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978-0-521-31552-4 - Japanese Society: Tradition, Self, and the Social Order

Robert J. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

In 1871, Lewis Henry Morgan published his monumental study *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, in which he attacked a problem that still commands the attention of a segment of the anthropological profession. He was concerned with devising a system by means of which kinship terminologies could be classified. Amassing information from many sources and collecting some himself, he assembled what he believed to be overwhelming evidence for the existence of two major types of terminology. The classificatory system, characteristic of primitive societies, merges lineal and collateral kin terminologically. The descriptive system, that of civilized societies, distinguishes between lineal and collateral kin by use of different terms.

It is not my purpose to reenter the continuing debate as to the accuracy or utility of Morgan's formulation.¹ I will, rather, take note of the extraordinary fact that one of the sets of kin terms recorded in the monograph is the Japanese. On the basis of the material presented there, Morgan characterizes the Japanese as evolutionarily primitive by virtue of their having a classificatory system of kinship terminology. They do not, nor is there any evidence that they ever did, possess such a system of kin terms,² but I am less interested in the reasons for Morgan's error than in the circumstances that led to the inclusion

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Japanese society

of the Japanese case at all, for it was Morgan himself who collected the information in Rochester, New York, in May 1867.

Reflect for a moment how unlikely an event this is. Only fourteen years earlier Commodore Perry's squadron had entered Japanese waters, breaching irrevocably the barrier of isolation that had sealed off the country for more than two hundred years. Japan, quite well known throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had become so indistinct to Western eyes that Perry apparently was not even aware that the military shogun with whom he indirectly negotiated was not the emperor of Japan, yet the distinction between the two offices had once been common knowledge in the West.

In 1867, then, a year before the Meiji Restoration, Morgan reports that he had brought to him a Japanese "troupe of adventurers" who were performing (what, he does not say) in American cities. They must have been among the first Japanese to pass through upstate New York, and it is an indication of the degree to which Morgan was seized by the imperative that drives all ethnographers that he felt compelled to add the Japanese to his roster of societies. It was from their interpreter, one Kawabe Mankichi, that he elicited the set of terms that graces the tables of his monograph.

A search of the local newspapers for early May 1867 (Morgan's own notes bear the dates of May 13 and 14) reveals not only the identity of the troupe, but also that their performances excited considerable interest and expressions of unbounded admiration for their skill. Both the *Rochester Daily Democrat* and the *Rochester Daily Union and Advertiser* carried the somewhat overwrought announcement shown on page 3. The *Union and Advertiser* reviewed the first performance in its May 7 edition, and the *Democrat* printed no fewer than four stories about the group between May 8 and 11. Unhappily, the name of Morgan's informant appears in none of them.

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Robert J. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

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This Troupe consists of the most **UNIQUE**, and **WONDERFUL JUGGLERS, BALANCERS, MAGICIANS, ACROBATS,** and **MUSICIANS** from Jeddo, Japan, being the first private citizens ever permitted to leave the Empire.

The same Troupe which has created so much excitement in Boston, Springfield, Hartford, Philadelphia, and Washington. This being an entirely Japanese entertainment, the stage will be conducted in precisely the same manner as in Japan.

Admission 50 cts. Reserved seats 75 cts.

In the course of the interview, however, Morgan was careful to inquire into Kawabe's background. Like any other ethnographer working in similar circumstances of isolation, he could not have known that his informant was lying to him. Kawabe represented himself as a member of a warrior family of high rank (*hatamoto*), an origin so implausible for a member of a traveling troupe of jugglers and acrobats that the claim can be dismissed out of hand. I am not simply guessing, for on internal evidence alone, the data recorded by Morgan can be seen to be the product of a combination of faulty interviewing on the part of the ethnographer and the responses of an informant of humble social origins with little formal education.⁹

There is, of course, no way Morgan could have known or

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

discovered the truth about Kawabe's background, but even had he done so, there was as yet no place in the study of kinship for the realization that social class, educational attainment, and interactive context may crucially affect the terminologies for kin that members of a given society employ. I will return from time to time to this and related issues in discussing several facets of Japanese society, but let me conclude this preamble by noting the peculiarly fitting identity of the man who brought Kawabe Mankichi to Lewis Henry Morgan. He is identified only as the entrepreneur who had organized the troupe's American tour — a Mr. Smith.

Because few of my readers share my longstanding concern with Japanese society and are not therefore regularly exposed to the outpouring of literature on the subject, an explanation of the tone I have taken in the following pages is in order. There are many views of Japan and many bitter disputes about the true character of that society, which is, after all, a very complex one. Some argue that the whole recent history of the country is one long tale of unrelieved betrayal of its people by successive repressive regimes. Others find in its achievements sufficient grounds for endorsement of the techniques employed in realizing them. Still others take the position that when all is said and done, there is more in the record to extol than to condemn. The disagreements are fundamental, obviously, but we do not find foreign observers aligned on one side of the debate against Japanese scholars and commentators on the other. Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable tendency for the Japanese to be far more critical of their society on the whole than are the foreigners who study it.

Among our Japanese colleagues are many who lament the failure of their compatriots to achieve social or psychological maturity, an outcome that can be obtained, they seem to feel, only when Japanese society is at last rid of that very tradition that is one of the themes of this book. In this regard, the atti-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31552-4 - Japanese Society: Tradition, Self, and the Social Order

Robert J. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

tude of the Japanese intellectual is one of black despair. Yet to many of us who come from other societies, Japan today seems a remarkably civil place, and its people more cheerfully optimistic for the future than are the citizens of most other nations, who probably have more objective cause to be so.

On every hand there is disagreement over the interpretation of behavior. What seems to some to be politeness is read as obsequiousness by others; what in one view is a passion for order is in another held to be hapless conformity; the dedication to work that so excites the admiration of many is elsewhere construed as mindless surrender to paternalistic exploitation; even the most modest degree of self-assertion that is lauded by those who hope for change is denounced as rampant egoism by those whose goal is stability; what one finds to be expression of individuality, another takes to be evidence of unbridled selfishness. Those who comment favorably on the achievements of Japanese society are accused of failing to pay sufficient attention to the high price paid for them; observers who stress their formidable personal and social costs are derided for their blindness to the positive social gains that have been made.

Nowhere, however, is the disagreement more basic than that over the answer to the obvious question: How different is this, the only major industrial society yet to emerge from outside the Western tradition? Those who think it not different at all are positively offended by suggestions that it is so in any significant degree.⁴ Those who hold the opposite view argue, as I do, that in fact it is a different kind of society. The difference lies less in its organizations and institutions than in the way all of its history shows how the Japanese think about man and society and the relationship between the two.

It would be remarkable indeed if at the end of only one short century the Japanese, alone among the peoples of the world, had managed to divest themselves of the legacy of their past⁵ — which, we cannot be reminded too often, is not based

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Robert J. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

Japanese society

in any of its particulars on the philosophical or religious heritage of the Western tradition. Of course Japan is unlike its Western counterparts. How could it be otherwise? Had Japan no high-speed trains, no great industrial cities whose streets are choked with domestically produced automobiles, and no pre-eminence in many fields of technology, the point would hardly need to be made. But because Japan has all of these and more, it seems to many that in the process of their acquisition, it must have developed into a particular kind of society. Which is to say it must be like other societies with which it shares so many technological and economic characteristics. I find that view less than compelling, for it is reminiscent of a time when grand social theories were in rather more abundant supply than they have been in recent years, and in better repute.

None of this means that Japan cannot be understood. It means only that in order to understand it, we must wrench ourselves out of well-worn ruts of assumption and expectation. I shall take the admittedly dangerous course of presenting a normative picture of a complex industrial society that I believe to be based on premises fundamentally different from our own. The result of this exercise, I hope, will be to provide evidence in support of the claim that there are alternative ways in which a mass society can be constructed. This is hardly as extraordinary an assertion as it may seem at first blush. Does anyone today really believe that all the industrial societies of the Western tradition itself are identical? Surely not. We know that the French and British bureaucracies are unlike one another in many respects and that both differ from the American. It is clear that Italy and Sweden and Australia are not stamped in the same mold. Why, then, should it so offend to suggest that Japan is different from them all?

In the course of a conference I recently attended, the discussion of development turned inevitably to this very question. One of those present cited approvingly the results of a long list

Cambridge University Press

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Robert J. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

of studies that seemed to him to show that the decision-making process in Japan, contrary to the usual claim that it is unfamiliar in many of its particulars, is in fact quite like that used in the West. A second participant, delighted with this confirmation of his own cherished convictions, exclaimed with evident satisfaction: "There, you see? The longer we study the Japanese, the more human they become!" What he was really saying, I submit, is that by diligent effort the Japanese can be made to seem more and more like us. It is one of the purposes of this book to show why we are driven to seek that reassurance.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

The Creation of Tradition

“We have no history. Our history begins today.”

*A Japanese to the German physician Erwin Baelz, 1876.*¹

The record of the past exists to be exploited, rephrased, abridged, or ignored. What is not in the record can be invented. Examples of all of these processes abound in the modern world, as the reader of any daily newspaper will know. The Japanese, I think, are not particularly unusual in the way they manipulate the record of their past, but it will be my contention that they are unusually adept at it. I also believe that a flexible approach to history may well prove to be a great advantage to any society faced with the necessity of making very rapid institutional transformations. As a Japanese proverb has it, the winds may fell the massive oak, but bamboo, bent even to the ground, will spring upright after the passage of the storm. Such resilience in social systems may be rare, I suspect, and even those that possess it run the risk of destruction if the appeals for change are grounded in a complete falsification of the past and violate the basic principles on which the system rests. In this regard, the Japanese uses of their past for present purposes commend themselves to our attention.

The geographic location of Japan has much to do with the peculiarities of its cultural history, for it lies far off the continent of Asia, more isolated from it than the British Isles from

9

Cambridge University Press

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Robert J. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

Japanese society

Europe. It is a kind of cul de sac, the terminus of the successive waves of influence that have washed into it over the millennia. Japanese culture today embraces traditions developed elsewhere in highly diverse times and places—the Buddhism of India out of China and Korea, Confucianism, and the institutions, arts, and philosophies of China and much of the Western world. Yet, as the physicist Yukawa has noted, their assimilation has been so complete that contemporary Japanese culture oddly lacks the cosmopolitan flavor that the diversity of its sources would seem to dictate for it (1973:15–16). Assimilation is probably not the proper term. Perhaps incorporation is better, for Japan is in some ways like a tidal pool, isolated for long periods from the source of all it contains, a place where accommodation, transformation, and amalgamation proceed uninterrupted until the next tidal sweep irrevocably alters its composition.

There are dangers in any analogy, of course, but let me demonstrate the utility of this one by reference to the Imperial Rescript on Education, promulgated in 1890, less than a generation after the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the Meiji Restoration of 1868:

Know ye, Our Subjects:

Our Imperial Ancestors have founded our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our education. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore advance public good and promote common interest; always respect the Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State;

Cambridge University Press

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Robert J. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The creation of tradition*

11

and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The Way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may thus attain to the same virtue. (Tsunoda et al. 1958: 646–7)

This document, representing the final victory of the conservative elements in the new Japanese government, early assumed an almost talismanic character. For the fifty-five years following its promulgation to the end of the Greater East Asia War, it was read aloud in full by the school principal at periodic ceremonies, was made the subject of countless exegeses, and its sentiments worked into the textbooks of ethics and morals used in the primary and middle schools. At the heart of both official and popular commentaries on the rescript, we encounter a point of view that enjoyed a great vogue at the time. It is derived from an entirely unexpected source, the writings of the all but forgotten English metaphysical philosopher T. H. Green.² Many of the leading educators of the time were strongly influenced by his writings and sought to introduce them into the curriculum in a variety of ways. The eminent educator Yoshida Seichi wrote that Green's doctrine of "self-regulation" recommended itself particularly for adoption by the Japanese, and from it culled two central propositions: "Man's worth is judged by the degree of his effort to approximate his existing self to an ideal self." He further maintained that the ideal "appears in the consciousness of each man as the social, and the ideal for one's self consists in the ideal for society" (Hirai 1979:118). It is difficult to imagine a theory of the relationship between the individual subject and the state more congenial to the aims of conservatives whose design it was to gain ever tighter control of the apparatus of the state.