

## The wish to belong – an impulsive force

(Lecture presented at the inaugural meeting of the Organization for Intracultural Development (OICD), Kyoto, October 2006)

Peter Ackermann

In a recent book by Mita Masahiro (*Dankai Rôjin* [The ageing baby-boom generation]. Tokyo (Shinchô Shinsho) 2004), one of Japan's most pressing problems is described as the huge numbers of persons of the baby-boom generation, i.e. those born 1947-49, facing retirement. Why is this such a problem?

Mita argues that this generation had succeeded in transferring its feelings of belonging, and thus its strategies for seeking emotional stability and life perspective, from regional communities to the company. Through this process the baby-boom generation became *kigyô senshi* ("company warriors"), united in the common immediate post-war fear of *binbô* (poverty).<sup>1</sup> The transformation process from *mura* to *kigyô* (i.e. from village to company) in fact began early in the 1900s, but the upheavals later on interrupted any straight-forward development. However, both the economic as well as the political context of the 1960s, together with the sheer number of persons entering professional life at that point in time, made the shift from village to company by the then still young baby-boomers an outstanding landmark in Japanese social history.

Today, the integrating power of the company, together with the mechanisms necessary for maintenance of a sustainable and predictable intra-organizational order, no longer exist, at least in the sense they had been envisaged by the baby-boom generation. Many among this generation now feel disillusioned; many realize that after the restructuring (*risutora*) during the last 15 years they must no longer consider themselves part of a "company family". However, they also know very well that there can be no return to a local community.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mita 2004: 30-31, and 158. Mita speaks of "the fear of poverty, which was the trauma of the baby-boom generation when they were young." (All cited texts in this paper are translations from the Japanese by P.A.)

<sup>2</sup> Mita 2004: 43: "When we were young the rural areas still had something of the old agricultural community spirit."

Mita 2004: 64: "We authors felt that we belonged to literary circles, but now our feelings are the same as those which the office workers harbour who have been betrayed by their companies and lost their jobs in the wake of restructuring measures."

Mita 2004: 75: "Belonging to a community which we could have trust in, this was synonymous with belonging to a company." "With the collapse of the economy also the illusion of the company as a community collapsed."

Mita 2004: 115: "In the period of rapid economic growth the children would by far surpass the

In this context, Mita makes a somewhat curious observation. In rather an envious tone he maintains that the later born generations had from the very beginning learnt to live without strong impulses for attachment (without *kizoku ishiki*) and have just focused on themselves as independent individuals.<sup>3</sup> Whether this is true or not remains open to doubt, but Mita's subjective impression of the younger generations as being more self-sustained indirectly does confirm that the baby-boom generation was socialized to develop a strong sense of attachment.

#### **Emotionality and rationality – two aspects of belonging in Japan**

Actually it is hard to believe that anyone would construct his/her identity without seeking emotional attachment and integration. This said, we do need to recall that Japan possesses a powerful tradition of seeking emotional detachment, passed on through Buddhist teachings about maintaining mental and physical health.<sup>4</sup> Mita makes no further reference to this point, but in daily Japanese life the admonition to remain detached is ubiquitous. This admonition, however, must be seen as a device for providing help and solace when the wish

---

living standard of their parents and make their careers." "Now, however, we have entered a period where even when they graduate from university they do not find a proper job. No matter how much we invest in education, we cannot expect very much."

Mita 2004: 133: "The wife of the office worker was used to a life where the husband and head of the family went off to his company and didn't return until late at night. In fact, the greatest stress for the wife was when the husband faced retirement and would then spend his days at home."

Mita 2004: 156-157: "Shortly before reaching the age of retirement, in a period where we still felt to be in our prime, the economic bubble burst and [we entered] a period severe crisis. The fear [of losing our positions] in the wake of restructuring or the abolishment of the seniority system – things which the generation before us had not experienced – brought about conditions in which we lost all hope."

<sup>3</sup> Mita 2004: 157: "Those one generation after the baby-boomers, those who call themselves *shinjinrui* ("a new type of human being"), are individualists right from the beginning, and they never had exaggerated illusions about what a company is."

On the topic of individualism, Mita also makes the following statements:

Mita 2004: 197: "Agricultural, but also down-town communities led a simple life, but were not forced into an exaggerated asceticism. Their lives were calm, they may have been poor, but then all were equally poor, they did not suffer from jealousy, and they had their little luxuries during the (mid-summer) *bon*-festival, at New Year, or in the context of the local shrine festivals. The entire community would care about offerings for the ancestors, and you could feel peace of mind when thinking about what would come after death." "Unfortunately, this kind of community is all but completely lost in the present world. Through modernization the individual has received attention and obtained freedom, but at the same time people are isolated from each other, and they are chased by feelings of anxiety."

Mita 2004: 202: "There is a limit to ideas about individualism. Human beings cannot live alone, and it is just too sad a thought that a person should face death all alone."

<sup>4</sup> Mita (2004: 194/5) formulates this as follows: "In original Buddhism all is *kū* (vanity, emptiness)." However, he is not explicit about the linked mental and physical implications of this *kū*.

for belonging and attachment cannot be fulfilled or needs to be suppressed, and it does not negate the fact that belonging and attachment are a basic prerequisite for a happy life. Thus we may keep in mind that Japan provides us with fascinating narratives about the struggle of two opposed principles, detachment as well as attachment, or, in other words, rationality as well as emotionality.

Leaving aside for a moment the frustrated feelings of many baby-boomers today, we can quite generally say that narratives about belonging abound in Japan, as do discussions about the concomitant structures to rationally organize belonging and provide a sense of emotional security (*anshin*) and stability (*antei*). We can learn a lot from these narratives about Japanese in-group, and thus intra-cultural development, because it is so explicitly tied up with organizational concepts. Perhaps we may say that by contrast European narratives about belonging are vaguer than those in Japan, because - except for legal, "rational" aspects like duties and rights - the emotional mechanisms of belonging are passed down more as tradition and common sense and less as objectified structural procedures consciously stressed and shaped by state and industry and, of course, the education system at all levels from early childhood to on-the-job training as the key to economic development.

A distinct feature of Japanese belonging, moreover, is the very detailed prescription of the bodily performance required of both those who integrate and those who are to be integrated. Such detailed prescription would not be in line with modern European narratives about the strictly individual "ownership" of one's body and the corresponding taboos concerning prescriptions for it.<sup>5</sup>

In view of the specific type of socialization of Japan's baby-boom generation, together with the many concrete prescriptions for integrative processes, it is not surprising that *kizoku ishiki* (the feeling of belonging) forms such a central element in Japan's present-day narratives. Knowledge about Japan's concepts of belonging and integration stimulate reconsideration of the reasons for Europe's great tragedies in the 20th century, and certainly also for the tragedies in the Middle East in our times: What role do the impulses to belong play on the path towards these tragedies, and what generally happens when adequate

---

<sup>5</sup> I have discussed this point more explicitly in Ackermann, Peter (2005) "Performing to increase turnover. A study of Japanese manuals for shop vendors". In: *Asiatische Studien, Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asien-Gesellschaft*, 58 (3), 2004: 739-759, and: Ackermann, Peter (2010) "Beyond the Japanese language: Communication and the human body." In: Hôsei Daigaku Kokusai Nihongaku Kenkyûjo (Research Center for International Studies on Japan, Hôsei University) (ed.) *Jintai to shintaisei* [The human body and bodilyness]. Tokyo (Hôsei Daigaku Kokusai Nihongaku Kenkyû Center), p. 99-114. (Kokusai Nihongaku Kenkyû Sôsho 13).

mechanisms to sustain belonging and thus emotional stability break down?

### **Narratives woven around the wish to belong in Japan**

Once we have recognized the importance and implications of the feelings of belonging we need to turn more closely to the narratives woven around these feelings. In particular, it is necessary to pay attention to contexts where such feelings are frustrated, as is the case, according to Mita, with so many members of the baby-boom generation in today's Japan. What options are there for relieving such frustration and guaranteeing a continued sense of belonging?

Probably the most frequently adopted perspective in Japan for discussing integration is that which focuses on local (regional or district) networks. In line with one dominant view in present-day Japan, Mita (2004: 148-150) sees volunteers and NPO as heavily responsible for structuring and shaping such networks, and we should certainly pay adequate attention to this topic.

Since a large part of the Japanese population lives in densely built-up areas, there is also a certain degree of interest in new regional networks out in the less-populated country, where life can be enjoyed in a more leisurely fashion. However, most people prefer to remain in and around the cities, because both the cultural as well as the welfare infrastructure provided here gives far more choices for a satisfactory life. A question of central importance is therefore whether city-based networks provide the kind of integration and feeling of belonging people tend to associate with idealized rural communities? In Japan, disillusionment on this point has long ago set in.

So what should local Japanese networks look like that aim to give those a sense of belonging who have been disillusioned? Consulting the internet, we find an enormous number of ideas put forth to foster feelings of local integration. Examples are "events", self-help organizations, volunteer work with handicapped persons, children, or foreigners, but also an intensified interest in the support of local shrines and temples as focal points for feelings of "belonging".

Let me here insert a comment on the integrative power of local shrines and temples. These should not be compared to Christian churches, which traditionally, and visibly, have served as the focal point of a European community. Churches at least in central and northern Europe identify a specific region as

synonymous with a community united by one specific confession, and at the same time link these communities to the larger organization of a specific church with a distinct notion of a civil community. In other words, churches have traditionally given individuals both regional identity as well as a sense of belonging to a larger spiritual entity. (Naturally, therefore, the demise of the church as the focal point of European regional communities has led to very specific forms of disorientation and reorientation not comparable to those in Japan.)

In Japan, one church, representing one particular confession, has not been a decisive factor for establishing regional identity. Rather, several temples can be found to represent different Buddhist denominations, which are – though not in all regions to the same degree - relevant mainly for shaping the link with the deceased ancestors of one's family. Being thus closely associated with the maintenance of lineage and family traditions it is difficult for Japanese temples to become centres for communal feeling. Shinto shrines may be more successful in this, but they do not have the extensive organizational infrastructure a European church has (the pre-war organization of shrines is a specific topic that needs to be seen in conjunction with the establishment of the Meiji period state). Thus religious institutions in modern Japan, if they do possess the power to give a sense of communal belonging, would do so in a much more fragmented way compared to a European church.

The Japanese internet, including homepages of shrines and temples, gives us insight into an enormous number of ideas about how to foster feelings of local integration. Ideas put forward by the soon-to-be-pensioned baby-boom generation are stimulating examples. The question is: will they succeed? A word of caution is necessary.

A discussion on the sense of belonging and identity with a person of Korean origin drew my attention to a distinction we should take very seriously. The point made was that persons who lived in reasonable comfort and enjoyed a respectable status in society based on individual competence in task-oriented organizations indeed possessed a relatively strong sense of identity. On the other hand, persons who objectively were, or subjectively felt themselves to be, in less favourable conditions did not focus on their personal competence but associated themselves with something more abstract, such as an ideology, a race, a culture, or a country or nation.

#### **Pragmatic vs. ideological foundations of "belonging"**

How realistic is it to expect people to establish frameworks for integration, or reintegration, on the basis of pragmatic task-orientation? And how far must efforts put into intra-cultural

development and integration relate to emotional attachment to "something large" and irrational?

Mita gives one answer. In Japan, says Mita, the baby-boom generation, which has lost both its company as well as its regional identity, needs to feel *aikoku* (love for the country). Without this *aikoku*, the feeling of security and emotional stability cannot be maintained.<sup>6</sup>

In what way can *aikoku* – love for one's country – function to provide the emotional attachment a person feels he/she needs to lead a meaningful life according to Mita? And to what degree does love for one's country mean love for one's nation, and, by extension, nationalist sentiment, which can be used, or misused?

It is a fact that the modern world demands from all of us identification with a national state and a national government. In a European country as well as in Japan it would nowadays seem strange for a person to limit his/her definition of identity to, say, belonging to a family of carpenters, or just to some neighbourhood. In fact, one of the modern world's most dramatic tragedies is when a person must define him- or herself as a refugee with no national status. Accordingly, tremendous pressure is exerted by the institutions that surround us to identify with a national state. It can be argued that national identity, consciously or unconsciously, overrides everything else feelings of belonging are shaped by in modern times – though these feelings can be positive, in the sense of acceptance, or negative, in the sense of rejection. However, national identity in effect is a very abstract notion, an elastic and inflatable concept that can evoke any number of images.

Mita in his call for love of one's country as an emotion for pensioned baby-boomers to resort to, defines the country as the sum of all things one's ancestors brought forth in the course of

<sup>6</sup> Mita 2004: 198: "We can say that the baby-boom generation to which we belong has lived a life in which we broke down existing forms of order. Now that we are facing our last stage in life, what is important for us is to focus on something beyond the individual, on something 'large'."

Mita 2004: 199: "'Something large', that is a group of persons an individual ought to belong to. The baby-boom generation has a strong feeling of belonging. That is why they got deeply involved with the student movement, and at the same time why they showed selfless devotion to their companies."

Mita 200-201: "I believe that [people feel] a strong attachment to the scenery of the place where they were born and brought up, to the temperament of its population, to its manners and customs, its values, and its very language. Speaking of the nation we [easily] end up thinking of the Diet members of the ruling party and of the government officials, and we will not have good feelings about them. However, there are certainly many who love the country of Japan." "I am sure there are many who feel great respect for the culture of Japan, and who are truly happy to have been born here."

centuries, i.e., in essence, he defines "country" as tradition. Since tradition in Mita's sense is the sum of concrete customs and works of art bequeathed to the Japanese by their ancestors it is there for all descendants to treasure. For Mita, respect and love for tradition is capable of giving peace of mind and a sense of belonging, and thus is an integrative force for intra-cultural development.<sup>7</sup>

The on-going arguments about *aikoku* (love for one's country) in Japan, however, show that even in this island country with relatively strong internal cohesion the most overriding concept of belonging, namely that of national identity, is subject to extreme controversies. Tracing such controversies in anonymous internet blogs shows an almost unbridgeable cleft between those who use a rational definition for "country", and those who use an emotional one.

The number of Japanese is not small who, for instance, criticize the call for *aikoku* (love for one's country) as being an important step in remilitarization of the country, i.e. for preparing young citizens emotionally to be ready to sacrifice their life for their country. Also, many Japanese make unmistakably clear that all forms of love and emotion are private personal feelings which arise where they are appropriate, and that no one, least of all the state, had any right to demand any distinct emotion.

The Japanese controversy between rational and emotional attachment to the country is remarkable, and it leaves us with uneasy feelings about Mita's call to seek a sense of belonging through identification with tradition. Upon critical reflection we are also forced to ask whether Mita's examples of tradition, such as the *nô* theatre, poetry, literature, art, pottery, or the uniquely Japanese tea ceremony or flower arrangement, are really adequate in a world with increasingly pluralist tastes and values to give future generations a sense of belonging.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Mita 2004: 201: "[Many] of those who take an active interest in traditional arts, or pottery, or handicraft, feel great respect for the country of Japan."

Mita 2004: 202-203: "To devote yourself to society does not mean just to work. Merely to take an interest in the history of our country and to have contact with its traditional culture already implies that you participate in its history and culture."

<sup>8</sup> Mita 2004: 94: "The Japanese have always attached importance to what we call *shumi* (doing something for pleasure, participating in something)." "A culture of *yûgei* (artistic accomplishments) developed, which was not oriented towards making money, and we can say that this is a very distinct characteristic of Japanese culture. Take for instance *waka* (poems consisting of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables). ... This is certainly an intellectual and elegant form of diversion, and it can indeed be understood as something that can be called culture or art."

Mita 2004: 95: "*haiku* (poems of 5-7-5 syllables) eventually became a form of poetry which developed with such vitality as to surpass the [traditional] *waka*." "Or take tea ceremony: here it

As we see, rational and emotional definitions of belonging exist side by side, and they can easily become incompatible when rationality is used to suppress emotionality, or vice versa. History worldwide gives us many examples for processes in which identity is sought in the fiercest of battles between reason and emotion.

In line with these two principles the German language today uses two different expressions to designate the place to which you belong, namely *Heimat*, where you feel at home and are emotionally aroused, and *Land*, the territory within whose borders you are a national citizen.

In Japanese, "country" (国 *kuni*) contains a strong emotional aspect, without which the term *aikoku* (愛国) – love for one's country – would not be possible. This is true even more for the term *kokka*, (国家), literally "the country as an overall family," i.e. the nation. On a more concrete level, and associated more with the surroundings a person is well acquainted with,

---

is certainly important to appreciate the tea itself, but just because it is linked to *sahō* (etiquette) and with it intellectually [stimulating] conversation, tea ceremony gatherings are deeply enjoyable experiences." "The same is true for the art of flower arrangement. Of course the finished arrangements are important, but it is the enjoyment of the process of "bringing-to-life" of the flowers which stands at the centre of this art."

Mita 2004: 96: "In artistic accomplishments of this kind there is no division between performers and admirers/onlookers. They are accomplishments for everyone, and any amateur can deepen his or her artistic skills. Moreover, occupying yourself with your own creative processes you will also develop your skills to appraise the art of professionals, e.g. in traditional Japanese dance, *kabuki*, or the singing of *nō* play texts (*yōkyoku*)."

Mita 2004: 97: "In order to enjoy the culture of artistic accomplishments it is necessary to acquire *kyōyō* (a high level of cultural education) and skills."

Mita 2004: 98: "Still today there are many who are learning *nō* play and *nō* play singing, Japanese traditional dance, or *gidayū* (story telling in the singing style of the puppet theatre), while [professional] *nō* and *kabuki* actors are revered as *iemoto* "(heads of artistic schools; actually only very few actors are *iemoto* and the system of ranking and authority within a tradition is far more complicated than outlined by Mita. P.A.)

Mita 2004: 100/1: "If we now, shortly before retirement, begin to practice some kind of artistic accomplishment, in a few year's time we can easily obtain a certificate as teacher and acquire a degree of artistic skill enough to teach/guide beginners." "If we teach *o-keikogoto* (traditional forms of artistic accomplishments) we will meet other people. Our pupils will look up to us, and they will show us thankfulness. That way we can enjoy a sense of fulfillment at being alive."

Mita 2004: 184: "People who have a *shumi* (something one does for pleasure / participates in) are in touch with a wide world through this *shumi*. People who enjoy *nō* or *kabuki* are in touch with the history of performing arts. Pottery and handicraft also have their histories. People who have learnt *waka* poetry are familiar with the worlds of the *Manyōshū* (poetry; 8th century) and the traditions of sung story telling (fl. from the 16th c. on)."

Mita 2004: 201: "It is, in a way, pleasing that Japan is esteemed for its fine art, its martial arts, its poetry or its tea ceremony. However, when I observe the foreigners who value Japan I sometimes wonder whether they really understand what they are esteeming. In other words, I take pride in being able to understand Japanese culture – maybe I have the fixed notion that only Japanese can understand Japanese culture."

we have the Japanese term *chiiki* (region, district), while *mura* (village) is a somewhat antiquated expression, and *furusato* (one's native place) sounds a bit like the remote hamlet your grand-parents used to live in when they were small.

Japan thus has a number of terms to designate the place to which you belong, and we should pay attention to the power each of them has to sustain the wish to contribute to development. In official terminology, to serve the smaller unit of *chiiki* (region) is the concrete application of being emotionally attached to the larger unit, the nation. Intra-cultural (or intra-*chiiki*) development then would be almost synonymous with national development, though, as mentioned, internet entries prove that the emotional underpinning of this equivalence is being sharply drawn into question.

In German speaking Europe there is a strong tradition of rationalizing relationships of belonging beyond just the most intimate network of the family. Love for one's *Heimat* (the emotional term for the place you feel attached to) is therefore in Germany limited to things like caring for the beauty of the local landscape. And "love for one's country" (Landliebe) is synonymous with "love for rural life" and is the brand name of a milk producer. By contrast, German speaking Switzerland uses the highly emotional term *Heimat* in its government statements to describe the focus of educational and political activity, thus basing the rational principles of the nation (rule of law, welfare state, direct democracy, and federalism) on an emotional foundation.

Contrasting the three countries Germany, Switzerland and Japan, we may say that in Japan integration and development is taking place on shifting ground between emotionality and rationality, while in Switzerland an emotional attachment to rational principles seems normative. Modern Germany, however, with its history of fatal upheavals and relatively high degree of lack of emotional attachment to national territory, appears like a testing laboratory for various rational types of integration.

Let me sum up. It is essential that we understand the mechanisms of emotionality that not only form the basis for the development of identity, but drive and structure our thinking and behaviour that is always in search of *kizoku* – belonging. The Japanese are able to draw very directly not only on well-rehearsed patterns for gathering individuals into contexts of belonging, but also to do so in an intriguing framework shifting between emotionality and rationality. However, and in spite of Buddhist teachings about detachment, the frequent absence of a clear distinction between emotionality and rationality, and consequently the

emphasis by influential parts of Japanese society on the emotional aspects of belonging (e.g. on *aikoku*), can severely upset rationally minded persons in a modern, open society like Japan; in a more closed society, and particularly where people feel themselves to be losers, it could lead to dangerous and uncontrollable identification with abstract ideas and ideologies.

I have pointed out that no matter how much attention smaller units in society are receiving, the nation-state's impact (through laws, education, economy, but also through force, or even mechanisms of corruption) is so strong that it essentially determines the norms adopted for all intra-cultural development. However, as no two modern nation states have the same history and the same narratives, it is essential to make considerable efforts to understand both the rational and the emotional patterns that link individuals and their organizations to the nation state.

Intra-cultural development needs to carefully take into account the elusive nature of belonging. The baby-boom generation realizes this perhaps better than anyone else, and in the end, it cannot provide general solutions. By all means, however, intra-cultural development requires a framework in which personal narratives can take shape and be linked and related to other narratives. Different points of view in modern organizations cannot be straightforwardly reconciled, but they can be helped to disclose themselves through the process of narration, in other words, through a speaker-listener relationship built upon trust. As we know, frameworks that emotionally develop a sense of belonging without losing sight of the rationality of their rules are heavily dependent on how they create a feeling of comfort that is capable of integrating separate positions without resorting to abstract terminology, inflatable notions, and ideologies.