Journal of South Asian Research
Vol. 1, No. 1, 2023, pp. 63-82

URL: www.arfjournals.com
https://DOI: 10.47509/JSAR.2023.v01i01.06

A DOCTOR WHO TURNED THE AFGHAN DESERT GREEN: RECTIFYING INTERNATIONAL AID THROUGH "PURE EXPERIENCE"

Katsu Masaki
Hirao School of Management, Konan University, Hyogo, Japan, 8-33 Takamatsu-cho, Nishinomiya-shi, Hyogo 663-8204 Japan. E-mail: masakik101@gmail.com

Abstract: This study examines the activities of Dr. Nakamura Tetsu—a humanitarian who served many years in Afghanistan, initially as a physician and eventually as the supervisor of a canal-building project. The project commenced in 2002 and restored greenery in areas affected by the Central Asian drought of 2000, which drove farmers away from their land to become refugees or mercenaries in armed conflicts. Nakamura thus addressed the root cause of the country's worsening security situation and defied the following parameter of post-9/11 international aid to Afghanistan, colored by the US-led "War on Terror" stabilization agenda; this agenda was a futile attempt to bring the "backward" country into the light of a market economy and democracy, consistent with the liberal peace paradigm. In this study, the notion of "pure experience" propounded by philosopher Nishida Kitaro is drawn on to describe how Nakamura led his team to forge "productive" international–local relations—the mainstay of the local turn that has gained acclaim as an alternative to the liberal peace paradigm proliferating externally driven interventions. Nishida's philosophy facilitates the explication of how Nakamura worked constructively with the people to turn the Afghan desert green, while arriving at a profound understanding of the on-the-ground realities.

Keywords: Afghan reconstruction; global warming; international aid; local turn; pure experience

Received : 20 March 2023
Revised : 11 April 2023
Accepted : 30 April 2023
Published : 30 June 2023

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Katsu Masaki (2023). A Doctor Who Turned the Afghan Desert Green: Rectifying International Aid through "Pure Experience", *Journal of South Asian Research,* 1: 1, pp. 63-82.

1. Introduction

In the post-9/11 era, international aid came to be channeled to countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq for the foreign policy objective of winning the "War on

Terror" to ostensibly liberate Muslim societies from Islamic fundamentalism. This represents a more intensive form of the prevailing liberal peace paradigm (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013, pp. 777–778) promulgating liberal ideas of free-market economies, democracy and individual human rights.

Against this background, the notion of the local turn, which earlier won acclaim in peacebuilding research and practice after the end of the Cold War, has been revitalized since the 2000s (Paffenholz, 2015, pp. 858–859). The local turn, intended to bridge the gap between the peacebuilder's blueprints and local perceptions, was revived in the wake of the failure of the liberal peace paradigm in Afghanistan and Iraq. The paradigm proved unable to achieve its ambition of replacing "illiberal" institutions with liberal institution-building (Moe & Stepputat, 2021, p. 294).[1]

At the same time, there are increasing calls among peacebuilding researchers for an "empirical turn" within the local turn (Paffenholz, 2015, p. 858). While aid workers came to "show a shifting sensibility" to the local turn, international aid for peacebuilding remains beset with the "imposition-ownership dilemma" arising from the inherent difficulty of narrowing the discrepancy between peacebuilders' blueprints and local perceptions (Bargués-Pedreny & Randazzo, 2018, p. 1549).

Against this background, this study discusses Nakamura Tetsu, a Japanese physician who worked in Afghanistan with the support of Japanese NGOs for over three decades; he succeeded in forging_"'productive' international-local relations" (Moore, 2013, as cited in Mac Ginty 2015, p. 846) —a major issue deterring an empirical turn within the local turn in peacebuilding. He received numerous awards, including the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Peace and International Understanding in 2003. In December 2019, he was killed in an ambush by gunmen while traveling to the project site in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province.

Nakamura began his involvement with Afghanistan in 1984—the period during which the country was trapped in the proxy war between the Soviet Union and the US, owing to the former's invasion in 1979. The Soviet army pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, and this was followed by a civil war that resulted in the Taliban's seizure of Kabul—the capital city—in 1996. However, the Taliban's rule did not last long, as it was ousted in late 2001 amidst the air strikes led by the US in response to the 9/11 attacks.

During those tumultuous years, Nakamura launched clinics in Afghan villages, and as the drought of 2000 led to increased rural malnutrition and displacement, initiated the excavation and renovation of wells. This initiative

eventually evolved into the Afghan Green Ground project, which constructed irrigation facilities to restore greenery in a locality that was once a rich farming belt in eastern Afghanistan.

The project was seminal in that it was based on Nakamura's practical knowledge of how the drought had driven farmers away from their land to join armed conflicts. Accordingly, the project de facto sought to address one of the root causes of the country's worsening security situation. This was in contrast to the liability of aid projects to pursue short-term, quick-impact-oriented objectives (Kapstein, 2017, p. 6) due to the country's intense security environment.[2]

How can we explain the project's success irrespective of the severity of the security environment and humanitarian catastrophes? What made Nakamura determined to defy a major parameter of international aid for Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era, colored by the US-led "War on Terror" —which aimed to bring the "backward" country into the light of a market economy and democracy consistent with the liberal peace paradigm? How did Nakamura lead his team to forge "productive" international–local relations?

To answer these questions, this study draws on the notion of pure experience proposed by Nishida Kitaro (1870–1945) in his first book *An Inquiry into the Good* (1990), which was originally published in 1911. Pure experience means to "rid ourselves of the self and merge with the object of thought" (Nishida, 1990, p. 13) and "to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications" arising from abstract concepts and categories detached from reality (Nishida, 1990, p. 3).

This definition of pure experience was derived from Nishida's Zen meditative practices. His goal when publishing *An Inquiry into the Good* in 1911 was to depict how the molding of human nature takes place at its deepest level, attained during Zen meditative practices, as far as he could (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 6). This is out of his realization that certain aspects of Zen cannot be grasped explicitly through reasoned arguments founded on theoretical clarity and logical consistency.

This does not imply, however, that Nishida stressed the superiority of Zen practices (which he had given up by 1908) or more broadly, Eastern thought that underlies them. Nishida drew inspiration from several Western philosophers, most notably William James and Henri Bergson, who argued for grounding philosophy in experience rather than abstract ideas (Chia, 2003, p. 968). Nishida sought to carry them one step further, and "reconcile the

intuitive, nonreflective consciousness cultivated in the East with the logical, reflective consciousness cultivated in Western philosophy" (Heisig, 2001, pp. 29–30).

While pure experience is often misconstrued as psychologism, Nishida's intention was to describe ethical conduct not as "a mere event inside consciousness" but as "an action that takes its goal as the creation of an objective result in this world of facts" (Nishida, 1990, p. 136). This study accordingly draws on the notion of pure experience, to analyze how Nakamura cultivated his commitment to greening the drought-hit areas—the issue that remained largely unaddressed under the sway of the "War on Terror" stabilization agenda.

This study first explains how Nishida's notion of pure experience can facilitate an empirical turn within the local turn by helping aid workers shed arbitrary mental additions that would detract from an understanding of the on-the-ground reality and thus from sustainable peacebuilding. The following section describes Nakamura's travails and achievements in restoring greenery in the drought-affected areas. The study then discusses how Nakamura grasped the plight of drought-stricken farmers in Afghanistan, while literally going though pure experience. The concluding section draws implications for those involved in peacebuilding.

2. Theoretical Framework

Nishida's notion of pure experience is suited to the purpose of this study because it helps elucidate how aid workers are prompted to "know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications," to repeat the above quote. This attribute of pure experience helps to describe how Nakamura led his team to forge "productive" international–local relations—the mainstay of an empirical turn within the local turn, to attenuate the external interventionist nature of peacebuilding.

To advance an empirical turn within the local turn, an "inductive methodology" of iterative exploration is called for (de Coning, 2018, p. 310). This is against the backdrop of the need for a more rigorous form of empiricism in peacebuilding as the local turn tends to lapse into a "decontextualized ritual" (Bräuchler, 2018, p. 20). Aid agencies tend to portray local communities as homogenous, benign entities devoid of the influence of power dynamics (Bräuchler, 2018, p. 20). The local turn should be based on a far more rigorous scrutiny of how "the local" remains vulnerable to co-option by political elites (Piccolino, 2019, p. 358).[3]

2.1. Nishida's empiricism diluting the subject/object distinction

In exploring an empirical turn in peacebuilding, Nishida's empiricism helps to elucidate a way to rectify the liability of the local turn to disregard the complexity surrounding conflict-affected localities. Pure experience takes place when "the knower and the known are not two but one" (Abe, 1990, p. xvii) or "prior to the distinction between subject and object" (Abe, 1990, p. xvii). This empiricism of Nishida is in stark contrast to orthodox empiricism, which posits that an object merely waits to be mapped out under the prerogative of an active subject.[4]

Nishida described the significance of diluting the subject/object distinction on the following grounds: reality manifests itself when our consciousness enters into a unified state, in which "there is not self apart from things" (Nishida, 1990, p. 65). This assertion accords with Zen practices aimed to reach the transcendental unity that surpasses the subject/object dichotomy and thus bring about a revelation of the essence of reality from within oneself (Schinzinger, 1958, p. 15).

When we enter into a unified state that dilutes the subject/object distinction, "the union of thinking, feeling, and willing" is attained (Nishida, 1990, p. 51). Nishida thus mobilized these three major types of mental content, namely, to argue that true reality is "established through our feeling and willing": it is crucial, instead of thinking merely rationally and intellectually with recourse to abstract concepts and categories, to "satisfy intellectual demands as well as the demands of feeling and the will" (Nishida, 1990, pp. 49–50).

While this stance could be misinterpreted as a form of mysticism, it represents nondual thinking that avoids downplaying the subject/object distinction altogether: it seeks to overstep the distinction that is "built into our language of experience" (Ong, 2004, p. 48). Pure experience serves to clear the mind before engaging in thinking that entails the subject/object distinction. When we "rid ourselves of the self and merge with the object of thought" and "consider this straightforwardly," "the activity of thinking constitutes a kind of pure experience" (Nishida, 1990, p. 13).

Likewise, an empirical turn in peacebuilding can be attained when aid workers blend in with local societies, thereby diluting the international/local (subject/object) divide. It is advisable that aid workers avoid solely engaging in rational and dispassionate thought that relies on abstract concepts and categories. Rational thought tends to carve chunks out of the entire spectrum of reality and thus detracts from the complex characteristics of conflict-affected areas.

2.2. Good conduct articulated from inner consciousness

The importance of avoiding mere adherence to rational thought led Nishida to problematize the "rational or intellectual theory" of ethics prevailing in moral philosophy (Nishida, 1990, p. 111). First, although the "rational or intellectual theory" can depict the universality of certain moral laws (such as "love thy neighbor"), "the will [to obey those laws] arises from feelings or impulses, not from mere abstract logic" (Nishida, 1990, p. 113). Second, the "rational or intellectual theory" thus "can neither provide a theoretical articulation of moral motivation nor in practice give active content to the good" (Nishida, 1990, p. 114).

Alternatively, while going through pure experience, one can arrive at a situation in which "knowledge [about true reality] is accompanied by the performance of the will [to translate it into ethical conduct]" (Nishida, 1990, pp. 90–91). This is because in pure experience, our thinking about what constitutes reality is "established through our feeling and willing" and "the knower and the known [about what good conduct is] are not two but one."

This characteristic of Nishida's theory should pave the way for good conduct to arise from one's inner consciousness, and thus to denote "something with a particular meaning unique to the person" who is in the original and independent state of consciousness (Nishida, 1990, p. 130). Unlike the "rational or intellectual" approach, value judgements do not arise externally but are propelled by the "internal demands of consciousness" bringing forth "the individuality of the self" (Nishida, 1990, p. 137).

As noted above, aid workers "show a shifting sensibility" to the need of locally grounded scenarios of peacebuilding. Against this background, Nishida's theory of ethics elucidates a way of enabling them to translate their "sensibility" into action, in search of "something with a particular meaning unique to each of them." Nishida's theory thus helps to prevent aid from lapsing into a "decontextualized ritual."

In addition, according to Nishida, "the individuality of the self" entails "social consciousness" at its base and thus gives rise to "a greater social good in us" (1990, p. 138). This allows us to "reach the quintessence of good conduct" (Nishida, 1990, pp. 134–135), which "takes as its goal the creation of an objective result in this world of facts," to repeat the earlier quote. The actualization of individuality therefore accords us supreme satisfaction and enables us to be an indispensable part of worldmaking (Nishida, 1990, p. 137).

Nishida's notion of pure experience is instrumental in elucidating how non-hierarchical relations are forged in lieu of the international/local divide,

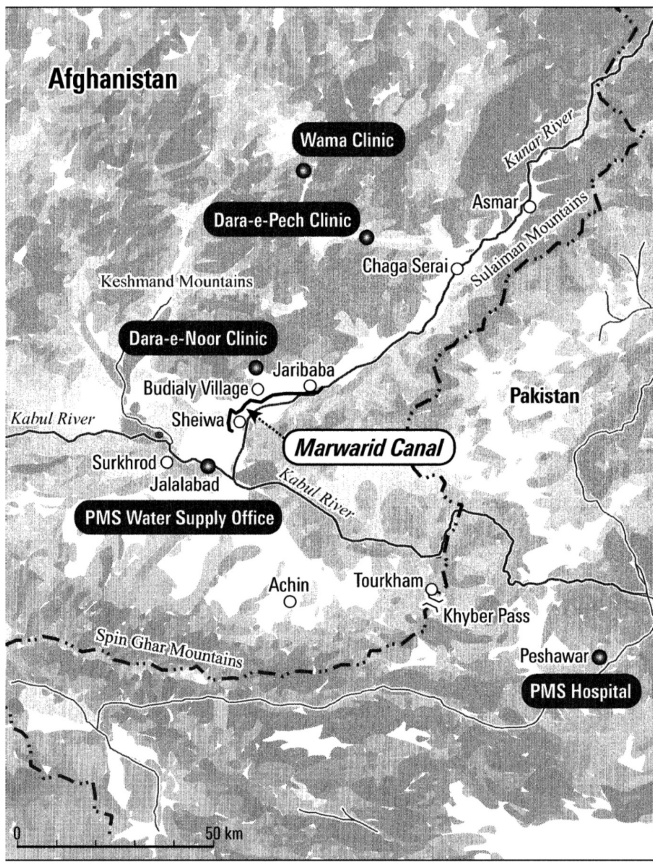

Figure 1: Peace Japan Medical Services' hospital, clinics, and canal

Source: Nakamura, 2020, p. 7.

which hampers an empirical turn within the local turn. Aid workers arrive at a profound understanding of the "quintessence of good conduct" and cultivate the inner consciousness to act on it. They become motivated to be an indispensable part of peacebuilding, while engaging in a rigorous scrutiny of "the local" to uncover hidden voices in conflict-torn localities.

3. Findings

Nishida's influence can be ascertained in Nakamura Tetsu's memoir, titled *Providence Was with Us: How a Japanese Doctor Turned the Afghan Desert Green* (the English translation of his book, published in Japanese in 2013). In the memoir, he mentions his admiration for Nishida since his university days (2020, p. 28). Nishida's influence can be observed in the manner in which Nakamura

conducted his humanitarian activities although it is not explicitly referred to in any of his 17 books or numerous essays written in Japanese.[5]

3.1. Evolving medical treatment into livelihood improvement

Nakamura's involvement with Afghanistan started in 1984, when he was placed by an NGO in the leprosy ward of a governmental hospital in Peshawar, Pakistan. More than half of the patients in his ward were of Afghan nationality, who fled from the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989) to the border areas within Pakistan.

Nakamura then set up emergency health centers in refugee camps, and subsequently started preparing for opening clinics in war-torn villages in Nangarhar, the adjacent Afghan province. During this period, Nakamura and his colleagues founded an NGO, which would later be renamed the Peace Japan Medical Services (PMS). Three clinics were subsequently opened in Nangarhar between 1990 and 1994. PMS also established a 70-bed hospital in Peshawar in 1998.

When a drought hit all of Central Asia in 2000, more than half of the Afghan population was affected and their farmland turned to deserts, thus causing their food production to drop or halt completely. PMS clinics resultantly witnessed an increase in the number of patients suffering from diseases due to malnutrition and the lack of clean drinking water. Most of the illnesses "could have been avoided if people had an adequate supply of food and clean drinking water" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 60).

PMS decided to repair existing groundwater irrigation facilities, and to initiate the excavation and renovation of wells to provide safe drinking water in drought-stricken areas. While these undertakings helped some farmers resume farming and obtain clean drinking water, they "just about reached the limit" of what could be done "to secure water sources" (2020, p. 79). The drought caused the water table to fall, thereby preventing farmers from securing sufficient volumes of water.

Nakamura also heard local residents saying that the snow lines on high mountain ranges, feeding agricultural land, had been receding year by year. The narrative relating to global warming tallied with what he had observed in Sheiwa district's Dara-e-Noor valley, where PMS had been operating a clinic since 1991. Two medium-sized rivers that flowed in the valley—once known as a rich farming belt in northern Nangarhar—had gradually dried up over the years. In addition, the unprecedented rise in temperatures in early summer caused the snow to melt suddenly, which resulted in occasional

floods. "Dealing with climate change, which was producing both flooding and drought conditions, should have been top priority" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 82).

In May 2002, PMS began preparing for a project that would draw water from the great Kunar River into the Dara-e-Noor valley. For this purpose, a water intake and a 13-kilometer-long canal (Marwarid Canal, see Figure 1) were to be built. Its goal was to restore 3,000 hectares of land that had turned into a desert. Nakamura had travelled around the planned area several times during the period when the rural clinics were being established. He was therefore familiar with the topography, which gave him "the audacity to take on the challenge" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 87).

Learning that the irrigation techniques used in Afghanistan needed to be upgraded to adapt to climate change, Nakamura went on to study riparian engineering by reading books and learning from specialists. He also visited irrigation channels in Japan to research techniques that could be applied in Afghanistan. Care was taken to 'avoid relying excessively on modern mechanical power or technology' in order that local farmers could maintain and repair the canal in the long run (Nakamura, 2020, p. 90).

3.2. Turning drought-stricken land into lush greenery

It was against this background that Nakamura's team constructed the 13-kilometre canal. The project encountered a series of problems, including occasional flooding, mistargeted attacks on the project sites by the US military, malfeasance by staff, conflicts between residents living on both sides of the canal, and disputes about land acquisition. The first phase of the project was completed in April 2007, to revive more than 1,200 hectares of farmland. It had drawn around 600 million yen—the balance of the funds raised for food distribution during the air strikes led by the US in response to the 9/11 attacks.[6]

Nakamura's team then decided to proceed to the second phase—greening all of Sheiwa district, which contains approximately 3,500 hectares of farmland. During the first phase, approximately 500 workers had mastered the skills required for canal construction, which included surveying, producing clay pipes and gabions, excavating bedrock, extracting stones and planting trees. Moreover, Nakamura's team had unintentionally been freed from most medical duties, which enabled them to focus on the construction of the canal.[7]

For this purpose, the canal required a 19-kilometer extension from the intake gate (or a seven-kilometer extension from the end point of the phase-one canal) until the end of the Gamberi Desert, which Nakamura called the "4-by-20 kilometer valley of death" (2020, p. 124). He had heard of countless

people dying while attempting to cross the valley during periods of intense sunlight and fierce sandstorms. He had also seen the rusted remains of tanks used in the Soviet-Afghan war (Nakamura, 2020, p. 126).

The Gamberi Desert posed three major difficulties for the project. First, the canal would have to pass through numerous deep and wide valleys that are susceptible to flash floods in times of downpour (Nakamura, 2020, pp. 144–146). Second, water could leak through coarse-grained sandy soil—potentially causing seepage loss that would amount to approximately 30 percent of the water flow (Nakamura, 2020, pp. 146–148). Third, the desert reclamation necessitated the creation of erosion-control forests (Nakamura, 2020, pp. 151–154).

Nakamura's team overcame these technical issues by formulating the ideas of utilizing reservoirs, stone walls and indigenous vegetation. Moreover, they were blessed with the cooperation of various people (Nakamura, 2020, pp. 134–142). A businessperson willingly rented Nakamura's team heavy machinery although most others declined to do so in areas where their equipment could be

Figure 2: The scene after water began to flow into the Gamberi cross-desert canal [August 10, 2009]

Source: Nakamura, 2020, p. iii.

Figure 3: The Gamberi Desert nearly ten years after the canal's completion [August 27, 2019]

Source: Nakamura, 2020, p. iii.

damaged easily. The representative of the local irrigation department ensured that his officials did not extort money from the project. An officer of the US military helped to reverse its peremptory decision to turn one of the project's reservoirs into a fish pond as part of its "reconstruction" efforts.

The canal was originally planned to be completed by the spring of 2009, but the construction site was within several hundred meters of the target as of July 2009. Despite some of the workers collapsing from exhaustion due to the arduous work, they did not hesitate to continue to work in the hot sands of the desert during the summer; many of them had been farmers in the vicinity and hoped to summon their families back upon the project's completion (Nakamura 2020, p. 154). The canal opened in August 2009. If the construction had been further delayed, the duration of the project would have had to be extended to the following year. "Our site manager, who had formerly led a guerrilla unit, told me that even during his jihadi days he had never seen such heroism" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 154).

As a result, "the valley of death" was transformed into "a valley of plenty" where about 150,000 people (re)started engaging in farming and where forest buffer strips protected farmland from sandstorms and floods (Nakamura 2020, p. 158). "We did what we could to create practical examples, thinking that if policymakers recognized the value of our work, that should naturally lead to implementation of more such projects" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 177).

Accordingly, the fruits of the project eventually spilled over to other localities and activities. Several weirs and embankments were either rehabilitated or newly constructed, some of which were supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). A training center was also established to develop human resources for water-use facilities with the assistance of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

4. Lessons

Nakamura's humanitarian activities corroborate the significance of pure experience, in which one comes "to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications." This is in the sense that Nakamura abstained from an act of abstraction treating the object of his thinking as an entity apart from himself, to grasp the practical reality of the country, not dispassionate knowledge.

This is evidenced by his description of seeing women walking for days to the clinic with their malnourished children: "No person with children of their own could help weeping at the sight of these bereft mothers" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 60). In this way, in line with Nishida's empiricism, Nakamura did not separate the object of his thinking (namely, the Afghan people's well-being) from his subjective feelings and willingness (to alleviate their plight that he saw at the grassroots level).

"No matter what, the first thing is to make it possible for people to live" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 74). Nakamura noted this while drawing on his knowledge about the practical conditions surrounding Afghan farmers, whom he saw leaving their drought-stricken land to become refugees or mercenaries for armed groups. By nurturing his commitment to redressing their plight, Nakamura virtually put into practice Nishida's call to cause the good to be "articulated from the internal demands of consciousness, not from without."

4.1. Good conduct underpinned by individuality and social consciousness

Nakamura's intention to "make it possible for people to live" surfaced as "something with a particular meaning unique to himself," in line with Nishida's

assertion that good conduct reflects "the individuality of the self." Nakamura used to say, "Where everyone goes, someone else goes, and we go where no one else goes," according to a leading figure at the PMS' administrative office in Japan (Fukumoto, 2009, p. 56). In an interview with a newspaper reporter, Nakamura stated, "You can't just leave people in serious trouble behind, can you?" (Ishikawa, 2019).

Moreover, as per Nishida's dictum, Nakamura's good conduct was not only founded on his individuality but was also accompanied by his "social consciousness" of broader issues surpassing the scope of aid projects. Nakamura raised questions about global politics that prioritized the "War on Terror" while ignoring the drought afflicting Afghan farmers. "Afghanistan would not see a revival if its farm villages did not come back to life" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 84).[8]

For example, in an essay originally published in 2010, Nakamura predicted that "[t]he fictitious worldview, built on fabrications that summon yet more fabrications, collapses when it is found to be unfounded" (Nakamura, 2021, p. 109). The "War on Terror" ended in failure as US troops withdrew in 2021, as did aid for Afghan reconstruction and state-building. The latter's "progress has been elusive and the prospects for sustaining this are dubious," as admitted by a US government agency (Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, 2021, p. vii).[9]

Against this background, from a broader perspective, the canal construction that brought farmers back to their land represented "the promotion of 'security' by unarmed Japanese who do not rely on military force" (Fukumoto, 2009, p. 75). "By preventing a cycle of retaliatory killing, we created a bond of trust that protected us and our work" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 186). On the contrary, the "War on Terror" was a "one-sided game of murder" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 70). "The more I learned about the situation, the more inhuman I felt it to be" (Nakamura, 2020, pp. 181–182).

The actualization of the individuality through the implementation of the Afghan Green Ground project provided supreme satisfaction to Nakamura, as per Nishida's dictum. Nakamura said in an interview, "The more we do, happier they are. What work could be better than this?" (Yatsu, 2020, p. 194). His team could not have contributed to the betterment of rural Afghanistan had they relied on what Nishida termed the "rational or intellectual theory": it would have caused them to grasp the situation in abstract terms and could not have offered "active content to the good."

The team's individuality is also exemplified by its adjunct support to construct a mosque-cum-madrasa (where children are educated in Islam

and general subjects) toward the end of phase one. "It was impressive to hear the shouts of the people at the groundbreaking ceremony: 'We've been liberated!' they cheered" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 107). Although "having a mosque and madrasa was comparable to having water in terms of being given back a foundation for their lives," they felt that their traditional culture was being denied by people around the world: mosques and madrassa were seen as hotbeds of Islamic fundamentalism, and were being bombed regularly (Nakamura, 2020, pp. 105–107).[10]

4.2. Entering into a unified state diluting the subject/object distinction

"Unless human activities in every realm—be it science or economics, medicine or farming—are directed toward seeking compromises between nature and humans, and among humans themselves, there will be no way for humans to survive" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 188). This is what Nakamura humbly described as "the unadorned conclusion" that he reached after more than 30 years of working in Afghanistan. His conclusion resonates with Nishida's call to bring true reality to the surface by seeking to enter into a unified state, in which "there is not self apart from things."

The subject/object (or self/other) divide, which serves to justify the primacy of humans over nature and that of some humans over "inferior" others, stood in the way of peacebuilding in Afghanistan. At the root of climate change causing the drought in Central Asia was the idea of privileging humans over nature, while the "War on Terror" was launched and failed in the name of bringing the "backward" country into the light of a market economy and democracy.

"The adorned conclusion," calling for "compromises between nature and humans, and among humans themselves," was based on Nakamura's retrospection on his work to transform drought-stricken farmland into lush greenery. Humans could reconcile with nature by engaging in a dialogue that requests it to share a portion of its bounty (Yatsu, 2020, pp. 201–202). Moreover, local people would spare no effort to collaborate with an aid agency if they had complete faith in the agency's activities (Nakamura, 2020, p. 186).

These attest to "an unshakable element of providence that exists within humans as well as governs the workings of life" in the words of Nakamura (2020, p. 188). The "unshakable element of providence" was particularly demonstrated during a flood in 2010. The flood posed an imminent threat to the lives of nearby farmers, as the spillway was too small to prevent water from flowing toward their settlements. Shaking off the restraints imposed on him by

his staff, Nakamura operated an excavator to cut off the canal and drain the water toward uninhabited land downstream.

The strange thing was that I felt no sense of fear. The reality of it was not tumultuous, like some action scene in a movie. Once I became absorbed in the situation, it was as though I had entered a world of silence. ... Only my willpower and powers of concentration were operating in the sea of mud. All I could think was my plan of action: If I could use that great stone as a scaffold, and open up that weak-looking part of the levee on the downstream side, then the vehicle would escape from tumbling over. After that, I could head back to the upstream side. I should be able to open a route that would allow the water to escape (Nakamura, 2020, p. 174).

Nakamura's snap decision paid off and left the nearby settlements with only marginal damage, although the flooding dealt a devastating blow to the canal and compelled PMS to re-design and re-build the main intake. This episode attests to the Nishida's dictum that our judgements bring about "the quintessence of good conduct" when "we rid ourselves of the self and merge with the object of thought," thereby "relinquishing one' own fabrications" arising from abstract ideas.

5. Conclusion

Nakamura's travails and achievements in Afghanistan unwittingly showcased how best to forge "productive" international–local relations—the bedrock required for an empirical turn within the local turn in the field of peacebuilding. The Afghan Green Ground project took shape through an "inductive methodology" of iterative exploration, which Nakamura literally adopted to create the locally grounded scenario. A "decontextualized ritual" was thus avoided, which international aid tends to conduct despite the rise of the local turn.

In explicating how Nakamura's activities essentially help elucidate a way to advance an empirical turn within the local turn, it is useful to draw on Nishida's notion of pure experience. Nakamura implicitly embraced the latter, in defiance of the intense conflict environment that deterred aid agencies' engagement with ordinary farmers. He entered into what Nishida described as a unified state, in which "the knower [Nakamura] and the known [Afghan farmers] are one," thus dispelling the international/local divide that often stands in the way of the local turn in peacebuilding.

Moreover, the resultant start of the Afghan Green Ground project attests to the utility of Nishida's philosophy that illuminates how the good, nurtured

in one's inner consciousness, is accorded active content and translated into action. Nakamura relinquished abstract ideas, such as those promulgated in the post-9/11 aid for Afghanistan, to bring the "backward" country into the light of a market economy and democracy. Consequently, the project idea arose from the "internal demands of consciousness" committing him to the cause of drought-stricken farmers in Afghanistan.

Yet, Nakamura candidly admitted the limitations of his activities: "I can't let go and be happy. Desertification shows no signs of abating, and the dark signs are coming to surface" (Nakamura, 2021, p. 34). In-country refugees continued to flood into his project areas amidst the worsening environmental and security situations that were rooting out their means of livelihood elsewhere (Nakamura, 2021, pp. 44–45).

Bearing in mind the magnitude of humanitarian catastrophes in Afghanistan, Nakamura considered the issue not so much "what to do" as "what not to do" (Nakamura & Sawachi, 2010, p. 229). It is advisable for aid agencies to pay attention to "what not to do" to become candid about the limitations of their endeavors; they would then be better positioned to face up to the complexity surrounding peacebuilding and forge constructive relations with the conflict-affected populace.

Aid workers must engage in self-cultivation to assimilate themselves into local societies and grasp the on-the-ground realities. This should open the door for "the creation of an objective result in this world of facts," thus facilitating aid workers in reaching "the quintessence of good conduct,' as per Nishida's dictum. The liberal peace paradigm, which has proven incapable of forging reconciliation in Afghanistan and elsewhere, would then be supplanted by an alternative "directed toward seeking compromises between nature and humans, and among humans themselves," as per Nakamura's "adorned conclusion."

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to the Peace Japan Medical Services (PMS) and the Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture (JPIC), for allowing me to use the photos and the map contained in Dr. Nakamura's memoir. This work was supported by the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (20H01183).

Notes

1. It is crucial to avoid unconditionally lambasting the liberalistic rhetoric that champions a market economy, freedom, and democracy, given that some aspects of it, such as human rights and feminist principles, contributed to bringing "deep currents of transformation to Afghan society" (Donini & Monsutti, 2012, p. 32).

2. Aid agencies tended to focus on mitigating reputational risks by implementing small-scale projects that show results immediately (ATR Consulting, 2018, p. 8) understandably due to the intense security environment of the country; it deterred aid personnel's engagement with target communities and their understanding of local livelihood contexts (Blankenship, 2014, pp. 28–32). Not all projects ended in failure, and some fared well in decreasing violence and improving livelihoods with the efforts of the incumbents to avoid profiting certain segments of the populace while excluding others of their target communities (Karell & Schutte, 2018). In this way, some aid projects managed to generate shifts in the security environment. At the same time, "no evidence indicates that these shifts extend beyond the lifetime" of those relatively successful projects (Kapstein, 2017, p. 6).
3. It is crucial to bear in mind that, in conflict-affected areas, "[a]t all levels, there are subjects exercising their agency for peace or against it" (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013, p. 764). This dictum is particularly relevant to Afghanistan, where more than 80 percent of the total aid bypassed the state system between 2001 and 2010 (Bizhan, 2018, pp. 1019–1020); the Afghan government was unable to handle the influx of aid; portions of aid had to be channeled outside the state system. This "off-budget aid" modality at times "strengthened non-state power holders on whom donors relied for logistics and security" including former anti-Taliban commanders, thus augmenting their capacities for violence and coercion (Rubin, 2020, p. 195).
4. Nishida's notion of pure experience is instrumental in exploring ways to rectify the coloniality of aid. This is because the subject/object distinction lies at the heart of the hierarchical classification underlying the modern notion of progress; the human/civilized are differentiated from the nonhuman/uncivilized to accord the former the status of subjects who exercise sovereign powers while relegating the latter to passive objects or resources (Escobar, 2018, p. 94). In this way, hierarchical relations are conjured, in which aid agencies articulate the "deficits" or "flaws" of aid recipients, with recourse to the modern notion of progress. In this respect, Nishida's notion of pure experience helps to elucidate ways in which aid personnel can take a nondualist stance superseding the subject/object dichotomy, and thus nurture non-hierarchical relations with aid recipients.
5. Nakamura, a devout Christian, essentially embraced the following view of Nishida, albeit never explicitly stated in any of his writings: reverence for God leads one to "the deepest unity" or the pinnacle of learning and morality (Nishida, 1990, p. 152). Nakamura likewise described his endeavors to understand the Muslim values and ways of life in Afghanistan as follows: "It's like tracing the sources of different waterways flowing from the same mountain to the same peak" (Nakamura & Sawachi, 2010, p. 61).
6. The air strikes had cut off food supplies to Kabul and PMS had initiated food assistance there—distributing wheat flour and cooking oil to starving people under bombardment.
7. Nakamura and his team had no choice but to withdraw from all the clinics, except the one in Dare-e-Noor. This was both because of the deteriorating security situations

arising from the US military's Taliban clean-up operations, and due to the new government's move to assign medical aid of different areas to various foreign NGOs (Nakamura, 2020, p. 77–78).

8. Recalling his attendance at a conference in 2002, Nakamura stated "the participants ignored how desertification was destroying farm villages within Afghanistan and instead focused on ideas from outside the country": "A certain arrogance was on display among advanced nations, who seemed to act as if they were bringing civilization to savage tribes under the glittering banner of 'Freedom and Democracy'" (Nakamura, 2020, p. 73).

9. A substantial amount of aid was channeled into the country to reconstitute the institutional capacity of the Afghan state. However, this brought about a rentier, corrupt state detached from society, contrary to the anticipated results of delivering the rule of law and good governance, conducive to improving people's lives (Dodge, 2013).

10. The building of the mosque was just one of many new ideas that Nakamura and his team undertook. For example, while conducting leprosy-related relief work in Peshawar in 1986, Nakamura initiated the production of sandals for patients with sensory paralysis in their legs. In 2001, when drought-affected displaced people rushed to Kabul and its adjoining areas, and infectious disease became rife in densely populated places, PMS opened five mobile clinics and conducted food distribution, in defiance of the intense security environment. After the completion of the canal's construction in 2009, PMS developed a model village in Gamberi, where 200 farmers who had worked on the projects settled down, to use the skills that they had acquired for the maintenance of the facilities as well as to pass them down to future generations.

References

Abe, M. (1990). Introduction. In K. Nishida, *An inquiry into the good* (M. Abe, & C. Ives, Trans., pp. vii–xxvi). Yale University Press.

ATR Consulting. (2018). *Aid effectiveness in Afghanistan*. ATR Consulting.

Bargués-Pedreny, P., & Randazzo, E. (2018). Hybrid peace revisited: An opportunity for considering self-governance? *Third World Quarterly, 39*(8), 1543–1560. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1447849

Bizhan, N. (2018). Aid and state-building, part II: Afghanistan and Iraq. *Third World Quarterly*, *39*(5), 1014–1031. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1447369

Blankenship, E. (2014). *Delivering aid in contested spaces: Afghanistan*. (Research Backgrounder series). Oxfam America. https://s3.amazonaws.com/oxfam-us/www/ static/media/files/Aid_in_Contested_Spaces_Afghanistan_1.pdf

Bräuchler, B. (2018). The cultural turn in peace research: Prospects and challenges. *Peacebuilding, 6*(1), 17–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 21647259.2017.1368158

Chia, R. (2003). From knowledge creation to the perfecting of action: Tao, Basho and pure experience as the ultimate grounding of knowing. *Human Relations, 56*(8), 953–981. https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267030568003

Donini, A., & Monsutti, A. (2012). Aid agencies and Afghanistan: The end of an affair. *Education about Asia*, *17*(2), 28–33.

De Coning, C. (2018). Adaptive peacebuilding. *International Affairs, 94*(2), 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy236

Dodge, T. (2013). Intervention and dreams of exogenous statebuilding: The application of liberal peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Review of International Studies* (Available on CJO 2013 doi:10.1017/S0260210513000272).

Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.

Fukumoto, M. (2009). Fukuryu no shikou: Watashi no Afghan note [Subaltern thought: My notes on Afghanistan]. Sekiryu Sha.

Heisig, J.W. (2001). *Philosophies of nothingness*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Ishikawa, J. (2019, 9 December). Obituaries: Japanese doctor who watered Afghan deserts. Nakamura in his own words. *Nikkei Asia*. https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Obituaries/Japanese-doctor-who-watered-Afghan-deserts-Nakamura-in-his-own-words

Kapstein, E.B. (2017). A*id and stabilization in Afghanistan: What do the data say?* (Special Report No. 405). United States Institute of Peace. https:// www.usip.org /publications/2017/06/aid-and-stabilization-afghanistan

Karell, D., & Schutte, S. (2018). Aid, exclusion, and the local dynamics of insurgency in Afghanistan. *Journal of Peace Research*, *55*(6), 711–725. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318777566

Mac Ginty, R. (2015). Where is the local? Critical localism and peacebuilding. *Third World Quarterly*, *36*(5), 840–856. https://doi.org/10.1080/ 01436597.2015.1045482

Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O.P. (2013). The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace. *Third World Quarterly*, *34*(5), 763–783. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.800750

Moe, L.W., & Stepputat, F. (2018). Peacebuilding in an era of pragmatism. *International Affairs, 94*(2), 293–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.800750

Nakamura, T. (2020). *Providence was with us: How a Japanese doctor turned the Afghan desert green* (C. Freire, Trans.). Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture.

Nakamura, T. (2021). Kibou no itteki: Nakamura Tetsu saigo no kotoba [A drop of hope: Nakamura Tetsu's last words]. Nishinippon Shinbunsha.

Nakamura, T., & Sawachi, H. (2010). Hito wa aisuruni tari magokoro wa shinzuruni taru: Afghan tono yakusoku [People are worth loving, and sincerity is worth believing: Promises to Afghanistan]. Iwanami Shoten.

Nishida, K. (1990). *An inquiry into the good* (M. Abe, & C. Ives, Trans.). Yale University Press.

Ong, G.G. (2004). Building an IR theory with 'Japanese Characteristics': Nishida Kitaro and 'emptiness'. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 33*(1), 35–58. https:// doi.org/10.1177/ 03058298040330010201

Paffenholz, T. (2015). Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: A critical assessment towards an agenda for future research. *Third World Quarterly, 36*(5), 857–874. https:// doi.org/ 10.1080/01436597.2015.1029908

Piccolino, G. (2019). Local peacebuilding in a victor's peace: Why local peace fails without national reconciliation. *International Peacekeeping, 26*(3), 354–379. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/13533312.2019.1583559

Rubin, B.R. (2020). *Afghanistan: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press.

Schinzinger, R. (1958). Introduction. In K. Nishida, *Intelligibility and the philosophy of nothingness: Three philosophical essays* (R. Schinzinger, Trans, pp. 8–36). Pantianos Classics.

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. (2021). *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. https://www.sigar.mil/ pdf/lessonslearned/ SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf

Yatsu, K. (2020). Afterword: The Nakamura Tetsu I knew (C. Freire, Trans.). In T. Nakamura, *Providence was with us: How a Japanese doctor turned the Afghan desert green* (pp. 191–202). Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture.

Wilkinson, R. (2009). *Nishida and Western philosophy*. Routledge.