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## PARENTS, CHILDREN AND THE BODY

*De nos jours, le développement de l'identité sexuelle de l'adulte au Japon est confronté à des problèmes spécifiques, difficiles à appréhender hors du contexte japonais. Selon moi, les postulats japonais de base quant à ce qu'est être un adulte trouvent racine dans le concept du ki, à savoir l'énergie et la circulation de cette énergie. Une circulation ordonnée de l'énergie entre les êtres garantit à la fois le développement individuel (y compris dans sa dimension sexuelle), de même que le maintien du contexte social qui lui est nécessaire.*

*Focalisé sur des formes ordonnées de transmission de l'énergie et non sur des règles visant à des arrangements intellectuels, qui permettent aux personnes, indépendamment de leur 'corps' (de leur âge, sexe ou statut etc.), d'affirmer leur position en tant qu'individu, le Japon a pendant longtemps préservé un système des plus efficaces dans le processus d'acquisition d'une identité sexuelle de l'adulte. Toutefois, les recherches japonaises marquent plus particulièrement les années 1970 comme un tournant où le contexte du développement individuel se voit isolé par la crise de cohésion communautaire et les nouvelles formes d'habitat. Dans de telles circonstances, aucune énergie extérieure ne peut être absorbée ; à l'inverse, les microcosmes parents-enfants ou groupes de même tranche d'âge, se développent engendrant une sensation de claustrophobie qui, à son tour, conduit facilement à l'agression et la frustration.*

*Ces changements relativement récents dans un Japon dépendant du flux 'corporel' de l'énergie, je les comprends comme forces décisives transformant la forme du développement de l'identité sexuelle de l'adulte. Dans le même temps, la montée en importance de l'individu des microcosmes isolés entraîne une sur-dépendance envers les petits 'mondes' et le danger concomitant de zaiakukan (sentiment de culpabilité) pour celui qui se développe en tant qu'adulte trop indépendant.*

In its historical development over the past centuries, Japanese culture has been heavily focused on the body. The reason for this is likely to be a preoccupation, not with sexuality as such, but with the key to all life, that is, with the concept of energy (*ki*), and the need to maintain the flow of energy. Energy can only be conveyed through bodies, and the flow of energy can only be effective and life-nourishing if it occurs smoothly. Thus an ideal form of sexuality is certainly not a sensual one in which emotions take the lead, resulting in *midare* (disorder, chaos). Adult sexual identity in Japan, therefore, would appear to be one ideally based on the concept of a sexual exchange of energy, and thus of the importance of the body as such for transmitting energy, doing so in an orderly, non-destructive, manner.

With this background in mind, I wish to argue here that the problems present-day Japanese youth are facing may have characteristics that are not necessarily understood outside Japan, where there may be no such concrete focus on the concept of "energy". I shall, however, not deal with sexuality as such, and particularly not as an isolated phenomenon. Rather, this paper is going to draw attention to a process of contextual change in present-day Japan that has worked to undermine the development of self-esteem based on adult sexual identity.

As just mentioned, adult sexual identity in Japan is rooted in a very "bodily" tradition of thinking in terms of exchange of energy, yet over the past quarter century, numerous forces have combined to prevent just such an - orderly and adequate - exchange of energies with others. I shall discuss some of these forces as they have been reflected in Japanese discourse in recent years, and hint at the fact that they may be working to build up a sense of guilt among young people that could well be a formidable hindrance to the development of sexually self-conscious adults in modern Japanese society.

### **1. How should parents communicate with their children? Observations in bookstores**

Let me start by focusing on the communicative exchange between parents and children and ask how and through which channels young people learn to produce the necessary bodily signals that make up communication. Communication must here be understood as a flow of bodily activities that includes language as one element. How do young people learn to get their whole body to competently produce such a flow? And, I shall ask later on in the paper, does observation of this learning process permit any conclusions about sexuality in Japan?

In Japan, there is an abundance of materials offering guidance for parent-child interaction approximately up to the age where the children enter middle school. The importance of the mother-child relationship is stressed and accompanied by many illustrations showing bodily closeness (but no caressing). Also the father-child relationship has begun to receive attention recently. The patterns described resemble those in other highly developed societies, but are very much less sensual.

In contrast to older Japanese manuals, *onbu* (carrying the child on one's back) today is no longer the norm. However, precisely *onbu* was said to have had a decisive influence in shaping the Japanese child's identity and communicative strategies, which it was understood to learn by feeling mother's bodily flows of energy (cf. Lebra 1976).

Besides the mother-child relationship, another area in which we find an abundance of materials on shaping the body is the discussion of necessary adjustments a person must make to fit the requirements of a working place. Japanese materials stress movement, flow of actions, and the value of activity as such, and they describe the body as a receptacle for flows of energy that produce actions. European materials for persons taking up a job, by contrast, do not argue along such lines, the concept of energy being conspicuously absent.

But what information and advice, we may ask, is given in Japan concerning interaction between parents and young adults of middle-school to job-hunting age, an age where physical strength increases, where a person can resort to threat or force, and where a sexual identity is gained?

## **2. The age of developing sexual identity: The breakdown of patterns in post-war Japan**

This age of developing sexual identity is handled scientifically as far as the development of the body is concerned, but little appears to be said about the social and communicative dimensions of these difficult years. What we do find, however, is that this age takes up much room in special shelves reserved for books on deviant behaviour and pathological problems. Must we conclude that acquiring a sexual identity is a pathological problem in Japan?

European materials discuss what they see as classical conflicts and typical forms of aggression and provocation by young adults as predictable patterns of behaviour. These are defined as the reaction of young adults to their changing body, and usually not as deviant.

Moreover, modern European materials offer sets of solutions for the arising conflicts. Such solutions are mostly communicative: Rules for arguing; rules

for defending oneself; rules for setting limits. As soon as the younger generation reaches maturity it is understood to become a communicative partner of the older generation, facing it on an equal level.

Japanese materials, by contrast, present norms, and not rules for communication. Verbal elements are largely limited to formulas for apology or acknowledgment. Such formulas do not permit presenting standpoints in argumentative strategies of conflict solution.

The Japanese norms, it should be noted, are principally oriented towards the bodily production of a required atmospheric state: *akarui* - cheerful, *sunao* – gentle and obedient, *teinei* - polite, *kisaku* - friendly, *majime* - earnest, *kichōmen* - meticulous, or *reigi tadashii* – respecting etiquette.

How does developing sexual identity then fit itself into the adult world of the parents' generation in Japan, and how is inevitable conflict dealt with? To answer this it is best to take a historical perspective.

#### *Before the mid 1970s*

In Europe, the notion of conflict solution through argument has been closely linked to the tradition of "self-determined organized family life", typical for the bourgeoisie as it aimed to root its personal, social and political norms in the concept of rationality that took shape along Christian societies' path to modernity. Japan's family structures have a different history, and they are based on the notion of defined duties towards one's lord and one's lineage (and, by extension, towards the state) and only marginally on the notion of the self-determined, organized family.

In Japan before the mid 1970s families often had a larger number of children; this in itself was not unlike other industrializing countries. Japan's emphasis on lineage, however, created a relatively high degree of pressure on all except the family heir to seek quick independence. Naturally, this meant developing an adult and sexual identity at an earlier age than today. As for the family heir, he would receive special attention and be given a distinct perspective for his own adult, sexual identity.

Before the salary man became the norm, growing up took place in a context of "absorbing the energies of life" in a community with all kinds of role models both male and female. The family not being bourgeois, i.e. not pursuing the ideal of privacy in the sense of ordered and secluded private family life, life's patterns were learnt less through rules than through observation, imitation and adaptation. Thus the older generation did not stand in a relationship of opposition to the younger, and could therefore also not stifle development of one's own sexual identity, even if, for instance, it sternly decided whom to marry.

Much learning took place on the street and in public spaces. Yamamoto Ichiriki (2005) from Kōchi recalls: "Children did what they liked, but they were forced to respect grown-ups. Grown-ups would scold you, you were scared of them. That way you learnt right and wrong. (However,) there was no communication between parents and children; people were busy doing their work. As there were no "material goods" (*mono*), facilities had to be shared; thus people were never anonymous; when they saw you they shouted: *onshaa doko no ko jaa?* (Hey you, what [family] are you from?)"

Until the 1960s, much less time was spent in educational institutions. To sit around in schoolrooms from 2 to 24 years old, from nursery school to graduate school, would have been unthinkable. Thus a 22 year old almost certainly had his or her own adult sexual identity.

To sum up, developing adult sexual identity had a lot to do with integration into the "flow" of a communal context, and the feeling of gaining strength (*chikara*) by performing a role. However, in elder family structures no development of strategies for verbal partner communication (husband – wife), not to speak of parent-child communication (on equal terms), can be detected.

#### *Increased isolation of the family unit in the 1970s/1980s*

After about 1975 adult sexual identity could no longer be learnt within the flow of a community. A young person's life context became increasingly limited to school and core family. In these closed spaces there was often little chance for social learning through observation and integration into a flow, while at the same time there was no tradition of conflict solution through communication between equals with different points of view.

We will follow Nishiyama Akira (2000) in his discussion of what these rapid changes of context meant. Nishiyama draws a line in the mid 1970s; before that date, he says, Japan was driven by admonitions like *oitsuki oikose* (Catch up and then surpass [the West!]), or *kyō yori mo yoi seikatsu o* ([Tomorrow's life shall be] better than today's!). On a personal level, one was driven by ambition, epitomized in the term *risshin shusse* ([Strive for] a successful career!).

These admonitions supported the drive to get into a good university, and the drive to overcome the small community and become one with the nation in the form of a successful company. Sacrifice and self-control were rewarded by success, embodied by the salary man and his career structure.

The path to success up to the mid 1970s could be calculated: From *ichiryū gakkō* (top rank school) to *ichiryū daigaku* (top rank university) to *ichiryū kigyō* (top rank company). Thus the idea was born of the Japanese

(educational) pipeline to success (*gakureki to iu paipu*), bringing with it a highly normative understanding of development towards adulthood. Those who remained outside the norm and were left behind basically stayed in their small, communally structured worlds within the large cities or in rural villages.

Both those who were successful and those left in small social communities could pursue fairly clear paths for becoming adult sexual identities: some through sacrifice and expected reward, some through traditional patterns of linking up with a community. However, those who grew out of communal links as they rose to become successful salary men – or housewives of successful salary men – did not develop communicative skills within the family. The family, Nishiyama points out, was merely a kind of base camp for sending out the children to school and the husbands to their companies.

The family was internally managed by a division of tasks and the adoption of the necessary morals formulated in the interests of the large employers (e.g. Matsushita) that guaranteed income and status. Family, school and company all upheld the same stern calls for sacrifice and hard work; the reward promised, however, was visible and tangible. Thus rather rigid people, who had been taught to follow a narrow path of sacrifice in return for social upward mobility, became parents in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the children these parents gave birth to have had to become adults in a very different world, in a sense lost beyond the generation gap.

Nishiyama sees the major change that occurred after the mid 1970s as the isolation of the family. Communal structures, linking the family to society at large, rapidly lost their meaning as a frame for personal development.

Furthermore, the family tended now to live in a very much larger house with space for each member to withdraw into. Alternately, living quarters could also be in high-rise apartment buildings with no links at all either to neighbours or to the street. In such surroundings mother was left alone, or sometimes with the grandparents (often her husbands', i.e. father's parents), with whom she quite likely would not succeed in communication. Father himself remained away at work, or drinking, or playing golf.

For the children, peer group integration weakened. This weakening of the peer group was facilitated by the possibility of withdrawing to watch TV or, soon, play computer games. Lack of socialization at home, Nishiyama points out, quickly led to social problems in school and could result in the breakdown of self-esteem. This in turn could erupt in violence and trigger the collapse of classroom order.

In the 1980s, when Japan - with its export surplus - had to shift from production to consumption orientation, the fear of not keeping up with others in what was felt to be normal middle class life created increasing stress

for both parents and children and led to aggression within the closed walls of the isolated family and its communicative deficits.

Many aspects of these developments are not so different from what we know in other modern countries, but the shape and speed of Japan's economic changes caused an enormous generation-gap, while the uniform Japanese pattern of pipeline to success confronted young adults in the 1980s with a striking lack of options for deviating from norm-oriented behaviour.

Compared to the European treatment of conflict between parents and young adults, Japan apparently did not understand aggression and provocation as predictable and natural patterns of behaviour; it did not offer sets of solutions for the accompanying conflicts, such as rules for arguing, defending oneself, or setting limits; and it did not see the younger generation as a communicative partner that could be faced on an equal level.

To sum up, along with Nishiyama we can say that young persons in families whose "outer walls were becoming thicker and thicker" (*kazoku no kabe wa masumasu atsuku naru*) were increasingly confined to microcosms with little chance of becoming a mature adult. In these microcosms, to quote Nishiyama, all energy was needed for mere survival.

#### *The 1990s – Winners and Losers*

From about 1992, when Japan entered a period of profound restructuring, reward for effort and self-control became more and more elusive. At the same time an increasing number of problem children needed much attention at school, which in turn could easily lead to *ijime* (mobbing) from non-problem children who began to feel neglected in spite of doing well.

The last 15 to 20 years have also seen more and more *kanri* (control), as society is no longer geared to achievement but to the upkeep of what has been achieved. This has a strangling effect, and increased *kanri* may be an important factor triggering an increase of *ijime*, since stricter outward control may contain the use of force but instead raise the wish to resort to psychological aggression. So how do young persons "survive" (to use Nishiyama's keyword), and what happens to young people's self-esteem, one of the most important factors of sexual identity?

### 3. Forms of surviving

#### *Closed microcosms and feelings of guilt*

Doi Takayoshi (2004) discusses the phenomenon of closed groups that provide hold for young adults. He points out, however, that these groups do not foster healthy self-esteem.

According to Doi, a particularly worrying fact is that the members of closed groups place the value of belonging above everything else. That means that they are reluctant ever to show any true feelings, for fear of being tipped out of the group. The result is an exaggerated degree of *omoiyari* (consideration for others) and *yasashisa* (gentleness). *Omoiyari* and *yasashisa*, says Doi, prevent clear positions, opinions and emotions. In the end, conflicts remain unresolved and the group becomes a breeding ground for aggression and mobbing.

Nishiyama Akira (2000) focuses on the struggles for surviving in closed family microcosms. More and more children, he says, are heavily dependent on obtaining mother's sympathy to maintain psychological security in the home. Thus they provide mother with almost limitless power to become a *jisonshin dorobō* (a robber of [her children's] self-esteem).

Another dangerous development are *tsui no kankei* (one-to-one relationships), taking the place of broader networks of acquaintances. Child-to-child as well as mother-to-child relationships, but also mother's relationships with other individuals, thus become too intensive and can create a suffocating atmosphere. Such one-to-one interdependencies easily end in fighting, jealousy, hatred - and even murder.

In a closed microcosm of interdependences, says Nishiyama, young adults take on a self-view that is determined by the feeling *mōshiwakenai* (I am terribly sorry), by *jiseki* (self-reproach), or by a sense of *dame na jibun* (I am worth nothing [because I have disappointed mother, or have not been good enough]). In other words, *zaiakukan* (feelings of guilt) develop.

On her part, mother also develops feelings of guilt when she finds that her children see no point in doing well or studying hard. Thus mother's ideal of leading a respectable life as a *futsū* (normal) and *hyōjun* (standard) Japanese woman breaks down.

Children outwardly often try to live up to the standards mother expects, namely *reigi tadashii* (respecting etiquette), *jiko shutchō sezu* (not putting forth one's opinion), being *majime* (earnest), *kichōmen* (meticulous), and *kampeki* (impeccable). However, in the context of the closed family unit of present times such standards are merely meant to please mother, and they do not function as natural forms of maintaining a constructive pattern of give-and-take in wider social context.



As conflicts inside the closed family microcosm are bound to escalate, many families break up, exposing the younger generation to *fūfu-genka* (fighting between the parents) and *kateinai bōryoku* (violence at home). This increases young people's feeling of not being wanted, and thus their *zaiakukan*, their feeling of guilt.

*Options for escape*

Looking at the options for young persons in their fight for survival and self-esteem described by Nishiyama, we become aware of Japan's non-Christian understanding of human existence. This shows up, for instance, in the astonishing openness with which life or death are talked about as options, with no perceptible taboo related to death. In this connection also the high degree of awareness can be noted that abortion would be possible at any time should one wish to change one's fate.

A solution for personal problems that is talked about very frankly is suicide: *shinde shimaitai* – *ikite ita tte ii koto nai* (I'd like to die, there's nothing good about continuing to live). Life, on the other hand, is not understood as something granted by a supernatural God, but a matter of energy necessary to continue (*ikitsuzukeru chikara*). If this energy is no longer felt, death remains a serious option.

Patterns of escape (*ridatsu*) equally reflect Japan's non-Christian traditions. Thus Nishiyama discusses at length how young adults escape into fantasy worlds and religion. This latter, he remarks, has taken on new qualities. Formerly, he says, religions served to secure *gense riyaku*, i.e. to fulfill wishes (money, health, and success) in the real world. Now, by contrast, many New Religions are in the service of *gense ridatsu*, escaping from the real world.

▲ Buddhist ideas about the realm of transcendence provide numerous concepts that give escape a concrete structure. Important concepts are *zensei*, *raisei*, *umarekawaru* and *inga* (former existence, future existence, rebirth, and karma). Many young people also have their mind set on ideas of *noriusuru* (spirits taking possession of oneself) and *kami* (a supernatural being) inside oneself, and they sometimes come up with expressions like *shinde yaru* (I'll kill myself to kill [the spirit inside me]).

▲ Interestingly, many young adults also told Nishiyama about how they abhorred dirt and impurity. Behind this lay ideas about returning to a pristine condition, but also fright of sex and the belief that rejecting sex made life easier.

#### 4. Conclusion: Facing the need to develop adult sexual identity

Japan has been and still is a very bodily culture, explicitly relating life to the idea of energy. Flowing energy – and the requirement to keep it flowing to maintain life – can be said to be a feeling gained in social context and inseparable from understanding self as a body.

Up to around 1975, absorbing knowledge and skills in close bodily contact was how young persons acquired adult identity. Among many other things, this fed into an extremely bodily approach to the adoption of skills for making a salary-man career through *doroyku* (physical effort).

At the same time, as the family was mainly a sort of base camp for sending children to school and husbands to work, it was hardly possible for a tradition to develop there for solving conflict through communication on a level from equal to equal.

The more isolated this base camp became between 1975 and 1992, the less opportunity young persons had of absorbing energies in society to become adults. Nishiyama describes this turning point as the change from *sotomuki* (looking outwards, drawing motivation from tasks demanded by outside society) to *uchimuki* (looking inwards, finding no more reward in investing in outside society). Thus tensions in the family microcosm are no longer diluted by a larger, outward looking perspective, while pressure is built up within by the wish to preserve what has been achieved.

Since 1992 the closed family microcosm with no more community integration, together with the in-family pressure to maintain standards (in place of a drive for new horizons), have led to problems in the development of adult identity. In Japan, the concomitant feelings of not living up to expectations are considerable, while communicative cross-generational conflict solution remains difficult as soon as parents have to face their children as adults. A tendency towards destructive behaviour (mostly self-destructive behaviour) cannot be overlooked as the hindrances to becoming an adult identity seem insurmountable. The key word here is *zaiakukan* (feelings of guilt).

Reactions to this are *ridatsu* (escape), be it into closed groups with tense interpersonal relationships characterized by fears of rejection, or into the fantasy worlds of the *hikikomori* (those who withdraw from social contacts). At the same time, the need to feel life as a flow of energy can quickly turn lack of self-esteem into a cause for suicide.

Through the positions presented above we gain a picture as drawn mainly by Japanese authors through in-depth interviews. We have to accept that this picture focuses on the more worrying developments, but it gives us an understanding of tendencies and very real fears that are seeking expression in

inner-Japanese discourse. Keeping this in mind, we must finally ask what we have learnt through these materials with regard to sexuality.

As mentioned, the bodilyness of Japanese culture, and the important role the concept of energy plays in it, is pervasive. However, this does not mean an overtly sexual understanding of human identity. On the contrary, sensual emotions are ideally under strict control so as not to endanger the delicate fabric of ties with the social context, even though today this context may be very limited. Nonetheless, traditionally these ties have provided a high level of self-esteem and the necessary flows of energy that permitted the development of adult, sexual identity within foreseen tracks.

Being cut off from these tracks upholding self-esteem, isolated from the flows of energy of a social context, and cemented inside closed microcosms as is happening today on a widespread level, together with the stressed interpersonal relationships and the lack of communicative exchange we find there, easily produces strong *zaiakukan*, feelings of guilt. This, I maintain, is probably the most formidable hindrance to the development of sexually self-conscious adults in modern Japan.

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