

Ruth Benedict's Obituary for Japanese Culture

C. Douglas Lummis

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Preface

I first found Ruth Benedict's The Chrysanthemum and the Sword in the Charles Tuttle Bookstore in Okinawa in 1960. I had just decided to spend some time living in Japan (little suspecting that "some time" would turn out to be a big part of the rest of my life) and I was delighted to discover that Benedict, whose Patterns of Culture I greatly admired, had written this book too. I read it avidly, and for some years was corrupted by the myth of (as Malinowski called it) the "ethnographer's magic". I walked around Japan like a miniature Benedict, seeing "patterns" everywhere, and thinking it was wonderfully clever to be able to "analyze" the behavior of the people around me, including even invitations to dialogue and expressions of friendship. I claim no monopoly to this kind of attitude; in those days it was rampant within the community of Westerners in Japan, and especially among the Americans, so many of whom saw themselves not only as miniature Benedicts, but also as miniature MacArthurs (some still do today). After some time I realized that I would never be able to live in a decent relationship with the people of that country unless I could drive this book, and its politely arrogant world view, out of my head. The method I chose was to begin the research that led to the following essay.

The original version of "Ruth Benedict's Obituary for Japan" was serialized in the

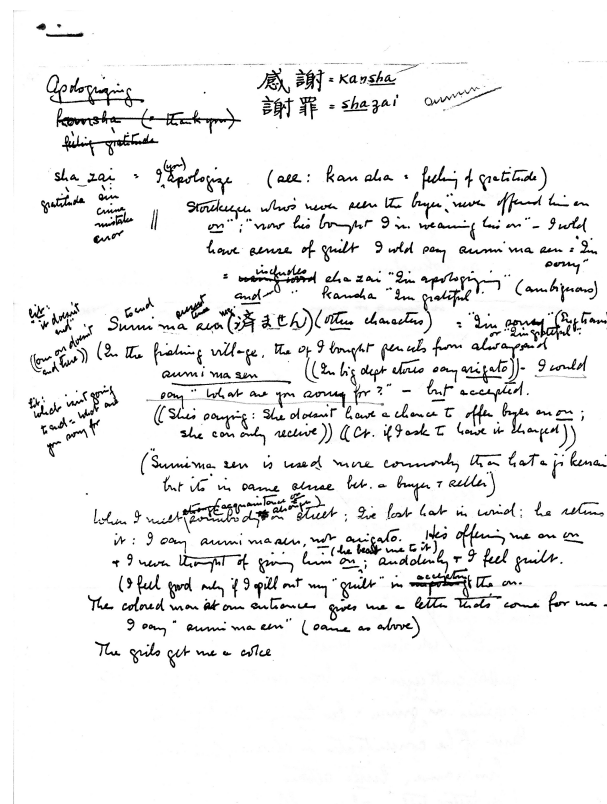
journal Shiso no Kagaku (Science of Thought) in 1980, and then appeared as part two of my book Uchi Naru Gaikoku (The Abroad Within) (Jiji Tsushinsha, 1981). In English it was published in the form of an annotated textbook for Japanese college students, under the title Rethinking the Chrysanthemum and the Sword (Ikeda Masayuki, ed. Shohakusha, 1982).

Looking back on it now, I think this essay can be considered as a fairly early study of what is now called the critique of orientalism, though at the time I wrote it I did not know the term, and was blithely ignorant of Edward Said's then-recently-published book of that title. At the same time, it can also be seen as an, again fairly early, example of post-colonial studies (early because the term had not yet been coined). (Or if there are those who object to using the word "colonial" in relation to Japan, shall we call it "post-occupational studies?") But while the essay got some attention in Japan, it has pretty much remained unknown outside the country.

In 1996 I was granted a sabbatical leave by Tsuda College where I was teaching then (Thanks, Tsuda College!) and I decided to use it to fill in some of the research gaps in the essay, and to rewrite it in a longer version. I had not, for example, yet had the opportunity to visit Vassar College Special Collections, where the Benedict papers are. When I finally managed to get there, I made two major discoveries. One was Benedict's "country report" on Germany. Benedict wrote this at about the same time she was doing her research on Japan, but the two works could not be more different. In Germany, Nazism is a recently cobbled together ideology; in Japan, totalitarian militarism is – just Japan.

The other discovery was Benedict's notes taken from her interviews with Robert Hashima, in which the insights that make up the core of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* are to be found.

After I found the Hashima notes I mentioned them in an interview with the *Asahi Shinbun*, and shortly after someone called the newspaper and said, "That's my uncle! He's well and living in Tokyo." And that's how I was able to meet that remarkable man and do two interviews with him. Even people who utterly disagree with the rest of my argument will, I believe, find in the Hashima notes and interviews much that cannot be ignored by Benedict scholarship in the future.



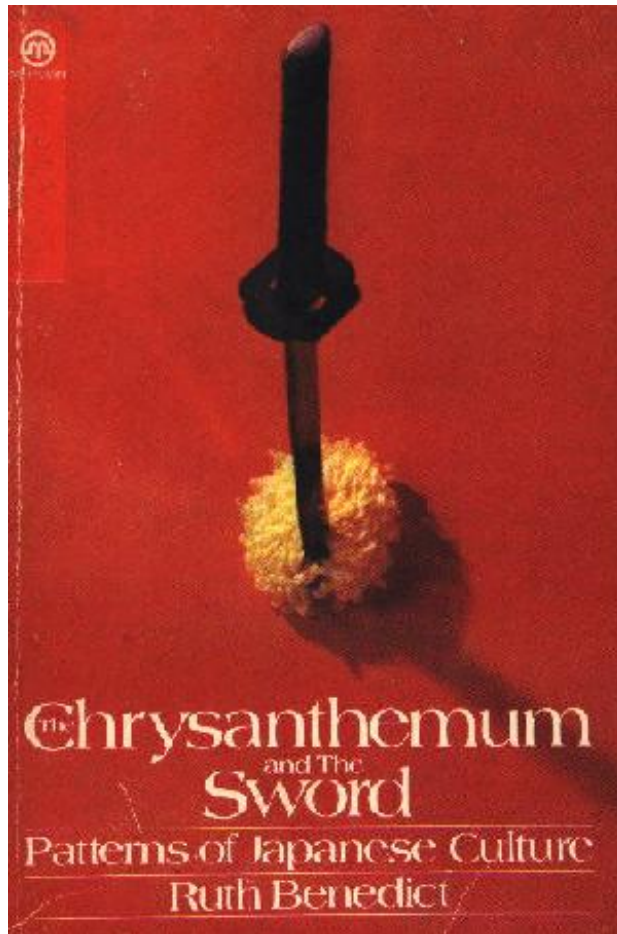
Apologizing. Benedict's notes from the Hashima interview. From Vassar College archives

On the basis of this new research I rewrote the essay and published it in Japanese as "Kiku to Katana Saikou - Paato II" ("Rethinking The

Chrysanthemum and the Sword - Part II") in *Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan Kenkyu Houkoku Dai 91 hen* (Bulletin of the National Museum of Japanese History #91, March, 2001). Then I had an offer to publish it in a book of essays on the work of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. I submitted it, but the editors saw fit to publish, not what I sent them, but a badly hacked up version that I saw for the first time when I received the book. ("Ruth Benedict's Obituary for Japan" in Dolores Janiewsky and Lois Banner, eds., *Reading Benedict/Reading Mead: Feminism, Race, and Imperial Visions* [Johns Hopkins, 2005]) I advise readers who want to quote from this essay, assign it to students, or use it in any other fashion not to use the version in the Johns Hopkins book, as that could lead to serious misunderstanding, but to use only the version printed here.

Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (first published in 1946) has long possessed an almost mysterious power to outlast its critics. Certainly this can partly be explained by Benedict's remarkable writing skill. Set down in marvelously simple, elegant prose, organized with extraordinary clarity, illuminated with wonderfully told stories and brilliant images, the book seems a model of the way one wishes social science could be written.

Moreover, given that the research was mainly done during World War II and the book published shortly after, it seems remarkably liberal and tolerant. Perhaps it was the best American liberalism could have produced under those circumstances. Nevertheless judged by the criterion that matters most - whether it helps or hinders understanding of Japanese culture - it is deeply flawed.



The Chrysanthemum and the Sword

While the flaws in the book have been difficult for many Western scholars to see, Japanese scholars including Tsurumi Kazuko, Watsuji Tetsuro, and Yanagida Kunio published devastating critiques of its inaccuracies and methodological errors soon after the Japanese edition was published. The criticisms that Benedict took the ideology of a class for the culture of a people, a state of acute social dislocation for a normal condition, and an extraordinary moment in a nation's history as an unvarying norm of social behavior, are by now well known in Japanese scholarly circles.⁽¹⁾

In its tendency to treat Japan as an absolute Other, and to explain the complexities of this state-run industrial society with a small number of generalizations about its "culture", *The*

Chrysanthemum and the Sword qualifies as a work of what Edward Said labeled "orientalism". However, while Said analyzed Western stereotypes as they appeared under the gaze of Europe facing east, *Chrysanthemum* represents an orientalism as it appeared under the gaze of America facing west. Its view of the Japanese as the "most alien" of peoples, inscrutable to the "Western" mind until unlocked by the "ethnographer's magic," opposed to and incompatible with the "West," had deep roots in the encounter between Asia and that section of Western civilization that reached the eastern shores of the Pacific Ocean in the late 19th Century. But the book must be located more specifically than that.

It was written on the occasion of the defeat of Japan in World War II and its occupation by the United States, by a person who did the research for it while working for a government that was working to bring about that defeat. Not only did it, unsurprisingly for the time, explain and justify the defeat and occupation, it was also brilliantly effective in shifting the terms of Japan discourse from a wartime to a peacetime footing, specifically by substituting "culture" for "race" as the key concept to be used for criticizing and transforming Japan. But if *Chrysanthemum* was very much a product of its time, it was also deeply affected by the theoretical stance, interests and obsessions of its author, Ruth Benedict. Paradoxically, it was also greatly influenced by the official ideology of wartime Japan, especially as communicated to Benedict by her chief informant, Robert Hashima. I discuss these influences below.

But first, something needs to be said about the nature and scale of the book's influence. This is not simply a matter of book sales, although it is important to note that in Japan some two million copies have been sold. More importantly, it was a founding work for what became mainstream postwar Japanology. In particular, though the debt is rarely

acknowledged, virtually the entire discourse of that branch of Japanese studies called *Nihonjinron* has been carried out within the framework established by Benedict's book. The debate launched among Japanese scholars over "shame culture" vs. "guilt culture" spilled over into lay society so that the two terms have become established as expressions in ordinary Japanese language. Her book gave birth, in both English-language and Japanese-language Japan studies, to an endless supply of binary "x culture vs. y culture" tools for blunt-instrument social analysis. Why, despite its errors of fact and interpretation, has *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* exerted such powerful influence?

The answer, I believe, is that the book is useful. It is useful, however, not as an accurate account of Japanese society, but as a work of political literature. The same could be said of other works of anthropology. Long before anthropology was invented, drawing detailed pictures of Another Country was a time-honored method of political theory, a method of establishing a "standpoint" from which one's own society could be viewed in a different perspective, thus enriching self-knowledge and making possible self-criticism (or self-praise). Plato's Republic, Aristotle's ideal polis, the Romans' mythologized image of Sparta, Augustine's City of God, Machiavelli's mythologized image of Rome, More's Utopia, the countries Swift invented for Gulliver to travel to, Rousseau's State of Nature - all these images of Another Country served the function of increasing the reader's awareness of the ruling spirit, the underlying nature, the dominating principle, of the home country.



Gulliver's Travels

And to serve that function it is not necessary that the Other Country be a real place. For Plato and More, it is only necessary that their ideal republics be possible; for Rousseau, it is only necessary that Natural Man be logical; for Swift, it is only necessary that his various countries be imaginable; for Augustine, whose City of God is unimaginable, it is only necessary that it be utterable.

Political education has been one of the not-so-hidden intentions of many anthropologists from the beginning. Many anthropological works contain overt or covert "lessons" the readers can draw from anthropological knowledge of other societies. The motivation may be laudable, but what has only recently begun to

be noticed is that sometimes eagerness to educate leads the researcher to arrange the culture to fit the lesson rather than to draw the lesson from the culture. To illustrate this point one need only mention the scandal surrounding Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and the charges that many of her conclusions were the product of a hoax (her informants told her what they knew she wanted to hear), but there are many other examples.



Margaret Mead between two Samoan girls, 1926

Anyone who doubts Ruth Benedict's desire to be a political educator need only read the last chapter in *Patterns of Culture*. According to Clifford Geertz, "To say one should read Benedict not with the likes of Gorer, Mead, Alexander Leighton, or Lawrence Frank at the back of one's mind, but rather with Swift, Montaigne, Veblen, and W.S. Gilbert, is to urge a particular understanding of what she is saying. The *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is no more a prettied-up science-without-tears

policy tract than [*Gulliver's Travels*] is a children's book." (2)

Geertz skillfully analyzed *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as a piece of Swiftian satire, a book principally about U.S. society. This is an important insight, one missed by most commentators. Certainly one of the reasons, generally unconscious, Americans tend to like the book is for the flattering things it says about their country. But Japan, in addition to being the only country actually on the map that Lemuel Gulliver visited, was also a country in the 20th century with which the U.S. was engaged in a very intense relationship. And it was what Benedict had to say about that country that has been the most important.

The Chrysanthemum and the Sword established the cultural paradigm for post-war U.S.-Japan relations. It depicted/invented Japan as the country the most appropriate for the U.S. to have defeated and occupied. And, of equal importance, it depicted/invented the U.S. as the country the most appropriate to defeat and occupy Japan. Thus Geertz is half right: the book is as much "about" the U.S. as it is "about" Japan. It taught that for the Japanese, being defeated by the U.S. was quite the best thing that could have happened, and that they should have been - and in fact were - grateful for this defeat. Moreover, the defeat was no mere accident of power, but had a kind of Hegelian necessity: it was Japan's only hope of advancing to a state of freedom. According to Benedict, Japanese culture contained no concept or spirit of freedom, no principle of liberation - in fact, no principle at all. This is the meaning of describing it as a "shame culture" where people act not according to principles, but rather according to how they think they will look to others, and whether they will be honored or shamed. In 1946 this was a convenient interpretation, because it meant that Japan, having just been shamed before the world, would be willing to change itself by importing principles from outside, meaning from the

principal conquering power, the U.S.

All this is written in a polite and tolerant tone. What matters, however, is the content. Benedict's judgment on Japan can be seen in her answer to the question: why did Japan fight this war? Her answer makes no use of economic or political explanations. Japan did not follow the well-known logic of colonial and imperialist powers, seeking markets, resources, investment outlets and cheap labor. Nor did Japan follow the well-beaten path of tyranny, seeking power, glory, a central place in history. Nor had Japan (in contrast to Germany and Italy) passed over into an extraordinary state of political pathology: nowhere does she use the concepts of fascism, totalitarianism, or any similar notion. To admit the relevance of any of these explanations would be to admit that Japan's behavior was understandable according to ordinary "Western" reason - that it was yet another rather extreme and badly-timed example of plain, old-fashioned imperialism. Benedict was determined to show that Japan's behavior was utterly different from anything known in the "West", and understandable to "Westerners" only by means of her "ethnologist's magic", the anthropological method. The explanation for Japan's conduct of the war could only lie in "a cultural problem": the war was the inevitable expression of Japanese culture itself.(3)

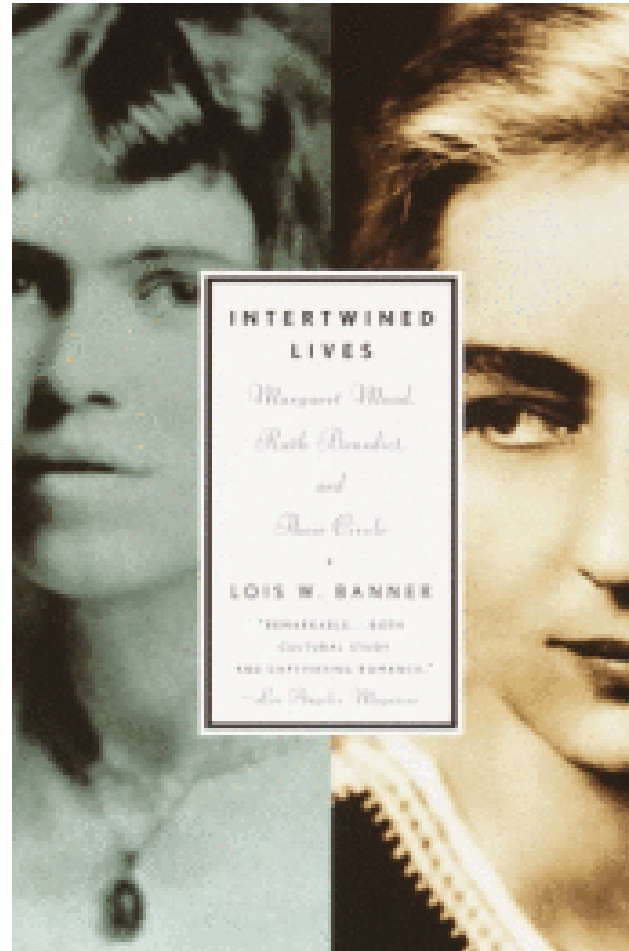
Militarist Japan was for her simply "Japan" - Japan as it had always been, and as it would continue to be unless changed from the outside. In an earlier version of this essay, I expressed the belief that no one could have written the same things about Germany at that time. This was an exaggeration: some critics of Nazism have tried to argue that it grew necessarily out of German culture. Be that as it may, this was not Benedict's view of Germany. Among her papers in the Vassar College Library is a study of Germany which she submitted to the Office of War Information in 1943, just at the time she was doing her

research on Japan. The contrast could not be more striking. Basing her analysis of the state of German "morale" on British surveys of prisoners of war, Benedict argued that only the generation of men (presumably not women) in their late twenties was solidly Nazi. "The Nazi regime . . . has . . . failed to Nazify the age group now under 25 as it did the one now 25-30. . . ." As for the older generation, "There is no need to discuss the relative non-Nazification of the generation over 30 since the grounds for this are well understood. The fact that Hitler Regime [sic] has been of such short duration that there remains a whole older generation who grew up under a different social order, is of great importance in estimating Germany's future." In Benedict's discussion of Japan there is no notion of a "failure of indoctrination" nor for that matter of a successful one, no term equivalent to "Nazify", no suggestion that "a different social order" may have existed in the recent past; even the word "regime" does not appear. While Germany's Nazism was a fleeting phenomenon that managed to attach itself to German culture only temporarily and precariously Japanese militarism was Japanese culture itself: It had existed essentially unchanged from ancient times, and far from being imposed through indoctrination, had been "voluntarily embraced".(4)

Was this difference in interpretation a result of race prejudice? While it is possible that racism played some role in the lower depths of Benedict's consciousness, it played no role whatever in her theory. Ruth Benedict was a devoted campaigner against racism, and considered anthropology - and in particular her theory of cultural patterns - to be the definitive refutation of race theory. Moreover, race theory no longer fit the times: while it was appropriate to U.S. war propaganda when the Japanese were to be killed, it was inappropriate as an ideology for the postwar occupation under which the Japanese were to be changed. Race theory asserts that behavior is

determined by racial inheritance, and therefore the subject lacks the ability to change. Benedict's work offers a prejudice appropriate to the period of occupation and reform (and, incidentally, appropriate to America's post-war projects of high-pressure economic development and other forms of humanitarian intervention elsewhere): cultural prejudice. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* told its readers that Japanese culture must be changed and explained how it could be changed, under the force of the U.S. military occupation. Benedict's theory of "patterns of culture" has been widely regarded as a theory of tolerance. Perhaps in some cases, but not in this one: "In the United States we have argued endlessly about hard and soft peace terms. The real issue is not between hard and soft. The problem is to use that amount of hardness, no more and no less, which will *break up old and dangerous patterns of aggressiveness and set new goals.*"(5, emphasis added).

As is well known, Ruth Benedict came to anthropology from English literature. She graduated from Vassar College in English, taught English at a girls school in California, and was a published poet all before she entered the Columbia graduate program in anthropology. That she received her Ph.D. in three semesters not only testifies to her brilliance, but also suggests that she did not undergo a fundamental retraining in methodology. This is supported by her own testimony, that "[l]ong before I knew anything about anthropology, I had learned from Shakespearean criticism . . . habits of mind which at length made me an anthropologist." According to Margaret Mead, Benedict was able to transfer her sensibilities from literature to anthropology by seeing "each primitive culture . . . [as] . . . something comparable to a great work of art" whose internal consistency and intricacy was as aesthetically satisfying to the would-be explorer as was any single work of art.(6)



Benedict (right) and Mead

In 1925 Benedict in a New Mexico village wrote in a letter to Mead in Samoa, "I want to find a really important undiscovered country." Interestingly, she was referring not to anthropology but to poetry. Benedict was a devoted poet, who published under the name Ann Singleton; one can see how the lure of the "undiscovered country" could set the same person on both a poetic and an anthropological journey. In Benedict's own account of her childhood, she wrote that as far back as she could remember she lived in two worlds, one the world of her family and friends, in which she felt alienated and unhappy, and the other of her imagination, where everything was calm, beautiful, and rightly ordered, and where she had an imaginary playmate. "So far as I can remember I and the little girl mostly explored

hand in hand the unparalleled beauty of the country over the hill."(7)

The meaning for her of this "country over the hill" is the main theme of her brief childhood memoir, entitled "The Story of my Life". It opens with the remarkable sentence, "The story of my life begins when I was twenty-one months old, at the time my father died." Though she did not remember that day herself, she was told later by a relative what had happened. Her mother "wanted desperately to have me remember my father. She took me into the room where he lay in his coffin, and in an hysteria of weeping implored me to remember."

This scene was reproduced annually, Benedict remembers, for "[s]he made a cult of grief out of my father's death, and every March she wept in church and in bed at night. It always had the same effect on me, an excruciating misery with physical trembling of a peculiar involuntary kind which culminated periodically in rigidity like an orgasm." It was this experience, she says, that divided her life into "two worlds", "the world of my father, which was the world of death, and which was beautiful, and the world of confusion and explosive weeping, which I repudiated. I did not love my mother; I resented her cult of grief, and her worry and concern about little things. But I could always retire to my other world, and to this world my father belonged. I identified with him everything calm and beautiful that came my way."(8)

This fascination with the calmness and beauty that comes with death was not merely a daydream. Benedict wrote that as a child she used to bury herself in the hay on the family farm and imagine she was in her grave. When she was taken to a neighbor's house where a baby had died she found the corpse a thing of "transparent beauty . . . the loveliest thing I had ever seen." The feeling stayed with her in adulthood. "Even now I feel I have been

cheated or unfaithful if I can't see the dead face of a person I've loved. Sometimes they're disappointments, but often not." This theme became deeply embedded in the consciousness of Ruth Benedict, and also in the poetry of Ann Singleton, who wrote such things as,

This is the season when
importunate rains
Rutting the graves unearth slim
skeletons
We buried to corruption, and
strong winds
Whip from the ocean where no
passing suns
Strike nethermost, the bones we
wept beside.
Now is the season of our mourning
past
And reek forgotten, the white
loveliness
Of ivory ours to play with. Now at
last
Our griefs are overspanned, decay
played out,
And nothing dead but it is
perfected.
Come, of the bones we'll make us
flutes and play
Our hearts to happiness, where
worms have fed. (9)

Margaret Mead claimed that Benedict, at least in her early work, kept her emotional life as expressed in poetry separate from her anthropological work. The evidence, however, points in the other direction. According to Mead herself, who decided to take up anthropology under Benedict's influence, the task of American anthropology in those years was a "salvage task". Anthropologists collected "masses of vanishing materials from the members of dying American Indian cultures . . . " It is not difficult to see how Ruth

Benedict/Ann Singleton could be attracted to this enterprise. How better than as an anthropologist could one make a career quietly exploring the country over the hill and contemplating the beauty of the dead, all under the supervision of Boas, the man she came to call "Papa Franz"? It is not difficult at all to hear the voice of Ann Singleton in this, perhaps Benedict's most famous, passage with which *Patterns of Culture* begins. "One day, without transition, Ramon [Benedict's Digger informant] broke in upon his descriptions of grinding mesquite and preparing acorn soup. 'In the beginning,' he said, 'God gave to every people a cup, a cup of clay, and from this cup they drank their life . . . They all dipped in the water . . . but their cups were different. Our cup is broken now. It has passed away.'"(10)

In this situation, the task of the anthropologist was, as Mead says she learned from Benedict, to "rescue the beautiful patterns", though not, of course, the survivors. And equally obviously, the patterns were not to be restored to living form but only written down. Thus the anthropologist would move backward in time, beginning with the fragments of the shattered cup - some missing, some badly worn - and try to piece together both from evidence and from sympathetic imagination the culture pattern as it must have once existed. The native informants were not themselves living examples of this pattern. They were defective as evidence: fragments. What the researcher wanted from them was their memory. (11)

Benedict has been criticized for writing *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* without learning Japanese language or visiting the country, but that is the way she always had done her anthropological research. "She never had the opportunity to participate in a living culture where she could speak the language and get to know the people well as individuals," Mead remembered. "She never saw a whole primitive culture that was untroubled by boarding schools for the children, by missions

and public health nurses, by Indian Service agents, traders, and sentimental or exiled white people. No living flesh-and-blood member of a coherent culture was present to *obscure her vision or to make it too concrete . . .*"(12, emphasis added)

Remarkably, Mead saw this not as a handicap, but as a source of the peculiar strength of her work. "The clarity of her concept," Mead continued, ". . . owed . . . much to the lack of a sensory screen between the field worker and the pattern and to her search for meaning within fragments" The "sensory screen" which might obscure her vision of the pure, clear patterns was of course actual members of the living culture. Benedict's field letters reflect an amused, patronizing attitude toward her informants. From Zuni: "Nick and Flora both eat out of my hand this summer." "As soon as I go out for water the men begin to come in. One amorous male I have got rid of, dear soul. He's stunning, with melting eyes and the perfect confidence which I can't help believing has come from a successful amour with a white woman." In Cochiti "stories aren't told night after night as they are in Zuni, and societies and priesthoods are reduced to almost nothing. - And I pay so little here I can afford to take the tales as they come - only a dollar a three-hour session." "My Black Flag arrived and the bed bugs are forced away from certain quarantined areas." ". . . I'm in luck that my old shaman is poor - otherwise he would be frowned on. One of those who rob the poor working girl, you know!"(13)

Her response to the location, however, was of an altogether different order. The day she left Zuni she wrote to Mead,

"Yesterday we went up under the sacred mesa along stunning trails where the great wall towers above you always in new magnificence When I'm God I'm going to build

my city there.”(14)

If as an anthropological field worker she was forced to come face to face with a “world of confusion”, it was as an anthropological writer that she had the power to be God, and to design perfect cities, if only for the dead.

As an anthropological researcher Ruth Benedict collected information about the customs, rituals, habits, ceremonies, myths, and other institutionalized activities that make up a culture; as an anthropological artist she arranged them in vivid, dramatic, and intricate detail, forming a coherent whole. Pattern was her fascination and her trademark.



Patterns of Culture

With that in mind the following entry in her journal, probably written around 1915, is

startling. “All our ceremonies, our observances, are for the weak who are cowards before the bare thrust of feeling. How we have hung the impertinent panoply of our funeral arrangements over the bleak tragedy of death! And joy, too. What are our weddings, from the religious pomp to the irrelevant presents and the confetti, but presumptuous distractions from the proud mating of urgent love?”(15) Ceremonies, observances, funerals, weddings - these are the very stuff of which cultural patterns are made. One might dismiss this as a youthful outburst were it not a constant theme in her private writings, her journal entries and especially her poetry. It is an attitude that we can only describe as horror of pattern. What is a marvelous creature of human genius in the daytime of her anthropology is a nightmare in the nighttime of her poetry. The constantly recurring image in her poems is that of some substance that escapes patterning - breath, wind, mist, water - in contest with the forces of rigidity.

Love that is water, love that is a
flood
Coming and going, silvering the
land,
How shall we say of this, inductile
water,
It shall be chiseled by the fragile
sand?
Water slips lightly, flawless, from
our confines,
Shaped to no permanent feature,
fluid as air;
Though we stand hewing till the
sword is eaten,
There is no lineament we shall
chisel there.(16)

In this poem a brave spirit of freedom seems dominant, but if Benedict knew that water could not be carved with a sword, she also knew what could be done to it by winter.

Ice when it forms upon the brooks
in autumn
Stills their swift feet that ran they
knew not where,
Rendered in stone that were but
drops tossed seaward,
Splintered to vapor down a rocky
stair.

.....

It were enough that stone should
lie quiescent,
Stone never ran quicksilver in the
shade,
Stone never gathered out of doom
a singing,
Lost now, forgotten, and its dream
betrayed.(17)

The beauty of flowing water is tragedy itself. Not having the permanence of stone, the brook is doomed to flow away and lose itself in the sea. But because it faces this doom, it can sing. It is not grateful to the winter for transforming it into rigid crystal. Dull, patterned stability or joyous, doomed freedom: it is a choice of how to live.

So I shall live, a raveling brief
smoke
Before the wind, and glut your
eyes with brightness.
Let be these words of a poor
foolish folk,
Unused to ecstasy, who make of
ripeness

Eternal durance, and a paradise
Got by the snakes upon Medusa's
head,
Immutable now forever. It's a price
Too great for heaven, where how
should the shred

And filament of the air-stepping

mist
Be lovely still, or hush itself to blue
Against the wintry sky? 'Twere
best we kissed
Before the wind, and went as
smoke clouds do.(18)

For a cultural patternist these are words of rebellion: cultural institutions as prisons of the human spirit. Can a society be built on such ideas? Certainly not, which is why Ann Singleton was a poet, not an anthropologist. But that is a fact that can lead one to a bitter assessment of one's fellow human beings.

In another journal entry, Benedict wrote that in modern society, "the majority are lost and astray unless the tune has been set for them, the key given them, the lever and the fulcrum put before them, the spring of their own personalities touched from the outside." The entry concludes with an outburst of pure repugnance: "The stench of atrophied personality." (19) The horror of pattern could not be more powerfully expressed. Is it possible to reconcile these contradictory ideas? Perhaps not. Perhaps Benedict's own inability to do so was one of the reasons she wrote under two names. Nevertheless one can make some suggestions. On the one hand Benedict cherished the image of the beauty of death, on the other she expressed a horror of atrophy. But atrophy is not death, it is sickly life, life so undernourished and underused that it is shrunken and decayed.

Culture patterns then carry a double meaning. When the culture is dead, its pattern has the same beauty Benedict found in the faces of dead people - the aesthetic closure of something reconciled and finished. But for the living, the patterns are a kind of death-in-life, an oppressive, imprisoning force. If the living do not struggle to liberate themselves from them they will never be fully alive. These "other-directed" ones, as David Reisman was to

call them just a few years later, who live only by pattern and custom, have neither the beauty of death nor the joy of life: they are in a state of life resembling death, a state of atrophy.

In her poetry and journal entries, Benedict was talking about her compatriots. In her anthropological studies, since the cultures were, in her view, safely dead, the diagnosis of atrophy would not apply. It was only with *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* that she transferred this damning diagnosis to the “other country” and erstwhile enemy, shame-culture Japan, enabling her to describe her own country (using a Singletonian air-metaphor) as a land of “simple freedoms which Americans count upon as unquestioningly as the air they breathe.”(20) From a Freudian standpoint this could be seen as a classic case of projection: just at the moment corporatized America begins to fear for its lost “individualism,” comfort is offered by arguing that it is the defeated Japanese who are the people devoid of “inner direction” (guilt).

Thus America’s historical situation as occupier of defeated Japan, its mid-20th Century concern with “conformism”, and Ruth Benedict’s ambivalent obsession with pattern all went into the shaping of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Two other major factors remain to be discussed, one is the Japanese government’s pre-1945 ideology, and the other is the peculiar reading of that ideology by Benedict’s chief informant.

It is common knowledge that after the Meiji Restoration the Japanese government labored to remake Japanese society politically, economically, technologically, and culturally. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* included no analysis of Japan, but surely Japan ought to be considered as a paradigmatic case. The Meiji elites, using compulsory education, military conscription, institutional reorganization, and many other forms of indoctrination and force, sought to

organize the various cultures of the Japanese and Ryukyu Archipelagos – and later the cultures of Taiwan and Korea as well – into a single nation-state under the direct rule of the Tokyo government, the whole apparatus mystified under the newly-organized emperor system and legitimized by means of the “invented tradition” of a modernized version of the ethic of the old *bushi* class. This story has been one of the chief objects of study for historians of modern Japan and hardly needs to be repeated here.(21)

What matters in this context is that Ruth Benedict looked at this national ideology, invented and imposed by a government for reasons of national interest, and called it a culture, something that had grown up naturally: “A human society must make for itself some design for living.” (22) Perhaps this distinction did not exist, or did not matter as much, in the small scale, indigenous cultures Benedict had studied before she went to work with the Office of War Information, but failing to take it into account in the case of Japan was a fatal error. The error was understandable, as it is an error that was positively promoted by the Japanese government, and passed on, wittingly or unwittingly, by many Japanese intellectuals. In his 1950 review of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Yanagita Kunio wrote, “One thing we may criticize ourselves for is that those of us who have tried orally or in writing to explain Japan to the world have often taught falsehoods. For example, *bushido* was the way of life of the *bushi* class, and while it is true that the *bushi* were the backbone of the nation, the teachings of bushido were limited and contained many exceptions, and there were not many outside the *bushi* class who were influenced by it. . . . [After the Meiji Restoration] in all customs, overt or tacit, the feeling that if one followed the path that had been previously followed by the *bushi* one could not go wrong gradually spread throughout the entire society, and in particular came to dominate the field of

education.



The bushi

Following the hint offered by Benedict's book, this is a point on which we need to reflect. The life of the *bushi* class had many peculiarities. To make it the basis for the life of all the people was neither possible nor necessary, and often harmful."(23) Yanagita erred in giving the impression that the gradual spread of the (revised) *bushi* ethic through the medium of a militaristic, state- controlled educational system was a kind of natural osmosis. But his insight that Benedict's misconceptions were grounded in a misconceived self-knowledge among Japanese intellectuals "biased toward a class amounting not even to ten percent of the population" is an important one. Still, identifying these "falsehoods" taught by Japanese scholars as one of her sources does not fully account for her analysis in all its peculiarity and detail. Benedict read just about

everything that was available at that time in English on Japan, but her analysis differs from all earlier works. Soeda Yoshiya claims to have found seventeen points where she seems to have used Nitobe Inazo's *Bushido* as a source , but even if this is true, her analysis is by no means the same as Nitobe's.(24)

The core of Benedict's work - what is original *and anthropological* about it, is her analysis of Japan as a "shame culture" whose central value system comprises a hierarchically ordered series of notions of obligation: *on*, *chu*, *ko*, *gimu*, etc., terms that are not part of Nitobe's or any other previous analysis available to Benedict in English. At one time I thought Benedict's chief source for these ideas might be the pre-1945 moral education (*shushin kyouiku*) textbooks issued under the authority of the Ministry of Education, through which the state ideology was disseminated in the schools.

Benedict did have at least some of those texts available in translation. However the matter was not so simple. The moral education texts do contain most of the terms that Benedict analyzed, but they contain a great many other value terms as well: words for cooperation, benevolence, civic virtue, enterprise, mutual aid, self-management, inventiveness, etc., etc., concepts that do not appear in Benedict's analysis. Benedict's analysis is by no means a direct rendering of these texts. Rather it selects a few of the ethical terms and ignores the rest. How did she make this selection?

Between Benedict and her data there was a medium, an interpreter. In her introduction, Benedict hints that this was so, but is enigmatic about the interpreter's identity: "The ideal authority for any statement in this book would be the proverbial man in the street. It would be anybody."(25) Among the many notes that Benedict took in preparation to write her report on Japan, which are now preserved in Vassar College Special Collections, there is one set that differs markedly from the others. Scribbled

on a few dozen yellow sheets is a series of analyses of value terms. To the extent that these handwritten pages can be represented in typescript, a typical page contains material like the following:

gimu
chugi
ko
aikokushin
nimmu, duty to your work
"included in gimu"

sumimasen lit: "it doesn't end" ((our on doesn't end here)) = "I'm sorry" (Eng. Trans) or "I'm grateful"

(In fishing village the woman I bought pencils from always said sumimasen. ((In big department stores say arigato)) I would say, "What are you sorry for?" - but accepted.

When I meet somebody in street; I've lost hat in
wind; he returns it, I say sumimasen not
arigato. He's offering me an on & I never
thought of giving him an on; (he beat me to it)
suddenly - I feel guilt. (26)

[illegible]

Gimu. Benedict notes from interview with Hashima from Vassar College Archives

And so on for many pages. Readers of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* will recognize the insights, and may wonder who is the person – the "I" – relating these experiences. On the first of these note pages, and on many others, his name is given on the upper right-hand corner: Bob. This is Robert Hashima, the only informant mentioned by name in the acknowledgements section of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

I interviewed Mr. Hashima in Tokyo in 1996 and again in 1997. At that time I showed him the passage about "the man in the street" and asked him, "Is that you?" He looked at the page a long time, laughed, and said, "I guess so!" More concretely, he said, "Well, as far as providing her with the information, I guess I would say it came from me." (27) It would be a mistake, however, to think of Hashima as a literal "man in the street."

they'd make me stand, you know, as a punishment and I'm *namaiki* [smart-aleck], they call you, they slap you around, make you serve tea, things like that.(29)

"Bob's TC [teachers college] exam problem: write on wa [harmony] bet. hub. and wife. He wrote it all right but omitted "These are all bec. of *chu* to prosper Imp. throne." He got 0." (30)

But I guess I felt that since everybody was, didn't seem to object to it, I gradually stayed, you know, followed it. I felt there was no sense in my trying to fight with these people, so I just played along.(28)

[illegible]

Masks. Benedict notes from interview with Hashima from Vassar College Archives
Although Hashima was not persuaded by this ideology ("... as far as the system goes, I didn't care for it."), he decided he needed to master it in order to survive. He mastered it - and the

language - well enough to graduate from the above-mentioned teachers college (Hiroshima *Shihan Gakko*) and actually to teach school for a while, including classes in "moral education". When I asked him, "[H]ow were you so knowledgeable about all this at the age of twenty-four?" his answer was, "Well, I went to teachers college there, you see . . . "(31)

Hashima was advised by an uncle to get out of Japan before the war started, but after he arrived in the U.S. in 1941 he was, ironically, sent to an internment camp. There he met the anthropologist John Embree, who got him a job working for the Office of War Information. Hashima recalled his first day at OWI:

"So I went in, and when I walked in and reported to [Alexander] Leighton, Leighton took me to Benedict. And, oh, she's reading [Natsume Soseki's novel] *Botchan*. She told me her assignment was Japan, and she was reading this book, *Botchan*, I remember. [Here Hashima relates the scene where Botchan throws back the price of a glass of icewater to a teacher who had insulted him.] Dr. Benedict couldn't understand why. So that's where I told her, this is where the giri, and on, these things start there. Ooooh. She went to Leighton, she says, I want Hashima." (32)

Hashima became the key medium between the 1930s militaristic government ideology, and Ruth Benedict. But he did not merely provide information; as I suggested above, he had an interpretation of that information. For him, coming to Japan for the first time as a teenager smack in the middle of the militaristic period and having no memory of the country before then, what he was taught in school was not "an ideology", it was Japan itself. He didn't like it

but, as with Benedict, learning it was his "assignment", and learn it he did. But underneath his apparent acceptance ("I gradually . . . you know, followed it . . .") and his mastery of its details, his interview reveals a deep alienation, one that remained even up to the time of the interview.

Hashima: . . . So even today, though that has changed, especially among the younger people, when you get older they seem to go back into this pattern, you know. And I feel that, ah, in order for the Japanese to change Japan, you gotta change the language and the history.

Lummis: How can you change the history?

Hashima: That's, that's the problem. So when they talk about democracy, it's not true democracy like you'd talk in the United States. Because these things are all binding, you know. Always comes up.

Lummis: Um hm. It's just built into the language?

Hashima: Language, living, history - you know, why do they have these *chanbara* [sword-fighting] tvs going on? You know, all these things. That's just teaching the public, you know, giri! on! ninjo!

Lummis: When you say change the language, do you mean change the structure?

Hashima: Get rid of Japanese! Get rid of the Japanese language!

Lummis: And talk what?

Hashima: Change it to English!

Lummis: So that's really a way of saying it's not possible.

Hashima: Ah, impossible. I'd say - it's not gonna change.(33)

Hashima's combination of rich insider information and radical alienation made him the ideal informant for Benedict's assignment, which required her both to analyze and to maintain distance from America's "most alien enemy". And one can easily see how the deep fear that must have been instilled into him by his bitter boyhood experiences would harmonize well with Ann Singleton's "horror of pattern". And lead him to a cataclysmic conclusion: nothing but total transformation, down to the root of the language, would do.

Of course Hashima was by no means Benedict's only informant, and her vision was doubtless informed by her wide reading in the English literature, but it seems that he became a kind of touchstone, the authority against which she would test information from other sources.

Hashima: But, ah, she talked to many other Japanese people, you know, living in Japan . . . and she'd ask me. So she did rely. I feel that she - maybe today I kinda feel guilty, but, ah, she would ask for my opinion, what I thought about what these people had said. And she seemed to, if I said no, then she would, you know, maybe change it or something, but, ah, she kinda relied on my opinion quite a bit . . . "(34)

Clearly, Hashima was Benedict's "ideal authority".

The Chrysanthemum and the Sword is the product of a remarkable convergence of conceptions. Benedict, Hashima, and Japan's wartime militarists - though each for entirely different reasons - all promoted the myth that Japanese society was something like a family or tribe, that there were no functional class differences within it, that the ideas of

democracy and rebellion were inconceivable within it, that its value system was traditional, that the core of its values was unchanged over the millennia, resulting in a national identity that was culturally determined and immutable, at least in the absence of powerful external force - in short, that the system was not the product of state or class oppression and that it was incomprehensible in terms of such categories as capitalism, colonialism, militarism which were being applied to other societies. To be totalitarian and to be Japanese were one and the same.

Benedict's most chilling expression of this was not the image of the sword, but that of the chrysanthemum. For her the sword was "not a symbol of aggression, but a simile of ideal and self-responsible man," whatever that means. This aspect, Benedict conceded, "they can keep...." It was the chrysanthemum that represented everything she found horrifying in Japanese culture.

The image appeared in a discussion in which the metaphor of gardening was used to illustrate freedom and its absence. In Japanese gardens, Benedict said, nature itself is forced to fit the pattern of culture, its wildness is tamed, and even the pine needles which seem to have "naturally" fallen from the tree are actually spread there by the gardener. "So, too, chrysanthemums are grown in pots and arranged for the annual flower shows all over Japan with each perfect petal separately disposed by the grower's hand and often held in place by a tiny invisible wire rack inserted in the living flower." (35) Here the poet's image of Japanese society has found its way into the anthropological text: chrysanthemums fixed rigidly on a rack, each petal impaled on a wire; human beings fixed rigidly on a rack, a wire passing through each soul. Once again one can sense a convergence of minds here, for this must be very much what it felt like to Robert Hashima, and surely the image describes a situation that Japan's wartime government

would very much have liked to achieve.

In any case, when confronted with this image of a culture, Benedict's vaunted cultural relativity shut down. Perhaps it never was operable anyway except in regard to cultures safely dead. With regard to Japan, she tried to sidestep the issue in part by suggesting that the Japanese system was such a violation of human nature that the people would naturally abandon it simply upon being shown the American alternative. Addressing her American readers, she writes, "We must remember, now that the Japanese are looking to de-mok-ra-sie since their defeat, how intoxicating it can be to them to act quite simply and innocently as one pleases." And continuing the chrysanthemum image, she adds, "The chrysanthemum which had been grown in a little pot and which had submitted to the meticulous disposition of the petals discovered pure joy in being natural." (36)

But there is no basis in anthropology - certainly not in Benedict's anthropology - for describing a particular social behavior as natural. The behaviors of all peoples are patterned, only the patterns are different. To imply, as Benedict did, that the behavior of the people of one's own country is "natural" was both to fly in the face of her own teaching and to fall into blatant ethnocentrism, all the more so when the point of reference is the enemy at the end of a bitter war. Is this the damage war inflicts on the scientific spirit?

Benedict hoped that the Japanese would "naturally" change, but as a government researcher she could not leave it at that. In the passage quoted earlier, Benedict made clear that the victorious U.S. government should not shirk from its task of using "that amount of hardness, no more and no less, which will break up old and dangerous patterns . . ." (37) There is something chilling about an obituary written by a person calling for an execution. It calls to mind the image of a priest who, when

his beautiful funeral ceremony is disrupted by the deceased struggling to sit up in the coffin, smacks him over the head with the shovel and then returns to his speech on how we should honor the life he had lived. It is in this context that Benedict's "respect" for Japanese culture should be understood.

But just as Benedict was wrong about Japanese culture, she was wrong about what the Occupation could and did achieve. In breaking the totalitarian power that the government had over the people, the Occupation did not "break up" the pattern of Japanese culture itself. The process was far more complicated than that. Japanese culture, like all complex cultures, contained many conflicting traditions and ideals. Long-standing aspirations for peace and democracy, which had been virtually silenced by the wartime regime, recovered and thrived under the post-war Constitution. But this story would be the subject for another work. (38)

Notes

(1) This is a revised and abbreviated version of part two of Douglas Lummis, *Uchinaru Gaikoku* (Tokyo: Jiji Tsushinsha, 1981), the English version of which was published as C. Douglas Lummis, *A New Look at the Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Tokyo: Shohakusha, 1982); See for example, Tsurumi Kazuko, "Kiku to Katana: Amerikajin no Mita Nihonteki Dotokukan [The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Japanese Morals as Seen by an American], *Shiso* April 1947, 221-224; Tokushu: Rusu Bendikuto Kiku to Katana No Ataerumono, *Minzokugaku Kenkyu* [Japanese Journal of Ethnology] 14:4, 1949 [Special Issue: Proposals from Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*] especially the critiques by Watsuji Tetsuro and Yanagita Kunio; for the latter in English, see C. Douglas Lummis, tr. "Yanagita Kunio's Critique of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*," *Kokusai Kankei Kenkyu* (Tsuda College) 24:3, 1998, 125-140; J. W. Bennett &

M. Nagai, "The Japanese Critique of Methodology of Benedict's Chrysanthemum and the Sword," *American Anthropologist* 55, 1953, 404-411; and Sakuta Keiichi, "Haji no bunka saiko," [A Reconsideration of Shame Cultures] *Shiso no kagaku* 4, 1964.

(2) See Derek Freeman, Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth (Cambridge and London: Harvard U. Press, 1983); Martin Orans, Not Even Wrong - Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and the Samoans (Novato, California: Chandler and Sharp, 1996); Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934); Clifford Geertz "Us/Not-Us: Benedict's Travels" in Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1988), 128.

(3) Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword - Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), 5.

(4) Ruth Benedict, "German Defeatism at the Beginning of the Fifth Winter of War", (Office of War Information, 1943.Box 99, Folder 99.4, Ruth Fulton Benedict Papers, Vassar College [hereafter RFB/Vassar], 1,6; Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 315.

(5) *Ibid.*, 299-30 (emphasis added).

(6) Chapter II, "The Beauty of the World of Death", *New Look at the Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 11-28; Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Humanities" in Margaret Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work - Writing of Ruth Benedict* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 460; Margaret Mead, "A New Preface" to the 1959 edition of op. cit. *Patterns of Culture*, ix.

(7) Op. cit., *An Anthropologist at Work*, 301; Ruth Benedict, "The Story of My Life", Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work*, 100.

(8) Benedict, "The Story of My Life", 98, 99.

(9) "Resurgam", Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work*, 194.

(10) *ibid.*, xviii. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 21-22.

(11) Mead., *An Anthropologist at Work*, 5.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 202, 206

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 207, 292, 301, 302. Concerning the informant they called Nick, or sometimes Nick Zuni, there is a story that needs to be told. In 1925 Jaime de Angulo, the Spanish-born enfant terrible of American anthropology, wrote to Benedict,

"As for helping you to get an informant, and the way you describe it 'if I took him with me to a safely American place' . . . 'an informant who would be willing to give me tales and ceremonials' . . .oh God! Ruth, you have no idea how much that has hurt me. I don't know how I am going to be able to talk to you about it, because I have a sincere affection for you. But do you realize that it is just that sort of thing that kills the Indians? I mean it seriously. It kills them spiritually first, and as in their life the spiritual and the physical element are much more interdependent than in our own stage of culture, they soon die of it physically. They just lie down and die." (Jaime de Angulo to Ruth Benedict, Berkeley, California, 19 May, 1925, Box 28, Folder 28.1, Ruth Fulton Benedict Papers, Vassar College Libraries Special Collections). In her biography of Benedict, Judith Schachter Modell quotes from this letter only to make light fun of it, and to assure the reader that de Angulo's "horror" (her quotation marks) was unfounded. (Judith Schachter Modell, *Ruth Benedict: Patterns of a Life* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983], 177). But the rest of the story is told in a footnote to a rather obscure field report written by Ruth Bunzel. In the main text she wrote, "And since there is an ill-defined feeling that in

teaching prayers, 'giving them away,' as the Zunis say, the teacher loses some of the power over them, men are 'stingy' with their religion." The note to this reads,

"This was made painfully evident to the writer in the death of one of her best informants who, among other things, told her many prayers in text. During his last illness he related a dream which he believed portended death and remarked, 'Yes, now I must die. I have given you all my religion and I have no way to protect myself.' He died two days later. He was suspected of sorcery and his death was a source of general satisfaction. Another friend of the writer, who had always withheld esoteric information, remarked, "Now your friend is dead. He gave away his religion as if it were of no value, and now he is dead." He was voicing public opinion." (Ruth Bunzel, "Introduction to Zuni Ceremonialism," Forty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1929-1930, [Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1932], 494 and 494n.).

From the description it seems certain that this was Nick.

(14) Ibid., 293.

(15) Ibid., 136.

(16) Ruth Benedict, "Love that is Water", Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work*, 474.

(17) Ruth Benedict, "Countermand", Ibid., 476.

(18) Ruth Benedict, "Preference", Ibid., 177, 8.

(19) Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work*, 144.

(20) Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, p. 294. As op. cit. Yanagita pointed out, Benedict achieved this transference by ignoring the rich vocabulary the Japanese language has

for expressing guilt.

(21) Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge U. Press, 1983); see Lummis, *A New Look at The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Ch. 4.

(22) Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 12.

(23) Lummis, "Yanagida Kunio's Critique," 131.

(24) Soeda Yoshiya, *Nihonbunka Shiron: Benekikuto Kiku to Katana wo Yomu* [Essays on Japanese Culture: Reading Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*], (Tokyo: Shinyosha, 1993) 98-99.

(25) Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 16.

(26) RFB/Vassar Box 104, Folders 4-9.

(27) Douglas Lummis, Robert Hashima interview, 16 October, 1996.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid.

(30) RFB/Vassar, Box 104, Folder 4

(31) Robert Hashima interview, 16 October, 1996.

(32) Ibid.

(33) Douglas Lummis, Robert Hashima Interview, 14 January, 1997.

(34) Ibid.

(35) Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 296, 295.

(36) Ibid., 294-95. Benedict's attempt to render

the word “democracy” into the Japanese phonetic system is an embarrassing reminder of her ignorance of the basics of that language.

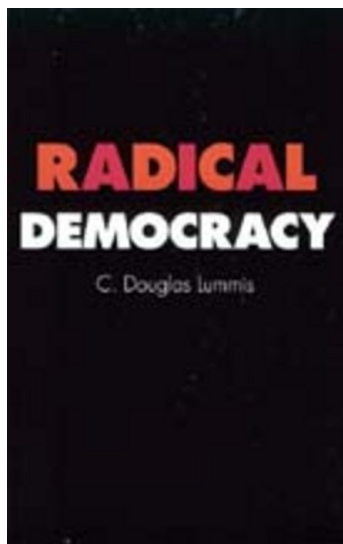
(37). Ibid., 299-300.

(38) Actually this work has already been written. See John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

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For an exchange on Benedict see [Uno and Lummis](#).



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