A cake in the shape of Uluru on display at the OBJECTively symposium, March 2019.

Photo: Yanhong Ouyang
Uluru can provide a prism through which to discuss Australia–Japan relations. Japanese tourists often refer to Uluru as the ‘navel of the world’, reflecting the idea that Uluru is an enigmatic centre of the earth. It is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Australia for Japanese.

After 26 October 2019 tourists will no longer be permitted to climb Uluru, in line with the wishes of the traditional owners. In response, Japanese tourism companies have been promoting this year as the last chance to climb Uluru. At the same time, however, they do remind their clients to pay respect to the local Aboriginal population while ‘experiencing the immense power’ of Uluru.

There has been an ongoing fascination with Uluru and traditional Aboriginal stories among Japanese, although this has not always translated into deep understanding. Several Japanese popular stories have used Aboriginal mythology and the image of Uluru, including mega-hit manga *One Piece*, *Oishinbo* and *Gallery Fake*. These cultural products often contain misunderstandings of Aboriginal Australia and do not feature Aboriginal characters who speak for themselves. However, they also attempt to portray some important issues such as the concept of indigenous land rights.

Katayama Kyoichi’s novella *Sekai no chūshin de, ai wo sakaebu* (which I have translated as *In the Centre of the World, I Shout Love*)
also features Aboriginal Australia as a major theme. The centre of the world, referred to in the title, is Uluru. *In the Centre of the World, I Shout Love* was a major success. It was adapted into a manga, a film and a television series and translated into several languages. The film reached a box office audience of over 6.2 million people. The official English title is *Socrates in Love*, which was the original title intended by the author before it was changed in the Japanese original by the editor. *In the Centre of the World, I Shout Love*, which I have chosen here, is a more literal interpretation.

The story focuses on Saku and his high-school romance with fellow student Aki who dies very young of leukaemia. The narrative surrounds his attempt to escape with Aki from the hospital to visit Uluru, which they were supposed to travel to together as part of their high school graduation trip, before Aki becomes too ill. Saku tries to take Aki to Australia himself, but she loses consciousness on the train to the airport and dies. After her death, Saku flies to Uluru with her parents to scatter her ashes over Uluru. In the story, Saku is given special permission to do this.

On the train to the airport, Aki tells Saku that she read in a book that Aboriginal Australians believe that the world was originally perfect, lacking nothing. This makes her think that perhaps the afterlife coexists with the living world—an idea in which she finds solace. She believes that Aboriginal people understand the real meaning of life and death that she was unable to understand in her own life.
When I explained this story to the Yolngu elders in Arnhem Land, they had a good laugh and agreed that it seemed to be a version of Marlo Morgan’s novel *Mutant Message Down Under* (1995) about her fabricated experiences with Aboriginal Australia. Morgan’s novel was translated into Japanese and became very popular. The author of *In the Centre of the World, I Shout Love* seems to have been inspired by it.

Not once in either the original story or the manga version of *In the Centre of the World, I Shout Love* does an Aboriginal person speak for themselves, nor appear as a complex character. Aboriginal people only have a symbolic role in the story. This is acknowledged by the author Katayama himself who writes: ‘the Aborigines in reality did not matter for Aki. Their way of life, their view of the world, those were an ideal or a utopia on which Aki wanted to project her own existence. Maybe there she could find a hope or meaning of survival through the torture of disease’ (my translation). I think these words reflect what Australian indigenous people are for the majority of Japanese. Aki found hope in the image of idealised Aboriginal Australians, but was not particularly concerned with Aboriginal Australians as living individuals. Her image of Australia shows little understanding of political and cultural realities.

The number of Japanese tourists to Australia is currently growing again, although it has...
not reached the level of its peak in the 1990s. This growth seems to be fuelled by the idea that this is the last chance to climb Uluru. Certainly, ‘Uluru Fever’ is spreading among Japanese tourists today. According to survey data, over eighty per cent of Japanese who visit Uluru climb it, as compared to less than forty per cent of Australian visitors.

But why do Japanese want to climb Uluru in the first place?

One important reason is the Japanese tradition of sangaku shinkō [mountain worship]. This widespread belief can be summarised as a form syncretic worship for mountain gods, which combines the animistic awe for nature found in Shinto with other beliefs such as Buddhism, Taoism and Shugendō. Practitioners follow a strict michi [road] of training themselves physically as well as spiritually, expecting a form of revelation after the hard experience of conquering the mountain peaks. This idea is reflected in the words of one famous priest, Shōdo (735–817), who said ‘I won’t reach enlightenment, if I don’t get to the top of the mountain.’ Gradually sangaku shinkō has been popularised and transformed into mountain climbing as a form of recreation. For Japanese, the holier the mountain is, the more reason to climb it.

The frequency of Japanese tourists climbing Uluru also reflects an imbalance in cultural understanding between Australia and Japan, with Australians having generally a deeper
A deeper understanding of Australia’s complex cultural history among Japanese would not only make us reconsider our Uluru fever, but also our attitude towards our own indigenous Ainu people.

I chose as my object a ‘consumerable’ cake in the shape of Uluru to challenge these ideas of consumption and possession of local cultures. By cutting into the cake we participants were forced to reflect on how we engage with each other’s cultures in both time and space.