

The Invisible Red Thread: Constructed Symbols of Unity

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It is common to see old Japanese temples amidst a bustling city, traditional garb and items on sale, and even *geishas* out and about in Gion district, Kyoto. This convergence between the old and the new is astonishingly noticeable in such a modern nation-state as Japan, and it is this aspect of the country that has the most allure for me. As a Filipino of Chinese descent, a third-generation descendant of immigrants, I thought I had begun to lose touch with the culture and history from both my countries, yet my trip to Japan in December 2019 helped reinforce an idea: it is possible to reconcile one's culture with modernity. In Japan, there seems to be an invisible red thread that binds the traditions of antiquity to those of modern lifestyles. It's not unlike Makoto Shinkai's *musubi*, symbolized by the red-knotted thread that ties the main characters of *Kimi no Nawa* (Your Name) together despite the challenge of time and circumstance.

Identity as the Convergence of the Old and the New

During our six-day trip, our group visited locations of this convergence: temples, shrines, castles, as well as corporate centers in four different prefectures. There, the Japanese still engage in traditional practices. During our first night in Kyoto, on our way to the Nishiki Market, two middle-aged

women, seemingly on their way home as they held their *furoshiki*-wrapped *bento* boxes, stopped for a moment to offer a prayer to a little shrine on the street. I thought to myself, “could it be the Japanese religion of Shintoism at work?”

Shintoism has long been ingrained into Japanese consciousness. The Shinto gods, Izanagi and Izanami, have been credited with creating the Japanese islands. The Chrysanthemum Throne of the current Emperor Naruhito still roots its legitimacy in the Shinto goddess, Amaterasu, by virtue of presumed descent. The throne and its mythical roots remained intact despite American rule, unlike its Northeast Asian neighbors, China and Korea, who were subjected to the ravages of Japanese imperialism. Shinto’s influence now transcends social hierarchy and religious worship, and is integrated into the Japanese lifestyle.

Francesca Bray (2014) discusses the role Shintoism played in the cultivation of rice, which became a unifying agent during the uncertain post-war years of nation-building. She argues that the Japanese government used home-grown Japanese rice to create a sense of pride and unity that eventually formed the people’s identity. In Japanese mythology, it is said that Amaterasu tended the first rice fields of Japan. Because of this, the emperor engages in a yearly ceremony of ploughing a rice field—a symbolic activity that reminds the Japanese of their shared history and singular identity.

Nihonjiron and the Japanese Identity

The sense of a single identity is expressed in *nihonjinron* or the “discourse of Japaneseness” (Lie 2000). Lie (2001) also explores the long-standing assumption that Japan is a culturally, economically, and ethnically homogenous society. But the country is far from being homogenous. Though the Japanese largely view themselves as an egalitarian society with a middle-class income, the fact that educational institutions are ranked indicates that occupational hierarchy resulting in income inequality do exist (Lie 2000). Variances in behavior and characteristics abound in the country.

Furthermore, as Befu (2009) writes, concepts such as “Japan,” “Japanese culture,” and “Japanese people” also disregard the reality of variation and appropriation from other cultures, such as that of the Chinese, who had, especially in premodern times, an integral role in forming Japanese identity.

Moreover, Japan is home not just to the dominant Yamato race, but also to the Ainu in Hokkaido, the Ryukyu in Okinawa, and the Burakumin, though there is a widespread lack of awareness of, and prejudice towards, them. Zainichi Koreans, who migrated to Japan during the Japanese rule over Korea, are also present, yet barely acknowledged. The ethnic homogeneity received another challenge in the 1980s due to the influx of foreign workers.

Even so, *nihonjinron* seems to be so ingrained into Japanese consciousness that any deviation from homogeneity is rejected. The Japanese still widely believe themselves to be ethnically homogenous, a source of their pride. As the writer, Matsuyama (1985, 143–44, cited in Lie 2000), comments, “It is rare to find a country so unperturbed by ethnic or racial problems.” Perhaps it is this shared history and identity deeply established by unifying agents such as Shintoism and *nihonjinron* that binds tradition and modernity together. But how much are they truly a part of Japanese life?

On the second day, I met Kisho,¹ a student from one of the universities we visited. Kisho expressed his interest in religions in the Philippines, Catholicism and Protestantism. In turn, I asked him about Japanese religiosity, to which he replied that they do not believe in any religion. Three years ago, during another program in Kyoto, I asked my Japanese homestay family the same question and got the same response. If this is the case, then Shintoism does not fill the role of a religious belief system. Is it simply a unifying agent for Japanese society? Likewise, when one looks into *nihonjinron*, there is much room for debunking, as we have seen above.

By the fifth day, our group had the wonderful opportunity to dine with the third-generation president of Panasonic, Mr. Masayuki Matsushita. After discussing a myriad of topics as we consumed the immaculately

prepared *bento* boxes, the conversation swayed into his hometown, Osaka. He beamed with pride as he shared how the people from the city are warm, noisy, lively, and friendly. According to him, an Osaka lady may randomly even give out candy as a friendly gesture. He then compared them with those from Kyoto, who may seem distant and insincere as they draw pride from their numerous cultural sites, and those from Tokyo, who are very self-conscious about their personal image. His perception of the different characteristics of the country's regions proves cultural heterogeneity.

Perhaps one of the most striking conversations I had during this trip was with a student named Kaoru.² She is half-Japanese and half-Filipino. We shared dinner after visiting a university and quickly bonded over dual identities—hers over her mixed ethnicity and my being a third-generation migrant. We had the same dilemma: belonging to neither of our ethnicities, and to both at the same time. The predicament made her a target of discrimination, if not bullying, from other “pure” Japanese students when she was in middle school. On the other hand, I grew up in a Chinese-Filipino community until I entered university.

Prompted by a few questions from my fellow students, I realized how Chinese-Filipinos formed a tight-knit community around a shared ethnicity, religion, and language. Are these “threads” a way to preserve our cultural identity, given that we were thousands of miles away from our roots? Although the older generation tried to prevent assimilation in various ways, it seems that this intention to preserve a group's identity is not exclusive to Japan or any other nation-state. Lie (2000, 83) states the role constructs play in nation-building.

Whether as a state ideology to promote national integration or as a form of civil religion, there are interminable discussions on what it means to be a member of a particular nation-state, how that may differ from other nation-states and so on... Nationalist social sciences establish the nature and characteristics of a nation and its inhabitants. (Lie 2000, 83)

On our last day, we boarded the plane back to the Philippines, with luggage slightly heavier than when we first arrived at Kansai International Airport. Souvenirs for tourists were the main culprits, as were the handful memorabilia from the trip, such as giveaways and photos. Safely tucked in the corners of our minds were lessons on the invisible red thread—the strong, unifying agent socially constructed to form the shared (yet contested) Japanese identity that paved the way to preserve traditions—less unique than initially thought, but no less reflective of Japanese character.

About the Author

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Endnotes

¹ Name was changed to protect identity.

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