

MARKSCHEME

November 2001

SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Higher Level

Paper 1

Extract (pp. 81-95) from Anne Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

1. Identify *three* different meanings that the *obentō* and the ritual of eating it carry for the Japanese nursery-school child.

[6 marks]

First, the *obentō* represents a comforting reminder of home and mother as young Japanese children confront a “threatening” outside world. Second, it provides for them a specific image of the role of mothers, as persons who can be expected to make sacrifices to meet the needs of children. Third, the eating ritual and its rules convey to the young children the message that they now must conform to the social expectations of schools and social life in general. Candidates may come up with more abstract formulations of each of these meanings: the third point, for example, can be framed as a statement that the child is now part of a community of equals and superiors, whose needs and requirements the child must attend to.

Good answers will recognize that these various meanings are of varied nature. The “comforting” symbolism of the *obentō* is an emic explanation, closely tied to the Japanese view that young children’s initial encounter with the world outside the home is a potentially traumatic experience, and that the child should be provided with emotional crutches to render the encounter less frightening. In contrast, the image of motherhood that children obtain from the *obentō* is an analytic finding, and one that most Japanese mothers and teachers would not articulate overtly (and may even greet with suspicion and hostility). The meaning of the *obentō*-eating ritual sits somewhere in between these two levels of analysis, depending on its formulation.

Candidates may opt for a variety of ways of organizing their answer, with equal potential for success. The important criterion here is the candidate’s ability to discover and formulate three distinct meanings, to support their arguments with specific and relevant examples from the passage, and to describe them in their own words.

2. **What is the explicit reason for requiring mothers to create aesthetically pleasing *obentōs*, and in what way is this reason only partial?** [6 marks]

Answers to this question may invoke some material of relevance to Question 1, but they must focus on the situation from adults' perspectives, rather than the child's, which is what Question 1 is about.

Japanese mothers are expected to spend time preparing beautiful *obentō* because Japanese adults believe that such beauty encourages children to eat in an efficient, orderly, and thorough manner. This in turn makes them conform to the expectations and needs of teachers and fellow students, and ultimately turns them into good, conforming, and sensitive citizens. However, Allison notes that some children have no difficulty in eating all of their food without fussing, and yet these children's mothers continue to spend time and energy on the presentation of the *obentō*. She thus deduces that the aesthetic aspects of the *obentō* are grounded in deeper and more complex dynamics. The insistence that *obentō* be nicely prepared is a subtle way in which mothers of small children are "trained" into a particular way of seeing themselves: as highly involved managers of the household and its members, particularly children; and as bearers of the responsibility for the children's success in school and life.

The analysis is particularly compelling in that the *obentō* appears at first glance to be a rather inconsequential object, yet the implications of its production are far-reaching. The best answers will highlight this striking observation, either explicitly or implicitly, and frame Allison's ethnographic analysis as an instance of how state institutions like schools can regulate minute details of people's daily existence. The question also offers candidates an opportunity to explore the differences between explicitly articulated analysis that participants themselves can offer, and the more covert analysis that an anthropologist aims for. Candidates may use a variety of terms to describe this phenomenon (*e.g.*, emic versus etic account, inside versus outside view, models and concepts are never neutral). The two types of analysis may differ radically, although anthropologists should be careful not to think of their own analysis as proofs that their informants are "wrong": informants' understandings are always partial and tied to particular agendas and positions, but have validity in the context of informants' lives. (Anthropologists' explanations are also partial and biased, but hopefully in more self-reflective ways.)

3. **Compare the covert exertion of institutional power on Japanese mothers with the way in which institutional power is exerted on another group in a different society.** [8 marks]

This question provides candidates with the opportunity to demonstrate their comparative skills and their understanding of the workings of institutional power. A broad variety of comparative situations can be used here: from the more obvious instance of the institutional control of prisoners to more subtle forms of power that institutions exert on the sick, the elderly, migrants, and company employees. The best answers will touch on both differences and similarities between the two situations. To receive more than [4 marks], candidates must explicitly design their answers as comparisons, and clearly identify the name, location, ethnographer and ethnographic present of the comparative material.
