have told you. Now there are some groups who continuously study this island, and, in theory, we will be able to visit these institutes to have a look at what they have collected and accumulated from this island. Some researchers approached what we believe to be trustworthy. I remember a married couple of researchers, who had carried out a very nice research. There are also a few scholars who accept the role of encouraging us islanders to learn more about ourselves, and provide help to do so.

11. A bit of reflection on ourselves

P: We islanders also have something to reflect on ourselves. As an example, 18 years ago, a

team of scholars came to record the traditional dances of the island, and they wished to film them. It was already rather difficult to have members with enough experience to perform the entire program, but we somehow managed to train youngsters to dance. While filming the performances, the professor was quite pleased with them, and explained to us that one of the dances was regarded to retain a long tradition, because some of the steps are in common with Noh dances which have more than a six-century history. He added that our dances have also a tremendous academic value! Soon after the survey he sent us reports and a copy of the documentary film to us. Unfortunately, the persons who received the film could not understand the importance of it, and now nobody knows where the film is now. Thus, we should also reflect well on the importance of our own cultural heritage.

I myself tried to take a video of a festival. I had small children at that time, and I asked one of the islanders to take a video for me. I abandoned the videotape for a long time, and when I wished to see it, it was already destroyed by mold. How stupid I was!

There are some islanders, not necessarily of this island only, who, through experiences with research teams, pretend to know all about the history and oral traditions of this island. This process, which might be called "privatization of local knowledge" by some islanders, can interfere with scientific researches. But I do not believe that researchers are allowed to point out such dubious traditions and insult the person by pointing out the ignorance of the narrator. Researchers are expected to have the wisdom and experience for distinguishing whether a narrative is based on some shared tradition or on privatized invention of the narrator.

12. Listen to the voices of small beings and minorities

P: I understand that sometimes you researchers cannot help behaving in a way that is against the benefit and welfare of local people. As a human being, it may be quite natural and understandable because human behaviors are very often uncontrollable. But there are some cases of willful self-centered behaviors. Such "conscious egocentrism" will never be allowed. It is different from sincerity. A person can be quite diligent and sincere, but still very self-centered. If they suppose that all their arbitrary wishes will be fulfilled simply because they are sincere, we will put them in an ashamed condition that will make them refrain from visiting this island again!

You, too, always be aware that you are a human being before being a researcher wherever you go.

I have been made to weep for sorrow because of the deeds of self-centered researchers coming from outside of the island, or because of people believing that sincerity is an excuse for their egocentric behaviors. But my tears are not shed for myself. The islanders of this island have believed in deities dwelling in the sea, mountains and fresh waters, we believe in the existence of holy spirits in rocks, trees, birds, fishes and all other beings. That is why we have cherished and conserved them all. Please try to sympathize with us, and you will realize that my tears are those of billions of living things, which are put in harassment, and danger of survival because of so-called "development" you bring to us. What important things can you care for if you cannot care for such pains and cries of small beings and minorities?

Can you hear and listen to the voices, each may be very tiny, but now echoing from all over the world?

Exercises

Q1. Why the author preferred to publish this article with an extreme anonymity including narrators' names or the name of the island itself? Doesn't it influence the scientific accuracy of the publication?

Q2. If you were the author, what would you do for the researchers who have reportedly done inhuman things to these islanders?

Q3. Propose possible remedies to change such situations in field research.

Further readings

ANKEI Yuji, 2002 Community-based Conservation of Bio-cultural Diversity and the Role of Researchers: Examples from Iriomote and Yaku Islands, Japan and Kakamega Forest, West Kenya. *Bulletin of the Graduate Schools of Yamaguchi Prefectural University*. No. 3: 13-23

ANKEI Yuji, 2006 Pitfalls in Field Surveys: Examples from Iriomote Island, Okinawa Japan. *Bunkajinruigaku: Japanese Journal of Cultural Anthropology*. 70(4) (in Japanese)

Acknowledgments

Ms. Jane Mitsuko Oshiro, together with students from Centre College (Kentucky), kindly polished a manuscript of this article.

(ANKEI Yuji, an anthropologist)