

BETWEEN TRADITION AND POST- MODERNIZATION: JAPANESE LOCAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The goal of the paper is to study the particularities of Japanese local community, its post-modernization and the persistence of tradition in its organization, structures, and activities. In recent years a different type of sociality has been established in the local community; the ‘community spirit’ of the past is giving way under the new conditions to the increasingly public character of relationships but traditional elements are continuing to be very strong. The theoretical approach applied in the study lies within the research field of social stratification more precisely in neo-Weberian tradition in sociology. The empirical basis of the analysis are surveys carried out by the author in Japan. In depth interviews were conducted with leaders of the informal structure of the communities, with enterprising local actors, and local residents. Observations were made on number of events, activities and initiatives of the surveyed communities such as their religious festivals - *matsuri* and some of their volunteer activities and projects. As a result of analysis the conclusions will be made concerning formal and informal structures of the Japanese local community, about changes in local people identity and in their spirit of solidarity in the middle of first decade of 21st century.

Keywords: local community, post-modernization, tradition, identity, solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

The empirical basis of the theoretical analysis contained in the paper are fourteen empirical sociological surveys conducted by the author in Japanese local communities during the period of 21 years from 1994 until now. Among them I could mention “Religious practices, rituals and festivals as basis of identity and solidarity of Japanese local communities”, Local communities lifestyle in Kyoto: Traditions in postmodern society”, “Local communities in Kumano: Local initiatives, traditions and protection from natural disasters”, “Informal structures of Japanese local communities”, “Traditional forms of mutual help and cooperation in Japanese local communities”, carried out in different part of Japan as Shiga, Hyogo, Aichi, Mie, Gifu, Toyama and Kyoto prefectures. These research were dedicated on studying Japanese local communities lifestyle, their traditions, structures, initiatives, religious practices, rituals and festivals. In all, ninety two in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders

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of the informal structure of the communities, with enterprising local actors, NGO activists, local administrators, leaders of agrarian cooperatives, farmers, and local residents, and seventeen focus group discussions were held with representatives of these same categories of respondents. A variety of other sources of information were also used: statistical, economic, demographic, etc. Observations were made on a number of activities and initiatives of the surveyed communities: their traditional annual festivals - *matsuri*, and some of their volunteer activities and projects. The investigations were based on the case study method. The results are not representative and are by no means taken as such, but they do contain valuable information that may serve for drawing conclusions regarding the lifestyle of local communities.

Two third of all fifteen investigated communities is located in villages, although some of them no longer conduct agricultural activity, or if they do, it represents an insignificant portion of their economies. Together with rural local communities five urban

local communities were studied in old Japanese capital - Kyoto city. Some of the surveyed rural local communities are situated far from the large economic and cultural centers, and this has an impact on their general social-political, social-economic, and cultural development. Among the basic problems of these communities are depopulation, migration of young people to large urban centers, and population aging.

The goal of the paper is to study the particularities of Japanese local community and the continuing persistence of tradition in its organization, structures, and activities.

The approach applied to the lifestyle of local communities lies within the research field of social stratification. In this study I proceed from the traditions of the classical names in this problem field, such as Weber (1978/1922) and Veblen (1994/1899), as well as on the work of Bourdieu (1984), Featherstone (1991), Jameson (1991) and others.

LOCAL COMMUNITY LIFESTYLE

The author argues that, despite the close proximity between the concepts of lifestyle and way of life, the two are not synonymous. Unlike 'way of life', 'lifestyle' emphasizes the activeness of the agent and the choices he/she makes among the various options at his/her disposal. Lifestyle is a characteristic and distinctive way of life. Since social-group formations are active in their lifestyle and can choose it, lifestyle is a significant indicator of their status. In modern societies it is a result of their activity; through it they delimit themselves from some social-structure formations and draw closer to others. The way of life, unlike lifestyle, is determined by the social-group status of individuals and groups, and is a result of that status (Keliyan 2010: 22-23).

It is assumed that lifestyle of the local community is an integral unity of specific, typical and distinctive activities carried out by the social actors (individual and collective) and structures of that community, activities carried out apart from paid labor (i.e. on a voluntary basis); some of these activities may be freely chosen (preferred), others may be pursued out of necessity (i.e. obligatory), still others may be initiated by its members and their organizations; it includes the evaluations, attitudes and satisfaction

derived from all these activities. Lifestyle also plays a structure-determining role with respect to the local community: ever since the emergence of postmodern society, not only individuals but the organizations and communities formed by individuals have enjoyed much greater freedom and have a growing possibility to choose their lifestyle; in turn, that lifestyle defines their position in the social structure of society.

Lifestyle acquires the characteristics describe above at a definite stage of social-historical development, more precisely, in postmodern society which distinctive features are presented in the works of authors C. Wright Mills (1951), Baudrillard (1981), Lyotard (1979), Jameson (1991), Featherstone (1991) and others. Postmodern society is based on a new type of social structuring, in which lifestyle plays an important and decisive role, and local communities have an increasingly important presence and role in public life in general. The process of important social-economic, structural, cultural, political and value changes through which society passes to its postmodern stage, is designated by the term 'post-modernization'. The latter took place in the developed Western societies and Japan in the 1970s.

Post-modernization poses significant challenges for local communities, but does not bring them to loss of identity and provides them with new means and possibilities for dealing with their problems. For instance, the development of technologies, especially information and communication technologies, which are making our societies increasingly global, can simultaneously be used as means for preserving local specificities, consolidating and even popularizing the local lifestyle beyond the boundaries of the community, thus effectuating a sort of 'globalization of the local'. But how and how much the local communities will inscribe themselves in the postmodern environment and cope with the challenges of that environment will depend on the social structures of the concrete society.

JAPANESE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Local community is a form of coexistence, a form of co-affiliation of individuals living in a network of social relationships; is has a specific social structure; its members perform socially significant activities within a clearly defined territory that they inhabit.

What is important here are not so much the physical and geographic characteristics of that territory, but the nature and quality of the social relationships that define the local community. The boundaries of the community, both real and symbolic, are especially important, for they serve to mark the membership and affiliation of the individuals included in it. The term 'community', as likewise 'local community', may be descriptive or it could refer to values and norms. The distinction that Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/1957) made between 'community' (*Gemeinschaft*) and 'society' (*Gesellschaft*) as two different types of sociality was at the core of the romantic notion of the community as based on *mutuality, cooperation, and mutual aid* amongst its members. This is one of the views that contributed to the *widespread, even mythical, representation* regarding Japanese society and its unique difference from Western civilization, regarding the specific feeling of community and community spirit that make up the *essential quality of being Japanese*.

The creation and spread of such highly ideological and mythologized representations is certainly connected to some real characteristics of Japanese society. This society has a developed community culture, which has been preserved over the centuries and continues to perform an important role and function even now, in postmodern society. In Japan there are certainly strong social bonds between individuals within the framework of the group to which they belong, between the communities and society at large. Japan is a communitarian society (Etzioni, 1998), in which social responsibility and duty towards the group and the community are of paramount importance, despite the intense current of individualism that comes through Western influence. In fact, this trend is not only a result of foreign influence but also of the impact upon society and its structures of modernization, industrialization, urbanization, mass culture, post-modernization, and the social transformations all of these provoke.

The concept of 'innovation of tradition' (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1-12) designates the newly created values and norms of conduct that correspond to the arising requirements in period of considerable transformations of the community; it should be noted that communities not only inherit but also create their traditions (Matsuda, 1998: 18-21). What is presented

as a tradition may in fact often be a reaction against the modern and postmodern, a display of flexibility and creativity on the part of the local community; many of the now existing traditions are, in fact, innovations.

In recent years a different type of sociality has been established in the local community; the 'community spirit' of the past is giving way under the new conditions to the increasingly public character of relationships (Shoji, 2006: 136). This transformation is revitalizing the latter, not on the basis of *Gemeinschaft*, but through the pervasive public quality of their lifestyle.

STRUCTURE, CHARACTERISTICS, AND RESOURCES OF THE JAPANESE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The local community and its structures cannot be studied and comprehended without clarifying the particularities of the traditional Japanese family system. *Ie* literally denotes not exactly the family or the household but rather the 'home', the 'house'. *Ie* is the fundamental social and productive association in traditional Japanese society. It is a perennial institution that continues beyond the lives of its members and includes the property, the family business, the family name and registered code, the ancestors who lived in the home, and the future generations. *Ie* is managed by its head, the *kachou*, a position that is inherited by the first-born son. The relations between members of *ie* are subordinated to the Confucian principles of loyalty of those lower in rank to those higher and the benevolence of the latter to the former. In the traditional Japanese household, gender, age and order of birth are indicators that determine the status of each member. The position of the head of *ie* is not for life: when the father reaches a certain age, he retires from the position of *kachou* and his first-born son inherits it. Ever since the Meiji period, the *ie* institution has been assessed ambivalently: on one hand it has been viewed as a basis of social solidarity, on the other, as an obstacle to the establishment of a modern lifestyle. The 1947 Constitution deprived *ie* of the functions it had before the war, but preserved its cultural and value contents. According to the census, conducted in 2005, in Japan are registered about 49,06 million *ie* (Statistical Handbook of Japan for 2009, 2010: 17).

Apart from the formal, institutionalized, and legally established structure, the local community also creates a functioning network of informal structures, which build up, maintain, and develop certain types of relationships between members. The informal structures express the 'moral rules' of the community, which the members are required to observe. These rules are an informal 'institutionalization' of its principles, its tradition, which, due to the symbiosis of the value aspect and the 'semi-institutional' aspect, are passed on through the centuries and, today, acquire a modern meaning.

The informal structure of the local community, established in Japanese tradition and functioning today, is called *chonaikai*, which literally means 'neighborhood association'. In some regions it is known as *jichikai*, a designation that emphasizes autonomy, unlike the official administrative institutions established through law. In villages these structures are known as *shizenson*, i.e. a natural village. In 2008 there were 300 000 such neighborhood associations in Japan (Pekkanen et al., 2014: 1); in the last 30 years 90% of the people residing on their territories were taking part in their activities, and 14% of Japanese every day are engaged in activities in their local community (Statistical Handbook of Japan for 2008, 2009: 188).

The twofold social organization of the local communities is a unique mixture of traditions and democratic principles. From village to megapolis, such informal structures have been built in each settlement. Membership in *chonaikai* is not personal but through the *ie*, each of which sends its representative to the sessions. By tradition, this representative is the head of the household, the *kachou*, but in present-day Japan, due to the fact that men are much occupied with their professions, the wife performs these functions. If the local community is more numerous and has a large structure, five or ten households may elect a common representative to the *chonaikai*. The members of the 'general assembly' elect an informal council of the local community, which manages all of its affairs for a period of four years. The chairman of this council is called *kuchou san* or 'community leader'. The council also includes a deputy chairman (*fukuchou*), a sub chairman (*kumichou*), an accountant, and a controller, all of whom work on a voluntary basis, without pay.

The tradition in Japan is for several *ie* to be united in a group called *kumi*, which according to the size of the settlement may include at least 2 and no more than 11 *ie*. Each household contributes the local *informal membership fee*, called *chonaikaihi*. The sums are relatively modest by Japanese standards (5000 Japanese yen, which are about 40 US\$) and are spent on the needs of the local community. They are collected by cashiers who represent the separate *ie* and are changed every month.

Each household is obliged to keep clean the area around its home, and all *ie* have the duty, on a rotation basis, to *maintain and take care of the local Buddhist and Shinto shrines*.

A bulletin, called *kairanban*, is published and circulated in the local community; this is an important means for exchange of information. It periodically announces news from the town hall, from the *kuchou san*, or from any household that wishes to share important family events with the neighbors.

The members of the local community are engaged in the numerous activities managed by the informal council of the *chonaikai*, activities for which the *kuchou san* is generally responsible. In various fields of activity the following organizations are created and function:

1. **Groups for protection against natural disaster** built on a volunteer basis. Their members generally meet once a month to check the condition of the fire-fighting equipment and to carry out regular training. They train to react quickly in case of fires, earthquakes, floods, and other disaster, in order to restrict the damage until professionals from the civic protection organs appear on the scene. Training is regularly organized for the neighborhood residents.
2. **Groups for maintenance and cleaning of roads and local infrastructure;** part of the activities of these has now been transferred to the special community services, but they are still important in small settlements. Usually, part of the collected funds from *chonaikaihi* goes for ordering the materials needed for the

envisaged activities. Every *ie* must send one of its representatives on the appointed date and hour; if not, a certain fee is paid for the work to be done by professional workers. This is how grass fields, parks, rivers, streams, canals and shafts are cleaned. In most cases the work is completed within the day fixed for it, usually a non-working day.

3. **Groups ensuring security and safety** of the residents of the local community; these groups generally include young men who perform the function of volunteer patrollers. Their aim is to help maintain peace and quiet for the neighbors and protect the neighborhood from crime.
4. **Groups ensuring the socialization of the children** of the local community. From the very first day of school the first-graders are organized in groups for going to school and back.
5. **PTA (Parents and Teachers Associations) groups** are an important part of the structures and activity of the local community. They include the parents of schoolchildren from elementary, primary, and secondary schools, and their activity are related to the scholastic performance, socialization, and conduct of children.
6. **Groups of people sharing common interests** such as housewives, pensioners, youths, mothers, classmates, different hobby groups, consumers associations, etc. Cultural centers are built in the local communities, in which *programs for lifelong learning* are implemented to train target groups of adults, according to their needs and interests, in subjects like foreign languages, sports, dancing, gardening, cooking, computer skills, etc.
7. **Groups organizing and conducting local *matsuri***, which are part of traditional Japanese cultural and are held in every neighborhood, village, small or big city. They are emblematic for local identities; during these events the

community displays its distinctive features before outsiders.

The leader of the local community, the *kuchou san*, is a very important figure for community activities and organization. He is responsible for collecting *chonaikaihi*, for conducting the above-mentioned activities of the *chonaikai*, for the work and results of the neighborhood organizations; he arbitrates disputes between neighbors. The chairman of the informal council also plays a very important role as intermediary, as a contact and transmission agent between the inhabitants of the region and the local authorities at municipal level. He receives 100 000 yen (about 800 US\$) per year from the municipality and uses these funds for the needs of the community, foremost for organizing *matsuri* and for the work of the various groups for civic protection, for cleaning canals, rivers, and irrigation appliances, for road maintenance in the neighborhood, etc.

Analysis of different kinds of informal structures and their groups in the local community shows that they are a basis of community identity, solidarity, and integrity. Social control in the framework of the community is informal but very important for the members. Refusal to take part in the activities and structures does not lead to administrative penalties but it does incur moral sanctions. Those who choose not to take part cannot rely on the support, friendship, aid and cooperation of their neighbors.

The typical characteristics of the local community – coexistence, and the harmonious combination of traditional institutions and values with a postmodern lifestyle and modern technology – are visible in the rural regions. The differences between local communities in large cities and those in small settlements consist above all in the way their residents take part in the community activities and in the meaning and functions for the life of the settlement that these activities have. Naturally, in villages, interaction between neighbors occurs far more often; people there are far more interconnected than in cities, especially large residential areas. Usually, the residents of villages and small towns directly contribute labor to the various activities of their community, while those in cities mostly contribute money for payment of specially hired workers to do the job. In rural communities, farmer

groups are active, while in urban ones various form of consumer organizations are more important. The latter prove a cross-point of interaction between local urban and local rural communities. An essential difference between the activity of *kuchou san* and the informal council in big cities on one hand and in small towns and villages on the other is that the latter are involved in activities aimed at ensuring more jobs, at making the village more attractive for outside visitors, for keeping the local residents in their native settlements, and for attracting retired emigrants back to their birthplace.

What is impressive in the local communities is the *spirit of enterprise*, the numerous activities initiated by their informal leader, *kuchou san*. For centuries, the informal structures, councils, leaders, and their activities have served as a *resource for mobilization* of local communities and of Japanese society in general. These structures are informal but they are also semi-official, because they are recognized by the central and local administration and have established relations with the latter. They fit in with the Japanese tradition of 'duality' and 'multiplicity', displayed in this case in the particularities of their status and nature. They fulfill the function of intermediary between the local administration and the members of the local community and ensure regular communication by maintaining the dialogue between them. The informal structures of the local communities are entirely based on volunteer work; the developed community culture and communitarian spirit are among the factors favorable to intense volunteer activity, to the existence of numerous volunteer organizations and high participation of the Japanese in those organizations.

Intense civic activity and inclusion in the life of the local community serve as a basis for the creation and development of various civic organizations. The informal structures of the local community are such organizations, for they unite the members, express and protect their interests before the local authorities, perform the role of mediators between individuals and families on one hand and the local authorities on the other. They are also a tool of public opinion in the community, for they set the principles and rules and check how these are being observed. They devote special attention to public spaces on their territory and, together with the collective efforts of the

inhabitants, take care of the maintenance of those spaces.

The informal structures and their activities promote collaboration and solidarity in the community and serve as a basis for increasing and preserving social cohesion. The effectuation of their initiatives works as a sort of response to the depersonalizing and bureaucratic trends of postmodern society; community members acquire the conviction that these negative processes are not so strong and pervasive, that their own efforts are important and meaningful to themselves, to their communities, to the region and the country.

On the other hand, under certain social conditions and circumstances, some possible results of this community system might include:

Social exclusion and moral penalties in the form of ostracism of those who refuse to participate in community life;

Growing mutual social control and mutual dependence between community members, limiting their possibility for personal choice and violating their individual liberties.

The activities and organization of the local community are a symbiosis between tradition and the related system of duty to the community on one hand and civil society on the other.

ENTERPRISING SOCIAL-GROUPS IN LOCAL COMMUNITY

The enterprising local social actors, whether these be individuals or groups, can successfully realize their initiatives because they have at their disposal the resources of their community. Of course, this does not at all diminish the importance of individual activeness, experience, enterprise, etc., but the potential of the community adds strength and carries with it energy needed for the success of personal initiatives.

An outstanding enterprising actor of the local community is its informal leader, *kuchou san*. It is on his initiatives that the lifestyle in the *chonaikai* greatly depends, and the organization and

effectiveness of the different structures and groups. Another type of individual enterprising actors are volunteers, who could be members of the community but also outsiders. Volunteers are at the heart of a number of activities; they organize, or take part in, already existing groups and structures. The enterprising social-group subjects in Japanese local communities can most generally be divided according to gender and age; each group, for its part, is devoted to and 'specialized' in certain types of activities. Generally, women are active members of consumer groups attached to the consumer cooperatives or to community supported agriculture. Mothers are those who mostly take an active part in groups engaged in the socialization of children and in PTA groups. In every local community there is a housewives' organization, called fujinkai, which has structures at the prefecture level and national level. Pensioners, because of their growing interest in ecological consumption and a healthy life style, in addition to being occupied with farming in the local rural communities, are also active in these consumer groups and in hobby clubs, where they are taught how to lead a 'meaningful lifestyle.' Generally they and housewives are more engaged with the matters of the chonakai than employed men and younger people.

Young people, in addition to taking part in study groups and hobby clubs, traditionally participate in activities requiring strength and endurance, such civil defense, the organizing and holding of matsuri (traditional ones and newly created by them) and in cleaning and maintaining the infrastructure, an activity suitable for their age.

The external volunteers included in the life of the local community generally take part in the activity of virtual communities functioning through the Internet, in consumer groups, in groups engaged in community supported agriculture, eco-tourism, etc. Such groups are extremely helpful in activities to restore the damage caused by natural disasters.

CONCLUSION

According to famous Japanese author and illustrator Taro Gomi "While the twentieth century was an age of nations, the twenty-first century is an age of regions and local people" (2006: 3). I am following the idea that the 21st century is the century of local

communities, for the activity of the enterprising social actors of those communities is the fundament of civil society. In postmodern society local people have at their disposal much greater and more varied possibilities for choosing a lifestyle for themselves, their family, and for the neighborhood they live in. This is changing the importance of traditions in our times: traditions are no longer followed unswervingly but, instead, are used as a resource for development of the local community. In Japan there are good possibilities for expanding such a potential: the informal structures of the local community, their established and time-tested functions and activities.

The local community, thanks to its informal structures and active personalities, appears as a collective enterprising actor in contemporary Japanese society. The community relies on traditionally inherited organizational forms and structures, but these operate in today's postmodern environment. With its environmental initiatives, educational programs and activities typical for civil society, the community has asserted itself as an important locus, resource and center of a postmodern lifestyle. Through this function and role it plays, it determines to a great degree the face of postmodern Japanese society.

Today Japan is certainly a leader of postmodern lifestyle: but the country is such not only due to its developed urban culture, high share of consumption of luxury goods and branded articles, its digitalization, robotization, ICT boom, etc. An important, distinctive trait of contemporary Japanese society is the enterprising lifestyle of its local communities, with their enterprising actors who use the resources of tradition for achieving socially significant postmodern goals.

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