

The concept of voluntary service and the Japanese "borantia"

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Voluntary service has many facets: Charity, helping persons in need, caring for the aged and the poor or for orphans or refugees, giving a helping hand within a community e.g. to keep its hiking trails in order, being a member of the volunteer fire-brigade, performing duties in sports and hobby clubs, participating in politics, etc. In German and in French we have the terms *Voluntariat* and *bénévolat* in the sense of "internship", a basically unpaid apprentice getting to know a field of interest and forming personal connections prior to taking up a job. Moreover, many European countries get unpaid service in the form of *Zivildienst* (mandatory community service in place of military service) or *Zivilschutz* (mandatory civil protection service).

We need to be aware that no two societies have exactly the same notion of "doing something for others on a voluntary basis". In my own country, doing something for the community is largely equal to doing something for the state, whereas in other countries the state may be seen as adversary, so that voluntary service is strictly limited to one's own family or clan. What is of interest here is to what extent the notion exists of voluntary service for anonymous others.

In contrast to my own country, where voluntary service is a taken-for-granted element of social life and the call for such service is quickly answered by persons of all ages and from all social strata, in present-day Japan voluntary service is the object of controversial debates. Moreover, the fact that Japan uses the foreign (katakana) term *borantia*, whereas my own society uses unspectacular common language terms, arouses my interest. Why do Japan's debates about volunteer work appear emotionally charged?

In Japan the distinction between *borantia* and *hōshi* (service extending from a lower to a higher level) is one such minefield. Another debate criticizes condescending top-down attitudes of people doing things for others. Also, volunteers may be criticized as being a nuisance as they force the recipients of help to feel indebted. For Japan in comparison we also need to note the absence of military service which requests the citizens to perform certain duties. The absence of the church as an institution that has politically and socially legitimized voluntary work for anonymous others is another important factor to consider. In many parts of the West the church in particular historically established the very definition of community, and today secular concepts of community and its volunteer activities are the

direct heirs to the former parish structures.

In Japan, we still need to better understand the patterns of feeling responsible towards anonymous others, and thus the image of a volunteer. We do know, of course, that rural villages have – or had - well-established systems of reciprocal support, and we also know that ethical standards often originating in Buddhist teachings such as freeing oneself from ego and becoming one with others have shaped human relations in Japan for centuries. However, only few studies have linked centuries-old concepts to the world of post-Meiji Japan in a way not tinged by national ideology.

One of the most substantial studies on volunteer activity from the Meiji period onwards is Nihei Norihiro: *Borantia no tanjô to shûen* (Beginning and End of the Volunteer). Nihei's work shows how concepts of self and society in Japan evolve through time, and how essential it therefore is to observe the sequences of generations and how they pick up, modify and change visions of self and society. However, Nihei also shows how certain strands of argument are sustained over generations, e.g. the above-mentioned distinction between *borantia* and *hôshi*, the latter implying the notion of offering and reverence. Also he points to the persistent opposition between *jihatsuteki* (doing something of one's own accord) and activity instigated by a government agency (*gyôsei*).

Nihei first describes the situation at the turn of the century, where social unrest particularly after the Russo-Japanese War was widespread. At that time charity was in the hands of individuals often with a Christian background. The state acknowledged certain public benefit corporations (*kôeki hôjin*) as from 1896, but only after a screening process many considered to be arbitrary. During the 1910s the concept of "society" began to take hold in Japanese debates, implying the idea that a sick limb will weaken the whole body, i.e. a suffering individual will weaken the whole state. Government aid around 1917-1920 adopted such ideas and – in a top-down direction – took action to fight poverty. In the context of *dôtoku* (morals) schools started to develop awareness and responsibility for anonymous others. Volunteers engaged themselves in so called settlements for the poor and discriminated, at the same time furthering the ideals of socialism. Other volunteer activity took place in the context of *hôtoku*, a concept propagated at the 50th death anniversary of Ninomiya Sontoku (1787-1856). *hôtoku* stands for acknowledging favours granted by the parents, ancestors, the emperor or nature, and the willingness to repay these favours in the form of service to society.

By the 1930s Japan had suffered the shocks of the Kantô earthquake and the Great Depression, and had triggered war in Manchuria. Repaying the favours granted by society was increasingly organised by the state, which required voluntary work on the basis of *hôshi seishin* (a spirit of offering). The word *hôshi* now implied *teishin* (self-sacrifice) for anonymous others in the sense of "nation", a problematic connotation it retains to this very day. The voluntary care for individual needs, on the other hand, was delegated to neighbourhood organizations and extended families.

In the immediate post-war period all forms of mutual aid within neighbourhood organizations or the extended family were dissolved as having been part of Japan's war efforts. Instead, inhabitants were called upon to cooperate in questions of hygiene, child care, or to propagate good manners. Then, with Japan's regained sovereignty in 1951, the state itself took the lead to model society according to its visions. Thus differentiation between state and society aims was officially absent, but remained the strong concern of many individuals. Volunteers were organised as district welfare officers (*minsei iin*), while at the same time the concept "community" was introduced, based on US models, and with it community service. However, such efforts were quickly interpreted as a device to offset the cuts in social aid that had been granted prior to Japan's regained sovereignty.

Industrialisation, together with the maintenance of a low tax level, brought with it hardships as the population had to depend on volunteer help, often provided by the extended family. At the same time, however, social ties were being severed due to rationalisation, elimination of jobs and relocation of families. It was therefore only obvious that volunteers tended to take a political stance, seeing the state as opponent.

At the time, the concept of *hôshi*, however, had not disappeared. On the contrary, it had a far more familiar ring than the foreign word "volunteer". The idea of *hôshi* was politically backed by influential groups that grew out of organised self-help by returnees from Manchuria after Japan's defeat. These groups, foremost among them the Nihon Kensei-kai (Japan Association for (Physically and Spiritually) Healthy Youths), sought to form a new generation oriented towards the values of self-discipline. The vision was of human beings as the product of a strict spiritual and physical moulding process (*tôya*). The personalities of many later Prime ministers - Kishi Nobusuke, Fukuda, Nakasone or Takeshita – were shaped in this context. In fact, it was only logical that in line with these values we still in the year 2000 find the government call for *hôshi katsudô gimu-ka* (making *hôshi* mandatory) at schools, at a time when the concept *hôshi* had long become taboo among those who propagated the

vision of a volunteer as a free, independent and autonomous individual not acting in the name of the state.

Caught between *hōshi* and volunteer values it seems somewhat doubtful how far the people were prepared to contribute much material or immaterial help, money or service to organisations of the sort we know in the West, e.g., just to take what was in my letterbox the other day, the Multiple Sclerosis Help Association, the Salvation Army, Aid for Alpine Farming Communities, Mediciens sans frontières, or Pro Senectute.

In 1995 the word volunteer came into focus as never before, when the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake occurred. Why was volunteer help suddenly so spontaneous? For one thing, the earthquake struck a large city – Kōbe - in which many were personally affected and to which almost everyone in Japan had some kind of direct or emotional relationship. Thus consternation was enormous when it became clear that rescue and government aid was not functioning. This gave volunteers unprecedented legitimization.

Since then three noteworthy developments have taken place: 1) Volunteers gained recognition in the form of *saigai volunteer* (volunteer active in disaster). Personal, often traumatic experience in Kōbe as helper or as victim – or even as onlooker on TV - led many to engage in spontaneous help elsewhere. At the same time volunteer work became a focus of research, not least because the 1995 disaster occurred in the area of many important universities.

2) Much Volunteer work took the form of NPO activity as soon as the new NPO law was established in 1998. Thus volunteer work, especially *saigai volunteer*, could be linked to a framework with official recognition. This boosted motivation, and in the succeeding years volunteer organisation could be refined in a sad succession of disasters that followed: 2004 the Niigata-ken Chūetsu Earthquake, 2007 the Noto Hantō Earthquake, 2007 the Niigata-ken Chūetsu Offshore Earthquake, 2009 the flood disaster of Sayo in Hyōgo ken, 2011 the Great East Japan Earthquake, 2014 the Hiroshima Landslides, 2016 the Kumamoto Earthquake.

3) In all these disasters volunteers were active and - above all - supported by recognized structures such as research and NPO. This also enabled a bridging of the divide between state and volunteering individual, as a degree of interdependence developed. It is interesting, however, to read how help was and is also spurred by the feeling *tasukete*

itadaita o-rei, ongaeshi (thankfulness and repayment of the favour of having oneself once received help). This feeling creates volunteer networks around the country of former victims returning help to those who are now in need.

According to Atsumi Tomohide (Saigai Volunteer), however, disaster volunteer activities are facing new challenges which again seem to position the state in an advantage and demotivate the volunteer. Volunteer work may lack continuity and long-term perspective, which can make victims wary. Thus volunteers will become trapped between the image of *benriya* (handyman) for the locals, and *shitauke* (subcontractor) for the state. Moreover, increasing rigidity and institutionalisation of volunteer activity is disastrous. Insurance regulations naturally stifle activities that contain a degree of risk, while the requirement to strictly obey regulations of the volunteer centres can make it impossible to act spontaneously. Indeed it is amazing to see how manuals spell out every movement and every step a volunteer may take.

The increase in numbers of volunteers is not necessarily just a sign of increased involvement with anonymous others. For one thing, changes in family and regional structures have led many individuals to feel more vulnerable and raise the awareness "it could also be me" (conversely, where people feel safe within stable social and family networks they appear to be less willing to volunteer individually for anonymous others). Secondly, interest in volunteering may also result out of the need for self-discovery (*jiko sagashi*), since clear-cut paths into adulthood and careers no longer provide landmarks in a young person's life plan. Accordingly, also the state formulates calls for personal development, the goal being *yutaka na seikatsu* (a rich life).

It remains to be seen how far volunteer activity settles down into a taken-for-granted element in the everyday life of a community, not in opposition to but going hand in hand with the state. Introductory texts in Japan point out that volunteer activity and the activities of the state should by definition be complementary, volunteer activity being geared more to immediate and specific needs and often arising from spontaneous emotions, state activity by contrast needing to be more unspecific and impersonal. Also, much will depend on who the volunteers are, whether they are just students, housewives or retired persons, or also a more general public. As for students, nobody can eternally make a living as volunteer, and it is an open question how far a healthy volunteer generation will establish itself in the face of increasing job insecurity.

Let me post still two other questions: What should we make of the stance that being a volunteer is making yourself a nuisance (*meiwaku*) by pressuring others into giving something in return? And why does research mainly point to the problematic relationship of individual and state but never touch upon Buddhist traditions of interpreting self and other? Here voluntary action is well established and supported by expressions like *yuzuru* (concede, give in), *yurusu* (forgive, allow), *itawariau* (to console), expressions that recognise the dignity of anonymous others.

More comparative research is necessary in the light of the alternatives given in a modern democratic state. Certainly a central aspect is the relationship between individual and state, or better: between the individual and something perceived to be "those up there". This relationship to a broader framework in which the individual is a part will spur, or block, voluntary activity. May I as volunteer trust the state, or must I extract myself from its strangling grip? History has shown that in Japan individuals have mixed feelings towards the state, and that the state is used to taking the lead in guiding, even moulding the individual, leaving little room for self-determination. True, some regions in Japan take a much less patronising stance than others, but the basic question in Japan remains unresolved: Can the gap between thinking in terms of *hōshi* and thinking in terms of volunteer ever be bridged?

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