

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF AMERICAN AND JAPANESE CULTURE

M. Hilo and Emma K. Himeno

This study was undertaken in a seminar on "Personality Adjustment in a Multi-Cultural Environment" as a means of defining some of the significant values which persons of Japanese ancestry inevitably encounter in the Hawaiian setting. Especial attention has been directed to some of the central and basic values of the two cultures which sometimes actively conflict with each other, but which, in other instances, we believe, may readily supplement each other.

Attitudes Toward Nature

Humanity and nature, to the American, are two separate entities. Humanity is part of nature, it is true, but the American conceives of nature as something that is given for him. He always thinks himself as standing apart from nature, viewing it as something other than himself. He alters and uses it for his own benefit. To the Japanese, humanity is an integral part of nature. He tries to fit himself into it, accepting nature as he finds it. Consequently, the Japanese does not have much curiosity about it. He does not try to find out what makes it "tick" because he has never thought of nature as something to be investigated or tampered with. Rather, he becomes one with it in spirit and finds enjoyment and well-being as a part of nature.

What happens when the natural elements play against him? The Japanese tries to avoid this if he can by various superstitious means. For instance, each village has a huge drum, about five or six feet in diameter, which they beat during times of drought and thus beg the gods to give them rain. Or a palsied person is said to have a fox residing in him. He will go to someone, usually a woman, who is supposed to have powers to drive out the evil fox.¹ One of the most typical and often used expressions of the Japanese is *shikata ga nai*. This means "there is nothing that one can do about it." Even if there is no rain after they have beat the drums or if they have not beat the drums because they have accepted the fact of rainless days as the way of nature and the crops are ruined, then they resignedly say *shikata ga nai*. If the palsied man get no better or if he dies, they again say *shikata ga nai*. People accept such things stoically and go on planting rice which may be ruined again and bearing children who may become palsied in their old age.

The American has a different attitude toward the calamitous workings of nature. He tries to do something about it by controlling the forces of nature. If a flood devastates property and human lives are lost, then the American tries to prevent such "needless" destruction by building dams and dykes, and by reforestation, etc. Medical doctors and scientists are constantly at work trying to find a way to cure and prevent disease. They have the financial support of millions of their fellow countrymen.

¹ It is interesting to note that there are persons of such powers among the Japanese in Hawaii and many people have gone to them, having more faith in them than in regular physicians.

American culture has produced the scientist and remarkable scientific advancements, as a result of careful observation of the world about him. The Japanese, on the other hand, does not come to nature to observe but to admire it. He has the aesthetic or the artist's approach in contrast to the American's scientific approach. These two attitudes of mind need not be mutually exclusive. Of course, there are certain things that are easier to observe and analyze than others and certain things that are easier to admire and contemplate with satisfaction than others. But it is possible for one person to assume both attitudes of mind toward the same fact of nature or experience.

The scientific mind selects what can be measured and counted as being of most importance. It investigates things in order to find out what are the characteristics that make them useful or useable.

The artistic mind does not seek analytical or intellectual knowledge. Rather, he tries to get an increasing familiarity with the thing itself by taking a contemplative and emotional attitude toward it. A thing's importance does not lie in its utilitarian value but in being what it is--be it an object of nature or a man-made work of art. The individuality of the object is what interests the artist. He tries to fill his mind with the object in order to remember or to realize more fully its unique qualities. He wants to imprint its image upon his mind, reviving and deepening the impression it first made. An artist in reflection passes from concentrating upon the easy and superficial beauty to deeper and more difficult forms, from the obvious beauty which is evanescent and fleeting to beauties that are enduring and eternal. He realizes the changeableness of things of experience and so tries to immortalize the evanescent, thus making the passing a possession forever. He tries to prevent what is unique from being wholly reabsorbed into the common dust from which it arose.

The American, under the influence of the scientific attitude of mind, has often lost touch with the other method of viewing and living in his universe. It is a pity when one becomes alienated and oblivious to the beauties of nature. We saw an all too typical example of this last year. We had taken a walk into a delightful forest when we suddenly came upon a student sitting by a quiet pond in a restful, meditative mood, we thought, until we approached closer and saw that he was listening to a popular program on his portable radio. What an incongruity! He couldn't hear the songs of the birds and insects, the sounds of the breezes as they went through the budding trees. How could he really enjoy the beauty of the May Apples first sprouting from the ground or the delicate but overwhelming beauty of the Dogwoods in full bloom? Did he see the reflections in the water or the blue of the sky above? We doubt that he even noticed the fascinating though destructive work of the tent caterpillars which had attacked one tree.

It is soothing, no doubt, to listen to a jazz singer singing the blues or an orchestra playing dreamy dance music but blessed is he who can also be soothed and find inner peace and tranquility by listening to the quiet voices and messages of nature--be it in one's first view of majestic Mt. Rainier far removed from the world of men or in the contemplation of a single flower in one's own home or garden.

There is an enjoyment of life for its own sake, the simple life and an appreciation of one's leisure time. Life doesn't have to be filled with material accumulations and one can find enjoyment from his own inner resources without having to be entertained in the American sense of the word.

The basic conception of Japanese flower arrangement and dwarfed tree culture is to make it look natural--in semblance of the way flowers, plants, trees and shrubs actually grow in their natural habitat. In contrast, the American tries to make them conform to his particular ideas of composition or fancy. Japanese architecture is very much in vogue just now. One wonders if it is not just a vogue which will pass on and one day become dated. We wish that more people, and especially those who have come in contact with and learned to appreciate the Oriental concept and way of life, would make it a permanent contribution to the field of American architecture. The basic conception here again is to make the house blend in with its natural surroundings. We admit this would be difficult to do in a crowded city situation. But, too often, even where there is an opportunity to do otherwise the American builds a house that stands out as a man-made edifice, glorifying man, and showing his inventive genius. We suggest showing and enhancing the natural grain of the wood instead of covering it up with paint or paper. Make use of rocks and stones. Let the house be a part of the garden, separated by glass and screen to be sure, but nevertheless let it be built to give this feeling.

We admit that too great emphasis on the artistic attitude of mind has its pitfalls. The artistic attitude can lead to irrationality because of its emotional nature. We are aware of the fact that the Japanese were considered the fiercest warriors of Eastern Asia and the Samurai was held up as the ideal for 700 years in Japan. This warrior could come home after his maneuvers, unbuckle his swords, take off his uniform, slip into a loose Japanese kimono and then spend an hour or so in quiet meditation, sipping tea in a room set aside for this purpose. Or he might tend the flowers in his garden or sit down to write a little poetry in graceful strokes of his brush. The warrior is gone and the lover of beauty, the poet and artist, is there. But let the word come that the Emperor has been insulted or that Japan is in danger and he joyfully dons his uniform and eagerly rushes off to war.

Attitude Toward Society

The American family consists of members respected as individuals. It is based on the relation between parents and children and on the need of children for care and protection. It is held together by mutual affection which may lead to cooperation and common interest. American society is composed of responsible individuals, each of whom is valued for what he is and not for his position. We regard any office or position or even commercial enterprises existing for the purpose of serving other members of society. Public servants can be deposed whenever they do not perform the service expected of them. Even the President of the United States can be impeached and a father can have his child taken away from him if he is judged unfit to be a father.

The American government is the rule of itself by the citizens who make up the total nation. It was plainly stated in the Preamble of our Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident; That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it

is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

America has faith in equal and inviolable rights and the right to better one's condition in life. Such ideas are totally unknown to the ordinary Japanese--such ideas as that of all men being created equal, the Creator, unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; government deriving its power from the consent of the governed; and the right of the people to alter or abolish its government and institute a new one.²

The basic unit in Japan is the family and the real society in which individuals move is among the members of their own family and their relatives. There is warmth of feeling only toward blood relatives. The larger Japanese society is a congregate of clans which are composed of families and each clan is represented by the patriarch who is the head of it. Japanese use the word "represented" but its meaning is quite different from that which is used in America. In America one who represents knows the wishes of those whom he represents, voices them, and acts accordingly. In Japan the representative speaks and acts as he sees fit and those whom he represents speak and act in accordance with the definition of their representative. They make his words and acts their own. This accounts for the Japanese mentality which can never make up its own mind. The individual never thinks as an individual. He always belongs to something and when he speaks it is as a member of the total whole to which he belongs, be it his family, his school if a student, his company if a salaried man. When abroad he speaks as a representative of his country and never as an individual. Among the Japanese who are living in foreign counties, they always regard each other as members of a certain Prefecture, town, or village.

There is an inviolable hierarchical order which the Japanese received from Taoism and this has governed Japan since feudal days. It is called the natural order of society. Americans would question the word 'natural'. All human relationships are governed by this order:

kun-shin -- Emperor and subject,
fu-shi -- father and child,
fu-fu -- husband and wife,
cho-ya -- elder and junior,
shi-tei -- teacher and pupil,
ho-yu -- among friends.

The first one of each pair is always considered to be above the second. He is the one who governs and the other is the governed. The only exception is among friends where there is no distinction. The man above you in the Japanese social scheme is not taken as a person when he orders or governs but as a depersonalized symbol of this hierarchical order.

² Mr. Himeno remembers how mystified he was in Japan when he studied the history of England (from which we derive our ideas of individual rights) and how the English people deposed their kings. He couldn't understand how a people could do such a thing. When he had only his Japanese background it was altogether illogical to him.

The source of cohesion in Japanese society or the basis of social relationships is revealed by the five inviolable distinctions which were taught in the schools by order of the Ministry of Education. These relationships are in the following compound words:

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| <u>jo-ge</u> | -- superior and inferior relations, |
| <u>ki-sen</u> | -- upper and lower class relations, |
| <u>son-pi</u> | -- the respected and the despised relations, |
| <u>ji-sha</u> and <u>hi-jisha</u> | -- he who governs and the governed relations. |

Again, he who is the first part of each compound word is he who governs, teaches, or commands and he who is represented in the second half of the compound word is always on the receiving end. One cannot even speak the Japanese language without using either a verbal ending for a person below you or above you. These distinctions are in the very language itself.

The basic human relationship consists in submission or absolute loyalty within the family. There are no ethical principles guiding relationships with people who do not fall in the hierarchical order or distinctions as far as that person is concerned. Morality consists in keeping the above distinctions and never violating the hierarchical order. They have no ethical God to whom they are morally responsible. A beggar child on the streets or a person who is badly hurt in an accident, if they are not members of your family or if they do not come within the hierarchical order as far as you are concerned, can exercise no moral claim upon you and you are under no obligation to do anything for them. You can pass by on the other side of the street and no one, not even yourself, will condemn you. Traditional Japanese ethics is based on this principle and it was the ideology of the governing class of the feudal period. In the Japanese family children are not allowed to talk back to their parents, the wife is a servant to her husband, and in the army a soldier's lack of humility toward his superior officer became lése majesté (crime against the sovereign).

Mikio Sumiya gives an illuminating illustration, however, macabre it may sound to American ears, in his book Nippon Shakai to Kirisuto Kyo (Japanese Society and Christianity). A father approached the chief of police in his town and asked him to try to change his son's mind because he had been converted to Christianity. The chief of police used his authority and tried to change the boy but he failed. Thereupon he called the father and told him, "Such a child is good for nothing. Any further effort on my part is useless. Take him home but a child is the possession of the parent. Boil and eat him or fry and eat him, I don't care. Do with him as you please!"

Over and over again we are told that submission is the whole duty of those in inferior positions. There is extensive teaching about this in Japan but there is nothing said about what is expected from those who govern or command by those insubordinate positions. We take exception to Ruth Benedict's statement in her book The Chrysanthemum and the Sword that those in superior positions act as trustees rather than as arbitrary autocrats. She says the father or elder brother does not have unconditional authority. It is true, that he must act responsibly for the honor of the house, but that only means that he observe his position in relation to those above him. If a father, for example, wishes to squander his money in gambling, mistresses, or drinking and his children do not have clothes or food, no one criticizes him. As long as he treats his superiors with proper and due respect, he is fulfilling all his obligations. There is no teaching about what those in superior positions should do for those below them. Thus the actions of the privileged persons cannot help but become

arbitrary. If he treats his inferiors well then it is regarded that he has acted out of his good grace and not out of a sense of duty. If he does not treat them well there is no condemnation. There is very definite teaching about the duties of the inferior and he is condemned if he does not obey or respect those above him, no matter how unjust or cruel his superior may be. It is only a one-way street.

In order to really understand the social institutions of Japan it is necessary to go back into its feudalism. Japan is only three generations from feudalism³ and it is a known fact that the habits formed under institutions outlive the institutions themselves. But Japan was more feudalistic than most other countries and the passing of feudalism has made little change, even allowing for the shorter lapse of time.

The Japanese still live by what centuries of tradition, formal instruction, and experience have taught them. Feudalism is the prime fact in Japan's development, in its contemporary social organization, and its psychology. Why is this so? What was unique about Japan that there has been so little change since the passing of feudalism?

We must give credit to the statesmen who guided the country through the transition from the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate, following America's forcible intrusion into Japan's seclusion, to the restoration of the ancient Imperial institution to actual power. They saw the danger of a vacuum that the breakdown of one set of traditions and values without substitution of another would incur. As far as we can tell from the records of written history, scant respect was shown the Monarchy by a succession of military dynasties up until the time of the Meiji Restoration. The present position of the throne is the result of one of history's boldest efforts to carry a nation across the gulf of time in one single span. They combined the ancient Priest Kingship with a modern constitutional monarchy and substituted the Emperor for the Shogunate. He became the new focal point of loyalties. During the feudal days the Samurai were a superior caste, the professional warriors. The essence of the Samurai code and the basic principle of the feudal system was 'loyalty' to a degree not found in any other feudal system. And the Samurai were admired and looked up to by the common people.

With the Restoration the Samurai class was abolished and the common people--farmers, craftsmen, and merchants--were elevated to the position where they could exercise the same loyalty shown by the Samurai themselves. Now they had the right to bear arms. The sword was the mark of the superior man and this had been the exclusive right and privilege of the Daimyo and Samurai. With the Restoration of 1868 universal conscription was introduced and everyone was eligible to bear arms and to serve the nations highest lord--the Emperor. This gave the masses a social and human dignity they had never possessed. The Samurai code became the code of the masses and they regarded it as the source of national strength. It underlay all Japanese education and so we had the Japan we knew until World War II.

³ Mrs. Himeno recalls her father telling of his grandfather who lived through the Restoration. One of the orders was that all men had to cut off their queues and great-grandfather wept when he had to have his cut. It was at this time that commoners were allowed to use surnames.

Now when we turn to the American we find that it is all too easy for him to forget that he is to be a responsible individual. He values his liberty and individualism very highly but this spirit of individualism needs to be tempered with some of the sense of responsibility and respect for the larger whole which we find in Japan. One can admire the spirit of independence behind the American who says that he owes nothing to any man. But any reflection will immediately bring to mind one's indebtedness in the first place to one's parents and family for his birth and care during his earliest years and his wider indebtedness for his education and well-being in later years to an increasing number of people. The older the individual becomes, the more he realizes the debt he owes to those of previous generations and the social heritage, as well to the community and nation in which he lives.

Respect, to the American, means to have a sense of admiration for what the person is in himself and it has little or nothing to do with the person's position. The American will do things for people to whom he feels an emotional attachment--he likes them, loves them, or feels sorry for them. He tends to forget obligations to those for whom he has no emotional attachment. The Japanese person does not have such a capricious guide for his actions. Society sees to it that he does not forget. It would be ideal if within the same individual the sense of obligation could be combined with warmth of feeling and love toward those, who in the Japanese sense are worthy of such devotion.

Take the problem of marriage. It is causing increasing concern in many circles that the American ratio of divorces to marriages of one to three or four is all too high. Romantic love is considered to be the sufficient grounds for marriage or divorce and this springs from thinking of marriage only as an individual's right and not taking into consideration his responsibility to society. Parents, with their years of experience, may not think someone suitable for their child but they usually say, "Well, he's the one getting married and if they love each other that is the main thing." But if romantic love is gone, there is nothing to hold the couple together. This is essentially an irresponsible attitude for a member of society to take, and omits the consideration of the other important factors entering into the establishment of a new home. Japanese marriage is a matter for the families involved, which makes for stability. A family literally gives a daughter away or else acquires a bride. Her name is taken out of her family register and transferred to that of the son's family.

The Americanization of the young people of Japanese ancestry frequently finds expression in a failure to show the expected courtesies to the older generation. The younger generation, commonly assume that they have American support in rejecting parental authority and values, whereas the older generation naturally assume that the traditional code of respect and deference will be observed. It is by no means clear, however, that the American spirit of individualism and independence involves a denial of any bonds of duty and obligation to society. Certainly no one can go through life saying or doing exactly what he pleases whenever the impulse arises, and courtesy and respect are controls essential in any functioning society.

On the other hand, a blind acceptance of traditional authority, has equally deleterious consequences. It is sometimes charged that second and third generation Japanese in Hawaii have been so thoroughly indoctrinated with attitudes of respect for constituted authority, that they are hesitant to express their own thoughts, if, indeed, they have any thoughts of their own. In such cases, more self expression could be encouraged, without necessarily sacrificing respect for the thoughts and expression of others. The child need not rule the parents in order to obtain adequate self expression.

Finally, a word about the subject of religious tolerance in Japan. The partial adaptation to western culture since the Restoration of 1868 has not been effective. Actually it was not the Westernization it appeared to be so much as a return to an older feudalism. There is a curious stratification of religions in Japan. Buddhism that came to Japan never succeeded in replacing the ancient native Japanese religion. So among the Japanese there exists not a true syncretism of Buddhism and Shintoism but the two religions, one piled on top of the other. The Japanese see no incongruity about this but keep them both. This is the reason for the lack of purity or orthodoxy in the Japanese religious outlook. They do not feel that they must embrace one to the exclusion of the other.

The Christian teaching is that its God is the One God and a person must forsake all others. There would be no conflict if a Christian were willing to add Christianity to the layers of religions that he already had. One can imagine what a convert to the Christian religion goes through. He must leave his ancestors' religion as well as that of his parents. He has been brought up within a society in which the family is the basis and he has been thoroughly disciplined in the virtues of submission and has been taught that loyalty is the highest virtue. It requires a great amount of determination and decision for a Japanese to turn to Christianity. This no doubt accounts for the small percentage of the total population that have become Christian in Japan. Christian Church workers in Hawaii must take account of this background and not be too shocked when they find their converts have not altogether cut all ties with their former religions.

We have tried to show that there are commendable elements in both cultures as well as dangers. The most serious handicap confronting a Nisei or anyone who is a product of two cultures is a chaotic state of mind. He must somehow resolve conflicting ideas, ideals and aspirations and the first step toward this, is in understanding the background and reasons for such tensions. He must form a new conception of himself, rather taking pride in the critical role which he is called to play. It is especially necessary that he not evade the issues nor try to deceive himself.

The unique role of one who has had the experience of living in two cultures can be that of an interpreter. His horizons ought to be wider because he sees both points of view. Since the origin of thinking always entails some perplexity, confusion, and doubt, the man on the margin of two cultures is likely to do more thinking than the ordinary person and have a keener intelligence. This conflict of cultures may produce the most truly creative minds in terms of both using conflict as they have known it as a theme of artistic expression and scientific accomplishments.

Owari (The End)