



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



JAPANESE TOURISM AND THE CONSUMPTION OF ULURU

Kazue Nakamura

There has been an ongoing fascination with Uluru and traditional Aboriginal stories among Japanese, although this has not always translated into a deeper understanding of the culture.

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 the Japanese.

Since 26 October 2019 tourists are no longer permitted to climb Uluru, in accordance with the wishes of the traditional owners. In response, Japanese tourism companies have been promoting 2019 as the last chance to climb Uluru, although they do remind their clients to be respectful of 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 a deeper understanding of the culture. 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 consumer products often contain misconceptions about 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 literally means ‘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. The novella 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. In the English translation the title is *Socrates in Love*, which was the original title intended by the author before it was changed by the editor in a bid for broader popular appeal.

The story focuses on Saku and his high-school romance with fellow student Aki who dies very young of leukaemia. The narrative centres on his attempt to escape with Aki from the hospital to visit Uluru, to which they have been looking forward to travelling

together as part of their graduation trip, before Aki became too ill. Saku tries to take Aki to Australia himself, but she loses consciousness on the train to the airport and dies. Saku later 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 had originally been a perfect place, lacking nothing. This makes her think that perhaps the afterlife coexists with the living world—an idea in which this dying girl finds solace. She believes that Aboriginal people understand the real meaning of life and death which seems to be beyond her reach in this living life.

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

When I outlined this story to the Yolgnu elders in Arnhem Land on one of my field trips, they had a good laugh and agreed that it seemed to be a version of Marlo Morgan's novel *Mutant Message Down Under* (1990), which details the American writer's 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* could have been inspired by it or similar popular narratives about Aboriginal people.

Not once in either the original novella or the manga version of *In the Centre of the World, I Shout Love* do Aboriginal people speak for themselves or appear as complex characters. Aboriginal people only have a symbolic role

in the story. The author herself acknowledges this, writing: '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 some hope for survival or meaning 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 them as living individuals, sharing the same time on the same planet with her. Her image of Australia shows little understanding of its political and cultural realities.





The number of Japanese tourists visiting Australia is growing again, although it has not reached the level of its peak in the 1990s. This growth may have been fuelled by the idea that this is their last chance to climb Uluru. Certainly, 'Uluru Fever' is spreading among Japanese tourists today. According to a survey, over eighty per cent of Japanese who visit Uluru climb it, as compared to less than forty per cent of Australian visitors.¹

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

One important reason might be the Japanese tradition of *sangaku shinko* [mountain worship]. This widespread belief can be summarised as a form syncretic worship of mountain gods, which combines the animistic

awe for nature found in the Shintō tradition 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 overcoming the trials of conquering 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 shinko* became popularised and transformed into mountain climbing as a form of recreation.

Still, for Japanese, generally, the holier the mountain is, the more reason to climb it.

The frequency of Japanese tourists climbing Uluru also reflects an imbalance in cultural

A deeper understanding of Australia's complex cultural history would make us Japanese not only reconsider our Uluru fever but also our attitudes towards our own indigenous population, the Ainu people.



and historical understanding between Australia and Japan, with Australians generally having a deeper understanding of Japan than the Japanese do of Australia. A deeper understanding of Australia's complex cultural history would make us Japanese not only reconsider our Uluru fever but also our attitudes towards our own indigenous population, the Ainu people.²

I chose as my object a 'consumable' 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.

1 Hueneke, Hannah and Richard Baker. "Tourist behaviour, local values, and interpretation at Uluru: 'The sacred deed at Australia's mighty heart'". *Geojournal* 74 (2009): 477–490.

2 Nakamura, Kazue. "Inbaransu: ōsutoraria no seijichiriteki tachiba [Imbalance: Geopolitical position of Australia]." *Gendai-shi techō* [Contemporary Poetry Note] 62, no.4 (2019): 126–129.



Kazue Nakamura is a critic and scholar of postcolonial literatures and modern Japanese literature, as well as a writer and translator of poetry, fiction, columns and essays. She began her academic career at the School of Asian Studies, the University of Sydney, and now teaches at Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan. She explores the realms of encounters between different cultures in the field of world literature, feminism, cultural studies and aboriginal arts, merging the styles of academic and creative writing. She is the winner of the Shincho Student Short Story Concours (1988) and the Tekken Heterotopia Prize for Literature (2014); and a finalist for the Nakahara Chuya prize (1998), Hagiwara Sakutarō prize (2014) and Oguma Hideo prize (2014)

for her collections of poetry.