

OBITUARY

In Memoriam: Nelly Naumann

December 20, 1922–September 29, 2000



PROFESSOR NELLY NAUMANN died after a brief but serious illness in her homeland, Baden, Germany, on 29 September 2000.¹ With her death, an extraordinary scholar passed away in the midst of her work. When we say that her passing away means an irreplaceable loss in terms of science as well as human relationships, it is not just a feeling of piety towards her that inspires us to such an expression. At present, while the concept of culture is again receiving increased and critical attention, the scientific approach of Nelly Naumann is known for its incorruptibility, quality, and substance due to her strict adhering to sources. For this she has become known in the cultural sciences beyond the field of her first expertise, Japanese studies (*Japanologie*).

MILESTONES

After successfully passing the final examinations (*Abitur*), Nelly Naumann left the Hebel-Gymnasium of Lörrach (Baden) in 1941 to take up studies at the University of Vienna where she enrolled in Japanology, Sinology, ethnology, and philosophy courses. Her studies of Japan, therefore, came under the strong influence of the culture-historical Vienna School (*Wiener Schule*) of ethnology, an influence reflected in the topic chosen for her doctoral dissertation of 1946, “Das Pferd in Sage und Brauchtum Japans” (The horse in Japan’s mythology and traditions) (published in 1959). After having been awarded a doctorate, she moved to Shanghai where she spent several years until 1954. During this time her Japan-related scientific work was almost completely suspended, but she published a German translation of Takeda Hisayoshi’s work on annual customs in a Japanese village. This translation is testimony to her continued interest in source material concerning the ethnology and folk culture of Japan.

After her return to Germany in 1954, Nelly Naumann worked for some time at the Bayrische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. Around that time she again started research on Japan focussing increasingly on the religious aspects of customs. The result of this effort was an extensive study of the

Japanese mountain deity published between 1963 and 1964. Publication of this work stirred an intensive and fundamental discussion about the Japanese concept of kami. After this it was only a small step for her to a detailed analysis of Japanese myths, which Nelly Naumann began to undertake in her second dissertation to qualify for a position as a university professor (*Habilitation*). The title of her *Habilitation* was “Das Umwandeln des Himmelspfeilers,” and after she finished it in 1970 she continued to pursue the study of Japanese myths for many years. Through a long series of studies in which she addressed numerous specific problems in Japanese mythology, she was able to reveal the meaning of Japanese myths as being basic statements about life and death, and to demonstrate that they form part of a worldview (*Weltbild*) centered on the moon—a worldview that transcends the confines of Japan. Nelly Naumann’s first training in ethnology can be seen in all these studies by her use of iconographic material offered by archaeologists, Sinologists, and classical orientalists and by her use of the written sources. As a particularly memorable example of such a research method I recall a class in which Professor Naumann in a fascinating manner made her students participate in her scientific exploration of “some religious concepts of the Jōmon period,” a topic that she later published an article on in memory of Carl Hentze.

In 1966 Nelly Naumann took up assignments to teach Japanese folklore and ethnology at the universities of Bochum and Münster in Westfalia. Later she began teaching at the University of Freiburg where after her *Habilitation* she came to represent the whole Japanese Department until her retirement in 1985. The Japanese Department in the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Freiburg was always a small-size Department, but due to Naumann’s research interests it was independent and pursued unique topics. These topics were as manifold as Naumann’s interests, which included early history and folk tales as the last reverberations of myth, or belles-lettres. Her diverse interests may be one of the reasons why no such thing as a “school” could emerge.

Although in 1973 she published together with her husband, Wolfram Naumann, a much acclaimed anthology of classical Japanese literature, *Die Zauberschale*, her main field of research had always been Japanese religious thinking prior to the advent and influence of Buddhism. The first summa of her studies on mythology and Shinto was published in 1988 as *Die einheimischen Religionen Japans* in the series “Handbook of Oriental Studies.” Naumann convincingly interprets religious concepts in their context and describes their transformation in history. In a subsequent volume, published in 1994, she pursues these transformations up to the eve of the Edo period. In order to introduce the Japanese myths and her interpretation of them to

a broader general readership, she published *Die Mythen des alten Japan* (1996).

After these insightful treatises on the Japanese religious thinking that evolved over many centuries, Nelly Naumann returned to specific research problems, especially ones concerning Japanese shamanism, which she thought should be defined as a form of shamanism peculiar to Japan. For this work she enlisted the help of the linguist Roy A. Miller. Their cooperation proved to be beneficial not only for Japanology but also for a number of other fields. It is very regrettable that Nelly Naumann is no longer able to continue her research and dedicate herself to it for many more years with the enthusiasm, energy, and intuition that were so characteristic of her.

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CORNERSTONES

Beyond its scientific importance for the immediate field of her research, Nelly Naumann's work had an eminently illuminating influence also on the understanding of modern Japanese society and culture. In her analyses—especially of Japanese mythology—she explicitly turned against some of the main pillars of Japanese self-understanding such as the conviction that Japan is ethnically and culturally homogeneous. She also went against the mainstream of Japanese folklore in the tradition of Yanagita Kunio, and against the traditional conception of *tennō* (emperor), particularly the orthodox interpretation of mythology underlying that conception.

The spiritual foundation of the modern Japanese state from the second half of the Meiji period up to the end of the Pacific War was based on myths in general, and, in particular, the Divine Order (*shinchōku* 神勅) that, as represented in the *Nihongi*, was passed down from Amaterasu-omikami to her grandson Ninigi no mikoto, and then to his descendants. A scientific study of the myths following historical critical methods inevitably collided with such a sacrosanct view of the state as several incidents have demonstrated. Any demonstration of links existing between the native Japanese mythology and traditions of the outside world, especially those of the continent and insular southeast Asia, threatened the dogma of Japan as a self-sufficient “Land of the Gods.”

Under these circumstances the liberating and illuminating influence of an unfettered scientific study of myths that began with the advent of the post-war period cannot be overestimated. Dogmatic propositions about the origin of the Japanese people and its ruling family gave way to an awareness that Japan's ethnogenesis had been an extraordinarily complex and histori-

cally much differentiated process. The origins of Japanese culture were freed from their artificially imposed isolation and put into the general context of East Asian and world history. With the help of comparative analysis, it was possible to provide proof that originally independent groups of myths continued to survive within the total corpus of myths and, therefore, suggested that Japanese culture was structured upon heterogeneous elements. In elucidating with scientific methods these heterogeneous origins of Japanese myths, only a few researchers play an important role, but among them Nelly Naumann deserves to be given a special place of honor.

In her extensive studies on Japanese folklore and religious history, she assumed a consistently historical point of view, which meant that she comprehended the phenomena of tradition in relation to their historical contexts and not as witnesses of a supra-temporal and quasi-metaphysical general Japanese culture. In doing this she implicitly demonstrated the processes of change in the genesis of a culture. There is hardly an example more suitable for demonstrating the fact that culture develops and changes than the Japanese myths Nelly Naumann studied so intensely. While she clearly grasped the political background behind the creation of a state mythology in the eighth century, she succeeded in restoring the original religious meaning of particular mythologems within the total corpus of myths by the means of intensive case analysis. She always stressed in her work that Emperor Temmu (r. 673–686) was the outstanding personality who, for dynastic reasons, pushed for the systematic organization of the myths into a binding mythology, but remained in regards to religion entirely dedicated to Buddhism. The means used to reveal the intrinsic religious quality of the myths was, therefore, historical regression. Only by stepping back into early and pre-historical periods was it possible to discover a cultural historical milieu in which myths still had a genuinely religious meaning. It is a widely spread tendency in Japanese folklore research to find in the wet rice cultivation of the Yayoi period the background that explains not only mythology as such but also the nucleus of Japanese culture conceived as a static phenomenon. Contrary to such tendencies, Nelly Naumann, on the basis of her own painstaking analysis of the sources that included the artifacts of material culture, considered the stratum of early hunters in the Jōmon period as providing a historical template to understand the mythical events.

However, as already suggested above, Naumann was also always aware of the political implications of the subject. Such an understanding finds clear formulation in her definition of the term *shintō*. As she states in a seminal article of 1970, “the meaning of the term *shintō* can be... concretely comprehended as [being coterminous with] the ideal representation of Japanese divine emperorship that includes the divinity of the reigning

emperors and their mandate to rule, imparted by the sun goddess” (1970, 13). The historical construct of the deification of the emperor has to be seen, therefore, as constituting the core of what is meant by the term *shintō*. One of Nelly Naumann’s outstanding contributions to research on the history of Shinto is her demonstration that this view of Shinto existed already in antiquity. As a consequence, explanations that attempt to interpret this politico-dynastic aspect merely as a modern aberration in the history of Shinto are exposed as being entirely unfounded. Shinto, as far as it can be historically traced, has been politically motivated since its beginnings, from the time of Emperor Temmu who knew how to consolidate his power through myths.

Yet, the religious substance of the myths was always the primary scholarly interest of Naumann. This substance, she believed, could be found buried both under the centuries of time before the myths were utilized in the service of a political mythology and within the political mythology itself. Then after excavating this substance, she believed it could be understood by using historical methods. For understanding the early meaning of these myths, Nelly Naumann regarded it as imperative to compare typologically, geographically, and historically relevant parallels from inside and outside of Japan. With this she contrasted sharply with the range of interpretations given by Kokugaku 国学 scholars, which traditionally focused exclusively on Japan. While the concept of *shintō* since the official chronicles of the eighth century remained inseparably linked to state and government, the consideration of the myths themselves threw open the door to the fascinating world of early religiosity in Japan as it was imbedded in the cosmos of the universal history of humankind.

Furthermore, by means of her distinct approach, Nelly Naumann has demonstrated that non-Japanese Japanology, too, can substantially contribute to internal Japanese research, and that in order to achieve this it is not necessary to bring oneself in line with Japan’s scientific mainstream. Because she never shunned controversy with the often authoritatively posing world of science at Japan’s universities, and never allowed herself to be used as a mere mediator or even propagandist of current doctrines, her work received high recognition and in some cases found enthusiastic support in specialized but innovative circles in Japan.

The late Miyata Noboru, a renowned former professor of Japanese folklore studies at Tsukuba University, wrote an article for the daily *Mainichi shinbun* of 15 December 1989 entitled “Learning from Nelly Naumann’s Japanese studies—On the universality of Japanese culture,” which was about the manner in which Japanese scientific research presents itself. In this article, where he also outlines a future course of study, he made the following remark: “Because of their originality, the astute analyses of Mrs

Naumann will certainly have attracted the attention of researchers of a younger generation." However, according to Miyata's judgment, the importance of her work goes beyond the positive effect of a stimulus for Japanese academic specialists. He recognized in Nelly Naumann's work a contribution of fundamental importance to the study of Japanese culture—namely, the questioning of conventional cultural assumptions: "(Nelly Naumann's) opinion that by intensely researching Japan the core of a common culture of humankind could be discovered, pricks the fundamentalists of current cultural studies in Japan because they insist so strongly on the uniqueness of Japanese culture." It is not without irony that the work of a scholar who at home had been repeatedly reproached for lacking contact to the real Japan had been acknowledged in such a sincere manner in present Japan. The fact that Nelly Naumann gained the attention and appreciation of Japanese experts because of her distinct academic approach, her independence as a scholar, and her immanently comparative point of view is worth remembering. One expression of appreciation of her work can be seen in the group of young Japanese folklore scholars that has been formed for the purpose of publishing Nelly Naumann's works in Japanese translation.

In her work, fundamental questions of eminent importance for Japanology are raised. The Japanology as developed by Nelly Naumann was characterized by an ethnological orientation, yet it was also based on philological hermeneutics. Because of this, it never occurred to her to ask whether Japan should be studied from a comparative cultural point of view or not. Being absolutely immuned to any temptations of cultural self-admiration, as is the tradition in Japan, she not only challenged such authorities as Yanagita Kunio but she also furnished proof that early Japanese culture had been embedded in a universal context. She mistrusted too much pontificating on method and theory because, with good reason, she thought that it could obstruct an unbiased view of the sources, which are the only things to be trusted. As for her own methodological approach, we can justifiably call it ethnological in the sense that it was comparative.

As is well known, Japanology in the German speaking world draws its origin from two sources that are different and yet linked in a close reciprocal relationship. On one side there is the Vienna School that can be considered to be part of ethnology, and on the other side there is a philological historical tradition with direct links to native Japanese national philology, or Kokugaku. Although here is not the place to discuss this history further, it is important to realize how her methods contrasted with the academic milieu in which she was working. If Japanology were simply to follow Kokugaku and a folklore science in the sense of the Yanagita School, it would always remain locked up in the isolationist and Japanese ethnocentrist view adopted

by those two lines of thought. However, in the present situation in which Japan, confronted with globalization and internationalization, seeks to free herself from the fetters of a historically transmitted state of intellectual *sakoku* 鎖国, and attempts to overcome the limitations of cultural autism—by reexamining Japan’s relations to the rest of Asia, for example—Naumann’s academic method, which advocates an approach that disregards national borders and is both comparative and universalist, proves to be especially productive. It appears to be a further irony that the very scholar who constantly resisted giving in to the *Zeitgeist* of alleged modernity, found her research topics in Japan’s most remote past, and refused to make concessions to a “present-oriented” Japanology, today offers the most modern scientific approach.

At these times, when even sociology, the leading paradigmatic science of the seventies and eighties, comes to realize that a purely functionalist synchronic approach alone does not lead to substantial insights, and that consideration of the culture historical dimension, i. e., a diachronic approach, is (also) indispensable in order to reach that goal, Nelly Naumann’s style of research provides a methodological model suitable for modern Japanology. Scholars today and in the future will be able to learn much from her rigorous critique of the sources and from her comparative approach, in which she succeeded in reconciling philological hermeneutics with ethnological comparison.

During Japan’s economic boom of the eighties, formulas were asked for that would culturally explain (or exalt) the boom. These formulas were believed to promise the revelation of what was special about Japan or what her cultural “secrets” were. Thus, a serious culture historical comparative approach like the one advocated by Nelly Naumann that would show a fundamental commonness of Japan with the world at large, was not in high demand. The studies at the time focussed on the present and promised insider knowledge, but too often they fell prey to the constructions of *nihon-jinron* 日本人論 studies, and as a result were never interested in the complex and complicated historical truth whose only constant factor is continuous change.

Nelly Naumann’s research interests put her much more into the center of the political and ideological dispute of recent years than she herself possibly realized. Just a few years after the end of World War II, she published in the German speaking world for the first time writings about the early history and mythology of Japan in a way that was contrary to everything that both official Japan and Germany had considered to be sacrosanct until just a few years prior. For her, who was completely unsusceptible to the lure of nationalist interpretations of Japan’s history of religion in the tradition of

Kokugaku, there was but one path she could follow: consult the available sources only, analyze them critically (i.e., by a hermeneutic-comparative method), and keep in mind at the same time the artifacts of material culture while comparing non-Japanese sources. Because of her approach and methods she found it impossible to believe, for example, that the mythical and legendary ruler Iware-biko of the written tradition could have ever become the nationally sublimated figure of Jimmu *tenno* in the sense promoted by Meiji and Shōwa ideology. Ideological constructs of that kind did not find expression in Nelly Naumann's work. For her "Japanese mythology" could be nothing other than a field for research into Japan's early history that had to be approached with the tools of historical criticism of sources and comparison—it was not a means to construct a mysterious national polity. The potentially disruptive nature of Naumann's scholarly work becomes recognizable in this methodological position that rejects any attempt at ideologization. Because of this, Naumann's writings were a precious source of support for those Japanese scholars who after the war rebelled against ideological restrictions and were committed to enlightening the people.

Even long after the end of the war, German Japanology remained marked by an ideologically biased methodology and succeeded only later in freeing itself from the clutches and entanglements of an understanding of what science was to be, which was still rooted in the time of the Axis powers. Within such a Japanology, the conception of the discipline as advocated by Nelly Naumann remained a minor branch. Because both the field of her research ("early history") and her methodology ("comparative, cultural historical") seemed to be hopelessly old-fashioned, the significance of her research was hardly ever recognized. Outside of Germany the situation was quite different, not only in Japan but also in the United States. And, finally, *Asian Folklore Studies*, which offered her an early platform for publishing her research, was not insignificant in making her work known.

All those who were fortunate enough to participate in her seminars will readily agree that Nelly Naumann was not only a scholar who could claim an impressive number of scientific achievements but was also a fascinating academic teacher. Probably only a very few people who have made scholarly contributions of comparable importance as Nelly Naumann have been as unassuming in manners as she was. We, her former students, shall never forget her lectures (as mentioned above by Maria-Verena Blümmel) in which she allowed the students to participate directly in the development of her scientific work by remaining always open to their discussions and controversial opinions. This kind of teaching reflected the instructor's demanding attitude and scientific competence. In the ongoing debate about what academic teaching means, her teaching should be taken as an example that excellent

teaching can only result from excellent research. Nelly Naumann was always ready to listen to her students and to stand by them with help and advise. She often insisted on celebrating the end of the semester with fresh home-made cake in the garden of her house in Sulzburg.

Now, as Nelly Naumann is no longer with us, her work and her understanding of science can serve as a source for present and future Japanology to draw from. We will always remember her in gratitude.

NOTE

1. The present obituary is a slightly revised version of an earlier German text published in *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens*, No. 167–170, 2000–2001, 7–22. We thank the publisher for the permission to use it again.

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