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Anthropology of Japan

Exploring Japaneseness

In order to “explore Japaneseness” we must first define what we mean by Japaneseness. There are many ways we could interpret this term, many angles of Japaneseness we could explore. There are many aspects of Japanese society, from ethnic identity to national pride to individual Japanese social conscience. When we explore Japan and its people we must always be aware of our focus and perspective. For me, I must always be aware that my perspective is that of an American who, despite having studied much about Japan, has not spent time in the country so my opinions are greatly formed by the authors whose works I have read. However I am going to attempt here to give a well-rounded account of “Japaneseness” by looking from the three angles: ethnicity, nationality and society.

Ethnic identity in Japan is quite unique from the rest of the world, or so they would have us believe. The true origins of the Japanese race are still disputed by experts but there are a few prevailing theories. According to Japanese mythology the Japanese people are a race of people totally separate from “mainland” Asia. The Emperor of Japan is told to have descended directly from the sun goddess Amaterasu-Omikami. This unique outlook on the origin of their people has contributed much to many aspects of Japanese sense of “Japaneseness” and Japan's national identity. The only evidence for this is a long tradition of written and oral tales of the story of Amaterasu-Omikami. One of the more factually based alternative theories is the theory that most of the people we

consider Japanese today are actually descendants of the Horse Rider people of Korea. The Horse Riders were theorized to have ridden through Korea, taking control of the people there then kept moving across the water to Japan where they conquered the indigenous peaceful agrarian people and turning them into the warrior state we now think of as old Japan. The physical proof archaeologists have for this theory are the remains of certain saddles, horse tackle and other paraphernalia not point to an origin outside of the Japanese borders. Also the rapid transition between an agrarian state to a systems of warriors is indicative of the introduction of a conquering force. These different theories may give us an insight into “Japaneseness” but we must look also to different parts of Japanese national society to explore the question further.

When one speaks of Japanese “nationality” and nationalism it is hardly surprising when thoughts of the extremely nationalistic Imperial era of Japan come to mind. One of the reasons that such images come to mind is that, from the western perspective, the study of Japanese society did not begin until World War II began and it was necessary to learn their culture in order to fight against their nation. But although this point of view may be bias it is not without worth. Through these studies we have learned more about Japanese society and Nationalism than we had previously known, even if some of these new insights are biased. One of the main observations the Americans made about Japanese society is that it is “unusually homogeneous. Because individualism is not held as of high importance like in America the Japanese people tend to conform more to a national norm, and this conformity is will eager willingness on the part of the citizens. They readily follow the rules and regulations set upon them by their superiors. Part of that willingness to conform may come from the fact that Japan is a “shame culture”. A

shame culture is a society where the deterrent from doing “wrong” deeds is not punishment or guilt, it is that a bad act may shame the person and all those associated with him. Shame, or “losing face” is the strongest deterrent. Comparatively western society is part of a “guilt culture” where people are taught from childhood to feel a sense of guilt at wrong-doings, a feeling which may over-power the urge to mis-behave.

Another one of the large differences Americans noticed while studying Japan is the large hierarchical structure which permeates the whole society, right down to the language. Japan's social ranking system is largely vertical. In almost every social situation between two people one will be the superior of the other. Even the language reflects these rankings. In a given conversation people choose specific markers (such as -san or -kun) and different verb-forms to indicate the hierarchical differences between the speaker and themselves. These rankings have to do with a variety of variables including socio-economic status, sex, education and most importantly age. Revere for the elderly is a key part of not only Japanese but much of Asian culture, especially as it is tied to Confucian values of filial piety. People must respect and obey their parents and their elderly relatives. This respect does not end at the death of the elderly person but is carried on in a practice known as “ancestor worship”. Families will pay special attentions to their dead ancestors to keep the ancestors' spirits at peace and their own lives safe from otherworldly interference.

As I have said Japanese society contains many specific roles for each member of society. These roles are woven together to allow the people Japanese society to lean on each other. The role of the individual in the society is not to search out their own personal goals, as it is in American society, but to help others and contribute to the whole. This

steams from the idea of *amae*, which is said in the first question of the exam is the symbiotic relationship like a child and a mother. It is the warm feeling of being at the breast of your mother that this sort of social arrangement propagates. The social obligation, or *giri*, plus the benefits which each individual person reaps from the arrangement form this *amae* bond in Japanese society. In modern society this social construct has been greatly implemented in the workplace. The workers are made to feel as though they are part of a big family that all depends on each other. The boss gives special favors to the workers, which translate into *On*, or “social obligation” to the workers to remain loyal and work hard for the same company for their entire life. These workers are called “company men” and are quite unique to Japan. That is why when people study Japaneseness the idea of a company man as a part of the social fabric, and perhaps as a replacement for the nationalism of the Imperial era, comes to mind. Unfortunately right now, with the struggling economy the “company man” is becoming less feasible and more men are minding themselves in dead-end jobs or even without steady employment all together. Sadly this has raised the suicide rate of middle-aged men in Japan within the last decade.

One of the last major points about exploring Japanese society I would like to make is the importance of the study of religious practices in understanding a culture. The two major religions of Japan are Shinto, which is the native religion, and Buddhism, which originated in far-away India. In Japan neither of these religions is generally considered exclusive to the other, meaning that a person is free to practice elements of both religions. Shinto, unlike most of the world's largest religions, does not have one specific body of teaching, instead it is a combination of folk stories, rituals and beliefs

which helped the ancient Japanese to explain the world around them. Many Japanese refer to Shinto as the "natural" religion, whereas Buddhism is the "religion of man". Buddhism was introduced in the 6th century and has made deep roots in Japanese culture. The teachings of Buddha combined with the morals of the Shinto sect to help form what we now think of as Japanese spirituality. Christianity was introduced to Japan in the 16th century but because of a strong effort to hinder its spread by the Japanese government the Christian Japanese remain a small fraction, only 1%, of society. This demonstrates a resistance to change and a move against the government's wishes and a fundamental loyalty to that which is considered native Japanese.

It is very difficult to come up with a clear definition of Japaneseness, as it would be for any culture or society. However, by exploring the many sides of Japan and its people we can hope to have a better understanding of the culture there. The best way to study Japan is to look at it from all angles; have personal experiences, meet the people, see the cities and the countryside, read the books written by scholars from around the world. Only if you spread your eyes wide will you be able to take in the many wonderful aspects of Japanese culture. I hope I outlined well for you some of the key parts of Japanese culture. Although these observations are from a western observer who has not had the privilege of studying in Japan properly I hope they are altogether not without merit.

Bibliography

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