



ABOVE THE
CLOUDS

*Status
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of the
Modern
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TAKIE
SUGIYAMA
LEBRA

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Status Culture of the Modern Japanese Nobility

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To the memory of William P. Lebra

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Orthographic Note on Japanese Words

Japanese names appear with the family name first, unless the authors of cited publications identify themselves using English name order. Japanese words are italicized only on their first appearance. A compound noun may be rendered as separate words (e.g., *bekkaku kanpeisha*), as one word (*kobugattai*), or hyphenated (*ikan-sokutai*), to signify different degrees of discreteness or connectedness and somewhat depending on the word's length. The honorific prefix *o-* or *go-* is treated as part of the stem (e.g., *otsuki*) if it is inseparable from the latter in informants' speech (this is particularly true in imperial reference, e.g., *gogakuyu*, *gokashikin*) and thus appears under *o-* or *go-* in the glossary and index. Otherwise the honorific prefix is connected with the stem by a hyphen (*go-sanke*, *o-atotori*) and the stem alone is indexed.

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The erudite Marius Jansen alerted me to some errors in my historical presentations and interpretations and offered suggestions to improve the manuscript. William Kelly made invaluable comments that will help the book appeal not merely to Japan specialists but to other social science readers outside the Japan area. I am grateful not only for the critical suggestions but also for the warm encouragement that both gave me. I did my best to assimilate their suggestions; nevertheless, any inevitably remaining flaws are entirely my responsibility.

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The photographs in this book are from family albums, except a few which were taken by me during fieldwork. I thank the subjects of these pictures, or their surviving families, for kindly allowing me to reproduce them here. With their permission, names are given, while anonymity is maintained in the text throughout except for historical figures and published materials.

One

Studying the Aristocracy Why, What, and How?

On May 15, 1947, some two hundred titled noblemen gathered in the imperial palace to hear words of farewell from His Majesty, who in the previous year had already renounced his “divine” status and assumed a human role. Twelve days before, the new constitution had come into effect, designed to ensure universal equality under the law. The titles and prerogatives of the nobility were thus revoked, and the former elite became commoners like everybody else: the word *commoner* was now obsolete. This abolished aristocracy of modern Japan is the subject of the present book. ¹My aim is to reconstruct the experience of the former nobility both before and after this constitutional change, as recalled and depicted by its surviving members and descendants. More precisely, I have undertaken a double reconstruction: narration by the insider informants, and interpretive rearrangement by this outsider researcher.

Rationales and Goals

What is the sense, one might wonder, of studying this seemingly anachronistic segment of the population? Was I being merely a curio collector? Or, more seriously, was I following in the footsteps of those anthropologists who prepared the memory ethnographies of dying tribes? I cannot deny that the latter was an initial motive, for I did wish to be a salvage ethnographer of a rapidly vanishing culture. In this respect my interest coincided with that of my informants: the main impetus behind their collaboration was their desire to document for posterity what was now beginning to appear illusionary even to themselves. Without this common interest, the research would have been impossible or futile, and I do intend to meet the expectations of my informants by recapturing part of that world which has been lost for good.

There are more important rationales, however, and they will be discussed below at some length. It will be shown that the aristocracy, rather than being an antiquated phenomenon, carries a present-day significance. Although legally fossilized and socially diminished, the aristocratic status survives, or is reviving, as a *cultural* configuration. Further, the aristocracy mirrors the rest of society; in that sense the present study is about outsiders as much as insiders of this small group, about commoners as well as the elite. More generally, this study is intended to contribute to the existing literature on hierarchy and stratification. I therefore proceed from the more to less obvious layers of significance, from what motivated and prepared me when I began this research, and move on to what evolved only after I had become deeply involved in fieldwork and post-field thinking and writing.

Four levels or dimensions of significance are delineated. The first concerns the need to fill the gaps in research on social elites. The second connects the Japanese aristocracy to the emperor- and ancestor-cult complex. The third locates the hereditary elite in relation to the nonhereditary elite and pursues the contemporary relevance of studying the former. The fourth analyzes the “traditional” prewar aristocracy from a modern vantage point, as seen against the massive changes taking place in Japan and the rest of the world, in an attempt to answer why this seemingly archaic social group warrants an ethnographic study *now*. The last two levels, which are closely interlinked, are intended to address theoretical concerns.

Let us first consider the dearth of research on elites. In studying complex societies, anthropologists and sociologists have traditionally (except in the case of caste societies) paid more attention to the lower or middle than the upper strata of the society, more to peasant or folk culture than to elite culture. This is certainly true of Japanese studies. Substantial knowledge has been accumulated on rural peasants since John Embree’s (1939) pioneering work on *Suye Mura*, and on the lower to middle classes in cities. Yet no research is available on upper-class Japanese, with one recent exception dealing with the business family (Hamabata 1990)—not the same substratum of the upper class as I describe, but connected with it. To be sure, historians have a magnitude of historical and biographical documentations of the hereditary elite, but no study has yet been done in ethnographic perspective.

As a possible reason for why Western ethnographers have avoided the elite, Marcus (1979, 136) mentions the researchers' moral and ideological sympathies with common people: "As a result, the cultural conditions of typical subjects of ethnography in complex societies are humanly portrayed while those of elites in the background appear more as caricatures, created from the ideological biases of the ethnographer combined with inferences drawn from non-ethnographic data on elites." Indeed, as if to confirm this viewpoint, one of my Japanese colleagues characterized a former aristocrat he had met as a "clown." Fuse (1972, 125-26), too, mentioned a similar ideological "hostility" toward the elite among sociologists. Whatever the reasons for the paucity of research on elites generally, that gap in our understanding of Japanese culture and society certainly needs to be filled. This book, then, is intended to reveal some ways in which elite culture is different from that of commoners, and at the same time to dispel some of the stereotypes of the people "above the clouds."

With this emphasis on status, might similarities between Japanese and non-Japanese elites lead us beyond the national border? After all, even the United States, generally considered a foremost representative of egalitarian, mobile, achievement-oriented, and capitalistic societies, has "dynastic" families that have accumulated capital over generations and thus form a hereditary class (Hansen and Parrish 1983; Marcus 1983). Sinclair flatly states: "That a genuine American aristocracy now exists is incontestable. The Cabots and the Lodges and the Biddles and the Whitneys have far longer and more distinguished pedigrees, not to mention greater wealth, than most Europeans who bear titles, for most titles in Europe date from no more than the nineteenth century" (1969, 267). More comparable to the Japanese elite may be the British nobility, which, according to my informants, offered a primary model for many aristocrats of Westernizing post-Meiji Japan. What similarities or differences do we find? In this book, although I do make comparative references to other societies (mainly the British) through occasional insertions and footnotes, I necessarily concentrate on the Japanese case as a step toward understanding human universals with regard to elite status or hierarchy in general.

This first level of significance assumes that the nobility formed a status group with institutional or social boundaries that inhibited, if not precluded, crossover between nobles and commoners. One of my goals was to locate such boundaries and to delineate the culture of this upper crust of society. This does not, however, mean that commoners were set apart from the nobility, or that the latter has lost its significance in democratic Japan. Which leads us to the second dimension.

In prewar Japan, the nobility was closely allied with the royalty, and in fact the emperor was a focal point of aristocratic life, as every chapter of the present volume will make clear. This historical memory has not vanished in the mind of the populace, but is kept kindled by the presence of the emperor and his family, the only hereditary elites today who survived constitutional democratization. The emperor, though no longer divine or sovereign, remains a viable center of contemporary Japan. In fact, in this age of mass media, the "humanized" emperor plays a more visible role than ever before in authenticating, dignifying, dramatizing, or otherwise highlighting political decisions, high-level state appointments, and social events. As Japan's role in international politics expands, the emperor's presence is conspicuous on television screens as the ceremonial host of foreign dignitaries. Indeed, Japan seems to share an "inverted relation between spectacular pageantry and de facto royal power," a situation attributed to the Swedish court as well by Rundquist (1987, 2). The emperor has not ceased to be a dominant symbol although he is no longer politically dominant. An emperor amounts to no less than what Ortner (1973) calls "a summarizing symbol," arousing reverence and catalyzing emotions, as occurred during the last phase of the illness that ended Emperor Showa's sixty-two-year reign on January 7, 1989. It is also understandable that left-wing activists target the emperor as the most central embodiment of the Establishment, whereas right-wing extremists rally around the emperor for the very same reason.

As long as the emperor or royalty remains vital, the former nobility retains its symbolic weight because of the halo effect. There continues to be real or presumed intimacy between the royal family and the former aristocracy, for the latter serves as a buffer to protect the royal life space from public intrusions. Indeed, the impenetrability of the imperial private sphere is the very source of a mystique that envelops the nobility as well.

Anticipations of a royal marriage have always stimulated speculations regarding sons and daughters of the former aristocracy as possible candidates, and the media have never missed any opportunity to play up such associations. According to a veteran journalist specializing in imperial household affairs (Togashi 1977, 73), the list of bridal candidates for then Crown Prince Akihito (the present emperor) was first compiled from among former noble families only, with no question being raised regarding this limited scope of choice. The nationwide sensation caused by the surprising nomination of a commoner businessman's daughter merely underscored the continuing role presumably played by the former nobility in royal affairs. Nor did this break with the imperial tradition, drastic as it was, bring to an end the royalty-nobility matrimonial alliance: subsequent royal marriages (of the crown prince's younger brother and sister) were with descendants of noble families.

Nevertheless, the remnant of matrimonial or social affinity between the royalty and nobility is probably destined to vanish entirely. Prince Aya, the younger son of Emperor Akihito, personally chose Kawashima Kiko, the daughter of a commoner scholar, as his bride, an "unexpected" announcement that the whole nation hailed with feverish enthusiasm. The hereditary status of former nobility seems to have lost its relevance in the selection of a future empress, a bride for the crown prince.

The resiliency of the emperor cult, and the resonance between the royals and nobles or between these hereditary elites and the Japanese populace as a whole, is deeply embedded in the cultural legacy of ancestor worship. Japanese people in general, resisting the monotheistic idea of a single, transcendental deity, continue to derive their mental security and spiritual salvation from a sense of connection with their ancestors. Their overall identity and self-esteem are, in my view, ultimately linked to their images of ancestors. The ancestral shrine is the center of the household, and parents continue to call on the authority of family ancestors in disciplining their children and themselves. For the majority of Japanese, memorial services are the most important religious rite. One survey (NHK Yoron Chosabu 1984, 6-11) suggests a persistent and widespread sense of attachment to dead ancestors: 57 percent of the survey sample prayed at the household ancestor altar at least occasionally, and 28 percent every day; 89 percent visited the cemetery on the days of major annual rites for the dead at least occasionally, and 69 percent did so regularly; and 59 percent felt "connected with ancestors at the depth of heart." To this extent, Japanese remain ancestor worshipers.

It is all too natural that a commoner Japanese will elevate his or her "original" ancestor to the status of village headman, samurai, warlord, feudal domain lord, court noble, royal prince, or emperor. Stories of subsequent family downfall (to explain one's present commoner status) are heard more often than those of ascension from bottom to top. ² Given the ancestor cult, the individual bases his or her self-esteem in part on aristocratized ancestors. There is nothing surprising in the Japanese tendency to trace genealogies upward to prominent ancestors rather than downward to obscurity. If one's own ancestry is found to be not so lofty, vicarious identity may be drawn from a borrowed genealogy. In the *iemoto*, for example—traditional schools of arts such as the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, dance, and music—the grand master (himself called *iemoto* as well) is worshiped by his disciples as embodying the essential formula of the art created by his "original" ancestor and perpetuated by more recent ancestors. By becoming attached to the *iemoto* master, a disciple takes part in the long line of distinguished descent of the *iemoto* family and thereby elevates his or her identity. In the same vein, the nobility has popular appeal as a model for identity construction. The nobility, like the *iemoto*, represents the "other" for the commoner "self"; via ancestors, however, the noble other beco

mes accessible and absorbable into self.

It is against this general background of genealogical aristocratization—whether direct or vicarious—that we can understand the persistent idiom of *kishu*, “noble species” or “of noble origin,” as a category of people. How often we hear such phrases as *yuisho tadashii*, *rekki to shita*, *o-iegara no yoi*, *kakushiki no takai* (all meaning “of proper origin” or “of good birth”) in asserting a person’s unequivocal reputation. Bridal candidates for royal princes, including those of commoner origin, are characterized in these terms by the approving media. In a TV show featuring Crown Prince Hiro’s speculated marriage choice, the emcee was carried away in endorsing one potential candidate: “Miss _____ is fully qualified in every respect. First of all, she is from the right kind of family [*rippana o-iegara*].” A Gakushuin University student, “she has been the best friend of Princess Nori since primary school at Gakushuin.” Even though her family does not belong to the nobility, still “her great-grand-mother is said to have mothered Emperor Taisho.” In other words, “Miss _____” virtually “came from the former nobility [*kazoku shusshin de irassharu*].” The speaker was saying what the popular audience wanted to hear. [3](#)

Ancestor worship and the emperor cult are wrapped in a single package. The emperor’s legitimacy as a key symbol of the nation has been largely unquestioned because of his genetic connection with a supposedly “unbroken” line of imperial ancestors whose origin fades into the mythical space of heaven. In other words the emperor cult is inseparable from the ancestor cult. It is no coincidence that Robert Smith (1974) begins his discussion on Japanese ancestor worship with a historical account of the imperial house. To the extent that the emperor cult and ancestor worship are alive, the hereditary charisma of the nobility remains untarnished. (Aristocratic ancestry occupies a prominent place throughout this book, but especially in chapters 3 and 4.)

The general sense, however ungrounded objectively, of national homogeneity and kinship, of the Japanese as a single race, follows from genealogical aristocratization, which ultimately can end up with all Japanese ancestors converging in one common stock. This feeling of shared ancestry has significant repercussions for minorities, who cannot claim to partake of such noble heritage. I return below to this issue of dominant versus marginal groups in Japan; for the moment, suffice it to say that the significance of research on elites extends far beyond the tiny anachronistic segment of nobles per se and to the general population, in terms of self-other interchange via the emperor/ancestor cultural package. The people “above the clouds” are thus viewed through a double lens by those down below: as an inaccessible other sharing the imperial mystique, and as an accessible other to be assimilated for self-elevation. Such bipolarity is inherent in the *kishu* consciousness.

I have argued for the contemporary and societal significance of the present study by linking the aristocracy to the still-viable cultural legacy of the emperor/ancestor complex. Underlying this argument is the assumption that the past survives in the present. This survival premise is then stretched or qualified by the third and fourth levels of significance. At the third level, we consider the nonhereditary elites who dominate modern Japan, beginning with the educational elite.

It is a national educational obsession to exact rigorous standards in the school life of Japanese children, from preschool through high school and to the “hell” of entrance examinations. Policymakers, seeking to unwind this national frenzy, are trying to overhaul the educational program, but Without success. Children continue to crowd the ever-proliferating cram schools—commercial establishments that supplement the regular school curriculum—thus relinquishing play hours and cutting sleep time. This educational obsession on the part of both children and their parents reflects a very realistic perception: Japan’s dominant career structure is interlocked with the eminence of its universities.

Commitment to educational attainment as the primary determinant of one's career placement is itself a sign that the prewar hereditary elite is obsolete and the ancestor market bankrupt. Takane (1976) demonstrates the crucial role played by the University of Tokyo, from the Meiji period on, in siphoning commoners into the political elite, thus eventually driving the hereditary aristocrats out of political leadership. At issue, in fact, is not simply the old versus the new. Japanese have long been education-minded, reaching back at least to the samurai class in the Tokugawa period (Dore 1965). More broadly, too, the political and social history of Japan is well marked by dynamic leaders and rulers of humble origin—as best represented by Hideyoshi (detailed in chapter 2 below). “Achievement” is among the most frequently cited attributes of Japanese.

The record of successful entrance into a prominent university translates into a pedigree that is carried as an inalienable asset and, when appropriate, displayed throughout the career of its possessor. Conversely, those who lack a proper educational pedigree feel doomed for good. Hence, two paths are open to the average Japanese: either one takes an “elite course” backed by one's educational pedigree, or one must make do with the mediocre back-alley course open to educational “commoners.” It is in this context that the ferocity of educational monomania becomes understandable. The composition of the elite has changed radically, but I discern a conversion of achievement into ascription, mobility into rigidity. Status here is not derived from birth, but acquired in adolescence at the time of passage through entrance examinations into university. In a similar vein, Galtung (1971, 357) draws an analogy between aristocracy and “degreeocracy,” or between biological birth and social birth:

It (the system) is essentially an ascriptive system in the sense that once one is allocated to a group it is very difficult to change one's class. It is like being born into a class, only that *in a degreeocracy social birth takes place later than biological birth*. More precisely it takes place at the time of the various entrance examinations, and like all births it has its pains. There is the pregnancy period with some element of social isolation (preparation for the exam); the labor (the exam itself); and there are miscarriages and infant mortality. . . . It is traumatic and dramatic. . . . The entrance examination is to be born again. (emphasis in original)

The candidate's success arouses extraordinary excitement among family and friends because success means a huge step of sublimation from achievement to ascribed status. Precisely because educational or professional aristocracy is an oxymoron, virtual aristocratization through educational performance magnifies liminal grandeur. In short, ascription serves as a cultural template for achievement. The educational aristocracy, born thus in youth, forms the career elite in various fields—economic, political, administrative, professional. This is demonstrated every time a top leader in any particular field is introduced with his educational background (see Rohlen 1983, 88-91).

There is nothing new about a nonhereditary elite: indeed, Japan's aristocracy created in the modern period (1868-)—the subject of this book—itself was an amalgam of old, hereditary nobles and hereditarily lightweight upstarts (see chapter 2). What is new is an enormous proliferation of fields for placement of nonhereditary elites, along with the predominance of the educational route for the attainment of elite status, which amounts to an aristocratization of the educational elite. Further, the unprecedented affluence of Japan since the 1960s corresponds with the rise of a massive economic elite topped by high-technology multinational businesses. Among the most recent economic aristocrats are young people, including unmarried “office ladies,” who with insatiable appetite consume the latest fashions, whether of commodities like brand-name dresses, accessories, perfumes, luxury cars, boats, and art objects, or of services like those of trendy beauty salons, well-known French restaurants, and foreign travel. These parvenu compete in joining prestigious sports clubs—tennis, golf, horseback riding—whose fees are often double or triple a salaried worker's annual income.

This instant aristocratization of the affluent class, entailing a gaudy commodification of status, while despised and abhorred by old-time aristocrats as a wild version of nouveau riche status grabbing, is not totally anomalous; rather, it is indexical, however crudely, of the fundamental nature of a social hierarchy. Just as educational achievers are aristocratized, so are the moneyed classes. This juxtaposition of hereditary and nonhereditary elites brings us to the heart of stratification in general, and Japanese stratification in particular.

Involved here are basic polarities such as ascription versus achievement, prestige versus power, status (of honor) versus class (of wealth) in the Weberian sense, and rigidity versus mobility. The main issue is how one side relates to the other, how the two are reconciled with each other in a shared status system. The present study addresses this theoretical question from the point of view of the hereditary elite—the issue being how deeply the first of each pair entangles with the second.

It is likely that some compromise, collaboration, exchange, collusion, complicity, or conversion occurs, that the two sides in fact enhance each other through the mechanism of “agglutination” (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, 58) whereby one’s position in an ascribed hierarchy, for example, correlates with that in an achieved one, status of honor with economic class, prestige with power, and so on. When a discrepancy exists, exchange or “complicity” between the ‘symbolic capital’ of the hereditary status and the “economic capital” of the bourgeoisie, to appropriate Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, is a possible solution. But even so, it is unlikely that perfect fusion is possible: dissonance, ambivalence, tension, guilt, or resentment may always be involved, and outright repulsion, confrontation, or inverse correlation is conceivable. An alternate solution may therefore be found in the coexistence of both as formal and informal, structure and practice, front and rear, public and private, as sanctioned in Japanese idiom. Whether and how an alliance or exchange between the hereditary and nonhereditary elite took place may be inferred from instances of marriage (the topic of chapter 6) and from the occupational careers of aristocrats (chapter 8).

The polar types, in short, make sense only if they are taken together as a dynamic interchange having mutual implications, as Parsons (1954) has demonstrated with regard to ascription and achievement, or “quality” and “performance.” We must therefore ask again, Is the ancestor market really bankrupt? Has there been a complete turnover in the composition of the elite from the old to the new? If one glances at recent popular publications on the old aristocracy, the answer would be a strong no. These publications indicate clearly and consistently that the old nobility and the royal family are closely connected with individuals prominent in the governmental, political, financial, industrial, and professional domains (Shin Jinbutsu Oraisha 1988a, b, 1987; Sato 1987; Hayakawa 1983). The Japanese popular press seems never to tire of printing genealogies showing networks of alliance between ancestry and money, name and power, heredity and talent. The Shoda, the commoner natal family of Empress Michiko, has often appeared in these published genealogies. Whether such a genealogy is faithful to “reality” is less important than the fact that it conveys the “cultural” survival of the old elite as assimilated by the rising elite.

The marketability of the old aristocracy can be seen in the appropriation by a number of professional actors and actresses of the names of prominent court nobles, such as Konoe, Ichijo, Nijo, Kujo, Tokudaiji, and Saga (Shukan Yomiuri Henshubu 1987, 325)—a telling sign that the aristocracy has been reincarnated in popular culture. If translated as snobbery, aristocracy is indeed a universal, timeless phenomenon. And indeed, the old, supposedly nonexistent elite is being recycled in contemporary Japan. In the following chapters, hence, I will explore how the hereditary elite and nonhereditary elite, status and class, honor and power, symbolic capital and economic capital, have entered into alliance, conflict, or any other relationship.

The foregoing does not imply that the hereditary elite has been free from criticism, animosity, or ridicule in the post-World War II era. On the contrary, negative views have been expressed not only by outsiders but by members of the hereditary elite themselves. Such criticism may reflect universal ambivalence toward power, authority, and the social order as being at once desirable and oppressive (Sangren 1988). Here we are facing another set of polar types of stratification: hierarchy versus equality, verticality versus horizontality.

Nakane (1967) has labeled Japan a “vertical society,” though this view has been challenged by many who see more “horizontalness” in Japan, whether of village organization or business management. Indeed, common sense tells us that no society is either exclusively vertical or horizontal, and Nakane’s book itself reveals an extremely egalitarian aspect of Japanese society. Even the Tokugawa social structure, which is regarded as the most rigidly stratified system in Japanese history, was not simply vertical. Irokawa (1975), like folklorists led by Yanagita Kunio, sees equality as having its genesis in the rural, “natural” community of the *buraku* (hamlet), uncontaminated by external administrative authority; in his view, that ideal is being recaptured as a model for citizens’ protest movements in Japan today.

I think, though, that it is naive to dichotomize equality and hierarchy in this manner. It would be more productive to look at how one links to the other within the same system. John Whitney Hall (1974b), for example, synthesizes the two sides of Tokugawa society into one package: rule by status. Dore (1973), in comparing British and Japanese factories, perceives in the latter *both* a more elaborate hierarchy *and* greater equality. And Bestor (1989) traces the subtle but dynamic coexistence and interchange of horizontal and vertical relationships in a Tokyo neighborhood.

Solidarity or even intimacy goes with hierarchy as much as with equality. Hierarchy, far from being a solid pyramid, is rather a fluid, multiple, vulnerable organization. This book reveals the contacts that the nobility had with lower strata of society. The elite can exist only if there are nonelites who sustain the status boundary: paradoxically, status distinction is maintained by having commoners cross the boundary, freely enter the aristocratic life space, and control their aristocratic masters. Such a cross-class relationship may, however, be a social logic rather than a paradox. In the high society of nineteenth-century England, too, as depicted in Jane Austen’s novels, superiors maintained their independence by being dependent on inferiors (Handler 1985). A superior’s dependency may have been even greater in Japan, where individual autonomy was not as prized as in England. It will be shown in chapters 5 and 7 that the two layers commingled, sometimes to an astonishing degree.

I have presented three levels of significance (and goals) of this research. Now we come to the fourth and last. This has to do with the twofold change that is engulfing not only Japan but other postindustrial societies as well, one that goes hand in hand with high technology and economic prosperity. One aspect of this change is “informationalization” through audio-visual mass media and computerized communication. Japan seems irreversibly trapped by the information industry, which not only codes, represents, and thus produces reality, but also sensitizes its clients to the newest information, along with the newest equipment—information and equipment that, however, are destined to become outmoded by whatever comes next. Updating is only an instant ahead of outdatedness; newly gained information quickly ends up in a trash can. Thus, an informationally precocious younger generation rises to outmode the older generation in increasingly shorter and more rapid cycles. Even the so-called *shinjinrui* (new human being) is said to have become obsolete. The information kick seems to intensify the Japanese cultural drive not to be left behind.

The second aspect of the ongoing change is internationalization or globalization, which presses Japan to lower or even remove its national or ethnic walls. While trade-barrier issues seem never to be resolved, goods and personnel *are* crossing the national borders in unprecedented magnitude, bringing ordinary Japanese into direct encounter with foreigners. Japan, having risen as an economic elite that stands out among economic commoners of the world, is a target of resentment, but at the same time it is solicited, not as a workaholic producer, but as a prodigal consumer in foreign markets—a true aristocrat. As a result, overseas tourism (including sex tours) has become routine for average citizens of Japan; studying at foreign schools, instead of being subjected to the rigid examination system, is a widely accepted option; and multinational businesses send native employees to overseas subsidiaries to maintain long-term contact with foreign locals. The host-guest relationship is also reversed. Japan hosts an increasing number of foreigners as travelers, investors, employees, teachers, students, stage and media performers, conferees, refugees, and so on. International schools have been set up to internationalize both Japanese and foreign enrollees. Cross-national contact results in intercultural and interracial marriages, which are no longer anomalous. Allied with the information industry, live overseas broadcasts flash instantaneously on Japanese televisions, and American movies are a standard viewing option.

Japan, then, is today confronted with a historically unparalleled situation: unrestricted access to constantly changing up-to-date information and expanding foreign contact. But no change is linear; indeed, the more sweeping and radical a change is, the more likely it is to invoke the past, tradition, and continuity (Shils 1981). Even while they adapt to the above changes, Japanese react by searching for fixed, “timeless” roots of their “indigenous” identity. This reaction seems stimulated by an ironic by-product of internationalization: namely, the worldwide exposure of historically persistent fissures between dominant and marginal Japanese. Especially noteworthy in the “marginal” class are former *burakumin* (outcaste) and Korean Japanese, who, though physically and culturally indistinguishable from the “mainstream” Japanese (De Vos and Wagatsuma 1967; Lee and De Vos 1981), remain targets of discrimination. In this sense, their situation differs from that of American blacks (Russell 1991). Illegal immigrant workers from Southeast Asia, the latest addition to the minority list, are also widely reported as targets of Japanese abuse and exploitation.

Internationalization, together with speedy, worldwide dissemination of information, thus poses a threat to the national, ethnic identity of Japan. It should come as no surprise, then, that the double change described above coincided with a search for and recovery/discovery of Japan’s ascribed, rooted self. This fact is best exemplified by domestic tourism. As Ivy (1988) shows, the Japan National Railways, tied up with Dentsu, the world’s largest advertising agency, began the “Discover Japan” campaign in 1970. Nostalgic appeals, radicalized paradoxically under the subsequent slogan of the 1980s, “Exotic Japan,” were readily accepted by prosperous masses of clients.

The mass media, even as they circulate constantly renewed information and present an elusive, boundless, chameleonic, chaotic world, are playing a significant role in promoting the “retro” boom. Television programs highlight the buried, hidden, or vanishing legacies of the past, such as folk crafts carried on by a handful of people, local performing arts, and centuries-old houses, temples, and shrines. Historical dramas depict the morally disciplined, socially ordered cosmos (which includes a rigidly structured gender hierarchy) of old Japan. The national government, through the Cultural Agency (established in 1968), launched a systematic cultural-property preservation policy, which has transformed a multitude of symbols of local and national “traditions” into public museums of sorts, which in turn serve as major tourist attractions. It is this backdrop of nostalgic yearning that makes the former elite worth studying.

Nostalgia is, according to Lasch, an inclination to evoke the past not so much in order to restore it as “to bury it alive” by “lock[ing] it up in museums,” not to establish a continuity with the past but to dramatize a discontinuity from it (1989, 69-70). Lasch’s definition may reflect the future-oriented American resistance to being dominated by the past, but if it contains any universal validity—and I believe it does—then nostalgia is better aimed toward the archaic, not the recent, past. ⁴Understandable, then, is the spate of popularized archeology that has accompanied the construction boom. This fever for things prehistoric was foreshadowed in the late 1940s by the Toro site excavation and the sensational disclosure of a well-preserved farming village of the Yayoi period (300 B.C.-A.D. 300). This discovery allowed Japanese, precisely when defeated and stripped of their identity, to reemerge with a repaired national identity: they found their roots in a rice-growing culture that had lasted for two millennia (Edwards 1991). Again, the aristocracy, along with the imperial lineage, is rooted in its ancient origin—the symbol of a fossilized past well suited for nostalgic consumption. I show in what follows, particularly in chapter 8, what part surviving aristocrats play in nostalgic dramas and the retro kick, how, in other words, they contribute to contemporary *popular culture*. Unlike Ivy (1988), who finds in remote, rural, and marginal space and people sources for the “cultural recuperation” of Japan, I see a recuperative asset in the centrally located, urban elite. If these two spheres have anything in common, it is that both are vanishing. (For dialectics of change and nostalgia, see also Kelly 1986; Robertson 1991.)

It goes without saying that nostalgia ties in with the second point made above, namely, the ancestor/emperor cult. Ancestry translates into “blood,” which may be pure, not so pure, or downright polluted. That the fear of contamination by “impure” blood has not diminished in urban Japan is demonstrated by the thriving detective agencies that undertake premarital or preemployment investigations of a candidate’s family background. As Japan faces the inevitable inflow of aliens as part of internationalization, the Japanese “blood ideology” (Hayashida 1976) may be restimulated and revitalized. The purity of one’s blood tends to be measured by the nobility of one’s ancestors, the emperor’s being the purest. Nostalgia for an immutable, native identity is interlocked with the idiom of *kishu* (noble species), as discussed above. This study thus explores the vulnerable point of Japanese self-identity as it is reflected in life experiences codified and recalled by the nobility.

Culture and Status: Theoretical Direction

Having presented the rationales and objectives of this book, I turn to its overall theoretical direction. As indicated by the subtitle, this study attempts to delineate the status “culture” of the aristocracy. Culture is generally understood as that which orders a universe that would otherwise be chaotic and absurd. The vast literature in contemporary anthropology provides multiple definitions of culture; I have decided to focus on the following delineation because of its relevance to my purpose.

Culture can be distinguished from what it is not in two ways. It is defined, first, in opposition to nature—biological and ecological—in that culture is designed and created by human ingenuity and work. As such, culture functions to extend or control, accommodate or disturb, or in some way modify nature. This definition covers both the adaptive and repressive function of culture relative to nature. Culture in this sense is an artificial construct; it is technology in a broad sense, in opposition to the world of givens. Second, and more narrowly, culture refers to the symbolic realm of human action, which is tapped for signification and representation of “reality” and is thus distinguished from the thing signified or represented. Culture here stands for meaning, conceptual scheme, code, cognition, ideation. This semiotic focus tends to capitalize on the operation of the “mind,” thereby allying culture with the philosophical tradition of idealism in opposition to materialism (Sahlins 1976). Paradoxically, however, the same focus draws attention to communication among members of a cultural community and the sociological emphasis on collective sharing as an essential part of culture. This communicative dimension takes culture beyond the subjective mind over to the intersubjective plane: culture is not in a mind, but between minds; not private, but public (Geertz 1973).

These two definitions of culture are not necessarily distinct from each other. All symbols are indeed products of human construction (or technology), while the nature-culture boundary is made, and nature becomes recognizable, only through the semiotic application of culture. Nevertheless, difference in perspective and emphasis is significant. In the following discussion, I attempt to relate culture thus defined to nature and the “real” world insofar as it is relevant to the status of aristocracy. I argue with Sahlins that culture and non-culture (nature/reality) are conceptually independent, that is, irreducible to one another. But I do not believe, unlike pure symbologists such as Sahlins, that culture can be fully dissociated from nature/reality. Here I come closer to action-theory sociologists like Parsons (1951), who is strongly opposed to reductionism and insists on the “independence” of action systems or subsystems, but whose analytical work concentrates on their “interpenetration.” How independence is reconciled with interpenetration is elusive, to be sure, and in his later work (1961) Parsons does propose the idea of a hierarchy of four systems—cultural, social, psychological, and biological, with culture at the top—a formulation somewhat similar to Dumont’s (1970) encompassment. Still, Parsons never did away with the notion of energy “input” from a lower to a higher level.

In analyzing status, I start with the culture-nature distinction. Status is a cultural construct par excellence, having nothing to do with the naturally given, as evidenced by the variation in status systems from society to society. Complicating the nature-culture dichotomy, however, is the fact that culture incorporates some arbitrarily selected elements of nature in its construction of status, such as race, gender, body height, energy level, and life stage. Culturally created status, moreover, is often deemed a law of nature. This culture-nature interchange (interpenetration?) assumes a special significance when applied to the status of hereditary elite.

Generally, aristocrats are distinguished from commoners by the maintenance of a wider gap between cultural control and natural proclivities. Aristocrats, for example, are supposed to be well regulated by cultural rules of decorum, inoculated against the unpredictable outbreak of natural drives, protected from “organic eruption” (Douglas 1975, 213). Aristocracy best symbolizes what Elias (1978) calls “the civilizing process,” which transforms such natural vagaries as spitting and nose blowing. The result is a strict division of culture and nature, or of the public and private spheres of life, allowing nature to be concealed from public view. Hayden (1987) addresses the same situation when she discusses the two “bodies” of the British monarch—the “body politic” and the “body natural”—which must remain rigorously separate. This nature-culture segregation can be further characterized by the stereotypic irrelevance of the aristocrat’s activity to his physical survival. He busies himself with ritual preoccupations and enjoyment of esthetic taste rather than pursuit of utilitarian gain, leisurely play instead of strenuous work, dilettantism rather than professionalism.

Yet significantly, all this “culturalization” (or “denaturalization”) of behavior or activity should occur “naturally,” as if one were born with it. What is more, the aristocratic status is deeply embedded in what is deemed as nature—blood, descent, ancestry, heredity. More correctly, these criteria are culturally defined as natural processes or states that are beyond human control (hence ascribed). The aristocrat, who is expected to denaturalize his behavior, activity, and appearance, is thus heavily dependent on nature and subject to its unpredictable course. The “natural” base of an aristocratic family—its “blood”—may run out, as when no heir is born, thus threatening the line’s extinction. But status is a cultural production, after all; when “anemia” strikes the family, status will likely be reproduced through cultural “transfusion.”

More generally, the rule of separation between nature and culture, or between the naked and the dressed-up body, requires special accommodations, for aristocrats are just as embodied as commoners. I venture to propose that aristocratic subculture, if there is one, crystallizes and is elaborated around the imperative of segregating and bridging culture and nature. In the following chapters I will continually question whether this in fact occurred, and if so, in what guise.

Similar confluence occurs in the second, semiotic dimension of culture as contrasted to reality. I see two sides of reality: subjective and objective. First, I want to capture the relationship between status culture and the subjective experience of individual aristocrats. If culture is meaning that does not reside in the individual mind but moves between minds, we need to see how it relates to the inner thoughts, feeling, and selfhood of persons. Despite the Geertzian definition of culture, it goes without saying that intersubjective meaning depends on the meaning carried in each individual, approaching the world with his or her own psychological apparatus, and vice versa. This focus on personal experience is largely lacking from the elite study, and I regard it as a native ethnographer’s privilege to fill this gap (a point which raises a methodological issue that I will tackle later).

More importantly, in looking more closely at personal experiences of the nobility, my account will, I hope, contribute to revising the stereotype held of the aristocracy, which amounts to an exaggerated uniformity produced by viewing things from a distance. Only revising, not demolishing, is my aim, for I do not surf on the waves of contemporary Western academia, which compel one to attack the previously accepted or opponent’s view as a stereotype or myth and so dismiss it as entirely false. ⁵I concede that the stereotype of the Japanese nobility is not entirely false; my contribution therefore lies in providing the nobility’s subjective view of themselves, which may or may not be consistent with the outsiders’ stereotype.

The other, objective side of reality has to do with political economy. Involved here are material, coercive means of production, hegemony, and oppression. In opposition to the culturalist, symbologist, or semiotic views of social phenomena, Keesing (1987, 166) warns us against (over-and mis-)reading cultural meanings and metaphors with no attention to the political reality behind them: “Where feminists and Marxists find oppression, symbologists find meaning.” In the area of stratification, Dumont (1980) represents the culturalist position in explaining the Indian caste system in terms of the ideological opposition of pure and impure. He is counterposed by Marxists (see Cancian 1976 for a review) and criticized by those who see in the caste system the injustice of political domination and economic exploitation as well as class antagonism (Mencher 1974; Apparadurai 1986).⁶

The Japanese nobility can certainly be considered a political elite. Indeed, its creation in modern Japan was without question politically motivated (see chapter 2). The top positions of the new government were monopolized by the nobility in the beginning, and later, new political leaders were ennobled. The new, bicameral Imperial Parliament, established in 1889, offered them a directly political opportunity as members of the House of Peers. The nobility, therefore, could be defined as having “political status” (Iwai 1980) and characterized in terms of its political function as a bulwark around the emperor and the “absolute imperial domination” (Suzuki 1979).⁷

Political and economic factors will enter into the picture I am going to draw, but only as they affect or are affected by status *culture*. In this limited sense, I go along with Cohen’s (1974) idea of “two-dimensional man” being political and symbolist. My choice here is dictated by my own interests, but also by my informants, who were more willing to release or more ready to recall the cultural, rather than the political and economic, aspects of their experience. Moreover, cultural data, in addition to personal data, are significantly lacking in studies of the elite.

Basically, my approach is eclectic. “Capital” varies from economic to political to social to cultural, and the boundaries of these categories are far from fixed or closed. To reiterate the argument made above, there can be complicity (as Bourdieu [1984] demonstrates with regard to French society) between the “cultural” and “economic” currencies, between a nobility of taste and the bourgeoisie. Conversely, it would be preposterous to obliterate the distinction, or even the contradiction, between these categories, in view of the notion of “gentle poverty”—a state that is not necessarily resented, but on occasion is even played up as a matter of pride by the nobility, which identifies itself as a cultural elite. While I agree with Keesing (1987) about the danger of over-reading hidden meanings, I think the same warning can be addressed to the Marxian overinterpretation, however coated in cultural terms, of the economic, coercive, exploitive, and conspiratory nature of social structure.

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