# Japan and the universal categories of "nation" and "nationalism" – Some remarks on a current academic debate

by

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## 1. The revival of nationalism in the present world

At the end of the twentieth century we face an astonishing trend in world politics: the revival of nationalism and national or ethnic consciousness in many parts of the world.[1] In Eastern Europe, after the decline of the communist system, thinking in ethnic terms revived as well as national traditions were reconstructed. Tragically ethnic conflicts led to warlike actions from the remotest parts of the Soviet Union to the Balkan region. Even before these recent problems occured in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the world witnessed a great number of so-called "national liberation movements" in Africa, Asia, and Latin America since many years ago, which, after the end of the Age of Imperialism, intended to lead their respective peoples into sovereign nation-states.

Although the critical intellectual, arguing from a standpoint of rational thinking, will evaluate terms and ideas like "national identity", "ethnicity" and the like as irrelevant products of an epoch long ago, belonging to the intellectual history of the nineteenth century with its tendency of political romanticism, it seems that exactly the opposite is true. It is a fact that the realm of irrationalism, the feeling of belonging to distinct ethnic or religious groups, still is a very influential part of the political and ideological behaviour of most people.

If categories like "ethnicity" and "nationalism" were omitted as irrelevant, analysis of most of the current national and international problems would therefore lead to a serious misunderstanding of the real structure of these conflicts.

For the observer of present world conflicts it is thus a question of absolute necessity to take the existence of a way of thinking in terms like "nation" and

[1] As to the meaning of the terms *ethnic* and *national* in present usage, I follow a definition given by Professor Barre Toelken, Utah State University, in private communication: "In English, especially in the U.S., *ethnic* has come to have associations based on the *awareness* of shared genetic, linguistic, and cultural factors, while *nation* has come to reflect a shared political or geographical situation".

"nationalism" as a fact and not only as a problem of political and ideological speculation. Reality and myth, ideology, religion and philosopy – are all blended together in the idea of the "nation". But only if we understand what the term *nation* itself means will we find a path to clear understanding of these breathtaking conflicts.

If we take a look at the etymology of the term "nation", we find that it derived from Latin *natio* and *nasci*, with the meaning of "being born", and in a wider sense, "born within a and into a community". But soon we have to realize that a purely etymological definition is methodologically not sufficent for solving our problem. We have to take into account the change and development of meaning in accordance with historical processes as well.

If the serious student, wishing to understand the present situation by knowing the past, therefore looks for an academic, not ideological, discussion concerning these difficult problems, he will, without question, come upon a new book with the title *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, written by the famous Austro-British scholar Eric J. Hobsbawm, and published only a few months ago.[2]

## 2. E. J. Hobsbawm on "nation" and "nationalism"

In this work, with the subtitle "Programme, myth, reality", Hobsbawm discusses the development of the modern nations since the end of the eighteenth century. On the basis of the works of some prominent predecessors he formulates right at the beginning of his work the nearly axiomatic conclusion that – since nations are **not** "as old as history" –, "the modern sense of the word is no older than the eighteenth century" (Hobsbawm 1990:3). On the question of what a nation in this modern sense of the word in fact is, the author quotes some common criteria for nationhood often cited, mainly common "language" and "ethnicity". It is the main purpose of Hobsbawm's study to prove the irrelevance of these two categories for defining the modern nation state. The author expresses his conviction that "the criteria for this purpose – language, ethnicity or whatever – are themselves fuzzy, shifting and ambiguous" (Hobsbawm 1990:6). So he sees the "nation" as a product of prior nationalism, since "nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way round" (Hobsbawm 1990:10).

So the idea of the nation is revealed as a highly ideological construct by Hobsbawm, and its criteria, like common language and ethnicity, are nothing more than artifical products in the historical process of "nation-making". Especially the criterion of ethnicity is, as Hobsbawm points out, highly irrelevant. "In ordinary usage this is almost always connected in some unspecified way with common origin and

[2] Eric J. Hobsbawm: *Nation and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, myth, reality.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990.

descent, from which the common characteristics of the members of an ethnical group are allegedly derived" (1990:63). But in fact, Hobsbawm concludes, "the populations of large territorial nation-states are almost invariably too heterogeneous to claim common ethnicity" (1990:63).

At least at this point of argumentation the reader with Japanologist's eyes will be especially attracted by the subject, since we all know about the extremely important function of the ideas of "common origin", "ethnicity" and "homogeneity" in modern Japanese nationalism. So, one of course expects Hobsbawm to discuss especially the Japanese case as probably the best and most striking example of a modern nation state on the ideological basis of postulated common ethnicity. But, to be brief, we are disappointed in this respect. He only states, in just a short passage, that China, Korea and Japan "are indeed among the extremely rare examples of historic states composed of a population that is ethnically almost or entirely homogeneous" (Hobsbawm 1990:66). Some more words on China, nearly nothing on Japan and Korea – that is all an eminent scholar like Hobsbawm has to write about East Asia in this context, even mixing together such different cultures as China, Korea and Japan. Here it becomes clear that the terms "nation" and "nationalism" are thought of in purely European historical categories.

## 3. Japan and the current academic debate on "nation" and "nationalism"

So Hobsbawm's book, the profoundest contemporary study on "nation" and "nationalism", proves to be in the end just one more example of historical and philosophical works that argue mainly on the basis of an eurocentric world view. Solely the cultures belonging to the European traditions seem to be worth being analysed within this context. To make it clear: In my eyes this is principally not a question of morals or a sense of justice for non-European cultures but even more of academic seriousness. In the present world data based on the various cultures of our planet has grown so immense that we have theoretically become able to take under consideration nearly all relevant regions when talking about universal categories like "nation" and "nationalism". And it is not because of my own coincidental preoccupation with Japan that I am convinced of the fact that Japan provides probably the most striking case in this respect.

From beginning of documented history on, starting with the earliest records like *Kojiki* (712 A.D.) and *Nihongi* (720 A.D.) of the early eighth century, we find through the centuries, among scholars and priests of Shintô, Buddhism and Confucianism alike, a definite awareness of being Japanese, distinguished from the outside world. *Nihonjinron*, the thinking in national and ethnic categories about Japan and her inhabitants by the Japanese themselves, indeed has a very long history in that country. In the centre of these ideas, unaffected by the changing

historical scene, the institution of the Tennô and its religious foundations were located.[3] "National consciousness" in Japan therefore has a very long and independent history. It is the fault of most Western historians that they are convinced of the idea that thinking in national terms – and hence nationalism – in Japan only started after the contact with the West in the second part of the ninteenth century. Of course the European idea of the nation state influenced the modern Japanese nationalism since the Meiji period, and here it was, as we all know, mainly the German-Prussian nationalism of the newly founded German Empire. But this eurocentric view on Japanese history is unable to see the most fascinating fact that Japanese ideological thinkers themselves, during Tokugawa times and even the previous historical epochs, developed their own kind of "national idea". It centered in the concept of a Japanese community, seen as *shinkoku*, "the country of the gods", later on manifested as the idea of a distinct Japanese *kokutai*, "national polity", under the Tennô's rule.

In Japan it was especially the idea of common ethnicity that was fundamental to this concept. It founded on the myth of common origin of all Japanese in the Age of Gods. This religious concept had always, since the days of *ritsuryô* times, a clearly political connotation as well.

Of course we cannot elaborate these ideas in detail here, but I hope it has already become comprehensible that, when speaking about the development of ethnocentrism and the idea of the nation one cannot ommit the Japanese case without giving up probably the most valuable materials.

This is the case with another important problem within this context too. It deals with the question of whatever traditional elements, incorporated into the modern nation state to prove its historical continuity and thus legitimation, are really that old and authentic as they are assumed to be. But if we, discussing this aspect of the "national question", have a look into another fascinating book, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in the year 1983 under the programmatical title *The Invention of Tradition*[4], we again face the distressing situation of preoccupation with European examples and cases. Here again the image is created that such phenomena do exist in modern European – and US American – history only. Hobsbawm, the author of works nearly uncountable on several fields of social and historical topics, became especially famous with this study. It provoked nearly a sensation in the academic world since it made clear that most of the allegedly old national traditions of the countries under consideration in fact were quite re-

[3] cf. Klaus Antoni: *Der Himmlische Herrscher und sein Staat. Essays zur Stellung des Tennô im modernen Japan.* Iudicium Verlag, München 1991.

[4] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger: *The Invention of Tradition.* (Past and Present Publications), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983.

cent, mainly products of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his "Introduction" Hobsbawm wrote: "Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations. Yet ... , in its modern form it is the product of the late ninteenth and twentieth centuries." Hobsbawm and his co-authors illustrate in a series of brillant articles in this work how, for example, the British Empire, Imperial Germany or the new Italian nation-state of the late nineteenth century developed a whole set of ceremonies, rituals and traditions that in fact were quite recent and therefore not real traditions but "invented" ones.

Reading this book the Japanologist again will have a very "familiar" feeling. Royal ceremonies as artificial, "invented", traditions? Who should not think of Meiji Japan in this context with its huge amount of ceremony, ritual, nationwide festivals and the like? These not only do remind us of Hobsbawm's "invented traditions", but in fact are fundamental examples for this phenomenon. We realize that the Japanese case is omitted here again, although it constitutes not just one more example in a series of similar cases but indeed provides us with extremely relevant material for discussing the whole, "universal", problem. Studying the development of national ceremonies since Meiji Japan gives the historian an unequaled clear picture of what "invented" traditions are, and how they are blended with "real" traditons to form a cultural amalgam that creates the basis for a modern nation state: Japan.

The historian Fujitani Takashi for example, analyses in his doctoral thesis at the University of California, dating from 1986, some of the Meiji era ceremonies from this point of view.[5] His work obviously was written under the influence of Hobsbawm's studies. Fujitani shows with some striking examples to what extent the Japanese case fits into the general paradigm of modern "invented" traditions. As a kind of initial summary the author states: "National ceremonies, the symbols and emblems of which they were made, the space in which they were performed, the sacred places which gave the ceremonies their cosmological meaning – had not existed in their early twentieth century forms since ancient times... " (Fujitani 1986:3).

Pointing out Hobsbawm's studies, Fujitani concludes with absolute clearness: "Japan's governing elites also invented, revived, manipulated and encouraged national rituals with unprecedented vigor" (Fujitani 1986:18).

To what extent this "unprecedented vigor" is still alive in present-day Japan we all could recognize at the ceremonial events surrounding the death of the old and the coronation of the new emperor since 1989. In a recent study on the Japanese

[5] Takashi Fujitani: *Japan's modern national ceremonies: A historical ethnography, 1868–1912.* Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley 1986.

enthronement ceremonies, the author, Nicola Liscutin[6], states, with reverence again to Eric Hobsbawm and his coauthors, "a closer look at the history of the *daijôsai* reveals that the architects of the Meiji period invented a new tradition of the ceremony" (Liscutin 1990:28).

As we can see, Japan forms not just a single example of the blending of real and artificial traditions within the context of modern nation making but in fact provides the historian with a central pillar for understanding and documenting the universal paradigm.

It is therefore necessary in my opinion that not only Japanologists as regional specialists but also the "general" historian take Japan into account when talking about tradition and the modern age, about nationalism and ideology. It is absolutely high time for the Western academic world to realize that world history and intellectual history cannot be described only by a eurocentric view of the world.

In this respect I want to back another author, Dietmar Rothermund, historian of Modern Indian history at Heidelberg University, who asks historians and Orientalists to work together in a field of study that he calls the "hermeneutics of the alien" ("Hermeneutik der Fremde").[7] His insights, formulated over a period of more than twenty years, can be understood in my opinion as a kind of dialectic synthesis of the problems we talked about, especially of the relation between "real" and "artificial" tradition in modern nationalist ideology, containing – this is the main point – extra-European cases too. Rothermund describes the tension between "real" traditions and artificial ones, and refers to the ideological product of these by the term "traditionalism".

"Traditionalism", the author wrote in 1970[8], "is a phenomenon that can be observed in many nations in a transitional phase of cultural and political development. Tradition is a many splendoured thing, it encompasses a variety of social structures and ideas which are frequently contradictory. Traditionalism, however, is a conscious attempt at streamlining tradition so as to fit a particular need for a useful past. This need arises when a people wants to aquire a national identity and looks for some common denominator. This common denominator is usually found in a reconstructed tradition of social, cultural and religious solidarity."

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[6] Nicola Liscutin: "Daijôsai. The Great Festival of Tasting the New Fruits". In: *TASJ*, 4th ser., vol. 5, 1990:25–52.

[7] Dietmar Rothermund: "Der Traditionalismus als Forschungsgegenstand für Historiker und Orientalisten". In: *Saeculum*, Bd. 40/2, 1989:142–148.

[8] Dietmar Rothermund: "Traditionalism and Socialism in Vivekananda's Thought". In: *Quest*, October–December, No.67, 1970:35.

## 4. Conclusion

As I pointed out in the beginning, Eric J. Hobsbawm's generally so valuable recent studies are lacking in one serious respect: they do not recognize the necessity of taking into consideration extra-European materials in the discussion concerning "nation" and "nationalism".[9]

Here, the methodological premises of Rothermund fill the gap. And it is especially the intellectual history of Japan that could contribute enormously to the study of "traditionalism" by analysing Japanese history in the sense of studying the relationship between original traditions and artifical ones within the context of developing national ideology.

These kinds of studies, I am convinced, will in the end also help to reveal the universal structures of ethnic and national conflicts happening around the world at the present time.

[9] Hobsbawm must be aware of this weak point in his argumentation since he admits in the preface to his book (1990) that he will "think further about non-European nationalism".