

'Nora' Land-space where a harmonious relationship exists between humans and nature

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1. Preface

In order to transcend dualistic and monistic views of nature and humans, modern geography argues that they exist as an indivisible whole, and that they intermingle. Hybrid Geography, in particular, proposes a place where nature and humans coexist, and the natural world and human living space are not separate entities (Whatmore, 1999). A new trend in cultural and bio geography, both of which are concerned with nature-human relations, is their attentiveness towards places and the creatures that inhabit them in discussing subjectivity and agents. It is uncertain, however, whether a concept exists that indicates where and in what state such a place exists, or that represents it as an actual physical place.

The purpose of this study is to elucidate the characteristics of places where nature coexists with humans. Here, nature is not considered something to be observed, but to be comprehended in terms of human activities that make use of natural space. Humans, as living things, act upon nature, bringing about changes to the natural environment. These human activities that nature is subject to, take the form of the utilisation of nature for resources and produce. On the other hand, in terms of a nature that is modified and utilised by humans, the fact that this nature continues to exist in a certain place means that it utilises the results of human work in its own development. In order to interpret such interaction between humans and nature as humans acting upon nature and nature in turn utilising the effects of that human action, this paper presents the concept of 'nora', a Japanese word. The cases that provide the background to this study were collected through field investigations conducted mainly in Japan and Southeast Asia concerning occupational activities and the use of biological resources.

2. Areas of coexistence from the perspective of nature

In the field of ecology, there is a concept relating to the 'ecotone', which represents a place where various elements intermix in a state of flux. 'Ecotone' is defined as 'the zone of transition between different

adjacent ecological systems with characteristics uniquely defined by time and space and by the strength of interaction between the adjacent ecological systems.’(Calow ed., 1998) “Ecotone is applied to more abrupt transitional gradients, where species turnover is high and boundaries are reasonably clearly defined.”(Risser, 2002) This suggests that nature should not be understood as something that exists in a fixed state, but as a place where there are various environmental factors and species of creatures, changing with the passage of time and in response to changes in environmental conditions. In the 1990’s, the results of various studies were published. The concept of the ecotone, whilst touching upon human influences, focused mainly on the discussion of the state of the natural environment as a consequence of these human activities, and so the activities themselves were not dealt with in any detail.

Akimichi, a Japanese ecological anthropologist, divided the concept of the ecotone into the ‘primary ecotone’ and the ‘secondary ecotone’. He showed that the primary ecotone is an area made up of natural elements, while the secondary ecotone combines an area where human activities take place and an area made by the agency of human activities (farming, land development, etc.); with its unique environment, the secondary ecotone attracts various living things so that it constitutes a unique ecological system (Akimichi 2001). It was also indicated that, besides its ecological features attracting many living things, easy access enables the active utilisation of these living things as resources within the secondary ecotone.

3. Proposing the concept of ‘nora’

The secondary ecotone may be regarded as a place where humans and nature intermix. The term ‘secondary ecotone’, by its inclusion of the word ‘ecotone’, strongly implies the demarcation of a physical area and, therefore, it does not adequately describe its dynamic state. In Japanese, there is a traditional word, ‘satoyama’, which means ‘an area of wooded hills close to a human settlement’ (Takeuchi et al. eds., 2003). It is regarded as a type of landscape, found in rural mountainous areas, made up of social and ecological networks, and surrounded by, for example, agricultural lands, open forestlands and forests (Fukamachi, Oku and Nakashizuka, 2001). *Satoyama* are places maintained by local people for collecting fuel and food, and which are inhabited by various living organisms due to changes made to the environment by people. They can be referred to as secondary ecotones. They also embrace a

multiplicity of interactions between nature and the humans that utilise the ecotone. Applied only to forests and hills, 'satoyama' is a term which denotes a type of landscape. In fact, however, similar places do exist in other areas and on various scales. Thus, at this juncture, this paper calls attention to the concept of 'nora', a long-established word used by Japanese people, denoting a concept which represents a situation where humans subjectively seek to understand the environment experientially, and human activities and nature exist in complete harmony.

'Nora' is an old word which had already appeared in a Japanese book written in the eighth century. The word means: 1. field; and 2. rice field and farm. When applied to human activities, and agriculture in particular, the word has often been used in expressions such as *nora-shigoto*, which refers to activities that involve dealing with nature in the natural environment, such as cultivating the soil, weeding, farming and collecting materials necessary for daily life, and gathering edible wild plants in the fields, rather than managing crops and domestic animals.

The word is also applied to domestic animals. Typical examples are dogs and cats. Dogs and cats that, once pets, now live independently having fled from human control, or having been abandoned by the owners, are referred to as *nora-inu* and *nora-neko* respectively. The word, however, is not used for wild animals. Humans raised in rural areas are described as *nora-sodachi*, or being brought up in *nora* areas.

Although rice fields, farms, and fields are situated, spatially, within the sphere of human living and have been altered from their wild state by humans, they are not completely artificial, and are later visited by living things and strongly influenced by nature. Though originally created through the agency of human work, they are considered to be places where nature is left to its own devices. As a result, they often come to be inhabited by various plants and animals. For these organisms, such places signify natural space.

They can be defined as places where humans, whilst making use of wild plants and animals, neither actively alter the natural state of the place, nor control the development of the organisms found there. Humans merely make use of the varieties as they grow naturally in the course of their natural growing season.

As stated above, when the word 'nora' is applied to artificial things or places, it implies that those things or places contain many natural elements. Applicable to humans, places, plants, and animals, *nora* is a concept which indicates their activities and their circumstances.

Although altered artificially, areas of *nora* land are significant in

that they create the conditions necessary to attract living things that are useful for humans, and provide a habitat for them. That is to say that *noras* can be regarded as (albeit artificial) places where a state of wildness can later return, giving rise to a new form of nature. Applying the term 'nora' (a word which is based on the notion of comprehending the state of living things), to 'ecotone' (a term which is based on the classification of space), may more clearly show how humans and nature are integrated, and that animals, plants, humans, and places constitute its integral parts. Moreover, most of these places, with the exception of paddy fields and farms, are characterised by being socially open to the public so that anyone can make use of the natural resources found there.

In summary, the following four points may be raised:

- 1) Flexibility: *Nora* areas change as environmental conditions change, or with the passage of time; human and natural domains are not determined;
- 2) Environmental diversity: Living things inhabiting the area, including humans, are able to exploit environmental conditions that they are suited to;
- 3) Relationships: Interconnections develop amongst the creatures and humans inhabiting the area.
- 4) Social existence: Most of the areas are freely accessible by anyone, and the resources are not individually owned.

4. Cases of *nora*

Under these circumstances, creatures benefit from various mutual relationships within the area. There, humans can obtain seasonal biological resources for various purposes. Good examples are edible wild plants, such as *tsukushi* (field horsetails), and *warabi* (bracken), which Japanese people eat in order to savour the delicate flavours of spring (Figure 1). Autumn mushrooms and insects are also

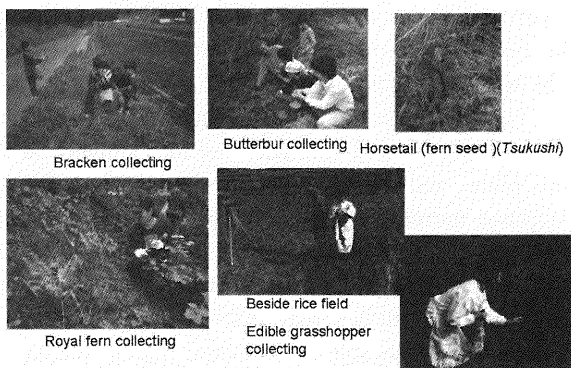


Fig.1 Cases of Nora in Japan: collecting wild plants for food

collected there for humans to enjoy.

Let us now look at areas defined as 'nora' in other countries. Where are they? It may be appropriate to seek *nora* in regions where occupational activities and cultures exist that utilise the natural environment as a source of resources, and where there are commons and places with easy access that are open for anyone to use freely.

The first case is from Lao P.D.R. in Southeast Asia. Engaging in farming as their primary activity, Southeast Asian people utilise a variety of wild plants and small animals. Most of them are obtained in the vicinity of the communities and within the farms and fields on which they work. Moreover, raising domestic animals, including cattle and water buffaloes, is an important aspect of their farming. In the Laotian language, there is a word, 'Khan bang', which denotes a place (Figure 2)

with more trees than a field, which is an area where people let their cattle and water buffaloes feed freely, and which has a relationship with farming and domestic animals. People say that they are pleased



Fig.2 Forest and Fields in Laos

if some pairing and breeding takes place among the cattle and water buffaloes they allow to live by themselves (that is to say, the animals are left to take care of themselves) in *Khan bang* throughout the year. It is necessary for these places to have various environmental factors available, and to be sufficiently large in area for animals to be able to move around freely.

The ways in which connections develop between water buffaloes and humans in *nora* areas may be explained by means of an example involving dung beetles that feed on the faeces of water buffalo. Water buffaloes are allowed to run freely in the fields, or on *nora* land, during periods when they are not being used for cultivation. Here, water buffaloes defecate, and dung beetles gather to feed on the excrement. The insects make balls from the excrement and lay eggs inside them,

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where the larvae grow. Dung beetle larvae are used for food by the local people. It is said that they are very good for stewing. Water buffaloes growing up in the fields, dung beetles feeding on the buffaloes' dung, and people who eat the beetles. If the area is completely wild, it is not only difficult for buffaloes to inhabit, but it also necessitates great effort for humans to find the beetles. These places involve human actions such as farming and creating fields.

These interrelationship among them are regarded as a food chain involving the field as shown in Figure 3.

The kaleidoscopic culture of insect-eating in South-East Asia was the product of life in the villages, and the rapidly changing environment. Thus, the water and rice field cultivation necessary for producing rice, methods of rice production, the ways in which people sustain their livelihoods, and the habitation of



Fig.3 The field-related food chain: Rice farming-Water buffalo-Dung beetles-Human food

Illustration by Nozomi Yanahara

insects are all intimately interwoven. This means that a kind of circular relationship becomes apparent between the history of the land, and the behaviour of the various creatures that live there. The semi-wilderness of 'Nora' comes about as a result of a cyclical process involving people as an integral part of the flow of nature as it is shown in this illustration.

Another example is the relationship between water buffaloes and the use of fish. Water buffaloes often bathe in water, so that the puddles they use often deepen, forming small pools. Then fish start to gather in the pools. As these pools are neither broad in diameter nor deep, fish can very easily be caught using simple fishing implements (Figure 4).

Are there such places in Europe? In France, small forests are often seen dotting the farmland. These forests, called 'bouque', serve as



Water buffalo bathing in a large puddle



Fishing in a pool dug out by water buffalo

Fig.4 Forest and Fields in Laos



Fig.5 Bouque in France

places for local people to collect firewood, edible mushrooms and plants, and also as the habitats of birds and small animals (Figure 5). These *bouque* are also places where people, whilst being involved in some way, tend to leave them relatively untouched, and thus may be considered *nora* areas.

5. The importance of *nora*

Nora may be considered places for creatures to grow and develop. In terms of human activities, *nora* may be considered as areas that have been cleared in order for new natural existences to be established. The creation of new ways of coexisting in the natural world attracts life. As a result, relations are established between the living things that come to inhabit the area and the people who, in turn, make use of the creatures. That is to say, the *nora* is a place where coexistence

involves an interdependence amongst living things, as well as interactions between nature and humans. It is suggested that the *nora* is a place where humans do not control creatures, but assist in their development (while allowing nature to take its course). Due to environmental changes and successions, the varieties of living things that live there may not always be the same. From the human standpoint, this is a situation to which the concept of *nora* can be applied because, in terms of this concept, working on a place is not considered to be the same as invading it. As a spatial concept, 'nora' refers to a kind of place as a landscape, although this does not imply a fixed geographical area, but a nature-human relationship. It is characterised by the living things that are attracted there without the active control of humans, although humans may make use of them, as well as the boundaries that change in response to changing conditions. Therefore, as a relative space, the *nora* gives rise to a sustainable environment and the sustainable development of both humans and other creatures. In its characteristic untouched state, a *nora* is sustained by the individuals living within it as its beneficiaries. This means that subjectivity and agency are present in *nora*. This approach of non-interference allowing for natural growth facilitates subjectivity and independence. This is a kind of relationship between humans and other living things.

The fact that human work is inseparable from the natural environment is of significance when considering the establishment and history of domestication. Domestication not only concerns past stages of evolution but also ensures that domestic animals and crops that can adapt themselves to various environmental changes will have higher genetic values. In particular, indigenous species of plants and animals have flourished in places like *nora*, rather than under the strict control of humans. This demonstrates how biodiversity is maintained and how important *nora* are as places for such diversified species to grow. *Noras* are places of ecology and landscape where there is interaction between humans and other living creatures, as well as the agency of living creatures other than humans, as discussed in recent cultural and zoological geography (Wolch, Emel and Wilbert, 2002).

Precisely because they exist outside human control, *noras* require humans to think about what is available, and when and where it is available, as well as how they should behave towards it in the light of changes to the area's natural environment. What is there? Where is it? What is it like? How will it change? This means that it is necessary to keep track of moment to moment changes, to sense the conditions and

movements of various interconnected elements, and to interpret one's perception of such factors based on experience. In doing so, one's own senses should be used, so that an independent knowledge of nature can be acquired. One will also begin to seek a harmonious relationship with nature when making use of a place.

As demonstrated above, in *nora* areas, one develops a familiarity with various relationships, notions of an ideal coexistence with nature, and environmental changes, elucidating the characteristics of living things so that they can also be appreciated. Thus, the *nora* provides one with a place in which the senses can be developed, based on which an understanding of nature and its creatures can be attained. In conclusion, the *nora* may be considered to be a biosphere which demonstrates how each living thing makes the best use of its own merits to live its life.

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