

Philosophical Position of

Motoori Norinaga's Criticism against *Karagokoro*

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In the context of reconsidering the philosophical significance of Japan's premodern intellectual heritage, Motoori Norinaga is one of the most important figures to reflect on today. He was himself a scholar in the premodern era (1730–1801) before Japan opened up to foreign countries and started to rebuild itself as a modern nation-state. As was usual for Japanese scholars at that time, he did not know much about European, American, or African civilization. This was typical because the Japanese government strictly limited communication with foreign countries until the middle of the nineteenth century. It permitted only communication or an exchange with China, Korea, Ryukyu (Okinawa), and the Netherlands under the control of the government. Due to such a lack of information, Japanese scholars at that time could not revise their worldview to be more current and thus they still retained a perspective in which China was considered central in a geopolitical sense, while Japan, Korea, and other peoples were marginal. In addition, the majority of scholars principally studied Confucianism. They were intellectually formed by reading classics that were written in ancient China and consulting Chinese commentaries from the Cheng-Zhu school of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This tendency was not limited to the eighteenth century. The normative status of Chinese civilization, including literature and science, is deeply rooted in Japanese traditions since ancient times. Norinaga was the most influential premodern scholar who attempted to systematically set aside the dominance of the Chinese way of thinking (*karagokoro*) to reappropriate the original Japanese spirit (*yamatodamashii*). In this way, he brought into perfection *kokugaku*, that is, the study of Japanese classics and exploration of the indigenous Japanese culture.

However, Norinaga's criticism against *karagokoro* has had a bad reputation among Japanese modern, that is, Westernized scholars. One reason is that Norinaga does not make any effort to justify his position on affirming the superiority of the Japanese spirit. An example is *Naobinomitama*, which constitutes an essential part of the preface to his masterpiece *Kojikiden*, that is a detailed philological commentary on *Kojiki*, the earliest Japanese history of mythology.¹⁶ In *Naobinomitama*, Norinaga dogmatically affirms the truth of Japanese mythology as a matter of historical fact and entirely rejects its indebtedness to Chinese civilization. Such an attitude on the part of Norinaga has given modern scholars a strange impression, because he is in general a quite reasonable and scientific writer. In effect,

¹⁶ For a general description of Motoori Norinaga and *Kojikiden*, see: <https://www.norinagakinenkan.com/english/kojikiden.html> (checked on may 5, 2022).

following *Naobinomitama*, which provides the context for *Kojikiden*, Norinaga meticulously examines each letter and word of the mythological text, consulting different versions and different secondary sources to draw a conclusion based on solid ground or refraining from doing so if such ground is insufficient. He is often so scientifically open-minded as to call upon others and the next generations to revise and correct his possible mistakes or unclear understanding. His scientific and impartial attitude in this respect is surprising when we take into account that no Japanese scholar at that time was familiar with European scientific methodology. It is natural to consider him as a Japanese counterpart to European philosophers of hermeneutics, which was even prior to Friedrich Schleiermacher and August Boeckh.² In contrast to the main text of *Kojikiden*, *Naobinomitama* displays an explicit dogmatism and even chauvinism without explanation. It is natural for modern Japanese scholars to separate these two aspects of Norinaga and interpret them as incoherent or incompatible.

Only relatively recently has scholar Koyasu Nobukuni (1933–) attempted to reveal the internal connection between these two aspects and critically form a total understanding of Norinaga. According to Koyasu, Norinaga’s lasting academic achievement in *kokugaku* is not incoherent in relation to, but rather is supported by a dogmatic ideology supporting imperial Japan that is accompanied by denial of the other, in particular China. Therefore, it is understandable that modern Japanese scholars have repeatedly recalled his thinking to secure self-referentially the Japanese identity. Norinaga has passed for an icon among nationalists. Koyasu coins the term the “Norinaga Problem,” which is the entire problematic comprising Norinaga’s achievement and chauvinism that inspired Japanese modern nationalism and its fate, including militarism, foreign invasion, and World War II.

Recognizing the validity of his problematization of Norinaga and the reference to him by Japanese modern scholars, I nevertheless try to find the philosophical significance of Norinaga’s criticism against *karagokoro*. In my view, Norinaga’s struggle cannot only be understood in the context of the dominance or presence of Chinese culture for premodern Japan. Rather, from the standpoint of the globalized twenty-first century, some of his arguments can be related to different discourses raised in various regions in relation to the presence of European or Anglo–American influence. I propose to place his thought into the context of today’s postcolonial situation and interpret them as a type of consistent answer given by a thinker who belongs to a marginal culture. Then, Norinaga can be considered as someone who brought up a problem related to belonging to a particular culture through his examination of subjects anxious about the influence of a dominant, supposedly universal civilization.

For comparison, let us recall Frantz Fanon’s description of the “inferiority complex”³ of the black Antillean, which concerns the fact that the black people lived under colonization, in which the French

² Muraoka, Tsunetsugu, *Motoori Norinaga* 2, 14.

³ Fanon, Franz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2.

government determined the educational system and social institutions. As a result, the colonized nation unavoidably believed in the superiority of the French. Under the presence of the French, black Antilleans became ashamed of themselves in terms not only of the color of their skin but also their intelligence and, generally, their entire culture. Black children educated in the French system eventually identified with a white explorer, an adventurer, and a missionary “who is in danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.”¹⁹ When they became adults and visited Europe, however, they confronted the fact that they were Negroes and then suffered an internal conflict.

Fanon points out that such an observation can be generalized for all colonized peoples.²⁰ We can still apply it to all culturally peripheral regions independently of whether they are or were politically colonized or not. This can be valid, for example, for Japan in the Shino-centralized East Asia until the nineteenth century, and for African and Latin American countries and Japan in a Euro-centralized world from the mid-nineteenth century. To be sure, Japan has not suffered political colonization or occupation by a foreign country except during a short period following World War II. Rather, Japan is one of the imperialistic countries that colonized other Asian countries and violently forced its own culture on other people. In this sense, it is definitively responsible for causing the inferiority complex of others. Nevertheless, in another respect, Japan was in the past more or less culturally dependent on foreign civilizations. As a consequence, Japanese thinkers have experienced an inferiority complex similar to that which the black Antillean felt under the French, but in the case of Japan it is in relation to China in the premodern era, and to Europe and Anglo–America in modern times. Admittedly, Japan is not so explicitly aware of, nor its inferiority complex so thematized as could be seen in a politically colonized region. However, plenty of discourses still exist that take the attitudes of Western people as normative, and Japanese understand and evaluate themselves through the criteria of the external norm. Here, I propose to contemplate these phenomena not in the limited context of Japan or the French Antilles, but to interpret them as specific cases of a global problematic common to culturally marginal people in, for example, Latin America and Africa. Reflecting on Norinaga from this perspective, we can discern the philosophical significance of his criticism of *karagokoro*.

1. A Situated Universalism

Norinaga’s criticism of *karagokoro* is, as Koyasu points out, not a thesis to be justified but a prescientific ideology to be dogmatically posited through a tautological affirmation.²¹ It is therefore natural that it can work as a highly disputing gesture in controversies with his contemporary thinkers.

In particular, *Ashikariyoshi*, a record of the controversies with author Ueda Akinari (1734–1809), demonstrates that Norinaga’s dogmatic attitude, in contrast to Akinari’s impartial thought which is

¹⁹ Ibid., 125.

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

²¹ Koyasu, Nobukuni, What is ‘Norinaga-Problem’?, 75.

much closer to our common sense in the twenty-first century. A typical case concerns the identity of Amaterasu, a principal female god as founder of the royal family according to Japanese mythology, with the sun in the physical world. Akinari recognizes the Japanese territory is small in size in the most recent world map that had been imported from the Netherlands, and doubts that a Japanese god could be identified with the physical sun, which must be the same for all countries. Therefore, nobody would take Norinaga's assertion seriously, according to which, because this tiny country was the origin of all others where the sun and the moon appeared for the first time, all other countries should pay tribute to Japan. When other people asked for the reason behind Norinaga's claim, it could not be justified because each of other countries has its own mythology. There were no grounds to affirm the truth and the superiority of Japanese mythology in comparison with all other different views. In this way, Akinari's attitude is relativistic and much more comprehensible for us in today's globalized age.

Norinaga, however, definitely rejects it as "common and ordinary Karagokoro" (8, 404). He adopts a kind of universalistic view according to which, though each country has its own mythological history, all histories can be reduced to one. *Kuzubana*, a controversial manuscript directed against a contemporary Confucian, also admits that different mythologies usually have common or similar episodes because they all express the same event that happened on earth. According to Norinaga, however, only the Japanese Shintoistic version transmits the truth without divergence from or embellishment of the historical fact.

Some modern scholars interpret Norinaga's dogmatic attitude as a type of religious "belief."²² It is known that, in his ordinary daily life, Norinaga usually followed the Jodo Shinshu of Buddhism, which supports the suggestion that he had a religious inclination. In addition, he actually declares to Akinari: "If you believe me, it results that I am right. If you do not believe me, it does not matter at all for me" (8, 412). These words seem to suggest that Norinaga argues for a belief that can be affirmed or denied according to each individual's personal decision.

Regarding this point, it is interesting to compare Norinaga to native intellectuals in colonized regions. Fanon testifies that their "stated belief in a national culture" "sometimes takes on the aspect of a cult or of a religion."²³ The native intellectuals may perceive a threat that their own culture is going extinct under the overwhelming influence of the metropolitan culture, which may push them to react in a way that seems to others to be based on irrational religious belief.

It is important that Fanon himself does not qualify these individuals as irrational or religious, but rather finds an element of truth in the motivation that urges them to move toward their precolonial culture. As he states: "this passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that

²² Muraoka, *op.cit.*, 130, 145.

²³ Fanon, Franz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 175.

Western culture in which they all risk being swamped.”²⁴ It is necessary that a native “tears himself away from the swamp that may suck him down.”²⁵ “If it is not accomplished there will be serious psycho-affective injuries and the result will be individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless—a race of angels.”²⁶

Returning to Norinaga, it is not important whether his stubborn attitude was supported by a kind of religious belief. We must rather examine whether it suggests an element of truth, and if so, what kind. Here, the matter principally concerns whether one can have an impartial bird’s-eye view of different mythological histories, one of which is one’s own. In this respect, it is useful to consider a debate between Norinaga and a Shino centrist, Tou Teikan (1732–1797), as well as between Norinaga and Akinari.

Teikan, as a Shino centrist, believes that the chronology in ancient Japanese mythology should be revealed as false and revised in reference to historical accounts of the ancient Chinese dynasties. However, according to him, to be able to do so, a scholar “must read books from a higher view point” (8, 300). Norinaga polemicizes this expression and demands that he “see from an even higher standpoint.” Then, Norinaga affirms, he will notice that it was a Japanese god, Sukunabikona, who established India, China, Korea, and other countries all over the world.

As always, Akinari observes such dogmatism on the part of Norinaga as unjustified. Akinari applies to Norinaga his own caricature of superstitious people with an illustration of climbers of Mount Fuji worshipping the sunrise as appearance of Amitabha Tathagata on the top. In other words, for Akinari, Norinaga’s belief in Japanese mythology is no different from the superstitions of ordinary people. Now, Akinari demands that Norinaga “see from an even higher stand point,” and then, Akinari assures him, Norinaga will notice that his belief is a kind of egocentric behavior of ordinary people who prefer themselves over others (8, 410). Also, as always, Akinari has a relativistic perspective that allows him to evaluate the Chinese and the Indian mythological world on an equal basis with that of the Japanese. His perspective is much more familiar to us in the globalized twenty-first century. In contrast, this time, Norinaga’s answer is not strong. He explains that he cannot help believing as he does based on his philological point of view. At the same time, he concedes that he is not insisting on his view as an objective or definitive truth (8, 412). Here, he seems to confess that his belief in Japanese mythology is only a methodological supposition rather than a devoted, firm confidence.

His words testify that he does not argue that Japanese mythology is an objective truth. Rather, he presents it as a matter that is dependent on a point of view. It is possible to understand it as a matter of “belief.” However, a fundamentalist believer, for example, a person who refuses to teach evolutionary theory in schools, would not admit that his/her own beliefs depend on a point of view. In

²⁴ Ibid., 168.

²⁵ Ibid., 175.

²⁶ Ibid.

contrast, Norinaga is clearly aware that his argument hangs on a point of view, and in this sense, his belief is already relativized. Therefore, even if we can qualify his attitude as a kind of belief, we should notice that his belief is not fundamental but relativized. His intention is to demand his contemporary Japanese scholars be rooted in the perspective of Japanese mythology, while recognizing at the same time the possibility of adopting a higher perspective to pretend to compare Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and other cultures from an impartial perspective.

To investigate the grounds for Norinaga's insistence on the point of view of Japanese mythology, it is worth paying attention to the fact that the intensity of his criticism in his controversial documents reflects different levels based on whom it is directed toward. It is true that he blames all people, including foreigners, who do not recognize the centrality and superiority of Japan. On this point, he behaves as if this were a universal and objective truth. However, we must take into consideration that at that time, Japanese scholars who wrote in Japanese did not usually presume that any foreigner might read their texts. There are only a few exceptions in which texts written by Japanese scholars in the Chinese language were brought to China and read there. For example, Ogyu Sorai (1666–1728), a great philological Confucian who belonged to an earlier generation than that of Norinaga, used to write in Chinese and his texts were also read there. Norinaga only occasionally wrote in Chinese, and usually in Japanese, so his arguments were hardly directed to foreigners. Rather, he wrote taking almost exclusively the domestic market into consideration. In this sense, even when he speaks ill of China or other nations, his intention must be distinguished from that of purveyors of hate who attack weak minorities through aggressive words and attitudes.

Moreover, Norinaga's words reveal that he does not take seriously the possibility that Indian, Chinese, and other people believe in the central and superior status of Japan of identifying Amaterasu with the sun in the sky. He confesses that it is understandable that foreigners do not know the original true history, records of which have been preserved intact only in Japanese history books and that do not exist in other countries (8, 266; 8, 312). In addition, the tone of his criticism is, relatively speaking, not harsh or intense toward Japanese Confucians. He admits that it is rather reasonable that a devoted Japanese scholar of Chinese studies does not believe in Japanese classics (8, 266). From Norinaga's point of view, the worst and most intolerable are scholars of Kokugaku, who study the Japanese classics, and who pretend to respect Japanese tradition but actually do not believe the contents of the classical texts and instead interpret and evaluate them in conformity with a Chinese worldview (8, 266-7; 9, 52).

In other words, Norinaga's criticism is not directed uniformly at all people who do not believe the worldview of Japanese mythology. Among the targets of his disapproval, he is angrier with the Japanese than with foreigners, and among the former, angrier with Kokugaku scholars than Confucians. This is because, according to him, it "conforms [more] to reason and order [順道]" to adopt the worldview of one's own country than to follow another country's perspective, even if the latter seems

better (8, 312). He argues, if Japanese oral tradition were not superior or inferior to another country's myths, it would "conform to reason and order" that each person in the world believes and keeps his/her own traditions. In reality, however, Japanese tradition is superior to that of every other country. Then, it would be "a spirit extremely against order" for a Japanese scholar to follow another country's way of thought and to doubt his/her own traditions (8, 132). We should read between the lines here and understand that Norinaga does not believe in the truth of the Japanese mythological worldview and in the falseness of the Confucian view in the same way as a religious fundamentalist or a scientist. His question consists in whether each scholar's standpoint conforms to or flouts reason and order with regard to the worldview of one's own culture.

If these observations are correct, it follows that Norinaga's criticism against *karagokoro* is not directed toward those who choose the Confucian view in a context in which they can impartially compare it with the Japanese mythological view. Rather, it is directed toward those who, born and educated in Japanese society and culture, admire however the Confucian way of thinking and depreciate the mythology that constitutes the foundation of Japanese culture. Norinaga demands that they restore a normative attitude which conforms to reason and order.

This interpretation is supported by a preface written by Watanabe Shigena to *Gyojugaigen*, Norinaga's version of Japanese history of external relations that contains much chauvinistic discourse. Watanabe testifies that his teacher Norinaga, is angry about behavior "against reason and order," parallel to that of those who serve another's master or parents without taking care of their own (8, 22). We cannot arbitrarily choose a master or our parents among different options. Rather, our parents and master, at least in feudal society, are given to us independently of whether we like them or not. The same is true with respect to culture and mythology as an expression of the worldview of a civilization. Norinaga blames those who reject their own culture and mythological worldview based on a foreign value system. Even though one's own tradition may appear false after receiving an education, it is wrong to abandon it, in his view.

At this point, it seems possible to answer Koyasu's recent criticism against Norinaga, which is that Norinaga's chauvinism presupposes "the self," which is only determined negatively; in other words, it lacks a firm foundation. Koyasu claims that Japan, with which Norinaga identifies, does not have any positive substance; it is only a product of denial of the other, which is frequently identified with China.²⁷ What Norinaga calls the "spirit of the divine country Japan" is nothing other than a negative idea of "something which is not the Chinese spirit."²⁸ In the same manner, Koyasu rejects Norinaga's famous thesis that ancient Japan did not have an explicit word for "the Way [道] [i.e., reason and order]" with a strong normative connotation as an ideal, precisely because people at that time did not diverge from the ideal way of life and did not need a word for reflecting on it. For Koyasu, such a

²⁷ Koyasu, *Norinaga Problem*, 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 65.

thesis is merely a negative discourse. That is to say, because Norinaga's criticism of *karagokoro* and his claim of Japanese superiority do not have positive grounds, his nationalism and chauvinism do not contain anything that should be taken seriously.

It would be reasonable to require Norinaga to base his claim on a positive foundation if it is a matter of objective knowledge. In reality, however, he does not evaluate Japanese and Chinese civilization from an impartial point of view. Rather, he points out that the value of one's own culture cannot be measured in such a way because it concerns self-constitution. Regarding the self, it is impossible to arbitrarily choose one after examining several options, each of which is positively determined. Norinaga does not base his assumption of Japanese superiority, for example, on the premise that while Chinese culture is theoretical, Japanese culture is emotional, and emotional is better. Rather, he draws attention to the fact that the way of thinking of those who have been educated in Japanese culture is unavoidably grounded in Japanese ways whether those individuals like it or not. Such a self-constitution cannot be reduced to objective description. Although it is possible to consider it as containing something positive, this positivity cannot be understood through an impartial perspective but rather only from a first-person perspective. Even though the contents may appear scarce and poor from a third person perspective, they can be very rich in content for the very person who experiences them.²⁹

Norinaga insists that the purpose of studying is to gain a rich sense of the ancient mythological world in which the ancestors lived pre-reflectively. To realize this task, we must keep an attitude that adheres to reason and order. In his essay *Tamakatsuma*, he writes:

If you would like to master the Way [i.e., reason and order] through learning, you must first of all cleanse yourself from *karagokoro*. Otherwise, you cannot master the meaning of the ancient thought, however you read and contemplate the ancient books. If you do not master that meaning, you can hardly master the Way. Originally, the Way was not something to be known through learning, but rather it was *magokoro* [truthful mind]. *Magokoro* is the very natural being of the people's spirit. However, later, people accepted and got focused on *karagokoro*, so that *magokoro* was lost. Therefore, today, it is impossible to master the Way without learning. (1, 47)

Norinaga opposes the widely accepted understanding of learning according to which learning is a determination of an object from an impartial perspective of a third person. He asserts that originally, the Way was not an object of learning but instead the way of being of the mind and the world, which

²⁹ Kanno Kakumyo describes the same thing when he stresses the richness of first-order articulation of meaning through perceptual experience in comparison to second-order articulation through theoretical observation: Kanno, Motoori Norinaga, 229–30.

ancient people pre-reflexively experienced from a first-person perspective. If we set this as an object of observation, analyze it, and determine its contents through positive propositions, then we miss its rich meaning. To master the Way, we must try to adopt or imitate the first-person perspective to capture the view that ancient people would have had. Of course, this is extremely difficult because we are not ancient people anymore, but is not impossible either, insofar as the ancient spirit is not yet completely dead. However, Norinaga observes that his contemporary scholars are so deeply influenced by Confucian studies as to consistently analyze, determine, and evaluate the ancient Japanese way of life and thinking on the basis of Chinese theory. Therefore, he demands a fundamental change in their spirituality.

In short, we can denominate Norinaga's philosophical position "situated universalism." On the one hand, it protests against relativism, which equally values both one's own culture and that of others. According to him, we cannot trust a Japanese who affirms that, just as Japanese people have the right to believe in Japanese legends, so too do people in other countries have an equal right to believe in traditions there. Such a relativistic attitude makes all belief empty. Granted, the principle that affirms equal inherent value in every culture may seem familiar to us in this globalized twenty-first century. However, Norinaga observes that such a principle presupposes a perspective that can impartially compare one's own culture and that of others. For Norinaga, such a presupposition of a kind of birds-eye view cannot be trusted. In reality, we are born and educated within a particular community and culture, so it is not possible to observe our own background at an equal distance to other ones. If it is possible to describe our context from a third person perspective, such a description may miss the rich meaning in which we pre-reflexively live. Therefore, Norinaga opposes to this relativism a kind of universalism that affirms without limitation the absolute value of the culture to which one belongs.

On the other hand, this universalism does not conceal but rather explicitly affirms the fact that it is rooted in a geographically and historically specific place. This attitude reminds us of the simplest version of ethnocentrism. It is difficult to deny that Norinaga is a kind of ethnocentrist. However, his point consists in that his position is more trustworthy than both a relativism and a universalism which ignore their own belonging or rootedness. The latter two positions behave as if they did not belong to any particular community, as if they could avoid presupposing a culturally restricted perspective. Against them, Norinaga observes that a Confucian who pretends to teach a natural order which is independent from any particular perspective tends to simply express *karagokoro* (1, 48). A universalism is only possible on the basis of a particular point of view, that is, the point of view of the culture in which one is born and educated. He affirms that the cosmos is unique. There is not a different cosmos for the Japanese, for the Chinese, or for the Indians; therefore, the origin of the cosmos is the same for all people (1, 547). From here, he advances to the conclusion that the description of this origin in Japanese mythology is common to all people. Obviously, Norinaga takes it for granted that we must choose one among several other versions. According to him, the most reliable approach is to

choose the Japanese version. This is valid especially for Japanese people, but even though he does not take seriously the possibility that a Chinese or an Indian might choose the Japanese version, he insists that for them, too, the correct choice is the Japanese one. He takes this view because he denies the possibility of both a completely impartial comparison of different versions of mythologies, and a completely universal view independent from any particular place. Now, given that he is a Japanese scholar, his conclusion cannot be other than that the correct outlook is to choose the Japanese mythology. This is the only possible option for him that allows him to maintain an approach that conforms to reason and order. Therefore, although his conclusion seems the same as the simplest version of ethnocentrism, this is a deliberated conclusion based on rejecting relativism and universalism, which ignores its own limitations of perspective.

To sum up, we can interpret Norinaga's criticism of *karagokoro* as a polemical performance aimed at protesting against a typical attitude of Japanese scholars who analyze, understand, and evaluate their own tradition in line with the perspective of a dominant foreign culture. It is not a simple confession of his belief but rather a deliberate performance on a specific stage or context. In effect, beyond the stage, that is, in his daily life, Norinaga does not strictly insist on his theses but rather follows flexibly the custom of the time which he views as deeply influenced by *karagokoro*. Sagara Toru finds here duplicate thinking in which Norinaga accepts the reality of a time without directly intervening to change it, while he prepares for a better future through his investigation of the ideal ancient Way.³⁰ In other words, Norinaga deliberately performs the desirable way of learning on a stage relatively independent from daily life and before a relatively limited audience constituted of those scholars of the time who learned the Way.

2. Learning in One's Native Language

In this Section, I discuss the importance of language in Norinaga's undertaking of establishing *kokugaku*, that is, *learning of Japanese classical texts*.

Koyasu observes an important difference between Norinaga and his most famous follower Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), both of whom focused on oral tradition in search of Japanese identity. Atsutane considers *Norito* a divine text. *Norito* comprises ritual prayers read for Shinto gods in shrines, and they are conserved in ancient written texts. Atsutane thought these texts show the undistorted original shape of the oral tradition in relation to the Japanese gods in ancient times.³¹ Put differently, Koyasu asserts that Atsutane intended to capture the transparent presence of the gods through the prayer *Norito*. However, according to Koyasu, Norinaga also concentrated on the oral tradition, but not because he sought the transparent presence of the ancient gods. Rather, the oral tradition that Norinaga considers can be approached through the language expressed in the text *Kojiki*, which was written in the

³⁰ Sagara Toru, *Motoori Norinaga*, 245.

³¹ Koyasu, 'What is 'Norinaga Problem'?', 79.

beginning of the eighth century. In other words, Norinaga does not seek to deal with the transparent presence of the gods, but is engaged in analyzing the fixed language in this text from ancient times. He idealizes this language as revealing the spirit of the ancient native Japanese who had not yet been influenced by Chinese culture or by Chinese characters, meaning they did not use any characters.³² *Kojiki* was aimed at creating a writing system for oral language by using the latest imported Chinese characters. That is why Koyasu describes the text as “oral scripture.” Although Norinaga idealizes the language of this text, it is nevertheless one among many different particular languages of a geographically and historically specific people. Norinaga calls this idealized ancient language *yamatokotoba*, suggesting it is the original normative language for all Japanese people.³³ Koyasu detects here a dangerous and ungrounded affirmation, according to which this specific language is exclusively beautiful, correct, and superior to the others. He criticizes Norinaga for seeking to justify this affirmation through the historical fact that in the late seventh century, Emperor Tenmu, who himself read versions of *Kojiki* from oral tradition, ordered Hieda no Are to memorize them, and after that, in the beginning of the eighth century, Ono Yasumaro finally wrote down the oral history of Hieda no Are using Chinese characters. This is only a historical fact, which is not sufficient grounds for claiming the superiority of this language.

Koyasu is right in that Norinaga does not have any objective justification for asserting that the ancient Japanese language is superior over others. However, this is because, as we saw in Section 1, Norinaga does not intend at all to objectively prove its beauty and correctness but instead to give it a concrete content, taking its beauty and correctness for granted.

The problem facing Koyasu is that it is not clear at what point he specifically criticizes Norinaga’s discourses. Sometimes Koyasu seems to accuse Norinaga of presuming the existence of an oral tradition without written texts in Japan, before the arrival of Chinese characters. However, it is a historical fact that people who lived in Japan before this moment were illiterate; therefore, there was only an oral tradition. Other times, he appears to attack Norinaga for seeking to learn the worldview of ancient people through reading the text *Kojiki* and trying to reappropriate the ancient oral language. However, this is not necessarily something to be criticized. If Norinaga aimed at recuperating in his time the ancient oral language in its completely original form before the influence of Chinese characters, then his effort would certainly be an anachronism. However, as Koyasu himself observes, Norinaga does not intend to return to the pure original world of spoken language that lacked knowledge of Chinese characters.³⁴ He deeply recognizes the reality that the text *Kojiki* and the Japanese language in general are penetrated and determined by Chinese characters. In his essay *Tamakotsuma*, he even affirms that it is difficult to learn Japanese classics without knowing the Chinese way of

³² Ibid., 85-7.

³³ Ibid., 94.

³⁴ Ibid., 112.

writing because they are all written using the Chinese writing system (7, 47). In effect, the text of the first part of *Kojiki*, which Norinaga offered under the title “Correct Reading of the Time of Gods,” comprises a mixture of Chinese characters (*Kanji*) and Japanese characters (*Kana*) that had been created by deforming the Chinese ones.

Another possibility is that Koyasu accuses Norinaga of offering his personal opinion about the reading of the text *Kojiki* as the correct and beautiful normative language. However, this is not the case with Norinaga. It is true that he starts his study of *Kojiki* from the assertion that the text expresses the idealized ancient language; however, he does not confuse it with his personal opinion about how to read it. On this point, his attitude is highly academic. Even when he is confident of his interpretation, he distinguishes between the status of his commentary or interpretation, on the one hand, and that of the normative language itself in the idealized ancient time, on the other hand. As we have seen above, he keenly recognizes the possibility that his interpretation of the text cannot be free from the possibility of error, and therefore, he explicitly welcomes different opinions that explain it.

Or is it plausible that Koyasu wishes to argue that Norinaga is wrong in conceding normativity to *Kojiki*, which is the object of his studies, and trying to explain its contents in his own language; or, in considering *Kojiki* as the most important classic text in Japanese culture and giving it immortal normativity? This is not necessarily a failure, however. As Kanno Kakumyo observes, in studying Japanese grammar, the ancient social structure, or the mentality of ancient people, Norinaga distinguishes the normal and the original state, on the one hand, and various temporal divergences, on the other hand. Norinaga tries to learn the forms and contents of the ancient language, which is accessible through the text *Kojiki*, so as to reestablish continuity with the ancient world and spirit. As Kanno affirms, Norinaga thinks that the language of *Kojiki* is pure Japanese in itself, which is the embodiment of the manner in which people made their first contact with the world. That is to say, for Norinaga, *Kojiki* does not express a reflective comprehension of the world through understanding and reason, but embodies the form in which people lived in the world in the most primitive and original layer of experience prior to reflection.³⁵ Norinaga recognizes that he has not completely lost continuity with this original form of life; therefore, he tries to reappropriate it in his time.

We can find a universal significance in Norinaga’s academic enterprise in this intention to reappropriate the ancient worldview through learning the grammatical rules of language prior to the arrival of a writing system and the meaning of words, which constitute the text of mythology. The intention of recuperating continuity with an oral tradition prior to the emergence of a writing system is important for people who experience the overwhelming influence of a dominant foreign culture. Admittedly, today, it is almost impossible in every region of the world to speak or to think without a writing system. Nevertheless, those regions with ancestors who had an oral tradition and lacked a writing system may not stop to trace back to the origin of this tradition until the moment when the

³⁵ Kanno, *Motoori Norinaga*, 331.

continuity with the ancestral culture would be entirely extinct. “If it is not accomplished there will be serious psycho-affective injuries and the result will be individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless—a race of angels.”³⁶ The search for continuity with the premodern oral tradition is essential for the self-constitution of those who suffer the overwhelming influence of a dominant foreign culture that possesses a writing system.

Currently, there are still alive 68 languages from 11 language families in Mexico, and 47 languages from 19 language families in Peru. Some of them are stable, but some are in danger of extinction. In any case, they all exist under the overwhelming influence of the Spanish language and the alphabetical writing system that arrived starting at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The majority of them were for a long time solely oral language without letters, with some exceptions like Mayan pictograms and Quechuan *kipus*. After the Spanish arrival, the indigenous people of these languages were called “analphabetic.” They were not treated as subjects capable of speaking, thinking, or governing themselves, but exclusively as objects of education, a supposedly necessary condition for becoming such subjects.³⁷ As a result of receiving education, they not only learned Spanish and an alphabet but also felt shame for their own traditions, so that they prohibited their children from speaking their own languages. After a long period of such humiliation, however, now in the beginning of the twenty-first century, they seem to have begun to express their ancestral oral tradition using the alphabet as a tool. Latin American literature and philosophy have almost always been occupied by people whose first language is Spanish, but now the voices of indigenous people are starting to be listened to in their native languages.

Norinaga’s endeavor seems to suggest a possible solidarity with indigenous people in Mexico, Peru, and other countries who are now struggling to express their thoughts in their own language, borrowing a foreign writing system. Neither Norinaga nor indigenous people ignore the overwhelming influence of a foreign central language system, which for Norinaga is Chinese characters, while for Mexican or Peruvian indigenous people it is alphabetical Spanish. Nor do they intend to restore the original form of the ancient oral tradition, which would be an expression of nostalgia and an anachronism. However, they refuse to forget the past and to pretend as if the ancestral oral tradition never existed. Here, refusing to do this is not an act of nostalgia but necessary for constructing their own language and mind today and in the future because this type of construction must be always based on the past. Where all connection to the past is totally severed, no positive construction is possible. Of course, the past is not an unchanging form but rather a whole, constantly changing through the continual addition of new elements. However, some elements that once existed cannot be eliminated from the whole. Norinaga proposes to construct the future on the basis of the whole past, instead of by eliminating the core part of the whole in favor of the present dominant force that exerts influence. Applying Norinaga’s proposal

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Martiarena, Óscar, “El indio como objeto de conocimiento”, in: *Diánoia* 44, 1998, 195-218.

to the situation of the present indigenous people in Latin America, this would mean an endeavor to explore the past oral tradition in its most original form and give it an expression through media that are available now. As Norinaga studied the text *Kojiki* and wrote a detailed commentary to it, in Peru, Mejía Huaman Mario, a Peruvian indigenous philosopher whose first language is Quechua, tries to give Quechuan basic concepts a bilingual expression through Quechua and Spanish.³⁸ Another case is that, even though he is not of the indigenous origin, De Hoyos Adalberto enters a community to listen to the worldview of the Zapotecan people.³⁹ Such efforts would never be made where people concentrate on relativizing or deconstructing their own tradition ignoring the continuity with the oral language.

Yet there seems to be a significant difference between Norinaga and the majority of Latin American indigenous communities. When Norinaga started his academic career, there had already been different versions of the text *Kojiki*, which he considered transmitted the ancient oral language, though the text was, from the beginning, written with Chinese characters because ancient Japanese did not have a writing system. In any case, Norinaga had a written text to read, analyze, and comment on. In contrast, many Latin American indigenous communities seem to lack such written texts that can be considered to reveal the pre-Hispanic worldview.

Regarding this point, it is interesting that Norinaga does not always insist on the existence of written texts as primary sources for his studies. As Sagara Toru highlights, Norinaga is intensely interested in contemporary rural popular customs and folkways such as weddings and funerals. His interest in these matters undeniably testifies that he is one of the precursors of the modern folklorist and anthropologist.⁴⁰ Kumano Sumihiko also affirms that Norinaga understands deeply that customs and traditions in rural areas can be sometimes treated as primary resources for his studies of the ancient Japanese spirit. Thus, Norinaga does not believe that there is no way to approach the original or primitive layer of our experience where classical texts were not written down in that past time. Even in the present time, approaches to it are available in such forms as the customs or oral traditions of rural people. That is why he loved to travel to rural areas and have conversations with native people there.

Such folkloric insight was supported by his evaluation of the value of language that lacked a written system, as may be found in one of his polemical texts, titled *Kuzubana*. According to Norinaga, it is not possible to determine which is superior between oral and written communication. It is true that letters or characters enable us to transmit certain contents to others beyond spatial and temporal

³⁸ Mejía Huamán, Mario, Teqse. *La cosmovisión andina y las categorías quechuas como fundamentos para una filosofía peruana y de américa andina*, Lima: Universidad Ricardo Palma, 2011; Mejía Huamán, Mario, *Anti Yachay Wayllukuy. Filosofía andina*, Editorial Académica Española, 2019.

³⁹ See his contribution to this E-Book.

⁴⁰ Sagara Toru, Motoori Norinaga, 195, 204.

distance without any divergence. However, he argues against his Confucian opponent who insists on the superiority of a writing system over oral language, citing a Chinese proverb: “letters do not tell all that is meant” (8, 124). He points out that, as Chinese people admit, we can orally explain in detail those contents that cannot be conveyed through writing. He even adds that if letters had not existed and we had had only an oral tradition, then we would know the more detailed and nuanced meaning of the ancient tradition. This is because each generation would have made a greater effort to explain the tradition in a more complete way. In reality, since the eighth century, Japan has produced various written classical texts that have long been misunderstood because of *karagokoro*, that is, a belief in the superiority of Chinese civilization. Norinaga warns that it is a mere prejudice on the part of those who are accustomed to a writing system, to imagine that it would be highly inconvenient not to have characters. He affirms that, in civilizations without characters, people have a different mode of thinking and living; therefore, oral communication works differently without any inconvenience. Similarly, in the present day, those who use letters may frequently depend on them and lose their ability to hold something in their memories, while those who do not depend on them can retain details much better than those who rely on a writing system. Along the same lines as Norinaga, we can affirm that people whose language is based on oral tradition, which lacks a writing system, can find a certain access to the original oral tradition. Each culture has its own way of exploring this tradition. It may be by recollecting oral tradition and folklore, or by analyzing the grammatical structure of the language and the meaning of some central vocabulary, or by investigating manuscripts written by foreign observers that describe the natives. In any case, the important lesson presented by Norinaga is not to abandon the exploration of tracing a continuity with the world of oral tradition that constitutes at least a part of various cultures even to the present day.

3. Philosophical Significance of Norinaga’s Criticism against *Karagokoro*

Norinaga’s attitude and arguments in his criticism against *karagokoro* are, as we have seen, highly controversial. Many modern scholars have completely rejected him in this respect, while they have praised him, for example, for his great achievements of providing commentaries to Japanese classical texts, for his scientific methodology of investigation, or for his deep insight into Japanese grammar. In contrast, we have seen that his chauvinistic discourse is part of a performance for his contemporary Japanese audience to urge them toward a way of thinking that “conforms to reason and order.” Some aspects of his performance seem to be applicable to those people whose culture is in danger of succumbing to the overwhelming influence of a dominant foreign culture. In other words, his criticism of *karagokoro* can be interpreted as a kind of reaction of intellectuals motivated by a sense of crisis concerning their own culture. It is an exploration of the possibility of independent or autonomous thinking by scholars in culturally marginal regions that have been subject to foreign cultural dominance. In short, Norinaga can be considered a precursor of those thinkers who have struggled to

“decolonize the mind.”⁴¹ It is not necessary to accept or reject all of Norinaga’s criticism against *karagokoro*. The important thing is to distinguish different points, to learn something applicable to the present globalized world. Below I tentatively differentiate his defensible points, not defensible but comprehensible points, and indefensible points that should be rejected.

First, today, some aspects of Norinaga’s criticism against *karagokoro* can teach important things not only for Japan but also for culturally marginal areas under the dominant influence of foreign cultures. Against the present major liberal stream of thought, Norinaga recommends that people explore the proper form to express their own thinking, starting from an absolute affirmation of the fundamental value of their own culture. Norinaga’s deep insight into the richness of oral traditions also instructs us to reconsider the richness and complexity of the pre-reflexive form of life even in the contemporary world, which is almost universally covered over by alphabetic systems. It is true that Norinaga is dedicated to investigating this richness principally through the reading of books. But he suggests the possibility of other methodologies such as collecting folklore or pursuing studies of grammatical form and the meanings of central vocabularies of one’s own language.

Equally, we can learn a lot from Norinaga in definitively refusing to accept a foreign theory as a universal criterion for understanding and evaluating our own reality. This does not mean that he demands that we quit learning about thought and knowledge produced or discovered by foreigners. Rather, he requires us to stop unconditionally adopting a foreign perspective as universally valid to objectivize the reality in which we live. This aspect concerns a practice not only of Japan but also of many countries in Latin America where the intellectuals tend to devote themselves to applying foreign thinking to the reality of their own society. In these aspects, Norinaga’s arguments can be applied to cases in which inhabitants of culturally marginal countries resist the threat of extinction of their own culture by overwhelming foreign influence in order to express themselves through their own language.

Second, it is not necessary nor desirable for us to follow Norinaga in those chauvinistic attitudes that have provoked repugnance against him. For example, *Gyojugaigen*, his description of the Japanese history of foreign affairs, contains many expressions that are extremely arrogant, without the least respect for other countries. This attitude is no longer acceptable. However, it may be comprehensible if we recall that his criticism of *karagokoro* is a kind of performance for his contemporary Japanese audience. His intention is not to humiliate foreigners nor to violate foreign culture but to warn the Japanese against their distorted attitude. In fact, many Japanese scholars in his time looked down on the Japanese traditional worldview, instead seeing Chinese civilization as superior. Through a provocative style of performance, Norinaga tried to urge them to return to an attitude which “conforms to reason and order.” Moreover, as Muraoka notes, we must take into consideration the historical backdrop against which, at that time in the late eighteenth century, Japanese intellectuals were beginning to perceive the real foreign presence of Russia or other Western

⁴¹ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, James Currey Ltd, 1986

nations in East Asia. Some Japanese scholars, including Norinaga, were starting to be motivated by a premodern form of nationalism.⁴²

To understand Norinaga's intention behind his performance, let us imagine a diplomatic negotiation between two countries in dispute with each other over a territorial issue. Two diplomats represent the national interests of each one's own country and, therefore, defend its official logic. In such negotiations, the two diplomats must set aside their personal opinion about the reality. A diplomat may sometimes insist on the official logic of his/her own country even if it seems absurd to him/her, or even if the logic of the opponent country seems right. If he/she admitted that the opponent's position seemed more reasonable, then he/she would lose sight of the interests of his/her own country. Or, if a diplomat behaved like a relativist affirming that both the logic of the opponent country and of his/her own country had an advantage, he/she would extremely weaken the position of his/her own country in a negotiation. Norinaga would connect such an attitude to Akinari's relativistic one, while an attitude that based on reason and order corresponds to being able to represent the interests of one's own community.

Finally, in which aspects is Norinaga's criticism against *karagokoro* wrong? We can answer this question in short by saying that Norinaga is not totally true to his own thinking. Put differently, he is not totally consistent with his own thought when he ignores the possibility of constructing a respectful relationship with foreign thinkers.

In Section 1, we described Norinaga's position under the term "situated universalism" contrasting it both with Confucian universalism, on the one hand, and with Akinari's relativism, on the other. Norinaga claims that Confucian scholars pretend to contemplate the world from a universal perspective without being situated at a specific point, but they in actuality simply understand and evaluate the Japanese reality based on the criteria from a dominant Chinese worldview. At the same time, he blames Akinari's relativism for making every belief empty. Akinari affirms that every mythology is true for the people who belong to the culture that has produced it; Japanese mythology is true for Japanese, while the Chinese one is true for Chinese, and the Indian one for Indians. From Norinaga's perspective, this affirmation makes every belief empty. If a Japanese says that he/she believes the Japanese mythological worldview while affirming that the Chinese view is true for Chinese, and the Indian view is so for Indian people, this proves that he/she does not believe the Japanese view as universally true. This means that this view is not valid in China and India. For Norinaga, such restricted belief spoils exactly what he intends to reestablish through learning Japanese classical texts, that is, the truthful spirit of the ancient Japanese, who simply lived according to the Japanese mythological worldview. That is why he determined to reject the relativistic higher perspective and fix his sights on Japanese soil. This position is comprehensible even today.

However, it does not mean that Norinaga's position is completely consistent. As just stated, he has

⁴² Muraoka, Motoori Norinaga 2, 133-6.

deep insight into the weak points both of Confucian universalism and Akinari's relativism; thus, he understands very well not only what a universalistic view means but also a relativistic view. As discussed in Section 1, in the controversies with his contemporary scholars, he understood well what a higher viewpoint means, that is, a viewpoint that allowed him to impartially observe his own culture and other cultures. In fact, it cannot easily be presumed that he did not have enough intelligence to surmise what a bird's-eye view would be. On the contrary, he was so intelligent as to conclude that the pretense of taking a bird's-eye view contained a deception in that it ignored our situatedness in a particular place, as a result of which we cannot be totally impartial to the culture to which we belong. Norinaga's problem consists precisely in this moment. He commits the error of disguising himself as if he had no understanding of this relativistic viewpoint to which he is actually open. In other words, he does not integrate into his doctrine the fact that he is actually willing to consider a broader perspective in spite of rejecting it. We do not claim that he should be a relativist like Akinari, but he should not completely dismiss this relativistic viewpoint. In other words, he should have explored a way in which to integrate the higher, relativistic perspective into his situated universalism, or at least to make these two standpoints compatible. Let us explain what this means.

In his essay titled "Karagokoro" in *Tamakatsuma*, Norinaga recognizes that the original condition of the human truthful spirit, before it was contaminated by *karagokoro*, was the same in every country. In other words, he acknowledges that, whether in Japan, in China, or in India, all people were originally and naturally truthful. In addition, he admits that every country has its own version of mythology about the origin and the development of the world. His situated universalism ascertains without justification that the true history of the world's origin has been conserved intact only in Japan (8, 309). Now, we claim that his failure does not consist in this dogmatic assertion but in *a priori* excluding of all the possibilities of producing thoughts conformable to reason and order in other countries. He writes:

We should recognize that in other countries, [...] people only tell lies and talk vanities. [...] it is shameful that until today, people in foreign countries always say absurd things. It is clearly because they do not have correct version of history of gods. (8, 311)

He denies any possibility that a foreigner can develop a faithful or truthful teaching on the grounds of the mythology or basic worldview of the culture in his/her own country. His assumption that foreign people only tell lies, vanities, or absurdities is insufficient based on his own premises. If the original condition of the human spirit is everywhere healthy, and if each community has its own version of mythology, even though it is untrue from Norinaga's perspective, then he should admit the possibility that someone in a foreign country may produce thoughts which are rooted in the soil of the culture there. It is true that Norinaga, rejecting all types of relativism, does not admit the truth of any doctrine produced on the basis of a foreign mythology. Nevertheless, this does not mean that every notion

produced by a foreign culture is a lie, vanity, or an absurdity. A foreign thinker could produce thoughts in a way that is truthful to his own culture. Such thoughts would, in Norinaga's terms, conform to reason and order (順道), if not true. In other words, far from being lies, vanities, or absurdities, such thoughts are worth respecting even from Norinaga's perspective. Norinaga does not recognize this possibility, however, and simply dismisses all foreign thoughts as lies, vanities, and absurdities. This is simply an arrogant and unjustifiable chauvinism.

We can learn from here that a situated universalism can avoid chauvinism and an exclusive attitude toward other cultures. In this respect, a situated universalist can be compared to a diplomat who can respect his/her counterpart from a country in conflict with his/her own as long as his/her counterpart behaves in a truthful way toward this counterpart's own country. If each diplomat represents his/her own country, neither one admits the truth in the claim of the counterpart. If this diplomat confessed that the claim made by his/her own country seems weaker than that of the country with which the diplomat's own country is in conflict, then he/she would neglect his/her duty as a diplomat. Equally, if the diplomat behaved like a relativist, saying that each claim were true for each country, this affirmation would make his/her country's claim in a negotiation empty. These are not attitudes that garner respect. A diplomat can distinguish whether his/her counterpart speaks in a way worthy of respect or an untruthful way toward the country that he/she represents. In the former case, the diplomat and his/her counterpart can respect mutually independently from whether or not they share the same recognition, so that the negotiation reaches an agreement and their countries are reconciled. In this way, the relationship between two situated universalists is not always hostile antagonism. Each of them claims his/her own truths, which are not compatible. Neither of them compromises. Nevertheless, as long as they are truthful to their own position, one can respect the other. There can be a kind of solidarity between people with incompatible claims and beliefs.

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