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Multiplicities of Japanese Whaling: A Case Study of Baird's-Beaked-Whaling and its Foodways in Chiba Prefecture, Eastern Japan

The main objective of this paper is to raise awareness about coastal whaling along the Japanese archipelago, and to identify whale-meat foodways in Japan in order to illustrate how these foodways have a regional—and not a national—heritage. Though special permit whaling (SPW) conducted in the Antarctic Ocean by Japan has attracted significant attention, there are three types of legitimate commercial activities in Japan: small-type coastal whaling with whaling guns for Baird's beaked and pilot whales, spear-hunting for some species of dolphins and pilot whales, and driving-hunting for some species of dolphins and pilot whales. Minke-whale meat caught through SPW is distributed nationwide, but the meat of cetaceans caught through the three commercial methods is distributed and consumed only in specific regions of Japan. While the driving-hunting practice attracted extensive media attention after the release of the film *The Cove* in 2009, the two other activities are relatively unknown and unstudied.¹

This paper will illustrate the diversity of whaling in Japan to criticize the “super whale” and “reverse super whale” concepts. It will explain the diversity of whale-meat foodways in different regions of Japan and briefly detail this through a case study of Baird's beaked whale (*Berardius bairdii*) whaling in Chiba Prefecture. The habitat of this unique species is limited to the area of the eastern coast of the Japanese archipelago and its meat and blubber are consumed exclusively in these regions.

Beyond a Super Whale Myth

In the early 1990s, Norwegian anthropologist Arne Kalland coined the term “super whale” to describe claims that conveniently combined characteristics of various species of cetaceans into one imaginary creature. He wrote:

1 Coastal whaling is regulated by the central government and is currently authorized in five ports: Abashiri and Hakodate (Hokkaido Prefecture), Ayukawa (Miyagi Prefecture), Wada (Chiba Prefecture), and Taiji (Wakayama Prefecture). As of 2018, the maximum catch per year is 66 Baird's beaked whales; 72 short-finned pilot whales, *Globicephala macrorhynchus*: 36 from northern stocks and 36 from southern stocks; and 20 false killer whales, *Pseudorca crassidens*.

Environmental and animal welfare activists often speak about the whale in the singular. We are told that the whale is the world's largest animal, it has the world's largest brain, it is social and friendly, it sings, it has its own child care system, and it is threatened, etc. It is true that the blue whale is the world's largest animal and that the sperm whale is the world's largest brain, but most of the other assertions are difficult to prove. Those that do hold some truth are rarely true for more than one or two of the 75 different whale species which exist. When one speaks about the whale they are combining all the characteristics found among the various species, such that the whale has them all. But such a whale does not exist; it is a mythical creation, a "super whale."²

Kalland stressed cetacean diversity and their multiple relations to human beings. Super whale is the term used to criticize how anti-whaling campaigners trivialize such diversity.

Japanese whaling protagonists also tend to fall into a similar simplified view. I call this a "reverse super whale" discourse. It is the claim that whaling and eating whale meat is a Japanese "tradition." Such a tradition relates back to inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago who exploited small cetaceans in prehistoric times. In the seventeenth century, many professional whaling parties were established in the western part of the Japanese archipelago. They utilized almost all parts of whales, consumed meat, blubbers, and intestines and used bones and baleens for other industrial purposes, for example as fertilizer, shoehorns, and teabowl saucers; such whalers would also hold memorial services for the hunted whales. After World War II, the Japanese were dependent on whale meat as a source of animal protein.

These claims are all true. According to the Institute of Cetacean Research, 8 families and 40 species of cetaceans appear in the waters around Japan: approximately half of the 85 species that exist globally.³ As is evident from the Mawaki ruins in the Noto Peninsula (Ishikawa Prefecture), the inhabitants of the Japanese Archipelago have been using cetaceans for at least the past 6,000 years. However, it is necessary to appreciate how

2 Arne Kalland, "Super whale: The use of myths and symbols in environmentalism" in *11 Essays on Whales and Man*, ed. Georg Blichfeldt, 2nd ed. (Reinei, Lofoten, Norway: High North Alliance, 1994), 7.

3 Institute of Cetacean Research, *Nihon kinkai ni iru geirui* [Cetaceans around Japan] (Tokyo: The Institute of Cetacean Research, 2007).

various whales were utilized, and that whaling culture complexes developed in many regions of Japan depending on the favorable ecological conditions. For example, the Mawakians dominantly harvested small cetaceans such as common dolphins, *Delphinus delphis*, and Pacific white-sided dolphins, *Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*.

Whale species, ecologies, whaling grounds, whaling techniques, processing techniques, and ways of consumption have greatly changed in relation to the ecological and political economy around whales and whaling. For example, while traditional whaling developed in the western part of Japan in the seventeenth century, modern whaling became popular in the eastern part of Japan only in the early twentieth century. While rich whale-meat foodways developed in the western part of Japan, whale meat harvested by modern whaling was partly used for canned food and fertilizers. The business entrepreneurs that operated in the eastern part of Japan had to create a new market for their own products.

Although certain whaling advocates claim that the Japanese consume the whole whale without any waste, when and how such practices occur should be further clarified. When Japan sent whaling vessels to the Antarctic Ocean in the early 1930s, the aim was to produce whale oil, but they did not intend to use the meat from the Antarctic Ocean (whale meat produced by coastal whaling was distributed at that time). It was only in 1938–39 that the vessels brought back whale meat under orders from the Japanese government, which was in the process of preparing for the impending war.⁴ It can thus be said that the super whale myth and reverse whale myth are alike in that they both stem from non-scientific attitudes toward the diversities of whales and whaling.

Whale-Meat Foodways in Japan

During the 1920s, recipes for home-cooked meals from across Japan were published in *Nippon no Shokuseikatsu Zenshu* (Fifty volumes of the collections of Japanese foodways).⁵ *The Collections* covered all 47 prefectures and one indigenous ethnic minority, the Ainu in Hokkaido. Each volume—based on oral history—contains recipes for everyday cooking, as well as for special occasions, such as the New Year celebration.

4 Jakobina Arch, "Whale meat in early postwar Japan: Natural resources and food culture," *Environmental History* 21 (2016): 467–87.

5 Nobunkyo, ed. *Nippon no shokuseikatsu zenshu* [The collections of Japanese foodways], 50 vols. (Tokyo: Nobunkyo, 1984–1993).

Interestingly, *The Collections* reveal that 26 of the 47 prefectures had at least one kind of whale-meat dish. The Saga prefecture listed 21 varieties of whale dishes, followed by Yamaguchi (15), Fukuoka (13), Nagasaki, and Wakayama (11). These places are where traditional whaling parties (*kujira-gumi*) were active. For example, Taiji, a small coastal town in Wakayama, has been a center of whaling history in Japan and continues to be active in whaling today.

The Collections describes recipes from the era before Japanese whalers ventured into the Antarctic, when whale meat was obtained through coastal whaling. In the early twentieth century, when modern Norwegian whaling practices gained a foothold in Japan, more whale meat was supplied to the market. Through *The Collections*, it is possible to interpret how the Japanese consumed whales when whaling became modernized. It is important to note that this was a period before the refrigerator was commonplace, which is why *The Collections* calls for most of the whale meat and blubber to be salted. Raw meat was limited to whaling regions in winter. People in whaling regions were therefore proficient in dealing with salted meat and blubbers.

Currently, there are no national statistics accounts for whale meat consumption by prefecture. According to the report conducted by Kyodo Senpaku (2008), a company that provides ships for special permit whaling (SPW), the top five prefectures for annual consumption per capita of whale meat produced from SPW were Nagasaki (197 grams), Saga (168 grams), Miyagi (148 grams), Yamaguchi (133 grams), and Fukuoka (120 grams).⁶ The survey does not indicate the species, but minke-whale meat is likely dominant. As all these prefectures are located in Western Japan, the survey suggests that even today, long after they have stopped whaling, whale meat is consumed mostly in Western Japan. As a result, whale meat is fundamentally a regional—rather than national—foodway. This should be the starting point to discuss the complex issue of whaling in Japan.

6 Kyodo Senpaku Kabusikikaisya, *Chosa fukusanbutsu: Todofukenbetsu ryutsuryou (suitei)* [Research byproduct: Distributed amount by prefecture, an estimate] (Tokyo: Kyodo Senpaku Kabusikikaisya, 2008).

Baird's Beaked Whale (*Berardius bairdii*) Whaling in Chiba Prefecture

In the sixteenth century, organized whale hunting methods were developed, followed by the creation of whaling specialist teams, known as *kujira-gumi* (whaling parties). Almost all *kujira-gumi* developed in the western part of the Japanese archipelago. These groups hunted mainly baleen whales such as the North Pacific right whale (*Eubalaena japonica*) gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*) humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) and sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*) and occasionally caught fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*). *Kujira-gumi* consisted of about 400 to 500 crew aboard the ships, and another 150 to 250 workers on land. Although their main product was whale oil for lamps and pesticides, whale meat, which would then be salted, increased in volume as the domestic commodity distribution system developed across the nation.

Among *kujira-gumi* between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Daigo-gumi* of Awa (current Chiba Prefecture) was an exception in terms of its location, target species, whaling method, and economic activities. First, it was the only *kujira-gumi* established in the eastern part of Japan—facing the Pacific Ocean—during that period. Second, the *Daigo-gumi* exclusively hunted Baird's beaked whales (*Berardius bairdii*) which migrate close to the Boso Peninsula in the summer. Third, they hunted exclusively by spearing, without using the nets other *kujira-gumi* employed, because Baird's beaked whales can swim to a depth of more than 1,000 meters, making it impossible to entangle them in the nets. Finally, while the oil produced from Baird's beaked whales was sold in Edo, within this region the local community exclusively consumed the meat. This is because the Baird's beaked whale is a toothed whale, and its meat was therefore considered to be of lower economic value than that of the baleen whales.⁷ Because the season for the Baird's beaked whale in Awa was during the summer, the meat spoiled easily, thus the consumption of whale meat in dried form, locally called *tare*, developed. As such, the people of Awa have inherited this taste for dried whale meat.

The *Daigo-gumi* stopped their whaling operations in 1869.⁸ Local entrepreneurs then hunted the Baird's beaked whale with the American bomb-lance method. Their whaling

7 Milton M. R. Freeman, et al. *Small-type coastal whaling in Japan: Report of an international workshop*, Occasional Publication Series, no. 27 (Edmonton, AB: Boreal Institute for Northern Studies and Japan Social Sciences Association of Canada, 1988).

8 Takao Kojima, "Hogeibunka niokeru dento: Chibaken awachiho no geishokubunka wo jireini" [Tradition in whaling cultures: A case study of whale meat foodways in Awa region in Chiba Prefecture], *Nihon jyomin bunka kiyō* [Bulletin of studies on common peoples in Japan] 24 (2004): 60.

grounds also extended to the Pacific Ocean from Edo Bay. However, it was not until the introduction of the modern whaling method in Japan during the early twentieth century, and the establishment of new whaling bases in the eastern part of Japan—near what is called “Japan Ground” among Euro-American whalers—that Japanese whalers became successful. The most well-known of these new whaling bases was Ayukawa, located in Miyagi Prefecture. Toyo Suisan (which later developed into Nippon Suisan) established its base for whaling in 1906. This was the beginning of modern whaling in Japan.

In 1907, Tokai Fisheries, a Boso Peninsula company that produced both oil and meat, successfully employed the Norwegian whaling method for Baird’s beaked whales. Meat was consumed locally as dried *tare*. By the end of the 1910s, there were 26 small whaling companies in Chiba Prefecture. The Chiba Prefectural Government eventually merged these 26 companies into two main companies: Tokai Fisheries and Suzuki-gumi with only 12 vessels in total.⁹ Whaling permits increased to 15 in 1940¹⁰ but in 1941, the two companies ultimately merged into one, Tokai Fisheries.¹¹ In 1948, a new company, Gaibo Whaling, joined Baird’s beaked whale harvesting in Wada Town in Chiba Prefecture. As previously mentioned, the season for Baird’s beaked whale was during the summer; in the winter, the two companies hunted minke whales in other waters. In 1969, another company took over Tokai Fisheries, but stopped its whaling operations in 1973, leaving Gaibo Whaling as the only remaining whaling company in Chiba Prefecture.

Aside from meat, Gaibo Whaling produced oil and fertilizer from blubber and the bones of the Baird’s beaked whales they harvested. Fertilizer was used in loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*) farming nearby, which made the fruit sweeter. Producing oil and fertilizer was so malodorous that the company stopped production in the 1980s. Currently, Gaibo Whaling produces *tare* and canned meat. The company sells meat locally, and ships blubber to areas in northeastern Japan that prefer whale soup. Blubber of Baird’s beaked whales is a substitute for that of fin or sei whales, which were once common.

Tare is a simple product. It is dried with soy sauce, sake, and other seasonings. It used to be processed at home, but nowadays few families process it. Lean meat used to be bought by the kilogram, and in order to process good *tare*, the processors should be

9 Kyoko Komaki, *Buri no nushi to wada no gyogyo* [Yellowtail and fisheries in Wada] (Tokyo: Bunkensya, 1996), 247.

10 Komaki, 257.

11 Hideo Kanari, *Boso no hoge* [Whaling in Boso] (Nagareyama: Ronshobo, 1983), 94.

good at discerning meat—sinewy meat is not suitable for *tare*. The *Obon* holiday, held in mid-August for paying respect to one's ancestors, happens in the middle of the Baird's beaked whale harvesting season, and *tare* is a necessary food item for family reunions in the southern part of Boso Peninsula.

Baird's beaked whale foodways are a local tradition in the southern part of Boso Peninsula in Chiba. Though it has a long history dating from the seventeenth century, Baird's-beaked-whaling has experienced great changes. It began as a passive whaling activity, but in the early twentieth century, when modern whaling was introduced, Baird's-beaked-whaling expanded to the Pacific Ocean. Its main purpose was to produce whale oil until the 1980s and lean meat that was consumed locally. When the catching of larger rorquals was banned, demand for Baird's beaked whale blubber rose in the northern part of Japan. This particular case study is an example of the local nature and multiplicities of Japanese whaling traditions. Each coastal whaling site in Japan has its own distinct stories and traditions. In this sense, neither "super whale" nor "reverse super whale" myths can contribute to solving the complex issue of whaling in Japan. If we want to solve such complex issues, we must first understand the diversity of coastal whaling in Japan.

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