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Moby Dick and *Isana*: Swimming in the Same Ocean but Poles Apart?

Alan MEADOWS

The UK and Japan work closely on many environmental issues from climate change to forestry and conservation – but we are poles apart on whaling

British Fisheries Minister, Elliot Morley (BBC 16th May, 2002)

Emotions run high when it comes to Japanese whaling. The way in which delegates at the annual International Whaling Commission (IWC) meetings are apt to thump the tables and throw accusations at each other at times defies that institution's supposedly 'diplomatic' remit. A senior official from Japan's Fisheries Agency, for example, once called members of the anti-whaling coalition "liars" (BBC 16th June, 2003), while a British minister described certain remarks by a pro-whaling delegate as "disgraceful" and accused Japan of "going nuclear" over the issue (*The Independent* 23rd May, 2002). Scientists seem able to work up equivalent heads of steam, as attested by the comments of one who said a minke working group that he had just attended was "as nasty and personal and vicious as anything I've ever seen" (*New Scientist* 29th June, 1996).

Passions rise even higher beyond the conference table. The annual Japanese whaling expeditions to the Antarctic, conducted in the name of science, invariably result in high-tech games of hide and seek across great expanses of icy cold ocean. On more than one occasion anti-whaling activists have shown themselves to be willing to act as human shields as harpoons fly or boats collide. Meanwhile, back on dry land, protestors have publicly burned the Japanese flag outside IWC meetings and spat at Japanese delegates (Nicol 1989: 59; Misaki 1994).

When one reads the pro-whaling literature put out by the Japanese side, or the opposing arguments offered by Japan's critics, it often appears that they are speaking on quite different planes of understanding. As Kalland and Moeran state, it seems that we have "two distinct value systems, each firmly embedded in and conditioned by historical processes in the cultures where they prevail" (Kalland and Moeran 1992: 193).

This paper will analyse how some of the cultural, religious, environmental and historical factors have combined to help shape these value systems. It will attempt to establish just how deep the differences really are, and will question the validity and relevancy of some of the key claims made by the opposing sides as the great whaling debate enters the second decade of the new millennium.

The central theme will be an examination of the claim, often heard from the Japanese side, that the disagreement over the rights and wrongs of whaling is essentially one that can be explained in terms of a clash between the meat-eating cultures of 'the West' and the marine-based culture of Japan. It will be argued that this not only oversimplifies the issue, but that the portrayal of Japan as a country with a long and continuous nationwide tradition of whaling and whale meat consumption is a factual inaccuracy.

Consideration will also be given to the way in which modern-day anti-whaling attitudes seem to have taken on an almost religious fervour, shaped both by a sense of guilt at the perceived 'sins' of the past and a conviction that the sympathetic way in which many people now view whales is evidence that a universal shift in morality has taken place. According to this line of reasoning, the whale has now attained such a unique and special status that the ethical arguments for total and permanent protection are overwhelming. This will be contrasted with the underlying Buddhist notions of reciprocity and interdependence held by many in Japan's whaling communities. To them, all animals are essentially equal, and attempts by outside forces to dictate how such communities should or should not interact with whales amounts to a form of

cultural imperialism.

Finally, an attempt will be made to gauge the attitudes of modern-day Japanese society towards whales and whaling. It will be suggested that, with the notable exception of a few coastal whaling towns, the long term decline in demand for whale meat is unlikely to be arrested, and that it is very difficult to envisage the survival of a viable nationwide commercial whaling industry in the future.

The Principal Players

Before commencing our investigation into the various historical and cultural claims and counter claims that pervade the whaling debate it will be helpful to establish how the opposing forces in the issue line up. In seeking to do this, however, one must remain mindful of Freidheim's warning that it is often all too easy to slip into language that groups disparate individuals, organizations, and governments into categories (e. g. pro and anti-whaling) because they share one or more (albeit important) attributes, especially when these shared attributes allow them to form a coalition (Freidheim 2001: 10). The whaling issue is a complex one, and the composition of each 'side' in the debate fluctuates. The IWC now comprises a total of 88 member countries, not all of whom vote in a consistent manner at the annual meetings. Russia, for example, voted against the establishment of a whale sanctuary in the Antarctic in 1995, although it had expressed its support for the same plan at the previous IWC meeting in 1994 (Berger-Eforo 1996: 443). However, despite running the risk of oversimplifying matters, an attempt does need to be made to map out the battle lines in the ongoing war over whales.

At the state level, the anti-whaling forces have been led by the United States of America ever since that country enacted the landmark Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972.¹ America's closest allies on the so-called 'preservationist' side are predominantly from the West, and include the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Australia, and New

Zealand, as well as the eleven Latin American countries that make up the so-called 'Group of Buenos Aires'. Most European states tend to vote alongside these staunchly anti-whaling nations, including landlocked Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Switzerland.

The anti-whaling position is also energetically supported by a plethora of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Many of these 'sovereign-free actors', as they are sometimes called, are permitted to attend IWC meetings and submit opening statements, but the most influential in terms of their extensive global reach and successful fund raising activities are 'the big three': Greenpeace International, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). Competing with them for a place at the NGO head table is the decidedly more controversial Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, whose militant approach has succeeded in grabbing increasing media attention in recent years.

Against this essentially Western transnational grouping the coalition supporting the restoration of IWC-sanctioned commercial whaling is smaller, and its members are, on the whole, politically weaker and more disparate than their opponents. At the governmental level, the main active whaling nations today are Iceland, Japan and Norway. Of the three, the Government of Japan (GOJ) is by far the most significant and vocal actor. Japan's high profile is not only the result of the country's economic might, but stems also from its annual and highly contentious scientific research programme in the Southern Ocean. Since the meat from this lethal research ultimately ends up on the Japanese domestic market, critics see this as little more than commercial whaling in disguise.

This scientific whaling is carried out by the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), a body which describes itself as a non-profit organisation but which critics maintain has extremely close ties both to the Japanese government and the whaling industry. The present-day ICR is an offshoot of the Japanese whaling company Nihon Kyodo Hogeï and plays a

role in a wide range of pro-whaling marketing and public relations activities (Morikawa 2009: 37–42). The governmental agency that coordinates and articulates the official pro-whaling policy is the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), while the Japanese whaling industry represents its case through two organisations: the Japan Whaling Association (JWA) and the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association (JSTWA).

The pro-whaling, or ‘conservationist’, position is supported at the IWC by a growing number of developing nations, including many in the Caribbean and Africa. Member states which have voted with Japan at recent meetings include Antigua and Barbuda, Benin, Cambodia, Cameroon, Dominica, Gabon, Grenada, Guinea, Kiribata, Mali, Mauritania, Marshall Islands, Morocco, Mongolia, Nauru, Nicaragua, Palau, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, St Lucia and Tuvulu (Morikawa 2009: 84). Anti-whaling groups such as Greenpeace claim that Japan actively seeks to influence the voting behaviour of some of the smaller less developed nations by linking promises of future ODA to the way in which they vote at IWC meetings. Japan rejects these accusations of ‘vote buying’ and in turn argues that the anti-whaling bloc tries to persuade non-IWC member states to join the organisation and tip the scales in their own favour.

The Cultural Divide: “Livestock Farming Peoples versus Maritime Peoples”

The history of whaling in most parts of the world is the story of an industry driven primarily by the demand for whale oil. This oil offered a cheap and plentiful source of fuel with which to heat and light the homes of an expanding population, and the lubrication needed to keep the wheels of industry turning. Long after petroleum had supplanted whale oil as the fuel of first choice, innovative minds found new ways to utilise whales and thereby ensure that whalers continued to find employment.

Chief among them was the process of hydrogenation, which allowed solidified whale oil to be made into soap and margarine, and the discovery that glycerol, a component in the manufacture of nitroglycerine, could be extracted from whales and used to feed the ever hungry global armaments industry. It was only when overhunting had effectively exhausted all commercially viable whaling stocks that the majority of the world's great whaling fleets finally returned to their home ports and mothballed their harpoon guns.

Alternatives to all the products that were once made from whale oil are now universally available and cetaceans are generally seen as having no particular commercial value outside of the whale-watching business. In short, for most nations there is no longer any *need* to hunt them. Naturally, this absence of any economic self-interest makes it much easier for politicians from non-whaling countries to claim the moral high ground and present the case against whaling as one dictated by principle.

The situation in Japan, however, is different. Although the Japanese have also utilised whale oil as both a fuel and a lubricant, the whale has long been viewed as being first and foremost an edible marine resource. This is in stark contrast to most other parts of the world, where a dead whale served no useful purpose once its precious oil had been extracted and was simply left to be devoured by scavenging animals. As Ellis puts it, the stinking, putrid carcass was seen as something "which should be as far away as possible from the human nose" (Ellis 1991: 223).

Why then have people from the Japanese archipelago chosen to eat the meat of an animal that most other parts of the world consider unpalatable?² Indeed, looked at from a wider perspective, one could also ask why certain societies choose to eat items such as insects or particular kinds of fruit which most outsiders would not regard as food at all.

MacArthur and Pianka (1966) have suggested that the answer lies in the prevailing environmental conditions of a given geographical area, which in turn combine with and influence historical and cultural factors. Their 'optimal foraging theory' states that an ecological and nutritional

cost-benefit interaction comes into play as human societies develop through time. This dictates that a food source will be chosen which provides the maximum rate of nutritional and calorific return for the minimum amount of energy expended in harvesting or hunting. In the case of the predominantly mountainous islands of Japan, a lack of sufficient open space upon which to raise livestock has induced its inhabitants to look to the sea for their protein needs. In other words, as one Taiji whaler explained to Nicol, as a source of food the ocean is for Japan what the prairies are to Canada or the United States (Nicol 1989: 56).

The manner in which ecological reality tends to mould historical and cultural factors relating to food preferences can be seen in the way the Japanese have chosen in the past to circumvent Buddhist strictures against the eating of meat from four-legged animals. In his imperial ordinance of 679 AD Emperor Tenmu imposed a ban on the consumption of all wild animals, leading to the disappearance of animal meat from the Japanese diet. Nevertheless, the need for protein and the availability of whales persuaded some coastal communities of the convenience of classifying the aquatic mammals as a kind of fish which, since they lacked limbs and swam in the sea, could legitimately be killed and eaten. Thus the old Japanese word for the whale was *isana* (勇魚) or 'brave fish'.

Leading Japanese pro-whaling advocates have concluded from this that the whaling issue is, in essence, a struggle between the world's 'meat eaters' and 'fish eaters'. A former Director-General of the ICR, Fukuzo Nagasaki, draws a distinction between countries with high consumption levels of meat, such as Australia, the United States, New Zealand, Argentina and most European counties, and "typical fish-eating countries" such as Japan and Iceland, which he states are "in a class of their own". He argues that "the nature of the confrontation has clearly shifted to one of differences in food culture... In other words, we find a juxtaposition of two food cultures... meat versus fish and livestock-farming peoples versus maritime peoples" (Nagasaki: 1994a).

Nagasaki is offering us a textbook example of the optimal foraging

argument. The Japanese people have turned to the sea to find sustenance because that was the most accessible source of protein. Although there is no doubt that this has been the case with fish, can the same be said of whales? This is an important question because it takes us to the very heart of the debate regarding the cultural aspects of Japanese whaling. The assumption being made is that the Japanese people have a widely practised and deeply rooted tradition of whaling and whale meat eating. It is this hunting and consumption culture that has moulded their attitudes to whales and explains why, unlike people from livestock-breeding cultures, they still view them primarily as a food resource. Further, this suggests that there is a latent demand for whale meat in the country at large, and that the market would spring back to life if and when the meat once again became widely available. The latter stages of this paper will attempt to show that the evidence to buttress this analysis is highly questionable.

The Tragedy of the Commons: Feelings of Guilt and the Influence of Religion

Throughout history whaling has typically followed a recurring pattern: namely that, within the limits of the available technology, once a 'resource' had been discovered it was then exploited with such vigour that it led to the catastrophic degeneration of virtually the entire breeding population. The largest species were targeted first and, once their numbers became depleted, there was an inexorable shift to whales of lesser trophic value. Whaling reached its climax in the twentieth century when a combination of advances in both harpoon and ship design enabled unprecedented numbers of the animals to be killed and processed at sea. Incredibly, more than two million whales are estimated to have been killed worldwide between 1931 and 1971 (Schmidhauser and Totten 1978: 230-1; Ellis 1991: 42-4).

To this day some of the largest species are still extremely endangered,

having been hunted to the point of commercial, if not actual, extinction. For example, it is estimated that the global population of blue whales is now in the range of 10,000–25,000, which equates to a mere 3–11% of the 1911 population size. Fin whales numbers, once thought to be around 400,000, have fallen by about 75% over the period 1929–2007, while a mere 70 reproductively active female right whales are estimated to still be alive (IUCN Red List 2010).⁵

While European and Yankee whalers were probably responsible for killing more whales through the ages, there is no doubt that Japan played a central role in the latter stages of this story of decimation. Its whaling fleets were taking nearly 27,000 animals a year in the mid 1960s (Freidheim 2001: 29), and it was Japan which filed the first objection when the IWC moved to protect the highly endangered blue whale in the Antarctic in 1964. Thereafter, Japan consistently voted against all subsequent US-led calls for a general moratorium at IWC meetings. Furthermore, in the early 1970s, a time by which the full extent of the collapse in whale populations was widely known, the former Soviet Union and Japan were responsible for no less than 80% of the total worldwide cull (Kempf *et al.* 2001: 8). In fact, the historical Japanese whaling statistics may need to be revised further upwards following an expose by a retired large-type coastal whaler which has shown that the Japanese whaling companies falsified reports on both the number and size of the whales they caught between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s (*The Asahi Shimbun* 11th May, 2002).

To what extent then has the historical near extirpation of most of the largest species of whale, described by one writer as a tale of "unrelieved greed and insensitivity" (Ellis 1991: x), affected modern day attitudes towards cetaceans, both among the leading anti-whaling nations and within Japan itself?

Towards the end of the era of Western commercial whaling, what had once been seen by some as an almost mythological battle between man (for whalers were overwhelmingly male) and the forces of nature, came

to be viewed as nothing more than a story of savage and unsustainable mechanised slaughter. The hugely influential 'Save the Whale' campaign, which started in the 1960s, brought about a widespread awareness of the bloody reality of whaling and seems to have led to something akin to a collective sense of remorse within certain ex-whaling countries. Totten, for example, has suggested that the success of the anti-whaling campaign, along with the continuing influence of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, predisposes Americans in particular to a strong feeling of guilt with regard to the destruction of whales (Schmidhauser and Totten 1978: 3).⁴

One detects more than the hint of a religious undertone here. A pained realisation that the Biblical prescription that mankind has "dominion over the fish of the sea ... and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1: 28) has been abused. A report into whaling commissioned by the Australian Government in the 1990s was clearly mindful of this when it explicitly rejected such views and stated that Thomas Aquinas' teachings that it was acceptable for man to use animals, "... either by killing or in any other way whatever are no longer accepted as unqualified statements of either the law or of ethics" (Australian Task Force 1997: 8. See also Barstow 1996: 2). The existence of a religious underpinning to this sense of contrition can perhaps also be seen in the selection of folk singer John Denver to sing a song entitled 'Hymn to the Whales' at the opening ceremony of a past IWC meeting (Misaki 1994).⁵

However, when it comes to Japanese attitudes Totten suggests that any sense of guilt at past injustices meted out towards whales by man is "totally absent" (Schmidhauser and Totten 1978: 3). This may be overstating the case, as increasing numbers of Japanese conservationists are taking an interest in the whaling issue, and books such as *'kujira no shimetsu-suru hi'* ('The Day the Whales are Wiped Out' by Oe Kenzaburo),⁶ do paint the whale in a more sympathetic light. Nevertheless, in much of the Japanese whaling literature factual details concerning Japan's role in the excesses of the past are often conspicuous by their absence. The former Director-General of the Institute of Cetacean Re-

search, while stating that “there is no denying that, overall, the history of whaling has been characterised by over-exploitation”, fails to make any specific reference at all to Japan’s own role in this sad tale of decline (Nagasaki: 1993). Meanwhile, the JWA website and other pro-whaling forums prefer to dwell upon matters such as the historical development of Japanese whaling techniques, or the various ways in which whale products have been utilised through the ages.

The language employed in government surveys of domestic attitudes towards whaling is also revealing. One, conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Fisheries, asks:

Do you know the fact that depletion of large whales, such as blue whale and fin whale, in the beginning of the 20th century was caused by the excessive whaling by *certain* countries? (italics added)

(Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2002)’

That Japan itself is not mentioned by name, despite being a leading agent in the cause of this “depletion”, is indicative of the general haziness that seems to descend upon officialdom when it comes to questions of past Japanese whaling practices.

Akimichi *et al.* together with Kalland and Moeran have suggested that the apparent lack of anything approaching the levels of guilt-laden emotional attachment to whales that prevail in the West is due to the different way in which the Japanese have traditionally viewed cetaceans. They are seen at one and the same time as creatures to be respected and admired, but also ones to be hunted and consumed. They argue that it is to religion again that one must turn in order to help explain this attitude. In place of the Christian perception that nature exists for humans to exploit, Japanese Buddhist teachings instead emphasise the interaction between man and animals. Especially prevalent within Japanese whaling communities is the notion of a reciprocal relationship, in which the whale gives itself to the whaler, who in turn is obliged to protect the ecosystem

and perform memorial services (*kuyo*) for the whale's soul (Kalland and Moeran 1992: 188).

It is here in this idea of the soul that we come to the key divergence in conceptual attitude towards the whale. In Western Judaeo-Christian anthropocentric ideology the soul is believed to reside exclusively in humans, since only they are endowed with reason. However, the Japanese biocentric worldview lends itself to the belief that souls can also be attributed to animals and objects, and that there are no essential distinctions between humans and nature (Akimichi *et al.* 1988: 53; Harrison and Bartlett 2002: 5). In particular, objects or animals that have been of some use to humans, and in the process were harmed or killed, have memorials erected in their honour and services are conducted in order to appease their souls. The Japanese whalers thereby become indebted to the whales in much the same way as they do to deities and fellow human beings. "The taking of a life is at the same time the giving of a life and the depth of this feeling is apparent in the energy and time expended in atonement and gratitude for it" (Akimichi *et al.* 1988: 53).

This may indeed be an accurate description of prevailing attitudes in traditional whaling communities, and it does help explain the relative lack of contrition among pro-whaling activists at past excesses in the whaling industry. Indeed, most Japanese would probably concur with the notion of an interdependent world between animals and humans and reciprocal relations between these realms. However, the extent to which the majority of modern urban Japanese share the vision of all life having the same value, and therefore deserving of an equal measure of respect, is far from clear when it comes to whales. For them to hold such a view would require that they simultaneously reject the typical modern Western portrayal of the whale as having a special status in the animal kingdom. As will be seen later, there is evidence to indicate that this is not necessarily the case. In the meantime, let us pause to consider the claims and counter claims concerning this 'special' status.

The Nature of the Beast: 'Special' or Just 'Super'?

The case that all whales deserve permanent protection arises not only from a sense of guilt at the 'sins' of the past, but also roots itself in the conviction that the whale is a special animal. It is an image that forms the cornerstone of most anti-whaling arguments. Sir Sydney Frost, for example, in a 1978 report entitled "Whales and Whaling" wrote that, from a biological point of view, the whale is one of the "two mountain peaks of evolution on planet earth – on land, ... human beings and in the sea, cetacea" (quoted in Australian Task Force 1997: 31). Barstow lists six separate criteria by which whales are "uniquely special". Along with their biological, ecological and aesthetic traits, he also considers them to be culturally, politically and symbolically outstanding (Barstow 1996). Another sympathetic commentator, Scarff, argues that "the rights of whales are greater than those of other animals because of their intelligence, social behaviour, appealing personality, uniqueness of their lifestyle and sense of mystery that accompanies our ignorance of their natural history" (quoted in Akimichi *et al.* 1988: 53).

Much of the attraction seems to lie in the charismatic nature of cetaceans, as reflected in the popularity of the Flipper television series and films such as *Star Trek IV* and *Free Willy*. The famous French naturalist Jacques Cousteau wrote of whales as "sociable, affectionate, devoted, gentle, captivating, high-spirited creatures" (quoted in Masson 1995: 132). Former US President Bill Clinton, meanwhile, described them as "some of Earth's most majestic creatures" (US Department of State: 2000).

Needless to say, Japanese pro-whaling advocates flatly reject such views. They question claims as to the high levels of cetacean intelligence, and tend to dismiss such 'anthropomorphist' views as evidence of an 'unscientific' approach. The Japanese Whaling Association, for example, maintains that whales are no more intelligent than cows or deer (JWA Website), while former Fisheries Agency chief Masayuki Komatsu went

even further when he described them as the “cockroaches of the sea”, a comment which he later claimed had been meant as a reference to the breeding habits of minke whales (ABC 17th June, 2010).

Many proponents of whaling argue that the anti-whaling activists deliberately sidestep the debate on whale intelligence in their ongoing ‘Save the Whale’ campaign by simply portraying the numerous varieties that exist as being one and the same animal, a single species of whale which they dub ‘super-whale’. Kalland and Moeran assert that ‘super-whale’ is nothing more than the “lumping together” of different traits found in various species to form the image of a creature that has the largest brain of any animal (the sperm whale), the largest body (the blue whale), the largest brain-to-body weight ratio (the bottlenose dolphin), the ability to sing (the humpback), and is friendly (the gray whale) but endangered (the bowhead, or the blue). As such, they argue, whales are “betwixt and between” and can thereby be singled out for special attention, allowing them in some ways to take on the characteristics of a totem for many environmentalists (Kalland and Moeran 1992: 6, 8; Kalland 1994).

Universal Morality or Cultural Imperialism?

The perception that whales are special has led many in the anti-whaling camp to the firm conviction that the present moratorium on whaling must become a permanent ban. They contend that this would reflect the existence of a potent universal shift in morality, one that supersedes any cultural differences that may exist on the issue among certain countries.

The case for a moral imperative to protect all whales certainly underpins the report of the Australian National Task Force on Whaling, which likened the development of the animal rights and animal liberation movements to the gradual shift in world attitudes that occurred towards slavery. Ethics, it states, are never static, and in the case of whales they are “changing and maturing”. The authors go on to argue that the conserva-

tion and protection of whales is now accepted as a hallmark of a "civilized, ethical and moral community". The report concludes that this tidal change in world opinion concerning the special nature of whales, together with the inherent difficulty in humanely killing such large animals, makes the case for permanent protection for all whales "ethically compelling" (Australian Task Force 1997: 8-15).

The assertion that this 'new morality' has come to represent a majority view may be true in certain countries. In New Zealand, for example, past polls have indicated that over 90% of the population are opposed to commercial whaling (Stoett 1997: 139). However, the evidence to support such claims at a global level is far from compelling. It was certainly not apparent at the 2006 IWC meeting, when the pro-whaling forces led by Japan were able to win a simple majority in favour of a motion calling for the eventual return of commercial whaling.⁸

To pro-whaling supporters on the other side of the attitudinal divide, the whale may indeed be notable in terms of factors such as its size and migratory behaviour, but that does not in any way make it unhuntable. To them there is nothing ethnically wrong in 'harvesting' species such as the relatively abundant minke whale, provided that this is done in a controlled and sustainable manner.

The pro-whaling lobby also argue that if morality is indeed an issue then it is one that is being applied on a selective basis. Pointing to the fact that anti-whaling nations breed and slaughter vast numbers of other animals every day, they dismiss claims of the existence of a new morality regarding whales as a "hypocritical, holier than thou attitude" (Schmidhauser and Totten 1978: 4). The Japanese government's submissions to IWC meetings contain numerous statements from whalers expressing their inability to understand why the act of killing a whale for food is morally wrong, while doing the same to a cow, pig or chicken is acceptable (See for example GOJ 1991: 199). Drawing upon this apparent contradiction Dansk Dyreetisk Rad, the chairman of the Danish Council for Ethical Treatment of Animals, has stated that, if he compared the life of

a whale with that of domesticated livestock, he would rather be a harpooned whale than a caged chicken or a pig (Kalland 1998).

Turning to the offensive, the Japanese argue that being told by outsiders what they should or should not eat amounts to a form of cultural imperialism at the ideational level, whereby culturally based, value laden judgements are being forced upon a reluctant minority. Kawakami certainly believes that countries such as America and Australia are guilty of this. After reminding readers that Indian Hindus refrain from eating beef and Muslims do not eat pork, he contends that,

Behind these customs is probably a kind of cultural pride. But forcing one's culture onto others contradicts the propriety of co-existence. Strictly speaking, doing so is a crime of cultural destruction. There is no reason why only North Americans and Europeans should be permitted to force their culture on others (Kawakami 1994)

Indeed, some go even further and claim the existence of prejudice or even racism. Yamamoto, for example, asserts that the whaling issue has become an outlet through which Westerners feel free to express their "amorphous but deep-seated anti-Japanese sentiments" (Kalland 1998).⁹

The Japanese General Public

The degree to which the general public in Japan is supportive of a resumption of whaling is hotly contested by both sides in the debate. Opinion polls often show contradictory data. A Greenpeace Japan survey of just over one thousand Japanese aged 15 and over conducted in 2006 showed 35% support for a resumption of commercial whaling, with 26% opposed and 39% saying that they neither support nor oppose it (Greenpeace Japan, 2006). However, another poll conducted by the Cabinet Office of the GOJ, which used different wording in its questions, found that more than 75% of people questioned would support whaling if man-

aged in a “rational and sustainable way” (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2002).

Contradictory polling data also exists at the international level. A JWA press release quotes the results of separate polls conducted by CNN and the BBC in which over 60% of respondents in both surveys said they would be prepared to see the re-introduction of commercial whaling (JWA 24th May, 2002), whereas an IFAW sponsored poll showed that more than 80% of US voters oppose whaling by Japan and Norway (*The Japan Times* 28th June, 2001).

Clearly the results of such surveys ultimately tell us very little, influenced as they seem to be by the way in which some key questions are worded. What one can say, however, is that the Japanese are no different from many other people in the developed world in showing signs of a growing, non-consumptive interest in whales and other marine mammals. This is perhaps best illustrated in the worldwide growth of interest in whale watching.

A major report into whale watching was commissioned by the IFAW in 2001. At that time, 87 countries and territories had some form of whale watching enterprise, which the report defined as “tours by boat, air or from land, formal or informal, with at least some commercial aspect to see, swim with, and/or listen to any of the some 83 species of whales, dolphins or porpoises”. In 1998, some 102,785 people went whale and dolphin watching in Japan, spending an estimated \$33 million, with the most commonly watched cetaceans being Bryde’s, minke and sperm whales, along with bottlenose and other dolphins. The report indicated that the industry grew much more quickly in Japan than the world average through the 1990s, with an average growth rate of 16.8% per year between 1994 and 1998, while from 1991 to 1998 the average increase was 37.6%. The report concludes that growth of interest in whale watching in Japan is part of a global trend, with the global business estimated to be worth well over \$1 billion a year (Hoyt 2001: 3-4).

Many in the anti-whaling camp cite this as proof that the Japanese

public is coming to view whales as creatures that are indeed special. Reports of local people in Kyushu making concerted efforts to try to rescue several sperm whales when they became stranded on a local beach seem to lend some weight to this argument (CNN World 23rd January, 2002). And later that same year it was certainly the case that many thousands of Tokyoites were motivated enough to flock to the banks of the city's Tama River, with many millions more watching live on national TV, when another marine mammal, in this case a wayward seal that became affectionately known as 'Tama-chan', was spotted there.

The evidence does seem to indicate that the Japanese public are showing growing levels of interest in watching and interacting with cetaceans in a non-consumptive manner. The pro-whaling lobby often try to dismiss this by saying that watching cetaceans in the wild and supporting whaling are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In this writer's opinion, the jury is still out on the question of how far the public of Japan are supportive of a resumption of whaling. Clearly, they are willing to see whales as much more than a potential food source. However, the extent to which a person who may have been captivated by a close encounter with a whale on a whale watching excursion is likely to adopt a critical attitude towards the Japanese government's pro-whaling policies is still a matter of conjecture. One suspects that the overwhelming majority of Japanese people have no strong opinion either way, with most of society showing little sign of getting actively engaged in the issues or the wider political debate.

The 'Tradition' of Japanese Whaling: Not All That It Appears

Earlier in our discussion we encountered the view that the disagreement over Japanese whaling is essentially a clash of food cultures, one mainly Western and Anglo-Saxon and based around livestock farming, and the other the maritime food culture of Japan. It was suggested that the accuracy or otherwise of the image of Japan as a whale eating nation

would take us to the heart of the issue. The final stages of this paper, which draw heavily upon the work of Jun Morikawa, will seek to show that the GOJ's representation of Japan as a nation with a long and deep whaling tradition is highly questionable and that the long-term commercial prospects for the whaling industry are slim. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, the pro-whaling forces in Japan overstate the degree to which whaling has been conducted in Japan through history. Secondly, the extent to which whale meat has been eaten by people in different parts of the country through history has been greatly exaggerated. Thirdly, and most importantly, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the Japanese public simply would not be interested in eating whale meat even if it became cheap and readily available. Let us look at each of these points in turn.

1. Japanese Whaling: Discontinuity Through Time

The Institute of Cetacean Research describes the history of Japanese whaling as a "centuries long evolutionary process", a tradition that can be traced back as far as the Jomon period, and which has continued in one form or another ever since (ICR Website). However, for most of this time it is highly unlikely that people were actually hunting cetaceans. Instead, they were probably availing themselves of an easy meal upon a chance encounter with a beached whale. Active whaling in Japan, as the Government of Japan itself acknowledges, has a much shorter history of some 400 years (GOJ 2008). It developed as a result of what Morikawa describes as three distinct "waves" (Morikawa 2009).

The roots of what could be classified as modern Japanese whaling practices can be traced back to the end of the 16th century in Mikawa Bay, in what is now Aichi Prefecture, before spreading to the surrounding areas of Honshu, such as Ise, Kishu and Tosa, and from there to Kitakyushu and Nagato (Kasaya in Morikawa 2009: 20). The town of Taiji in Wakayama Prefecture was the birthplace of key technical innovations in the use of nets and the division of labour, and the so-called 'Taiji model'

was then adopted in some parts of Shikoku, Kyushu, and the Chugoku and the Boso peninsula regions in the main island of Honshu. To this day Taiji is the location of a highly contentious dolphin drive, and it is this which became the subject of the Academy Award winning documentary 'The Cove' in 2010.

The historical origins of the nascent Japanese coastal whaling industry are well established and are often quoted in pro-whaling literature. However, the important point to bear in mind here is that these traditional commercial whaling operations were all small in scale and had very limited distribution networks. The whales were caught and consumed locally, and the practices had a negligible social and cultural impact on the rest of the country.

Other factors, such as Tokugawa-era laws prohibiting maritime enterprise, and the effective monopoly on whaling enjoyed by the Americans and European whalers when they moved into Japanese waters in the 1820s, further conspired to keep Japanese whaling confined to isolated coastal pockets. Indeed, the indiscriminate and large-scale whaling activities of the Westerners probably had a disastrous impact on both local whale populations and local Japanese whalers alike. As a result, Edo whaling practices created nothing more than a "rather small ripple effect" and had little in common with the modern commercial whaling that Japan adopted at the outset of the 20th century (Morikawa 2009: 20).

Another important historical fact that has been widely overlooked in the debate relating to the culture of whaling in Japan, and one which runs contrary to the analysis of Akimichi and others outlined above, is that many coastal village communities actually looked upon whales as creatures that were to be admired and protected, and that hunting or eating them was considered a taboo. For example, Watanabe has shown that the village of Same in Aomori Prefecture had a long tradition of venerating whales as gods which blessed them with their important sardine harvests. Rather than being targets for harpoon gunners, they were revered as 'Ebisu-sama', one of the 'Seven Gods of Good Fortune' (Morikawa 2009:

22).

Other local coastal communities in Chiba, Ishikawa, Miyagi and Hokkaido actively opposed the construction of whaling processing plants, fearing that the pollution caused by the flensing and processing of whale carcasses would adversely affect fishing in the adjacent fishing grounds. Same again enters the fray in 1911 when the fishermen of the village were so enraged at the construction of a whaling facility by the Toyo Hogeï Company that they raised it to the ground.

If this first wave of Japanese whaling was a localised small-scale coastal affair of negligible importance outside of the areas in which it was conducted, the second and third waves were much more significant. The second wave occurred in the first half of the 20th century and can be traced back to enactment of the Deep Sea Fisheries Promotion Act of 1898 and the introduction of modern Western whaling methods into the country in the following year. Centralist government policies led to the establishment of new whaling enterprises and the reorganisation and integration of the fishery as a whole to such an extent that it could accurately be described as an 'industry' for the first time. New large-scale coastal operations fanned out into the Pacific and the Sea of Okhotsk, and the northern waters off Korea. Later, whaling stations were constructed in the Kurile Islands, Sakhalin, Ogasawara and Taiwan. This growth in large-scale whaling activities was further propelled by the commercial opportunities arising from the Russo-Japanese War (the entire Russian whaling fleet was captured and transferred to the Toyo Gyogo Co., Ltd), World War One, and the extension of Japan's territorial reach into other parts of Asia before the start of the Second World War.

Morikawa characterises this second wave of Japanese whaling as being one of repeated cycles of excessive competition, overfishing, price declines, resource depletion and government intervention (Morikawa 2009: 23).

Japanese pelagic whaling in the Antarctic and North Pacific forms the third wave. This occurred in the periods before and after the Second

World War and came to a halt when the decline in whale populations meant that it was no longer viable to maintain a large-scale working fishery. As we will soon see, it was during the latter stages of this third period of Japanese whaling history that whale meat came to be eaten by a vast number of people in Japan.

Thus, while true that a very small-scale whale fishery has existed since Edo times in certain areas of the archipelago, the history of Japanese large-scale coastal whaling is much shorter. From this, Morikawa is able to conclude that “the Japanese government’s attempt to link all three types of whaling to present an argument emphasizing continuity obscures the reality by depicting a whaling history of just 100 years as a magnificent Japanese tradition. However, the historical facts are clear” (Morikawa 2009: 23).

2. Whale Meat Consumption: An Important Part of Japanese National Food Culture?

Japanese pro-whaling literature makes much of the myriad culinary possibilities that whale meat offers and seeks to portray this as a deep-seated and widespread cultural tradition. The GOJ states in a document submitted to the IWC that “the Japanese have been eating whale meat and utilizing whalebones, blubber and oil for more than two thousand years” (GOJ 2008).

Roy Chapman certainly thought that whale meat was of great importance when he visited Japan during the early part of the last century:

Few people realize the great part which whale meat plays in the life of the ordinary Japanese. Too poor to buy beef, their diet would include little but rice, fish, and vegetables were it not for the great supply of flesh and blubber supplied by these huge water mammals (Roy Chapman. *Whale hunting with Gun and Camera. National Geographic* 1911. Quoted in Ellis 1991: 269).

That whale should be important to coastal communities is hardly surprising, for as we have already seen the optimal foraging theory states that people will naturally make use of the food that most readily comes to hand. It is clear that the application of the net fishing methods in places such as Taiji in the 17th century led to the development and refinement of localised whale eating traditions that continue to this day. Evidence suggests that whaling still has deep cultural and spiritual significance to the people living in these communities. A study conducted among residents in Ayukawa, a small whaling town in Miyagi Prefecture, indicated that 92.4% of respondents like whale meat, with 98.1% saying that they had eaten it in the year before the moratorium came into effect (GOJ 1991: 209–212). It is at this localised regional level, where community identity and pride are associated with a specific whale cuisine, that the importance of whale meat still lies. Studies have shown that rituals associated with whaling along with activities such as the gifting of whale meat give local residents in these communities the feeling of common heritage and meaning to their lives (see for example Akimichi *et al.* 1988, Manderson and Hardacre 1989, and Braund *et al.* 1989). As Morikawa himself concedes, “the fact that some areas of the Japanese archipelago had historically developed a whale-eating culture and that this culture has unique value should not be denied” (Morikawa 2009: 33).

However, this is not the same as saying that the entire country of Japan has a long and well established history of eating whale. As we have seen, communities such as Same Village consciously chose not to eat any whale whatsoever. A variety of other factors would have conspired to keep the practice of consuming whale meat part of localised, rather than national, culture. Foremost among these were the severe travel restrictions that were in place during the Tokugawa period and the technological difficulties associated with the preservation, transportation and distribution of the meat in pre-modern Japan. Also, the simple fact that whales are migratory by nature would have made it virtually impossible for most mountainous areas of Japan to have been able to secure a steady

and constant year round supply of the meat. In other words, for most of history whale meat was at best no more than a minor source of protein in the diet of the average Japanese person.

Whale meat only truly became part of the national diet for a short twenty year period as a result of the severe food shortages after the end of the Second World War. In 1946 McArthur gave permission for Japan to resume whaling, and the fleet headed for the Antarctic in the winter of the same year. This led to a huge increase in whale meat consumption. According to the *Sankei* newspaper, whale meat made up over 50% of total meat consumption in 1947 and Japan's catch was the biggest in the world by 1958 (Morikawa 2009: 29). Many Japanese seem convinced that whale meat saved the country from a major famine at this time. The Director of the Institute of Cetacean Research credits it with boosting "the Japanese people's health, growth and energy so that they made a remarkable recovery after World War II and built a strong economy" (BBC 17th July, 2002).

The reason why Japanese of a certain age are still able to recall eating whale meat is due to the landmark School Lunch Act of June 1954. This led to whale meat becoming a staple in all state primary and secondary school lunches the length and breadth of the country, thereby entering the collective memory of an entire generation of children.

However, this sudden and remarkable increase in whale meat consumption proved ultimately to be just a temporary spike in demand dictated more by the economic severity of the times than any deep craving for the taste of the meat. Rather than continuing to avail themselves of cheap whale meat, people instead turned to other more expensive types of meat such as chicken, pork and beef.

It is important to note that this move away from whale meat began at a time when the relative price of the meat was still low. According to *The Asahi Shimbun*, the price of 100 grams of whale meat in 1963 was 18 yen, while 100 grams of beef cost 65 yen. The same amount of pork cost 61 yen, while chicken was priced at 57 yen (quoted in Morikawa 2009: 30). Not surprisingly, the trend away from whale meat grew more pronounced

through the 1960s and 1970s as the collapse in whale numbers led to increasing international restraints on whaling activity, which in turn brought about a hike in prices. Statistics provided by the Japanese authorities themselves show that annual consumption per person plummeted from 2,359 grams in 1962 to 261 grams in 1985, a fall of almost 90%. In 1985, just before the IWC moratorium came into force and a time when whale meat was still relatively plentiful, it made up a mere 0.017% of the total Japanese domestic consumption of fish products (Australian Task Force 1997: 14).

There is no doubt that the School Lunch Act was a defining event in the history of Japanese whaling, since it enabled whale-eating to become an everyday part of the dietary habits of a large section of Japanese society. It is this event, a conscious political act, more than any inherent desire for whale meat on the part of the Japanese consumer, that has allowed the Japanese government to install in the minds of the general public, and particularly the baby boomers and their parents, the image of whale-eating as part of an ancient popular food culture (Morikawa 2009: 30).

3. Into the Future. Whale Meat: Tasty Option or Toxic Threat?

Finally, let us consider the key question going forward: the extent to which the people of Japan are likely to be willing to eat whale meat in the years to come. The Japan Whaling Association would like the outside world to think that it is already being widely eaten. Pointing to what it calls "strong demand in the domestic market" the English version of its website draws the following analogies:

Asking Japan to abandon this part of its culture would compare to Australians being asked to stop eating meat pies, Americans being asked to stop eating hamburgers and the English being asked to go without fish and chips. Attitudes toward animals are a part of national cultures. No nation should try to impose their attitudes on

others. (JWA Website: Questions and Answers)

Equating Japanese consumption of whale meat with North American's love of the Big Mac would strike most Japanese as very strange indeed. In fact, on the Japanese pages of the same website the JWA makes no such claim, with the closest equivalent sentence merely stating that "the respective differences in attitude toward animals are due to differences in the cultures of each nation, and no nation should interfere nor criticize another."⁶

Elsewhere, the ICR when lobbying for the preservation of Japan's "traditional food culture" is reported to have distributed 125,000 leaflets to Wellington households which read: "New Zealand lamb—what would you do if Japanese people told New Zealanders 'No More Sunday Roasts?'" (*The New Zealand Herald* 20th May, 2002).

One can only conclude that a strong element of embellishment has again crept in here. The reality, as we have already seen, is that for the vast majority of the Japanese population whale meat was only ever considered a stop-gap measure, a substitute source of meat that was consumed for a short time in fairly recent history when nothing else was available.

There is little to suggest that the pattern of consumption established after the post-war whale eating boom years has altered today. The existence of large quantities of unsold whale meat from Japan's scientific whaling programme would seem to indicate that disinterest remains, with the stockpile reportedly standing at around 4,000 tons (*The Japan Times* 12th September, 2010). A Gallop/Nippon Research Center opinion poll commissioned by Greenpeace Japan in 2008 indicated 95% of respondents either consume whale meat very rarely or not at all (Greenpeace Japan 2008).

The GOJ is reluctant to either confirm or deny figures relating to sales of the meat, but one Fisheries Agency spokesperson has admitted that "it is true that stocks are on the rise" (*The Age* 13th June, 2006).

Former IWC Fisheries Agencies officer Masayuki Komatsu has argued that sluggish sales are due to the high cost and poor quality of the meat, and asserts that the construction of new whaling ships would reduce costs and enable the meat to be frozen more quickly, thereby improving the taste and leading to an increase in demand (*The Asahi Shimbun* 31st May, 2010).

The GOJ, clearly concerned, is seeking to rekindle public interest in whale meat, and school dinners are once again being targeted as the means by which to do this. The ICR is making the meat available to local municipalities at one-third of the market price, and according to a report released in August 2010, 18% of 29,600 public elementary and junior high schools surveyed have served whale meat to children at least once in the fiscal year to March 2010 (*The Japan Times* 5th September, 2010).

There is nothing to suggest that this is having any effect on overall whale meat sales. In fact, quite apart from a disinterest in eating whale meat, evidence seems to indicate that the Japanese are becoming less inclined to eat seafood of any kind. Much to its chagrin, the GOJ has reported that meat consumption now exceeds that of fish, with young people in particular preferring beef and poultry, and that per-capita seafood consumption has fallen some 20% below its peak year of 1997 (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2008a).

Quite apart from the apparent lack of public interest in eating whale, the main reason why the government's efforts to resuscitate the industry seem doomed to failure lies in the existence of troubling evidence of high toxicity levels in whale products sold in Japan. In 2002 a study conducted at the Health Sciences University of Hokkaido revealed heavy mercury contamination in whale organs marketed for consumption in Japan between 1999 and 2001. Two of the liver samples tested had almost 5,000 times the mercury consumption limits permitted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (Endo, Haraguchi and Sakata 2002). At such high concentrations, which one scientific journal described as "astonishing", acute intoxication could result from a single ingestion (*New Scientist*

6th June, 2002). In an unconnected study carried out a year later, mercury safety limits were breached in 62% of the cetacean samples that were examined. Furthermore, the limits of methylmercury, a more poisonous form of mercury derived by the action of bacteria in the water, were exceeded in 53% of the samples tested (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 13th June 2003).¹¹

Such findings have not yet been widely reported in the Japanese-language media and the GOJ continues with its pro-whaling PR campaign. A recent Fisheries Agency pamphlet maintains that whale meat is not only safe but that it is a much healthier alternative to other forms of meat such as beef, pork and chicken (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries: 2008b).

Such claims would surely not remain unchallenged if sales of whale meat were to rise. Japanese consumer confidence in the domestic food industry has already been severely shaken in recent years. A number of false labelling and food safety scandals involving such famous names as Snow Brand Milk Products, the confectioner Fujiya and cookie maker Ishiya Trading have made the public highly sensitive to such issues. In the light of such cases, even the hint of a potential risk associated with eating whale produce would probably destroy all hopes of a revival in whale meat sales.

Concluding Remarks

The whaling debate often appears to be an almost impossible tangle of cultural, historical, economic, scientific, and philosophical issues. The matter is complicated even further by the way in which both sides lay claim to the moral high ground. To the anti-whaling countries, many of which were once leading whaling nations back in the days when they still had an economic interest in killing the animals, the adoption of an 'ethical' approach places the argument at such a level of principle that it is almost impossible to give any ground in their fight to protect these

'special' creatures. At the same time, the Japanese position that they have an inherent right to pursue their traditional practices and that any alien voice of criticism smacks of cultural, or culinary, imperialism is in itself a kind of moral absolutism. Both sides argue that they are pursuing a right, one the right to preserve and protect, the other the right to conserve and consume. In truth, both are highly subjective, value laden viewpoints.

This paper has concentrated much of its attention on one of the lynchpins of the Japanese 'whaling as culture' arguments: the assertion that the Japanese attitude to whales and whaling is a direct consequence of the country's marine-based culture. The argument is based on two premises: that whaling has been of great historical and cultural significance to the people of Japan and that whale meat has been widely consumed through the ages. At the national level, the supporting evidence for both of these premises is patchy at best. In the historical past few people ate the meat, and even fewer actively hunted the animal. In more recent times, except for a brief transitory period after the Second World War which occurred as a direct result of the exceptional circumstances brought about by that conflict, most Japanese people have rarely, if ever, eaten whale. Moreover, they still choose not to eat it today, preferring instead the taste of beef, pork and chicken. And in all likelihood they will probably not eat it in the future given the evidence of high toxicity levels in the meat.

As to the attitude of the Japanese people toward the animals themselves, while a case can be made that recent growth in the domestic whale watching industry is proof that the Japanese general public are beginning to view whales more sympathetically, all that can really be said at this stage is that the jury is still out. The younger generation, who are generally more environmentally conscious than their parents and grandparents, may be more receptive to Western images of whales as special animals, but this may not be the case among the older generations who still remember eating the meat. Overall though, one is left with the feeling that Japanese society as a whole is largely indifferent to the issues

involved in the whaling debate.

However, this is certainly not the situation for the residents of small coastal communities like Taiji, where whaling has had deep cultural and spiritual significance for many centuries. There is an inherent contradiction in anti-whaling nations denying these people the right to continue their traditional way of life while elsewhere aboriginal hunters such as the Inuit are still allowed to cull a limited number of bowhead whales, a relatively rare species. A case can be made that these people do have the right to follow their chosen traditions and customs and live a way of life that is distinct from the mainstream, provided it is undertaken in a balanced and sustainable manner. But for that to happen, both the Japanese government and the anti-whaling nations would need to bridge the gap that still separates them and make genuine compromises, something that neither side has yet been sufficiently able or willing to do.

Notes

- 1 The act officially declared that all marine mammals were to receive protection within US territorial waters. This made the importation, exportation or sale of any such animal, animal part or product a criminal offence.
- 2 Apart from Norway and Iceland, whale is still eaten in the Faroe Islands and parts of Indonesia, as well as by certain indigenous groups, such as the Inuit and Yupik.
- 3 The reason for the extremely low number of rights is due to the fact that they were one of the first whale species to be targeted. Their size, relative lack of speed and propensity to float once killed making them the 'right' whale to hunt.
- 4 Gregory Peck, who played the lead role of the obsessed Captain Ahab in the John Huston film adaptation of the famous novel, once appeared on a television programme confessing his own feelings of sorrow at having 'killed' the great white whale on the silver screen (Misaki: 1994).
- 5 The Aquinas quotation comes from *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3, Part ii, Chapter CXII.
- 6 Published by *Bungei Shunju*, 1972.
- 7 The answers were recorded as: Yes 76.4%, No 23.6%.
- 8 Under IWC rules, a majority of at least 75% would be required to end the current moratorium.

Moby Dick and *Isana*: Swimming in the Same Ocean but Poles Apart? 147

- 9 Such views are not entirely without foundation. An article which appeared in the British tabloid *Daily Star* in 1991 entitled 'Japs Feast on Whale' is full of derogative language, with references made to a "banquet of blood" in which "Jap VIP... gorge themselves on a sickening dinner" of whale meat (Kalland and Moeran 1992: 16).
- 10 The original Japanese reads: 動物観の違いはそれぞれの民族の文化の違いによるものであり、お互いが干渉したり、非難したりすべきものではありません。
- 11 In the Faroe Islands a twelve-year study which showed a correlation between developmental problems and maternal exposure to toxic elements in pilot whales has led to warnings being issued to women of childbearing age to avoid eating some pilot whale products (BBC News 25th May, 1999).

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Moby Dick and *Isana*: Swimming in the Same Ocean but Poles Apart? 149

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152

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