A Swarming, a Wolfing, a Godling

The last Japanese wolf (Canis lupus hodophilax) was shot in Higashi-Yoshino (Nara Prefecture) in 1905 (Meiji 38). Its corpse was bought by an American zoologist and transported to the Natural History Museum in London, where it stays to this day. The sad remains of the last wolf of Japan are stretched unnaturally in a glass case in one of the closed-off research rooms of the Museum. Although requested by the authorities in Higashi-Yoshino, it was never returned to Japan.

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The attempts of the extermination of wolves have been commonplace around the world. The case of Japan, however, is particularly interesting, as it was a country where wolves were once revered as gods.

Unlike in Western cultures, where wolves were considered pests, Japanese referred to wolves as good animals (the Chinese character 狼 is made of two elements, “beast” and “good”) that brought luck and protected against evil powers. The difference between the attitude stems from the difference in food cultures. In Europe, where animal products such as meat and dairy constituted the substantial part of the diet, wolves were the enemy who killed the livestock. For the Japanese—who followed mostly pescatarian diet—wolves were allies who protected crops from overpopulous deers and boars. In animistic Japan, wolves were thus referred to as one of the most important messengers of gods or worshipped as the mountain gods themselves. Wolves belonged to the inaccessible mountains, which represented “the other world”: the realm of the spirits. The remains of the

wolf worship (狼信仰) can be traced in dozens of shrines around the country but also in the language. The word 狼　ōkami is a homophone of 大神, the "great god." The binomial name of the Japanese wolf, "hodophilax," meaning "the guardian of the path" in Greek, comes from a belief that wolves protected travellers traversing through mountains and guided them safely home.

Japanese anti-wolf sentiments arose in the Edo period, when humans began to stretch their habitat and enter more boldly into the mountains—the holy space that was formerly feared and respected. By that time, a large part of the forests had already been deforested
as a consequence of soaring human population. The proximity of humans led to the transfer of rabies from dogs to wolves. The previously human-avoidant protectors of crops suddenly turned into madly aggressive, blood-thirsty beasts who posed a risk to travellers and inhabitants of secluded areas.

Another consequence of the closer human-wolf interaction was the hybridisation between dogs and wolves. In fact, the taxonomy of the Japanese wolf is still a controversial issue. There is an ongoing academic debate whether the animals traditionally referred to as ōkami (wolves) and yamainu (mountain dogs) were the same or two separate species. Furthermore, there has been a discussion whether the Japanese wolf was a separate canine species (Canis) or just a subspecies of the grey wolf (Canis lupus). The zoological mystery gets even more complex, as we can consider the Japanese dog breeds like akita or shiba-inu, genetically-speaking, the closest dog relatives of wolves.

The real war against wolves, however, began as Japan entered Meiji era and turned its system of habits, values and beliefs upside-down. By taking in the Western culture, Japan also took in the Western diet style and, consequently, the hatred for wolves. As Japan, with the teeth of the

Emperor Meiji, took its first bite of beef in 1872 (Meiji 4), the extermination of wolves, informed by wolf-killing specialists invited from America, began.

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In 1882 (Meiji 14), Frederick Nietzsche famously wrote that “the God is dead.” These words are considered as a critique of the Western culture – the culture that Meiji Japan was desperate to mimic. Christianity created the culture that brought the Age of Enlightenment that hardened the rational, materialistic, and, consequently, capitalist approach to the universe. This culture created the reality that did not allow the existence of such thing as “God.” The Christian God created modern Europe and modern Europe killed the God. By taking in the Western culture, Japan also had to kill its “god”.

The god that Japan decided to crucify was, however, a god from a different paradigm. The Japanese god was a grey-haired “Large-Mouth Pure God” (大口の真神) that roamed the other-world’s realm, the realm that was in the woods just behind the village, on its four paws. It was a howling god that guarded crops and controlled the population of deers and boars. It was a “home-sending god” that observed the travellers during their hikes. It was an animistic god. It was a plural, one-of-the-many god. This was the god that belonged to the Earth, that was “true to the Earth,” as Nietzsche would say through Zarathustra.

Nietzsche’s philosophy, read from the perspective of eco-criticism, is the philosophy of the Earth. In contrast to Hegel who repeatedly used the word “World” in his state-centered and progress-oriented philosophy, Nietzsche would use the word “Earth.” He himself, unlike other Western thinkers,

focused on putting his philosophy into practice. He believed, very much like ascetics in “the Far East,” that philosophy is something one should live by. He experimented with daily routines, such as dieting. One of the forms of “philosophical living” was also hiking. Around 1880, Nietzsche decided to move away from the city, away from civilisation, to stay closer to nature. Just as the last Japanese wolves were roaming the soon-to-be-destroyed mountains in Japan, Nietzsche spent most of his time hiking in the Swiss Alps. And just like a Japanese shugenja, he would meditate during his walks and think about the direction of the civilisation and the relationship between humans and nature. It was during one of these hikes, in Sils Maria, on 6 August 1881 (Meiji 13), that he experienced his moment of satori, enlightenment, when he was struck by the concept of the “eternal recurrence.” That experience became the inspiration for Thus spoke Zarathustra.

Some eco-critic scholars argue that Nietzsche foresaw the ecological catastrophe that Western civilisation would bring. He was highly critical of the concept of “progress,” promoted by the likes of Hegel. Nietzsche lived in the time of rapid industrialisation and globalisation of the New Imperialist Era. He observed how the world of science was becoming obsessed with measuring, hierarchisation, systematisation and reductionism, developing typologies and taxonomies, dividing humans into races, dividing species into subspecies, turning nature into resources, and putting nature’s representatives into glass cases in museums of natural history.

Western civilisation wanted to understand the world through division and reduction. It failed to understand that the world is, what Gills Deleuze called, a rhizome rather than a hierarchical tree: non-hierarchical, non-linear, ever-changing and interconnected multiplicity: a labyrinth of potentialities without the beginning and ending. The Japanese wolves and other gods stem exactly from the rhizome permeating the ground, hidden underneath the forest duff in the mountains.

The Western scientific paradigm struggled when it encountered something that was hard to classify and hierarchise – is it a wolf or a wild dog? It struggles to understand the relation between humans and nature – are culture and nature really separate realms? It struggles right now, at this very moment, to save the world from the climate catastrophe and save the few species that survived the 6th mass extinction.

The Japanese wolves/mountain dogs became the enemies of the "progress," thus they had to die. They were reduced to 0, just like the white wolves from the dream of Freud's famous patient, the Wolf-Man. In their critique of Freud's dream-interpretation, Deleuze and Guattari pointed to the absurdity of the reductionism of classic psychoanalysis: the pack of 7 wolves perching on a tree was reduced to one wolf, and then to 0 wolves, then castrated. The West does not understand the multiplicity. It prefers "oneness" (or even "zero-ness"). It focuses on the individuality, as it feels uneasy with the multitude. And yet, Deleuze and Guattari would argue, every individual always belongs to some pack(s) of wolves. We are plural.

What we have left after the death of god is 0, the lack: the lack of wolves; the lack of howling in the mountains; the silence. We lost a pack of wolves we belonged to. What we have left is an absurd corpse—just one specimen in a glass box—in a museum of colonial heritage, and a monument in Higashi-Yoshino: a silent village which tries to build its identity on that very lack.