

# The History and Current Situation of Anthropological Studies on Africa in Japan

MITSUO ICHIKAWA

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies,  
Kyoto University  
Sakyo, Kyoto, 606-8501, Japan

## Early Contacts: Reports on the Travels in Africa

Japanese writings on Africa began to appear shortly after the Meiji Restoration, when Japan transformed itself into a modern state, but these were all based either on the Western sources or Japanese translations of writings by Westerners. Take, for instance, Henry Morton Stanley's "*In Darkest Africa* (1890)," a record of his journey from the Congo River to the southern part of Sudan. The Japanese translation was published as early as 1893, only three years after the publication of its first edition. It was, however, not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Japanese began to write about Africa based on their own encounters with Africa. Moreover, unlike the explorers, Christian missionaries, and colonial administrators from Western countries, a few Japanese who stayed in Africa for extended periods did not leave any documents of their experiences with Africa. The few Japanese who wrote about their experiences with Africa were all short-term travelers. With a notable exception of Naokichi Nakamura, the author of *Traveling around Africa* (1910), who visited Africa in 1903 on his round-the-world trip without money (Aoki, 1993), most of these travelers appeared to have visited Africa with some economic or political purpose. This was the case with the famous geographer Shigetaka Shiga and co-authors who compiled a report of their 1910 voyage, *A Trip to South Africa* (published in 1912). These authors visited Africa with the primary purposes of determining whether Japan, with its limited territory, might be able to send out emigrants to Africa, and looking into Africa's potential as an export market for Japanese capitalism, which was taking off at the time.

The report published in 1917 by the Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture is a record of the travel of a bureaucrat at the Ministry, who visited South Africa to study trade affairs (Nishino, 1974; Okakura and Kitagawa, 1993). Even though his activities during the stay in South Africa were restricted by the 1913 Regulation on Immigration, he stayed there for several months, making first-hand observations of local residents and their society. In this report, he described the life and society of the Bantu people at the time, and stated aptly as follows: "Many of them possess books, and have strong intentions to educate themselves. They harbor a strong longing for education, much stronger than that of poor white people, and the average school enrollment rate among their school-aged children is higher than that for white children." Despite, or rather precisely because of, the fact that he was unable to achieve positive results with regard to the purpose of his visit, he was able to make unbiased observations about people living in South Africa.

Another author, Ikai Kojima, a journalist, wrote a book "*On-the-spot Survey of East Africa* (Shirakawa, 1928, cited in Nishino, 1974)" on his visit to East Africa in 1926 on board the Japanese ship that made the inaugural voyage on East African service. He reported in the book on the traditional political organization and the legislature of the Buganda Kingdom in Uganda, and also told stories of his contacts with local peoples with a friendly and straightforward touch.

There is also a report of a critique, Takehiko Kojima (1938), who traveled in South Africa in 1936. The author tried to examine popular African resistance movements against the imperialist domination from a world-historic perspective (Nishino, 1974). His criticism on the European powers is probably related to the economic and political situation that in 1936, shortly before the outbreak of Second World War, Japan's manufactured exports to Africa were peaking. By that year, Japan had become the fourth largest exporter to South Africa, following Britain, the United States, and Germany.

Most of the early travels to Africa were planned with some utilitarian purposes in mind. Nonetheless, not only did the authors describe economic and political situations of African countries, but they also offered affectionate accounts of the life and society of local populations as looked at

from their own perspectives. Subsequently, however, trade between Japan and Africa began to dwindle from around 1937, and was virtually non-existent by the time the Pacific War broke out at the end of 1941. During the following two decades, African studies in Japan again remained inactive.

### **The Beginning of Full-Fledged African Studies: The "East" and "West" in African Studies**

It was not until the early 1960s, when Japan had extricated itself from the postwar confusion, that Japanese researchers began to undertake full-fledged on-site research into African societies. That was precisely the time when African countries began to win independence one after the other. In other words, the history of full-fledged African studies in Japan based on field surveys coincides nearly perfectly with the histories of many African countries that won independence at the time. While the Anthropological Society of Japan was established in 1884 and the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology somewhat later in 1934, and Japanese researchers had started to undertake field surveys at considerably earlier points in time, most of the early field surveys were on areas in which Japan had strong economic and political stakes, such as Taiwan and the South Sea Islands; virtually no field surveys were undertaken on Africa until after the end of World War II. This was due to the fact that Japan was not only geographically "far away" from Africa, but also did not have the kind of unfortunate but close ties that Western countries maintained with their former colonies in Africa.

When African studies emerged in Japan around 1960, there were two centers for this new academic discipline. One was at Kyoto University and had its origin in a field survey in East Africa undertaken in 1958 by late Professors Kinji Imanishi and Jun'ichiro Itani. The other, centered around the laboratory of cultural anthropology that was established at the University of Tokyo, organized a joint study group composed of researchers from that university, as well as from institutions such as Tokyo Metropolitan University and the Institute of Developing Economies. The two groups were so different in terms of research interests, methodology, and the manner of

promoting and financing academic research undertakings, that a "contrast between East and the West" (Kyoto is in western Japan, and Tokyo in eastern Japan) was often referred to as the hallmark of African studies in their embryonic days.

African studies at Kyoto University, after having been launched by Kinji Imanishi, who was said to be one of the leaders of the New Kyoto School, gave rise to two main currents. One was the current of human evolution studies based in the Laboratory of Anthropology in Kyoto University's Faculty of Sciences. It was on the basis of this current that the Center for African Area Studies was established in 1986 (see, <http://jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp/index.html>). The other current was based in the Division of Social Anthropology, which was established in 1961 in Kyoto University's Research Institute for Humanities, with Professor Imanishi appointed as the first chair. Researchers belonging to each of these two currents undertook intensive research activities by carrying out field surveys in teams, and by organizing joint study meetings with researchers from within the country. The findings of these research undertakings were disseminated abroad by means of English-language publications such as *Kyoto University African Studies* (Vols.1-10; 1967-76) and *African Study Monographs* (launched in 1981).

Imanishi contributed an essay to the inaugural issue of *Kyoto University African Studies* published in 1967. He wrote as follows recollecting the circumstances that led him to become involved in African studies: "My desire to go to Africa stems from two sources. The first was an early commitment to the study of apes (i.e., human evolution, note added by Ichikawa), and the second was from personal experience with pastoral peoples (in Mongolia)." In other words, he chose Africa as a continuation not only of his interest in the evolution of human society, but also of his studies in pastoral peoples before and during the Second World War. In his studies of pastoral peoples in Mongolia, Imanishi had developed an ecologically oriented and farsighted theory of nomadic culture, characterized by a symbiotic relationship between people and livestock. Imanishi's research perspective was symptomatic of both his own experience of having advanced a very original theory of "ecology of co-

existence" (instead of Darwinian "ecology of competition" ) on the basis of his deep understanding of natural history, and African studies carried out by younger generations at Kyoto University. This does not mean, however, that Imanishi himself did not harbor much interest in contemporary Africa, which was making a fresh start at the time. In the essay, he also stressed the need for studies aiming to determine where the newly independent countries of Africa would be heading.

The anthropologists of the Kyoto group were also characterized by the method by which they financed their research undertakings, and by the very collective manner of their research. When the group launched its earliest field surveys in Africa, it could not count on any subsidization by the national government, and so had to secure funding by collecting donations from the public at large, and drawing financial support from newspaper publishers and other private firms. Large-scale investigation teams were organized as receptacles for these financial contributions, and the members of the teams took part in a series of intensive joint study meetings before their departures. Upon their return from Africa, the members worked actively to disseminate their research findings to the public at large by speaking at open lecture meetings, and by publishing a number of books, with some meant for an academic audience and others for lay people. Through this extensive set of activities, encompassing field surveys, joint study meetings, publication of the research findings, and publicity activities aimed at the public at large, the Kyoto group developed a unique, ecologically-oriented approach to African studies, which had been lacking from the orthodox approaches of anthropology. At the same time, they gradually gained a wider recognition in Japan's academia.

On the other hand, the group led by Professor Seiichi Izumi, who held the Chair of Cultural Anthropology upon its establishment at the University of Tokyo, organized an "African Study Group" in 1961, with participation of researchers from the university, as well as from Tokyo Metropolitan University where the Division of Social Anthropology had been established in 1953, and from the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE, <http://www.ide.go.jp/English/index4.html>), which had been founded in 1960 as a statutory organization under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of

International Trade and Industry. This study group established a base in the IDE, and began to hold series of study meetings to jointly read literature on African societies. The inaugural issue of *Afurika-Kenkyu*, the journal of the Japan Association for African Studies, launched in 1964 (the title was later changed to the *Journal of African Studies*) carried the following two articles as early products of the study group: "Traditional Societies and Cultures in Africa, I: Characteristic Features of African Cultures" authored by Nobuhiro Nagashima, and "Traditional Societies and Cultures in Africa, II: Black Africa and Social Anthropology," authored by Toichi Takahashi. Thus, in launching their African studies, the group of anthropologists in Tokyo took a very different approach from that taken by the Kyoto group, which emphasized field surveys in Africa before all else. One of the leading figures in African anthropology in Japan, Nobuhiro Nagashima (1974), later recalled as follows: "In Tokyo, we had no means to go to Africa regardless of how strongly we wished to do so. We don't have that action-oriented mentality of saying 'Why don't we give it a try first, and then see what happens.' That is for people living on the West side of the divide of the Hakone Mountains."

Eventually, some members of the Tokyo group began to undertake field surveys in Africa. Even so, they did not go straight there to start their on-site surveys, as did members of the Kyoto group. Instead, they first headed for Europe to receive orthodox education in anthropology at British or French universities, and then went to do their field research in Africa. In this way, Junzo Kawada undertook his study in Burkina Faso after receiving a graduate education in Paris, and Nobuhiro Nagashima similarly spent a few years at Oxford University before going to study the Iteso society in Uganda. (The only exception is the case of Hitoshi and Fujiko Ueda, from the Kyushu University, southern Japan, who did their fieldwork in Kenya in the early 1970s). Moreover, they undertook their researches on an individual basis, and financed by receiving scholarships, rather than by collecting donations from the public at large. Soon after returning home from their field surveys in Africa, they started actively publishing their findings. These anthropologists of the Tokyo group took the initiative in introducing cutting-edge anthropological theories and methodologies from

the West to Japan, and developing studies in anthropology and African studies into sophisticated intellectual pursuits.

Thus, African studies in Japan in its embryonic days consisted of two currents, namely, the current in the "West" (Kyoto) with its emphasis on the collective and interdisciplinary approach based on interests in natural history and ecologically-oriented methodologies, and the current in the "East" (Tokyo) with its emphasis on independent research undertakings by individuals making use of orthodox anthropological methodologies developed in the Western countries. The two currents differed significantly in terms of their theoretical and methodological underpinnings, their attitudes toward the discipline of anthropology, and the ways in which they carried out and funded their overseas research projects. Given the underdeveloped state of African studies in Japan at the time compared to world standards, the two currents represented two different approaches to bringing these studies upward. More specifically, the "West" group, with its emphasis on undertaking field researches based on its own ecologically-oriented methodology, and disseminating its research findings to the outside world through English-language publications from an early stage, might be likened to an "export-oriented industry" (though of a pretty small scale, but producing "specialties;" see also Ichikawa, 2004). By comparison, the "East" group, with its emphasis on introducing the latest theories and methodologies of anthropology from the West, and improving the quality of African studies in Japan, was reminiscent of an "import substitution industry."

## **Creation of Bases for Research and Education in African Studies**

### ***1. Creation of Bases for Research and Promotion of Interchange among Researchers***

The development of African studies in Japan created the need for organizations and research institutions that could serve as bases for promoting these studies. It was under this state of affairs that anthropologists from both "East" and "West," as well as groups of

economists, geologists, and specialists of tropical diseases who had already been pursuing studies on Africa, gathered in 1964 to establish the Japan Association for African Studies (<http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/africa/index-e.html>). The association subsequently continued to grow, reaching a membership of nearly 900 as of 2005. The research interests of the members cover a broad spectrum of fields in both natural sciences, such as geology, agronomics, ecology, medical science, and public hygiene, and humanities and social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, geography, economics, and political science. However, anthropology has remained the leading discipline of the association since its establishment, with approximately 25 to 30% of the members specializing in anthropology or related fields.

Stimulated by the rise of African studies and of anthropological studies on other regions, efforts have been made to establish research institutions capable of serving as bases for these studies. The year 1964 saw the establishment of the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, ([http://www.aa.tufs.ac.jp/index\\_e.html](http://www.aa.tufs.ac.jp/index_e.html)) with researchers of the "West" group being invited to join its faculty as specialists in cultural anthropology. In 1974 the National Museum of Ethnology (<http://www.minpaku.ac.jp/english/>) was established thanks to the efforts of Professor Tadao Umesao, who succeeded Professor Imanishi at the Research Institute for Humanities of Kyoto University, and other anthropologists based in Tokyo. The museum was not meant exclusively for exhibitions but also to be a research and educational institution. It is under the direct control of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). In Japan, research institution under the direct control of MEXT receive preferential allocation of a research fund that is approximately twice the amount allocated to research institutes of comparable size attached to a national university. Making use of these ample research funds, the National Museum of Ethnology organized many joint research projects by researchers from around the country, including some on Africa. The establishment of these new research institutions and the launching of joint research projects began to stimulate interchanges between the two schools of anthropology in the



"East" and "West," that were once relatively isolated from each other, and rapidly encouraged anthropologists from the two groups to work together. This change also brought about a change in the way research projects were organized and carried out. Previously, a research project in African studies in Japan was typically carried out by a "tree-shaped" research team composed of researchers from the same educational lineage and headed by a prominent and influential anthropologist. Today, however, as Yoneyama (1984) pointed out, it has become increasingly common for research teams to form a "rhizome-shaped" research network, with researchers drawn from many different fields of specialty and from different educational lineages mixing with each other, and forming plural nodes while working side by side with each other. Consequently, different research teams came to share similarities with regard to research interests, methodologies, and contents. Another feature of the new research structure is that it encourages graduate students to participate in field surveys, helping to train new generations of researchers.

## **2. *Creation of Educational Bases***

In 2004, the Japan Association for African Studies celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary by publishing a special issue of its journal (*Journal of African Studies*), entitled "Presenting Africa: The Current Situation and Future of Education on Africa in Japan." According to the reports in the issue, courses or seminars related to Africa are offered by a total of 45 departments or institutes, including courses in anthropology offered by 25 universities. These figures refer to courses that deal with Africa to one extent or another, and therefore include those that do not necessarily bear the title of "African studies" or "anthropology on Africa." It should be pointed out in this connection that no Japanese university has a department or a chair of African studies that offers undergraduate programs for students majoring in African studies, with a single exception, Osaka University of Foreign Studies, which offers undergraduate programs in Swahili language and culture. The undergraduate education in African studies available at Japanese colleges and universities is quite poor.

Postgraduate education in African studies is not much better. The Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies at Kyoto University (<http://www.asafas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/econtent.html>), which was established as late as 1998, is the only graduate school that offers coherent and systematic education in African studies. Its Division of African Area Studies has a total of 14 fulltime faculty members assigned to three departments: cultural ecology, historical ecology, and political ecology. Basing themselves on the "ecological methodology in the broad sense" the time-honored methodology of the Kyoto school, they are engaged in research and educational activities dealing with the various regions of Sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition to the Graduate School of Area Studies at Kyoto University, both the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and the National Museum of Ethnology provide training to doctoral students majoring in cultural anthropological studies of Africa under the tutelage of their faculty specialized in African area studies. Postgraduate education in African studies from an anthropological perspectives is also available at the Division of Comparative Studies of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nagoya University's Graduate School of Letters, which has been energetically carrying out field surveys in Cameroon, and at Hitotsubashi University's Graduate School of Social Sciences, which has years of experience in carrying out on-site surveys in Uganda and Kenya. Furthermore, Kyoto University's Graduate School of Natural Sciences offers postgraduate courses in Prehistoric Anthropology and Human Evolution Studies in the area of East and Central Africa. Graduate students willing to specialize in anthropological studies on Africa in Japan can study at either of these universities where African studies are undertaken on a systematic basis.

### **Characteristics of African Studies in Japan and the Partnership with African Countries**

One of the characteristic features of African studies in Japan can be found in the "ecological methodology in the broad sense" derived from the

academic tradition of the Kyoto group. This methodology places importance on fieldwork as the basis for African studies, and as the source of firsthand data that must underpin research undertakings. This reflects the academic temperament that gave priority to outdoor activities rather than armchair contemplation. At the same time, it was adopted out of the strategic necessity to carry on research.

As Japan became increasingly affluent, research institutions began to purchase many old documents and books on Africa from second-hand bookshops in Paris and London. This has had the effect of considerably improving the collection of books and documents accessible in Japan both qualitatively and quantitatively. However, when African studies were launched in the early 1960s, the materials available in Japan were in a miserable shape. There was a lack of basic materials such as historical and ethnographical books on Africa, not to even mention old reports and documents from the colonial days. There was also a shortage of monographs and other books of secondary sources. Furthermore, severe restrictions were still imposed on travel abroad and on the amount of foreign exchange an overseas traveler could take outside Japan, making it almost impossible for researchers to visit libraries and archives in Europe and make thorough studies of relevant literature for extended periods as they pleased. One effective way for researchers to attain something new in the academic field, despite the terrible lack of basic literature, was to rely on first-hand data collected from their own fieldwork..

Thus, earlier studies by Kyoto group were promoted mainly with interests in the evolutionary history of humanity, or in the basic human nature represented by diversity of cultural forms, and field researches were carried out on the pastoral, agricultural and hunting-and-gathering societies in East and Central Africa. Gradually, research has expanded to other fields of interest and other parts of Africa, including inter-disciplinary approaches to contemporary issues, such as rural development, sustainable use of the environment, rural-urban relationships, and socio-cultural problems in multi-ethnic African societies. Underlying in these academic pursuits has been the ecologically oriented holistic approach to the problems.

Before concluding this overview, I would like to comment briefly on the partnership with African researchers, by taking the example of Kyoto University where I work.

While a large number of Japanese researchers and students are visiting Africa to undertake fieldwork, academic and educational exchange between Japan and Africa leave much to be desired. Kyoto University has an enrollment of a little more than 22,000 students, and a teaching staff of nearly 3,000, but the number of students and researchers from Africa account for a very small part. Of a total of 1,200 students from 76 foreign countries at the university, only 12, or a small one percent, are the students from sub-Saharan countries. During fiscal year 2004, Kyoto University accepted a total of 845 researchers and teachers from 71 countries, of which only 15 were from sub-Saharan countries. It is indeed deplorable that even Kyoto University, despite one of the bases for African studies in Japan, cannot do better than this in the area of academic and educational exchange with African countries.

It should be pointed out, however, that Kyoto University has a long, if not extensive, history of academic exchange and joint research undertakings with research institutions in African countries. The Center for African Area Studies has concluded academic exchange agreements with research and educational institutions in a total of nine African countries, notably in East and Central Africa, including Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, the Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Unfortunately, however, we are desperately short of funds to put these exchange agreements into effect, and to carry out joint research and academic exchanges more fruitfully.

African countries and Japan are in much the same situation in the sense that they share similar contemporary problems caused by the Westernization of culture, or that their respective time-honored cultures are on the verge of extinction in the face of the ongoing process of globalization. The mounting waves produced by rapid changes in culture and education are threatening to swallow up and wash away the precious unique cultural heritages that African people have accumulated over many centuries, including traditional technologies and related knowledge. It

seems that we urgently need to keep track of and preserve information concerning endangered cultures such as intangible cultural heritages peculiar to Africa. It is also important to devise ways to develop local societies and make sustainable use of locally available natural resources both through the appropriate introduction of technologies of foreign origin, and through the utilization of "what is already there," namely, indigenous technologies and knowledge (Richards, 1989). We would like to continue to pursue and improve joint research undertakings with our African partners on themes such as the application of indigenous technologies to agricultural development (a joint project is already under way between the Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania, and Kyoto University), and the question of achieving balance between environmental conservation and the livelihoods of local residents. We believe that in these endeavors, the "ecological methodology in the broad sense," which has been the hallmark of research undertakings by the Kyoto group, will prove all the more effective and instrumental.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY<sup>6</sup>

- Aoki, S. 1993 *Early Japanese Travelers and Emigrants to Africa (Afrika ni Watatta Nihonjin)*. Jiji Tsushinsha, Tokyo.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2000 *The "Discovery" of Africa by Japanese (Nihonjin no Afrika Hakken)*. Yamakawa Shuppansha, Tokyo.
- Ichikawa, M., 2004 The Japanese tradition of Central African hunter-gatherer studies: with comparative observations on French and American traditions. In, Barnard, A. (ed.) *Hunter-gatherers in History, Archaeology and Anthropology*. Berg Publishers.
- Imanishi, K., 1967 The Purpose and Method of Our Research in Africa. *Kyoto University African Studies*, vol.1:1-10.

---

<sup>6</sup> The information on early documents by Japanese travelers was obtained mainly from the writings by Terutaro Nishino (1974) and Sumio Aoki (1993; 2000). The four issues of the *Journal of African Studies (Afrika-Kenkyu)*, namely, vols. 25(1984), 57(2001), 58(2001), and 59(2001) carry several important articles on the anthropological studies on Africa in Japan. Also, the round-table talk on the African studies in Japan (*Kikan Jinruigaku=Anthropological Quarterly*, 7:1, 1976) was quite helpful to understand the history of African studies in Japan. Unfortunately, all of these are written in Japanese, however.

- Itani, J., J. Kawada, N. Nagashima, T. Yoneyama, Y. Wazaki, S. Wada, 1976, Round-Table Talk on the History of African Studies by Japanese. *Kikan Jinruiigaku (Quarterly Anthropology)*, vol.7(1).
- Kawababta, M. (ed.), 1994 *Africa and Japan (Afrika to Nihon)*. Keiso-shobo, Tokyo .
- Kojima, T., 1940 *Standing on the Cape of Good Hope: A Trip to Africa (Kibouhou ni Tatsu)*.
- Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture, 1917 *Trade Affairs in South Africa* (written by Magoichi Nunokawa).
- Nagashima, N. 1964 Traditional Societies and Cultures in Africa, I: Characteristic Features of African Cultures, *Afrika-Kenkyu*, vol.1 (in Japanese).
- Nishino, T., 1974 Three Travel Writings on Africa (Mitsu no Afrika Kikou). *Monthly Journal of Language*, Special Issue.
- Nakamura, N., 1910 *Traveling around Africa (Afrika Shuuyu)*.
- Okakura, T. and K. Kitagawa (eds.), 1993 *The History of Interchange between Japan and Africa (Nihon -Afrika Koryu-shi)*. Dobunkan, Tokyo.
- Richards, P., 1989 *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*. Unwin and Hyman, London.
- Shiga, S. et al., 1912 *A Trip to South Africa (Minami Afrika Kikou)*.
- Shirakawa, I., 1928 *On-the-spot Survey of East Africa (Higashi Afrika Genchi Jijyou)*, Tokyo.
- Stanley, H. M., 1890 *In Darkest Africa*, New York.
- Takahashi, T., 1964 Traditional Societies and Cultures in Africa, II: Black Africa and Social Anthropology, *Afrika-Kenkyu*, vol.1 (in Japanese).
- Yoneyama, T., 1984 History and Prospects of African Studies: Cultural Anthropology. *Afrika Kenkyu (Special Issue for the 20th Anniversary of Japanese Association of African Studies)*, vol. 25.

### Useful Websites

- <http://jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp/index.html>
- <http://www.asafas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/econtent.html>
- [http://www.aa.tufs.ac.jp/index\\_e.html](http://www.aa.tufs.ac.jp/index_e.html)
- <http://www.minpaku.ac.jp/english/>
- <http://www.ide.go.jp/English/index4.html>
- <http://wwwsoc.nii.ac.jp/afrika/index-e.html>