



MUDDY LABOR: A Japanese Aid Ethic of Collective Intimacy in Myanmar

CHIKA WATANABE
University of Manchester

THE SMELL OF MUD

The first Japanese aid worker that I met from the Organization for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement (OISCA) told me that OISCA was an NGO that “smells like mud” (*dorokusai*).¹ Yamada and I were sitting in a coffee shop in Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar, and she had just given me an overview of OISCA’s training activities teaching rural youth techniques in organic farming. Although she described in impressive ways OISCA’s training programs around the Asia-Pacific, its cooperation with international agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), and the organization’s prominence as one of the oldest NGOs in Japan, her conclusion boiled down to OISCA smelling like mud. Working in the paddy fields alongside trainees and villagers constituted an important approach to aid work for OISCA staff members. Echoing other OISCA staffers that I met later on, Yamada explained that the training courses throughout the Asia-Pacific aimed not only to teach techniques in organic agriculture and animal husbandry to Asian rural youth but also to cultivate particular dispositions among trainees and staff, so that they may become leaders of sustainable development in their communities. An important way to accomplish this was to conduct the trainings in an environment of long-term communal living, and to emphasize the need for trainees and staff to struggle through the intimate relations created in

this setting. The Myanmar training center was run in the same manner. Living together for a year, sharing work as well as meals, baths, and collective duties did not come easily to participants, but I later came to understand that both Japanese and Burmese staffers considered living alongside each other a meaningful aspect of their work. The quality of being *dorokusai*, Yamada indicated, pointed to both of these forms of collective work: physical and relational labor.

In this article, I examine how Japanese and Burmese aid workers in OISCA constructed, experienced, and negotiated what I call the ethics of “muddy labor” at the Myanmar training center, which was constituted through an emphasis on collective physical labor and close social relations in a communal lifestyle. It is based on twenty months of ethnographic research that I conducted from 2009 to 2011 in OISCA’s Tokyo headquarters, its training centers in Japan and Myanmar, and at other Japanese and Burmese aid organizations throughout the two countries. In the sections that follow I describe how participating in a communal lifestyle and shared physical labor—what Yamada described as *dorokusai*, muddy labor—produced what I call a form of collective intimacy among Japanese and Burmese aid workers and trainees. These intimacies with each other and with the soil in the agricultural fields did not concern an individual’s interiority or practices of intimate recognition as in liberal traditions (Povinelli 2002). By describing intimacy as tied to collective physical labor and relational struggles, I point to the ways that the analytic of intimacy here is inseparable from the materiality of bodily activity and the labor of constructing a collectivity (cf. Parreñas 2012). Collective intimacy in this sense did not depend on whether one could attain and exhibit an interior emotional state with another person; rather, it hinged on bodily participation in shared labor and the unmaking of individual subjects in the process of making a collectivity. But neither did it concern the other side of individual intimacy, namely, the genealogical imagination of inheritances and social status (Povinelli 2002, 2006). I argue that the formation of collective intimacy aimed to unmoor OISCA’s aid actors from both individual intimacy and genealogical grids, promoting a collectivist ethic that emphasized communal labor, covered in mud from the fields, and relational entanglements that would create persons committed to a new collective defined by the boundaries of the training center and the global imaginations of OISCA’s senior Japanese staff.

In the strict sense of the term, OISCA is not a humanitarian organization—it mostly does not engage in life-or-death emergency situations, except when major disasters strike its project sites—but neither does it fit squarely into the popular definition of a development NGO. Although OISCA, like a development

organization, aims to alleviate poverty and implement schemes of community or national improvement (Edelman and Haugerud 2005; Li 2007), it focuses on training programs within the confines of a training center. As such, it follows more specifically a pillar of Japanese aid policies called “making persons” (*hitozukuri*).² The term *hitozukuri* became central to the Japanese government’s aid policies in 1979, when then Prime Minister Masayoshi Ōhira (1979) gave a speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). He stated that the Japanese state had historically emphasized education and human resources as central factors in the development of the country. He called this “*hitozukuri*,” and announced that one of the most important tasks in Japanese international aid was to nurture the “unlimited potential of young people” through technical training based on Japan’s recent experiences of development. Subsequently, Japanese aid policies, as well as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and NGOs such as OISCA, have adopted *hitozukuri* as one of their core missions. Nevertheless, the concept has remained ambiguous, often pointing to training-based programs with widely varying goals and methods.

Staff members at OISCA did not seem to agree on a precise definition of *hitozukuri*, but there was a general understanding that the training programs aimed not only to teach agricultural techniques but also to develop trainees’ character—that is, to “make persons.” An important fact to keep in mind here is that local Burmese staff at the Myanmar training center are former trainees. After finishing the training course, participants who wish to become staff are sent to Japan to train for a year and hired as full-time employees on their return. As much as the courses thus meant to produce leaders of sustainable development, the program also aimed to create aid workers out of aid recipients, and specifically OISCA ones, by circulating them from Myanmar to Japan and back to Myanmar. Thus *hitozukuri* was intended for staff as well as trainees, and this work of making persons occurred through an emphasis on collective labor that applied to all participants in the training center. In fact, the point was that everyone was subject to this organizational principle, which ultimately sought to create a collectivity that would unmoor people from familial and other existing social attachments and would, theoretically, transcend national and cultural borders.

Thus OISCA does not implement programs to save lives. The literature on humanitarian moral sentiments nevertheless provides a useful analytic from which to explore *hitozukuri* aid because it offers critical insight into the ways that particular forms of transnational governance produce global moral actors (Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Fassin 2012; Ticktin 2011; see also Feldman 2007). The

collective intimacy produced through shared labor, as I describe below, constituted an instance of such moral subject-making, as the relations and bodily experiences of communal labor and belonging defined Burmese and Japanese aid actors' understandings of the ethical basis of aid work and personhood.

The scholarship on humanitarian sentiments has largely conceptualized moral impulses as arising in response to the distant suffering stranger (Boltanski 1999). In contrast, I suggest that the morality underlying Japanese hitozukuri aid emerges from the production of proximity with cultural others, with the aim to create a transnational collectivity. This aid ethic of collective intimacy has its own political effects. While Burmese and Japanese aid workers and trainees in OISCA found meaning and a sense of belonging in shared labor, these affective experiences also masked the unequal relations on which the feelings of this form of solidarity were based. In this modality of aid, racial and cultural hierarchies are embedded in the notion of oneness, and as such, the affective sense of belonging and closeness to others renders the challenge to existing structures difficult. At the end of the article, I explore how such ambiguities might complicate aid workers' and anthropologists' capacities for critique.

JAPANESE AID IN MYANMAR

Since 1962, a military junta has ruled Myanmar. In the past few years, however, political changes have taken place, and the country is opening up in unprecedented ways. Amid these changes, NGO activities have been growing as well. Yet contrary to common perception, a number of local and international organizations have been active in Myanmar for the past decade or more (Heidel 2006; Tegenfeldt 2001). With Japan serving as the largest aid donor to the country for many years (Holliday 2005; Nemoto 2007), a handful of Japanese NGOs have also been active since the mid-1990s. In fact, given the restrictions on Japanese official and commercial engagements in Myanmar since the military regime's rise to power, humanitarian projects and NGOs have played an important role in representing Japan in Myanmar, despite their limited scope. Japanese aid workers in the country agree that OISCA, in particular, stands as one of the exemplary NGOs that reflect Japanese positions of engagement in Myanmar.

The Myanmar training center, established in 1996, is one of OISCA's newest project sites. The NGO conducts training programs at four training centers in Japan and at sixteen others in eight Asia-Pacific countries. Each training center outside Japan has one or two Japanese staff members and dozens of local staff, overseeing trainees that could number from twenty, as in Myanmar, to hundreds,

as in Papua New Guinea. About forty staff members at the Tokyo headquarters manage these projects. In addition to its training courses, OISCA runs environmental projects such as mangrove reforestation activities in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, which are also conducted out of the training centers.³

The organization was established in 1961 by the founder of a Shinto-based new religion called Ananaikyō, and it is one of the oldest and most prominent NGOs in Japan. The founder, Yonosuke Nakano, created OISCA after realizing that religious leaders alone could not bring about world peace. In an effort to forge a movement that would transcend both religion and secularism through what he saw as Shinto values, he established OISCA as an organization that would promote a new world in which humans lived in harmony with nature (see Watanabe, forthcoming). He preached that this Shinto ecology and “nonreligious” worldview would enable forms of development that did not undermine the natural environment, cultural traditions, and human relationships as the process of rapid development in Japan had done. The training centers served as microcosms of this utopian vision, and the communal lifestyle centered around organic farming was meant to produce ripple effects through the trainees and staff into the larger world. While this philosophy, which OISCA’s Japanese staffers called “earth ethics” (*chikyū rinri*), constituted a universalistic idea, it was also framed in nationalist terms, as staff members understood this ethic of “living in harmony with nature” as a fundamentally Shinto and therefore Japanese value. The organization’s first staff members who joined Nakano’s movement in the 1950s and 1960s embraced this nationalist-universalist philosophy, and powerful conservative politicians, such as the former prime minister Eisaku Satō, also supported the NGO based on its vision of Japan’s role in international aid (Watanabe 2013).⁴ As one of the first NGOs in Japan with powerful political backing, established even before JICA, OISCA significantly influenced the definitions of hitozukuri aid, sustainable development, and NGO work among politicians, policy makers, and the public in postwar Japan. Although OISCA’s mission was particular in its Shinto ecology and spiritual orientations, I therefore contend that the approach to sustainable development and aid work among OISCA staffers—such as the emphasis on collective labor and intimacy with local communities—had considerable impact on wider official discourses of aid.

The Myanmar training center was also the product of OISCA’s political clout. In 1996, a Japanese official of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) invited OISCA to begin projects in Myanmar, and with the support of the Japanese and Myanmar governments, OISCA initiated activities in the semi-

arid region of the dry zone in central Myanmar. The goal was to create a training center that would serve as a model farm for nearby villagers and nurture new generations of community leaders in sustainable development. The facility is technically co-operated by OISCA and the Myanmar Agriculture Service (MAS), a department of the Myanmar government—its official name being MAS-OISCA Agro-Forestry Training Centre—although OISCA is responsible for daily operations. The first cohort of twenty trainees arrived in 1997. Most trainees are in their early twenties, hail from middle-income rural families, and many of them have connections to local MAS officials. One of MAS’s activities is to spread new agricultural techniques to farmers around the country through the human resource development of agricultural extension workers (JICA 2010). Although smaller in scope and without MAS funds, the Myanmar training center seems to fit into this general policy, as well as into Japanese policies of engagement with the Myanmar government.

All training centers, including those in Myanmar, follow a similar schedule that leaves little time for rest or privacy. Every day, staff and trainees share meals, communal baths, and collective duties such as cooking and cleaning. Morning exercises and regular roll call punctuate the day, all of them conducted in brisk, militaristic form. Japanese staff members explained to me that these routines were an important way to teach young trainees throughout Asia the value of discipline and harmony in creating a collectivity. Burmese participants often echoed this message. “The most valuable thing that I learned from OISCA is the importance of punctuality and discipline,” a former trainee told me. He now works for another Japanese NGO, teaching organic farming. “The OISCA spirit (*OISCA seidat*) is about working hard to overcome challenges, never giving up,” he added. Life at the training centers required adherence to disciplinary standards that nurtured tenacity and hope in trainees, among other qualities.

Participating in the daily life of the Myanmar training center, I quickly realized what Yamada meant when she spoke of the quality of “smelling like mud” in OISCA’s approach to aid work. Staff and trainees spent most of their time working together in the vegetable fields, rice paddies, and animal sheds. Covered in soil from the same farmlands and inhaling the smell of manure from the same animals they cared for together, staff and trainees told me that sharing the physical labor strengthened their sense of belonging and oneness. When I asked Burmese staff members what they liked about OISCA, a common refrain was, “Because we don’t have any divisions amongst us” [A:loun: hkwai cha: ma shí ló]. Many of them thought that trainees and staff getting up at 5 a.m. every day to clean and

participate in the same agricultural labor gave evidence to this oneness. “Even Sakurai [the Japanese director] cleans the bathrooms with us!” one of them explained.



Figure 1. Morning roll call, 2010. Photo by Chika Watanabe.

Staff and trainees also shared an understanding of the hardness of the soil in the semi-arid region during the dry months, its sudden transformation into a slippery mass that oozed between our toes during rainy season, and the relief of washing our bodies together in the collective (though gender-separated) open bathing areas. Japanese staff members often described life at the training centers as “eating rice from the same bowl, sweating together” [onaji kama no meshi wo kutte, issho ni ase wo nagashite]. The material and visceral qualities of collective labor and communal life in “the field” constituted important forms of immediacy that fortified the sense of belonging—and thereby defined understandings of aid work as the making of a particular collectivity. Japanese and Burmese staff imparted to trainees and to each other the importance of prioritizing the collective over individual interests, and of becoming persons who cared about others’ well-being and who committed to sharing physical labor regardless of status. The OISCA aid workers hoped that the hitozukuri activities would create persons with certain moral qualities and good skills in organic farming, people who would lead

not only the community's development in sustainable ways but also a world transformation.

This emphasis on collective forms of life, at first glance, seems to stand in contrast to liberal ideologies. Following Michel Foucault, among others, it is now conventional to see liberalism as a spectrum of ideologies ultimately founded on the idea of autonomous individual subjects that rules through the freedom of these empowered, self-governing subjects (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996; Cruikshank 1999; Dean 2009). Recently, anthropologists have developed ethnographic analyses that oppose these liberal assumptions, noting that the liberal ideals of an individual free from subordination cannot help us understand certain phenomena around the world. For instance, they point to how persons in certain cases can be formed and given meaning through pursuits of “unfreedom,” obligation, socially prescribed forms of behavior, or dependence (Borovoy 2005; Englund 2008; Ferguson 2013; Mahmood 2005; Robbins 2007, 295). In such circumstances, people might strive not for individual freedom but for belonging in a community, for dependence on others, and even to be part of the social and political machine subjugating them in structures of inequality. The aid ethics of collective intimate practice in OISCA precisely concerned such aspirations for dependence, obligations, and prescriptions of communal living. Rather than constituting a debilitating condition, I contend that participating aid actors experienced it as an ethical domain of meaningful everyday action and sentiment (Lambek 2010; Mattingly 2012; see also Das 2010). At the same time, despite this ontological orientation toward material and relational entanglements, acts of judgment that entailed “discerning when to follow one's commitments and when to depart from them” (Lambek 2010, 28) also proved central to aid workers' experiences, as I show in the concluding sections. In a way, what I call “muddy labor” therefore also describes an ethic of muddiness in such processes of discernment amid belonging, one neither quite free nor prescribed.

Arguments about moral obligations and dependence are often made in contrast to liberal and neoliberal modes of government (see, e.g., Englund 2008; Ferguson 2013), but recent analyses show that what we conceive as liberal and nonliberal might not necessarily be mutually exclusive. In Europe, the increasing “humanitarianization of the public sphere—a process whereby depoliticized forms of sympathetic action become paradigmatic acts of citizenship” (Muehlebach 2012, 133)—shows that even liberalism and neoliberalism can foster moral and collectivist propensities of “disinterested love” (Feher 2009, 35) and fellow-feeling such as compassion and charity (see also Redfield 2013). According to Andrea Mueh-

lebach (2012) and her study of the moral dimensions of neoliberalism in northern Italy, the discourse of solidarity has played a particularly central role in this humanitarization. Pertinent for the purposes of this article is that, as Muehlebach (2012, 194) points out, solidarity makes for a versatile concept mobilized by liberals as well as nonliberals, by the left as much as by neofascists (see also Holmes 2000). Given this slippage, the distinction between the liberal and the nonliberal might be more tenuous than one might imagine (see also Hindess 2001). Thus, for instance, we might see some traces of nonliberal orientations in aid efforts such as the Peace Corps, which has promoted the importance of American volunteers “working on a village level with their hands in the dirt,” echoing the Japanese notion of being *dorokusai* (Peterson 2011, 236). The ethic of proximity and solidarity can also be found in a number of Western NGOs such as Partners in Health. Even in an organization such as *Médicins Sans Frontières* (MSF), which “shuns commitment to place” (Redfield 2012, 359), the effort to inhabit and negotiate social and physical proximity with local people becomes central to international aid workers’ understandings of their tasks (see also Feldman 2010). While we cannot call these organizations nonliberal, particularly since I view them as still validating the free individual as the privileged locus of morality, I suggest that the moral and affective value placed on relations, proximity, and solidarity hint at the impossibility of neatly distinguishing the liberal from the nonliberal even in NGOs hailed as bastions of Western liberalism. My point here is more sobering than Muehlebach’s: while she concludes her monograph with hope for the progressive political potentiality of solidarity, I am concerned with the non-emancipatory aspects of solidarity, namely, its appearance in collectivist forms. As a boundary concept, solidarity is always already both of the liberal and of the nonliberal, thereby muddling the distinction itself. I make this observation not to simply reveal the interconnectedness of the two ideological orientations but also to indicate that a study of the ethics of unfreedom and a collective type of intimacy, such as this one on OISCA, can offer important insights into the politics of aid ethics that ostensibly promote emancipatory aspirations.

THE FLOOD THAT NEVER CAME

Japanese staff members in OISCA defined aid work as the workers’ and recipients’ full bodily commitment to labor in the “the field” (*gemba*) of aid. Many of them did not consider tasks at the offices of the Tokyo headquarters as “true” aid work. A senior Japanese staffer once told me: “The OISCA spirit [*OISCA seishin*] is about staff, trainees, and local communities working hard together,

amid the muddiness [*dorodoro*] of the field [*gemba*].” This “working hard together” referred not only to the materiality of the soil in agricultural work but also to the labor of human relations in proximity. Another Japanese staff member wrote in OISCA’s monthly magazine that no manual existed for OISCA’s activities. The “textbooks” were the visceral experiences of being “tossed about in the field” [*gemba de momarete*], which he described in terms of the hard work required in negotiating intimate relationships in the training centers (Shibata 2006). This value of relational labor was evinced in an incident during my stay at the Myanmar training center, when two male Burmese staffers got into a fistfight. The immediate reason was small, but it was an eruption of a long-term disagreement brewing between the two men who shared a bedroom and the same agricultural tasks. Sakurai, the thirty-something Japanese director, mediated a conversation between them, after which he told me: “The training center is not just a place that teaches skills but also a place that nurtures people. . . . It is in instances like this [fight] that staff and trainees in the field can learn about OISCA.” The struggles of creating and living amid relations in a communal environment seemed as important as the physical labor of agricultural work in producing the sense of collective intimacy that defined aid work.



Figure 2. Staff and trainees working in the field, 2010. Photo by Chika Watanabe.

Although this insistence on physical and relational labor permeated the daily routines at the OISCA training center, I found that intermittent emergency situations also helped strengthen the sense of collective intimacy. On October 23, 2010, Cyclone Giri hit the western coast of Myanmar. Although we were about two hundred miles away from the eye of the storm, heavy rains and strong gusts swept across the region. By midday the rains had subsided, but winds continued to rip through the area, knocking down a tree behind the office building. As we stood by the windows, a staff member came running into the room to relay the rumor in the village: the dam upstream from us was about to break. People gasped. Someone told me that a few years ago the dam had cracked, flooding the training center and damaging tons of rice stored for the WFP program. Sakurai feared a repetition of this disaster. As soon as he heard the rumor, he called on all staff and trainees to prepare for the possibly imminent flood.

I noticed that the women had gone to the other side of the courtyard to shovel sand onto a tractor. I quickly joined them. Most of the time in OISCA, neither staff nor trainees told others what to do, and this case was no different. People were expected to notice what was needed and to take initiative. I looked around anxiously to figure out how I could help. Seeing one of the staff briefly stop her task, I quickly picked up her shovel and took over the job of hauling sand onto the tractor.

Moments later, I saw that some people had gone inside one of the storage houses to start packing bags with corn. There were two rooms, about thirty by forty feet, filled with kernels of corn piled chest-high. We were to put all the corn in bags and move them above ground. More staff and trainees joined us, and we split into the various tasks of bagging, shoveling, sealing, and hauling. The bags could hold fifty-five pounds each, which meant that I could not lift them once full. So I helped hold the bags open or put the corn inside. This was also no easy task, as the continuous crouching and bending strained my joints in ways that I had never experienced before. Once in a while I looked up to see that the mountains of corn looked the same, no matter how many bags we filled. I had to fight the urge to stop; everybody else was moving at least double my speed, including Sakurai. It felt endless. The dust was starting to become unbearable, weighing down our breath, leaving all of us wheezing and coughing. Some of the men had wrapped their shirts around their faces. Finally, three hours into the labor, all the corn had been bagged stacked securely from floor to ceiling in one of the adjacent rooms. It was dark outside, and the rain had started again. After washing up, we dragged ourselves to the dining hall for a very late meal.

The large flood never came. But the stream nearby did overflow, and water surrounded the pig sheds for a couple of days. We all went to see the following day, and staff and trainees waded through the muddy water to save the animals from the flooded sheds. Aside from the help given these pigs, most of the preparations turned out to be unnecessary in the end. Nevertheless, the collective effort and our shared literal muddiness seemed to have strengthened our sense of solidarity at the training center. From our perspective downstream from the dam, the crisis on the horizon, not yet arrived, seemed unpredictable. We were uncertain what actions would ultimately help us, but that all of us exerted ourselves in labor anticipating the worst bound us in a sense of mutual commitment.



Figure 3. Saving pigs from the flooded sheds, 2010. Photo by Van Lian Ceu.

Shared muddy labor created a collective form of intimacy among aid actors in OISCA, showing how this aid ethic depends on physical and geographic proximity, as well as on contingent conditions and material effects for its actualization. Without the sweaty, backbreaking collective labor, no sense of oneness would have existed among OISCA aid workers. The bonds of collective intimacy might not have been so strong without the unfortunate yet fortuitous emergency of Cyclone Giri. Such intimate, visceral, and circumstantial experiences defined the

concept of aid work and shaped aid actors in OISCA. The moral sentiment of collective intimacy had to be enacted through the close social relationships in the training centers and the contingent practices of collective labor. But this also meant that social and cultural others beyond immediate relations and shared experiences rarely received OISCA's hitozukuri aid. This pattern had significant ties to Japan's colonial legacies in the Asia-Pacific, and it might explain why OISCA did not have training centers beyond those former colonial borders. As I describe below, as much as collective labor had the affective appeal of belonging and solidarity among aid actors in OISCA, the ethic of muddy labor also relied on certain structures of inequality, ones almost reminiscent of Japanese imperialist ambitions.

THE HIERARCHIES OF ONENESS

Cyclone Giri mobilized everyone at the training center from Sakurai to the trainees. A sense of solidarity emerged from the experience, but at the same time, it was impossible to ignore the hierarchies on which the day was based. Sakurai made the decision to prepare for a potential flood, and staff members instructed trainees what to do, not the other way around. There was no overt coercion, but the collective effort had unfolded according to the hierarchical structures underlying the training center, even though no one commented on it.⁵

The hierarchical structures behind practices of collective intimacy emerge clearly in wider Japanese official discourses of so-called soft aid (non-infrastructure aid). In many ways, OISCA's activities since the 1960s foreshadowed what I perceive as a wider emphasis on the importance of the field in current Japanese views of soft aid. Scholars have criticized earlier official Japanese aid philosophies for focusing too heavily on matters such as national economic interests, developmentalist policies, and trade (Johnson 1982; Rix 1993). The rise of soft aid, Japanese NGOs with an international reach, and volunteerism, especially in the 1990s, indicated a shift away from such growth-oriented principles. I propose the foregrounding of another aid ideology at that moment, one that coupled assertions of "Japanese values" with the principles of working intimately with local communities in the field. Thus, for example, we find Tarō Asō (2006), the minister of foreign affairs at the time and the current finance minister, stating in a speech (official English translation): "This is based on my observation during those two years [in Sierra Leone] in which I did not see many Europeans or Americans who worked hard together with the local people contrary to Japanese people. While I should refrain from generalizing, I can say that it was only us Japanese who had

taken an approach to work together with the local people, eye-to-eye.” In this statement, Asō highlighted a supposedly fundamental Japanese value—superior to Western approaches—that current Japanese aid workers also exhibit. His view reflects a popular moralization of Japaneseness that emphasizes sweaty, diligent labor as an ethical-cultural practice (Kondo 1990; Rohlen 1974). At the same time, by appealing to the idea of “working hard together with the local people,” Asō sought to advocate this Japanese ideal as an instantiation of a common humanity, manifesting simultaneously a commitment to a universal solidarity and to a particular Japanese ethic. In this perspective, “local people” appeared simply as objects of this Japanese ethical project.

During my fieldwork, I frequently heard such confluences of the idea of solidarity and Japanese superiority in official Japanese discourses of aid. In June 2010, I visited one of the training centers of the Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), the Japanese version of the Peace Corps, in Nagano Prefecture, where government-sponsored Japanese volunteers were preparing for their overseas dispatch. One day, JOCV staff invited a JICA official, Tanaka, to give a speech to the volunteers. About two hundred young people assembled in an auditorium, and Tanaka stood at a podium on an elevated stage. A PowerPoint presentation projected onto a large screen behind him.

“What is a volunteer?” he asked rhetorically. “To be a volunteer is to take initiative in doing things.” Quoting JOCV’s foundational concept, he added: “But another definition is the effort to ‘become one with the local people’ [*jūmin to ittai to naru*]” (see Ban 1978). He explained that the work of a volunteer was not simply a job but something that involved daily life, conducted from the same perspective as the other person, and with respect for the other person’s culture. He added that the power of human emotions constituted an important element in this work. “Becoming one” with local communities meant sharing emotions with them, which Tanaka argued was an important attitude for the young Japanese volunteers to adopt.

Yet if the principle of becoming one pointed to an ethos of solidarity, what came next in Tanaka’s speech made for a sudden shift in register. A slide appeared in front of the audience that asked, “What does ‘developing country’ mean?” Another slide followed, and it contained statements such as inconvenience, difference in values, and the fact that people in such countries would most likely fail to keep promises and always arrive late to appointments. Tanaka had written on another slide: “These are the reasons why developing countries are developing countries, and if they could be different on their own, then they would have been

a developed country by now.” He concluded: “It’s important to take a step back and see things from a wider perspective, which is what makes you [the Japanese volunteers], different from them [local people].”

On one level, Tanaka emphasized the importance of constructing proximity with aid recipients, to the point of “becoming one.” But in the same breath, he spoke unequivocally about the superiority of Japanese people in these aid relations. He implied that non-Japanese people inherently did not have the proper work ethic, and that close relations with Japanese volunteers and aid workers would help local people learn, by emulation in proximity, the necessary dispositions to develop themselves and their countries.

The Japanese aid workers at OISCA echoed this view, indicating that the importance of becoming one with aid recipients also meant advancing the idea that Japanese values could serve as models of progress for other countries.⁶ In an interview, one senior Japanese staff member in the Tokyo headquarters said:

In the end, I think that OISCA’s activities are about teaching and learning about Japan. That means, taking care of nature, of things—to have them understand our traditional culture. Foreigners often tell us that they like their interactions with Japanese people, and they praise the Japanese people’s spirit and attitude toward work. We want them to understand how Japan was able to develop to this degree. . . . The training is not only about techniques, but also about coming into contact with the daily habits, communal lifestyle, and kindness of Japanese people.

Senior Japanese staff members upheld communal living and collective labor as methods of transmitting what they believed to be Japanese values that would show trainees and local communities how they could cultivate themselves and develop their countries. As such, the emphasis on oneness in Japanese soft aid relied on a hierarchical worldview in which Japan emerged as the model of development.

Although this conflation of solidarity and national superiority exists in other aid activities such as the Peace Corps, the Japanese case has specific historical implications. From Japanese popular culture (Iwabuchi 2002) to Japanese fascination with Bolivian Andean music (Bigenho 2012), scholars have shown how intimacy and distance, as well as similarity and difference, often constitute two sides of the same coin in Japanese relations with other parts of the world. Michelle Bigenho (2012, 139) describes how Japanese people speak of their intimate connections with indigenous Bolivian music, which were in fact “articulations of

intimate distance, where the indigenous ancestor with whom one claims intimacy is usually safely beyond the nation's borders and outside specific histories." She situates this discourse in the historical context of the making of modern Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Japan was ideologically constructed as a racially homogenous nation. This racial myth accounts for the fact that [Bi-genho's](#) (2012, 140) Japanese interlocutors spoke of connections with indigenous peoples in Bolivia, whereas continuities with the Ainu, for instance, remained completely absent.

This simultaneous existence of intimacy and difference regarding cultural and racialized others is reminiscent also of Japanese imperialism in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet if indigenous people in Bolivia remained safely "outside specific histories," the same cannot be said of Japanese relations with Myanmar.⁷ [Ann Stoler](#) (2002) has shown in her studies of European colonialism in Southeast Asia that intimacy and care proved central to the imposition of racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies in colonial rule. She examines how questions of intimacy demonstrated the "tensions of empire" between "the discourses of inclusion, humanitarianism, and equality that informed liberal policy at the turn of the century in colonial Southeast Asia and the exclusionary, discriminatory practices that were reactive to, coexistent with, and perhaps inherent in liberalism itself" (Stoler 1997, 198). Yet if European colonial authorities policed intimate relations and problematized the blurring of distinctions between colonizer and colonized, Japanese imperialism in Asia imposed policies of assimilation that instrumentalized proximity for colonial rule, thereby "concealing the gap between political and economic discrimination and cultural assimilation" ([Ching](#) 2001, 106; see also [Dikötter](#) 1997). Assimilation and Asian commonality constituted important ideologies of proximity that confounded intimacy and rule, discrimination and "becoming one" ([Uchida](#) 2011). As such, the ideology of intimacy in Japanese imperialism did not only concern the regulation of sex as an instrument of colonial policy but also described a wider principle of closeness, familiarity, and collectivity that was nonetheless defined by racial and moral ideas of Japanese superiority.

In this sense, the ethic of muddy labor among Japanese aid actors in Myanmar was more than just an ideology of intimate distance. Taking the colonial historical connections between the two countries into consideration, the aspirations for collective intimacy in hitozukuri aid appear eerily similar to colonial dreams of assimilation, or as [Naoki Sakai](#) (1991, 190) has stated, to imperialist ideologies of absolute totality. When I asked the former director of the OISCA Myanmar project (1996–2008) how the training center became OISCA's most successful

project overseas, he replied: “Myanmar is the country that Japanese people can feel most familiar with” [Myanmar wa nihonjin ga ichiban shitashimi yasui kuni dato omou]. He explained that people in Myanmar were hardworking because of their strong Buddhist foundation, a quality resembling Japanese people—familiarity and similarity to the Japanese constituting the reasons for success.⁸ Conversely, differences threatened this ethos. Sakurai once chided a Burmese staffer who had failed, despite repeated instructions to do so, to send a thank-you letter to a particular Japanese donor, by telling the staffer: “That’s what still makes you a Burmese person!” [Soko ga mada Myanmar-jin dane!] This exasperated comment suggested that Sakurai saw the work of hitozukuri aid to be, at least in part, about making persons in his image of the Japanese.

According to such discourses, relations between Japanese and Burmese people were thus not only about closeness but also about similarity. Given the colonial history, I would be remiss if I ignored that the idea of oneness promoted in official discourses of soft aid, as well as the sense of collective intimacy produced in the training centers, in many ways recalled Japanese imperialist projects that simultaneously upheld intimacies and inequalities.

Yet I never heard Burmese or Japanese aid workers say explicitly that their work was based on unequal relations, much less on neoimperialist designs. During and after Cyclone Giri, no one ever questioned the hierarchical structure in which Sakurai made the decisions and passed them down from staff to trainees. Neither did Burmese staffers ask why the training center was run with such an emphasis on communal living. They took for granted the suspension of their individual interests for the good of the collective, as defined by OISCA’s Tokyo headquarters, and aid workers and trainees seemed to cherish the elimination of distances and the resultant feeling of collective intimacy.

Nevertheless, sometimes certain Burmese staff members did question the ethics promoted in the training center. A senior Burmese aid worker, Ko Naing, had been with OISCA for more than ten years. He believed in the OISCA model of hitozukuri aid and praised the values of discipline, hard work, and communal living that he had learned at training centers in Myanmar and Japan. He often remarked that the training center felt like “home” to him. Yet one day, when I asked him about the connections between the training centers in the two countries, he replied:

Japan is Japan, and Myanmar has Myanmar culture. If our ways of thinking here [at the Myanmar training center] are completely different from those

of the villagers in the area, it's not going to work. It's about incorporating what's good about Japan into Myanmar, but not about doing everything like Japan. . . . If you just copy everything in the way that outside people do it, the country will be destroyed. You have to do things according to that country, that culture, just as we have to bring about democracy in our own ways.

As meaningful as the feeling of collective intimacy was for Burmese aid workers in OISCA, many of them did not overlook that it was, after all, a Japanese organization implementing activities in their country, Myanmar. The two countries and their people differed. Several other Burmese staffers made similar comments in which they distinguished their work in Myanmar and their training experiences in Japan. It was never clear how they reconciled their belief in doing things “in Burmese ways” and the fact that Japanese staff members had determined the importance of collective labor and communal living in the trainings, but Burmese aid workers did seem to feel that the collectivity of the Myanmar training center was ultimately theirs. If physical and relational labor created a sense of collective intimacy, the experience of oneness remained unstable, as it also fomented such moments of recognized difference and divergent nationalist understandings of global and social order.

CONCLUSION

Many aid workers might argue that both humanitarian and development aid should be based on an expectation of eventual withdrawal, whether in the short or long term. Even in OISCA, Japanese staff members in Tokyo and Sakurai himself talked about the ultimate goal of “self-reliance” (*jiritsu*) and of handing over the training centers to local aid workers. The ethic of muddy labor rendered this difficult to achieve, however, as hitozukuri aid activities were predicated on the inseparable relationships between Japanese and Burmese aid actors. Yet I have argued in this article that this difficulty of establishing self-reliance also makes Japanese hitozukuri aid compelling for its participants. Foregrounding the ways in which aid workers and trainees in OISCA engaged in shared labor, I have described how this ethic created what I call a feeling of collective intimacy. This sense of belonging among aid workers and trainees reproduced, in turn, the importance of collective physical and relational labor in hitozukuri aid.

Nevertheless, discourses among Japanese government officials and senior Japanese staff members in OISCA indicated that the value of collective labor and

proximity with local communities in conceptualizations of Japanese soft aid buttressed particular arguments of Japanese superiority that were in some ways reminiscent of Japanese imperialist projects. These views suggested that claims of intimate relationality and bodily experience could generate sentiments of solidarity as positive affective and social conditions, but that they could also produce political effects. As governments and transnational actors increasingly reference ideas of human connectedness in humanitarian, ecological, and other projects (Feldman and Ticktin 2010), we must examine the mechanisms by which such moral and affective appeals of solidarity can advance particular politics and inequalities, while also encouraging people to participate.

Although this problematic in high-level rhetoric did not seem to negate Burmese aid workers' daily practices and experiences of collective intimacy, it did pose limits to this intimacy. Most of the Burmese staff members did not question the hierarchical structure in which they worked, though some of them voiced their desires to define the training center in "Burmese ways." As such, the ethic of muddy labor remained ambiguous, producing an incomplete sense of oneness as underlying differences and inequalities surfaced from time to time. Anthropologists have examined the role of ambiguity and ambivalence in the production of institutional knowledge and ethical practices (Elisha 2011; Holmes 2000; Miyazaki 2007; Whitmarsh 2008; Zaloom 2003). Elucidating how particular regimes are created and negotiated through multiple meanings, inconsistencies, and experiential uncertainties constitutes an important endeavor that complicates monolithic views of, for example, international aid systems.

The ambiguities of the ethic of muddy labor also show that discrepancies between the politics of official discourses and aid actors' experiences can challenge the anthropologist's capacity for critique. In other words, one can identify the politics of discourses of aid, trace how particular practices produce governmental and neocolonial regimes, or examine the embodied experiences of aid work, but the work of critical intervention becomes difficult when two or more of these perspectives seem to generate incongruent effects. In the case of OISCA, the point is not that Burmese staffers are blinded in a kind of false consciousness about solidarity. Rather, we must question how practices and experiences of collective physical and relational labor can simultaneously constitute a collectivist, seemingly neoimperialist aid regime *and* serve as the grounds from which to launch an internal critique or judgment (Lambek 2010; also see Muehlebach 2012). As Ko Naing indicated, the collective intimacy in the training center proved meaningful for Burmese aid workers as much as it provided the basis for a hierarchical

structure of aid and perhaps ironically, also constituted the framework for their critiques of Japanese authority in the organization. In other words, the ethic of muddy labor and the consequent communal sentiments of collective intimacy formed both the foundation of hierarchical relations and the basis of critique against such structures. To be sure, this constitutes an unstable point of ethnographic intervention, but perhaps all that the anthropologist can do is to depict the ambiguous and tenuous possibilities for change that arise in such fleeting moments of ethical struggle and judgment.

ABSTRACT

Japanese aid has long been criticized for its focus on infrastructural projects, but Japanese aid actors have also valued non-infrastructural soft aid, especially through NGOs. Drawing on twenty months of fieldwork conducted with a Japanese NGO and its training program in sustainable agriculture in Myanmar, this article examines how Japanese and Burmese aid actors engaged in what I call an aid ethic of “muddy labor”—an emphasis on shared physical and relational labor that produced a collective form of intimacy. Scholars have tended to formulate humanitarian moral sentiments as responses to a distant suffering stranger. In contrast, I argue that the ideologies and political effects of a collectivist form of aid emerge in physical, relational, and geographic proximity. I demonstrate how the collective intimacy of physical and relational labor generated a meaningful sense of belonging among aid workers, while Japanese official discourses of soft aid indicated that this ethos of solidarity was also based on hierarchical views of Japanese superiority. The article ultimately asks how this ambiguity of the ethics of muddy labor challenges capacities for critique. [NGO; development aid; humanitarian sentiment; intimacy; solidarity; ethics and morality; Japan; Myanmar]

NOTES

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1. I conducted research in Japanese and Burmese.
2. *Hitozukuri* is a term used widely in other sectors of Japanese society, such as in companies, government agencies, and schools.
3. Some OISCA project sites do not have training centers, such as those in Cambodia and China, where local staff members conduct environmental activities. There is also an affiliated global network outside of the NGO itself, called OISCA-International, which is composed of local groups that carry out activities of their own.

4. Although OISCA received government subsidies from 1972 to 2004, thanks to Satō and other politicians' support, it has been funded mainly by membership fees from people across Japan (mostly Ananaiyō members), other individual donations, and, increasingly, by Japanese corporations.
5. Although details lie beyond the scope of this article, gender inequalities also formed part of the structure of the training center and of the organization as a whole.
6. Tanaka was speaking about the ethos of volunteer work, and it is important to note that OISCA is not a volunteer organization. Nevertheless, OISCA's senior Japanese staff members believed in the ethos of volunteerism, and as such, a similar thinking dominated in OISCA.
7. My argument is thus specifically about Japanese aid in Asia, and more concretely, in Myanmar. This aid ethic and its implications might differ for Japanese aid in other parts of the world.
8. Conversely, Japanese staff members in OISCA often told me that the projects in Bangladesh were failing because Bangladeshi people differed too much in nature from the Japanese.

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