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Ethnic legacy is no excuse

Junko Deguchi (May 5) doesn't like whale meat, but she apparently wants whaling to continue in order to preserve Japan's ethnic identity. If she is really worried about the demise of this country's ethnic legacy, there are plenty of other things she might like to consider campaigning for.

For example, has she noticed the way in which people in high places who are involved in bribe-taking and other financial scandals don't commit *seppuku* anymore? Not only are Shin Kanemaru, Yasuhiro Nakasone, Kakuei Tanaka and Noboru Takeshita guilty of impropriety in public life, they have also contributed to the demise of Japan's ethnic legacy by not killing themselves.

In the 17th century, about the same time that some Japanese people began hunting whales in a methodic way, the government established a tradition of killing any foreigners found in Japan, including shipwrecked sailors. Foreign pressure eventually brought this custom to an end, but in the interest of maintaining Japan's ethnic legacy it could be revived. It would certainly help allay the fears of those Japanese who believe that antiwhaling foreigners are "our foes."

Japan's ethnic legacy is a hotchpotch of customs, some created by local communities over the centuries, others by government decree overnight. When expedient, supposedly indispensable old customs are quickly discarded and new ones are adopted, often wholesale. Examples include the demise of the feudal system in the Meiji Period and the overhaul of the emperor system after World War II.

I could go on quoting examples to demonstrate that so much Japanese tradition has been created and destroyed down the ages that the term "Japan's ethnic legacy" now means anything you want it to, but what's the point.

Now that the samurai's right to carry a sword and the divinity of the Emperor have been swept aside by "progress," I can't see that Japan has any ethnic legacy left worth defending. Henceforth your habits and customs will have to stand on their own merits.

So Deguchi, if you want to talk about whaling, you'd be wise to leave appeals to tradition out of it. After all, if Japan had maintained its ethnic legacy intact since the Tokugawa Period, as a woman you wouldn't even have been allowed to express an opinion.

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