



Rainbow Serpent

by Kazuaki Tanahashi

Mayumi Oda called me up in early January and asked me to collaborate in an effort to stop Japan's plutonium energy project. She described her vision of a painting we might create together—I would draw an explosive brush line representing the destruction of the Earth and she would paint an emerging goddess.

About a month before this, both of us had attended a meeting of KAI, a group of socially-concerned Japanese residents in the San Francisco Bay Area, at which film director Kiyoshi Miyata had presented his video on Japan's plutonium utilization program. This video demonstrated the tremendous threat posed by this artificially produced substance: Its half life is 24,000 years and just one millionth of an ounce is lethal to a human being; one accident could affect millions of lives for centuries. We were terrified and questioned: Who can stop this? How can we help? Kiyoshi described a desperate political situation in Japan, where public indifference had stifled all resistance and the government was in the process of starting a huge full-cycle program—producing plutonium, burning it to get electricity, and disposing of and storing the nuclear wastes. While other industrialized nations had been phasing out plutonium energy plans, Japan alone was trying to forge ahead with this technology. By the 2010s Japan would possess more plutonium than was contained in the US and Soviet arsenals combined.

I thanked Mayumi for her suggestion and promised to work with her. Along with several other members of KAI, we formed a group called Plutonium Free Future* in February. We thought the only way to reverse the situation was to raise international awareness, and create pressure to alert the Japanese public. We decided to ask citizens' organizations throughout the world to make this a top-priority issue for the global environment.

A handful of artists getting together and trying to stop a national project, carried on in great secrecy with an enormous budget, seemed like Don Quixote on a donkey challenging a giant windmill. We asked Kiyoshi to draft an appeal; through ongoing questions and discussions, a substantial document was created. We consulted with specialists in nuclear science and nuclear energy in Japan and the USA, enhancing the accuracy of our statement.

Kiyoshi told us about an aboriginal Australian myth according to which a female Rainbow Serpent in the Earth guards the powers that are beyond human control. Any attempt to disturb its sleep will cause rainfalls of doom. Mayumi painted a picture of the serpent and I added a red flame being

belched from her mouth. This image became our group symbol as well as the cover picture of the pamphlet "Japan's Plutonium: A Major Threat to the Planet." Mayumi also created silk-screen prints called "Earth Ship" as gifts to people who give donations at a certain level. These prints and T-shirts of the same design became the major source of support for our activities for the first six months.

One of the unusual things we did was to launch an international campaign of letter-writing to the Emperor of Japan, whose function has been constitutionally outside of the political decision making system since the end of the World War II. We thought that if letters of concern poured in to him from different parts of the world, and if copies of the letters were sent to the media, the Japanese public would notice that a crisis was in the making—something like the approach of war.

Our immediate focus has been to stop Japan's plutonium transport program, a key element of Japan's nuclear energy policy and the international plutonium economy. The plutonium, separated from Japanese nuclear reactor waste at the reprocessing plants in France and England, will be used to fuel Japan's ambitious plutonium energy program. A cargo ship, escorted by a lightly armed civilian cruiser, will be carrying one-ton of plutonium each time. The first of the 30 shipments from Europe to Japan will begin in October of this year. We wrote letters to media and governments of sixty nations along the potential routes of the shipment. For this campaign we have been working with Greenpeace International, a major voice against Japan's plutonium, as well as the Nuclear Control Institute, Washington, D.C., and Citizens' Nuclear Information Center, Tokyo.

Now some nations and many citizen's groups overseas are opposing Japan's globally life-threatening shipment and energy program. Japan is beginning to be isolated from the international community on the plutonium issue. According to the August 3 issue of the *New York Times*, "Facing growing criticism from abroad, Japanese Government officials say they have begun rethinking the nation's ambitious nuclear energy plans, and may delay or derail the building of self-sustaining breeder reactors that would add to the worldwide oversupply of deadly plutonium."

I think we are living in a very strange period of history. Even if no one had the intention to create violence or destruction, we could make a large area of the Earth uninhabitable for centuries through a single stupid mistake. And don't we all make mistakes? In fact, isn't the plutonium energy drive itself a gigantic lack of mindfulness?

Many of our friends have been extremely supportive of the work of Plutonium Free Future. I was fortunate to be sent by our group to Rio de Janeiro

for the Earth Summit and made connections with people who shared the same concern.

This work has strengthened my sense of connectedness to all people and all being. On the other hand the work has led me to believe that we all are challenged to respond to fundamental questions: Do we have the right to risk the future of the entire planet for satisfying our material needs? Can we afford to keep silent when we see other people pursuing a program that could be extremely destructive? Is it possible to leave the future of the Earth to those who are so out of touch? Is it ethical not to try to hold the future in our own hands?

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"Earth Ship" by Mayumi Oda