THE LEGACY OF THE KAMON IN THE JAPANESE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Japan in itself but especially after the so-called "Japanese miracle" generated a frenzy of questions that searched for the hidden secret recipe for economic growth. Japan has limited land and natural resources, but something special must have led to their economic ascension.

Long series of works and studies were aimed at deciphering the inner workings of this amazing culture. Since Japanese culture is so unique and hermetic, it must also be the core reason for its economic successes after the Second World War. Indeed, their culture forged their peculiar type of management that seems to be the key to success. But what exactly did trigger their particular type of management that led to such high economic standpoint?

This paper aims to elaborate an explanation of the basis of the Japanese management and underline the reasons for its extraordinary results.

Japan's power, the Japanese nation

Japan is the second economy in the world and the reasons for this exclude extensive land or natural resources, because the Japanese have none. Something else, something so special that it was able to boost a destroyed post-war economy to the highest levels, is the key factor to their soaring economic activity.

To achieve an insightful understanding of the morality of another culture is to go beyond the mere accumulation of factual knowledge. We can know all about Japan – its population, history, geography and managerial style – and still not understand it. Understanding goes beyond knowing; it includes feeling and imagination, the capacity to project ourselves into the place of the Japanese, to imagine at least for a fleeting moment what it is like to be Japanese (1).

To do so is to enter the sphere of intimacy, to stop thinking that a certain society is the sum of its individual members which can be studied piece by piece, and start realizing that it might be possible to face a different society, that cannot be divided and studied as a kinetic sum of parts. Intimacy involves inseparability,

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a belonging together and a sharing. Many things are in relation, but only some are intimately related, as the Japanese are.

In order to understand an intimist society like Japan, two things are necessary. First of all, we need to realize that cultural patterns applicable to Japan as a whole, can be detected in smaller units like families, companies or even in individual behavior. Second and most important point is that intimacy is based on the strong feeling of *belonging*.

We, as outsiders, have to maintain a certain occidental logic in the analysis of social phenomena, to be more precise to identify, point out, study the history, and understanding the results of deeper mechanisms which are moving the Japanese society.

Beginning with Y. Lotman's theory of text orientated society and grammatical orientated society (2), we have the first tool that provides a better understanding of the Japanese system, starting from the neighborhood of our own occidental culture. Lotman speaks about two different types of culture – text orientated (TOC) and grammatical orientated (GOC).

Our type of culture is a GOC, and has a certain set of characteristic rules that it is based on. Operating with rules that are used in any kind of relation or approach, a GOC type of society develops a predictable human behavior, because any individual will apply the correct (expected) rule in the giving situation. For this individual, only something that can be checked exists, and from this point of view even a text is a unity of parts following the rules of combining together. Everything can be explained using the scientific language.

On a TOC on the other hand (as in Japan) the rules of combining are not important. They are operating with a different set of determinants based on precedents (behavior models), practices, models, texts, and among these boundaries all that exist is correct. The rules are not used to create texts, but can be generated by the text itself, and because a TOC is developed starting from a text corpus, it will take this entity as a witness and base for any behavior. In a GOC, explanations are always necessary, and the analytic style is a common thing, but in TOC suggestions and the internal references between texts are the common way of interaction.

Japan is definitely a TOC and understanding this fact explains the tendency of valuing the tradition. At the traditional level they have the key of understanding this amazing society that seems to be ruled by ways of vague guidance. The text corpus and behavior models exist outside temporal borders, but the physical core can be found in the past, in times of gods at the beginning of history and literature. This is the part that Japanese have in common, this is the very core of their intimist society. In Japan the knowledge is not passed by way of many words, but by praxis and suggestion. The group is the central unit, and the sense of belonging dictates the behavioral pattern.

As we observed before, this cultural pattern can be detected in smaller units as groups, families, villages and in extended units as well – clans, provinces and even the Japanese nation. An outsider will always be an outsider, because he does not share his social and spiritual soul with the group, he is not intimus with the community developed over hundreds of years.

The history of the group centered culture, of the intimist society, starts in the time of primitive Shinto and agrarian communities. In that time, two different systems of belief can be traced. The first one, called the *uji-gami* type (guardian shrine system) was based on the particular family or clan system. Each family had its own shrine, as a central symbol of its solidarity, dedicated to the ancestral spirit who had been enshrined and worshipped by its ancestors (3). This type of belief applies the intimist pattern at the family level (exclusiveness), and aims towards the goal of integrating all the members into a patriarchal hierarchy. The maintenance of the good name of the hereditary family and the continuation of its ancestor's glorious work from generation to generation were the most important responsibilities. The emphasis on filial piety maintained even in contemporary Japan has its origin in this *uji-gami* system as well. The entire system of Japanese social relationships and values reflects family relationships, which are strictly controlled and regulated by the patriarch. The emperor himself is responsible to his ancestors for this behavior.

The second type of belief is called the *hito-gami* type (man-god system), and was based on the close relationship of an individual *kami* (god) with a religious specialist such as a shaman or a medicine man (4). Charismatic personages and their descendants entered into a special relationship with their *hito-gami* and made a kind of *uji-gami*, playing an important role in the politics of ancient theocratic ages. The selected person or family is believed to be a divine descendant or divine servant, which leads to the *uji-gami* type religion.

Beyond the intimist system of beliefs, there are other daily life routines and symbols which complete the concept of the Japanese inner-group society. For a better understanding of the Japanese system of thoughts, it is absolutely necessary to focus onto the traditional village unit, which is the prototype of physical and spiritual interaction between the *insider* and *outsider*. Furthermore, it will be easier to understand the concept of village conscience – *mura ishiki* – the base of any Japanese company.

For the ordinary Japanese the space is structured around a central point, the point he is standing in, and is gradually dividing into two distinct areas: *uchi* (in, inside) and *soto* (out). The outside borders of *uchi* are the borders of his own village, and everything beyond this border is *soto*. The *uchi* space is the intimate one, while the *soto* space is non-intimus. This double standard is applicable to any group at any level, starting with the family (in Japanese *uchi* has the meaning of home, as well), and extending the *uchi* concept to the Japanese nation in

opposition with *soto* – out – outsider. Talking about *soto*, there are again two different areas, the close one (soko, sore) and the distant one (asoko, are).

In the close outside region a similar system of values can establish a horizontal relationship (equality – marriages, conflicts etc.), but for the distant outside region – a space of interdiction for the villagers – only vertical relationships can be generated (superior – inferior). Sometimes there are visitors coming from the distant outside region, entities or humans that are either superior or inferior, or both in the same time, but they will never be seen as equals. Gods, demons and daimyo are always superior beings, beggars are inferior, and monks, artists and prostitutes are both superior and inferior.

It is now clear that the Japanese culture is a group centered one, a group with an intimus relationship among its members. Starting from the base of common values that are controlling and directing any action, feeling or thought, it is obvious that for any member of the group the sense of belonging and the security of the community are very important. In the Japanese society, any member of the group is perfectly integrated, everybody knows and understands everybody, and they are sharing almost all the information, and for this reason details and explanations are futile. All the elements which must be communicated are already in the conscience of the interlocutor, or present in the circumstances, and thus they operate with the minimum quantity of information.

The Kamon, between tradition and modern management

The sense of belonging is something that gained, because of its importance, some external expressions as well as internal ones. There are many external signs meant to link the individual with a certain group, but one of the most important is the *kamon*.

The *kamon* is basically a family crest, which symbolize the *uji-gami* system of inner relations among the family or clan members. The physical representation of it is called the *mon* and can be compared with the European heraldic symbols, sometimes having the same role in battles or alliances. The Japanese *mon*, as an exterior expression of the intimist perception of life and space, is traced in the 12th century (1100), when the noble class (*kuge*) started to use floral or plant symbols as a sign of recognition for their clans on battlefields and everyday life. Beginning with the Tokugawa Shogunate, a period of peace and cultural development, family crest spread among many people as an identity of families, and as a symbol of belonging. Although there are no rules for *kamon* exclusivity, the respect for others dictates the unicity of the family crest. For example the 16 petalled chrysanthemum flower is the sign for the Imperial Family, and nobody else would integrate this symbol into his family crest. The important dedication to support the Emperor can allow the honor of using the

modified symbol, but only one family has gaind this right in the 14th century (Masashige Kusunoki), and nobody else ever since.

A woman does not have to adopt her husband's *mon,* but her family's crest must be traditionally smaller than her husband's. On the same level, the elder son will keep his father's *mon*, while his younger brother can modify the symbol, keeping it only to show his origin.

The *kamon,* with its visual representation the *mon,* has its roots deeply spread into the Japanese soul, and can be traced as any cultural pattern on an intimist society at any level of group joining. This is the reason for which any Japanese company has been ruled under this philosofical and traditional sign – a guaranty for the group power, and for the group conscience built by sharing and sense of belonging. The *kamon,* which became the company logo in our days, keeps the company together, beeing the company itself. It is well known that until the recent years, Japanese companies have been acused of bad management policies, as they applied *lifetime employment* system, and *promotion by age* system. As outsiders, coming from a non-intimus society, it is very difficult to understand such policies, but for the Japanese their traditional background dictates their behavior.

Deciphering the Japanese Type of Management

The culture of Japanese management so famous in the West is generally limited to Japan's large corporations. These flagships of the Japanese economy provide their workers with excellent salaries and working conditions and secure employment. These companies and their employees are the business elite of Japan. A career with such a company was the dream of many young people in Japan, but only a select few attain these jobs. Qualification for employment is limited to the men and the few women who graduate from the top thirty colleges and universities in Japan.

Placement and advancement of Japanese workers is heavily based on educational background. Students who do not gain admission to the most highly rated colleges only rarely have the chance to work for a large company. Instead, they have to seek positions in small and medium-sized firms that can not offer comparable benefits and prestige. The quality of one's education and, more important, the college attended, play decisive roles in a person's career.

Few Japanese attend graduate school, and graduate training in business per se is rare. There are only a few business school programs in Japan. Companies provide their own training and show a strong preference for young men who can be trained in the company way. Interest in a person whose attitudes and work habits are shaped outside the company is low. When young men are preparing to graduate from college, they begin the search for a suitable employer. This process has been very difficult: there are only a few positions in the best government

ministries, and quite often entry into a good firm is determined by competitive examination. The situation is becoming less competitive, with a gradual decrease in the number of candidates. New workers enter their companies as a group on April 1 each year.

One of the prominent features of Japanese management is the practice of permanent employment (shushin koyo). Permanent employment covers the minority of the work force that work for the major companies. Management trainees, traditionally nearly all of whom were men, are recruited directly from colleges when they graduate in the late winter and, if they survive a six-month probationary period with the company, are expected to stay with the companies for their entire working careers. Employees are not dismissed thereafter on any grounds, except for serious breaches of ethics.

Permanent employees are hired as generalists, not as specialists for specific positions. A new worker is not hired because of any special skill or experience; rather, the individual's intelligence, educational background, and personal attitudes and attributes are closely examined. On entering a Japanese corporation, the new employee will train from six to twelve months in each of the firm's major offices or divisions. Thus, within a few years a young employee will know every facet of company operations, knowledge which allows companies to be more productive.

Another unique aspect of Japanese management is the system of promotion and reward. An important criterion is seniority. Seniority is determined by the year an employee's class enters the company. Career progression is highly predictable, regulated, and automatic. Compensation for young workers is quite low, but they accept low pay with the understanding that their pay will increase in regular increments and be quite high by retirement. Compensation consists of a wide range of tangible and intangible benefits, including housing assistance, inexpensive vacations, good recreational facilities, and, most important, the availability of low-cost loans for such expenses as housing and a new automobile. Regular pay is often augmented by generous semiannual bonuses. Members of the same graduating class usually start with similar salaries, and salary increases and promotions each year are generally uniform. The purpose is to maintain harmony and avoid stress and jealousy within the group.

Individual evaluation, however, does occur. Early in workers' careers, by age thirty, distinctions are made in pay and job assignments. During the latter part of workers' careers, another weeding takes place, as only the best workers are selected for accelerated advancement into upper management. Those employees who fail to advance are forced to retire from the company in their midto -late fifties. Retirement does not necessarily mean a life of leisure. Poor pension benefits and modest social security means that many people have to continue working after retiring from a career. Many management retirees work for the

smaller subsidiaries of the large companies, with another company, or with the large company itself at substantially lower salaries.

A few major corporations in the late 1980s were experimenting with variations of permanent employment and automatic promotion. Some rewarded harder work and higher production with higher raises and more rapid promotions, but most retained the more traditional forms of hiring and advancement. A few companies that experienced serious reverses laid off workers, but such instances were rare.

Another aspect of Japanese management is the company union, which most regular company employees are obliged to join. The workers do not have separate skill identification outside of the company. Despite federations of unions at the national level, the union does not exist as an entity separate from, or with an adversarial relationship to, the company. The linking of the company with the worker puts severe limits on independent union action, and the worker does not wish to harm the economic wellbeing of the company. Strikes are rare and usually brief.

Japanese managerial style and decision making in large companies emphasizes the flow of information and initiative from the bottom up, making top management a facilitator rather than the source of authority, while middle management is both the impetus for and the shaper of policy. Consensus is stressed as a way of arriving at decisions, and close attention is paid to workers' well-being. Rather than serve as an important decision maker, the ranking officer of a company has the responsibility of maintaining harmony so that employees can work together. A Japanese chief executive officer is a consensus builder.

Problems with the Japanese economy affect the Japanese way of life

After the war, Japan reinvented itself, found innovative products to make and pushed ahead with its technological development. Expansion of its sales into the USA and later the European markets created a boom which continued through the 90's.

The crash came when property prices (which were over-inflated) peaked and then crashed.

The whole economy suffered in the resulting financial crisis and has stagnated through most of the 1990's, despite the fact that industry and technology are still in a strong position. Fundamental structural changes need to be made within the economy to pull the nation out of its slump. Such things as a huge corporate tax, 50% tax on property sales and a population which is not inclined to demand change are contributing factors. A lot of the money collected through tax is then spent subsidising domestic agriculture and then buying the products at a high price to sell back to consumers at a lower price. National debt also takes its toll.

But changes are now underway. Japanese companies are also forced to expand their foreign sales and production, which means an increased need for new employees in Europe, US and Asian operations.

Despite all these problems, Japan still has the second largest economy in the world.

Neverthreless, the more threatened aspect seems to be the Japanese way of life, which has been constantly under pressure from the western influences, ever since the 1950s.

A company's "core" workers in Japan can still expect jobs for life, but recession has brought an end to automatic progression up the corporation's hierarchy. The result is a growing army of "plateaued" middle-aged and older employees. Some fare even worse. They remain on the company payroll but are, to all intents and purposes, unemployed.

Some companies engage in "shoulder tapping" (katatataki) and urge such employees to resign voluntarily. Those who fail to take the hint are sometimes referred to as "window gazers" (madogiwazoku) and "marginal employees" (genkai shain). Many of those who do manage to find another job suffer reduced pay, with a smaller firm. Major Japanese companies with a number of affiliated firms often transfer middle-aged and older workers to the subsidiaries. Here, they can play a coordinating role between the parent and its affiliate, and pass on technical know-how. But the parent is also passing on to the subsidiary its problem of overmanning. Many Japanese companies now hold seminars to help prepare middle-aged and older employees for retirement. Some invite retired employees back to talk about their life after retirement. A number of firms give increased paid holidays to employees approaching retirement, for them to take part in voluntary work. The principles of lifetime employment, seniority-based pay and almost-automatic promotion for core employees have traditionally supported the growth of Japanese companies. Chipping away at these principles involves chipping away at the very essence of Japanese corporate society. Even if companies successfully overcome the current crisis surrounding middle-aged and older employees, the traditional Japanese industrial-relations and personnel-management systems are unlikely ever to be the same again.

If the old Japanese notion that the aim of a career is to get promotion is taken to its logical extreme, only the handful of company presidents are ever going to be satisfied with their working lives. The crisis facing middle-aged and older employees in Japan is perhaps beginning to force a collective realization that there is an alternative route to job satisfaction, which involves doing what one really wants to do for a living, rather than what society expects.

Is the Japanese culture in danger?

After the Second World War, Japan crossed a black era, a period of crises based on the feeling that the nation has lost its identity. It is strange to find out that a strong system of beliefs which sustained Japan for generations proves itself pointless, unable to prevent losing the War. If the occidental system is better, based on the results, it must be applied as well in Japan. This is the moment that triggered the beginning of "occidentalization", but nobody can tell how deep the insertion of new values has penetrated the Japanese soul. The intrusion is obvious, but nobody knows if it is a temporal process or not. There are evidences that can sustain both answers, but the need for the sense of *belonging* comes from the beginning of time and will exist in this intimist society for ages to come.

It is true that *the American dream* has altered the contemporary Japan. The new generation has embraced almost all Occidental values, and the national sport in Japan passed from *karate* to baseball or golf… It is also true that the structures of Japanese thinking and acting mechanisms have also changed or are on the verge of changing as T. Hall's recent study proves (5). Hall talked about poly-chronic and mono-chronic systems, comparing the two:

Poly-chronic	Mono-chronic
Multi task	One task at the time
Interrupting and changing of tasks are allowed	Individuals cannot be disturbed
Focus on context	Communication with little contextual links
Interrelation more important than the task itself	The task is the main focus and goal of the interrelation
The projects are easily changed or replaced, by direct interaction	The individuals have a distant behavior, trying not to disturb the others
Loans and changing of personal objects are allowed	Private property is very important
Punctuality is not an issue	Focus on punctuality
No patience, immediate action, spectacular beginning but the action and enthusiasm decrease in time	Slow start, methodic approach, long lasting action

Traditionally, Japan had a poly-chronic cultural system, but in the 20th century the mono-chronic system took control of Japanese behavior. Are we witnessing a process of dilution in this traditional society? Is this a temporal process? If we discuss the problems that Sony faced over the last years, we might

think that the traditional system rejects the occidental imported one. A big company ruled by non-intimus concepts is felt by the common Japanese as an intrusion into their very soul.

In conclusion, Japan as an intimist culture will always judge any situation starting from a common base, unknown and unintelligible for the outsiders. The accent is and will be on the group, and any individual is happy to melt his personality and will into and for the group (family, clan, company, nation). In the outside war of globalization, out of a long tradition and hermetic culture, the Japanese will always fight a guerrilla war, and the deep resorts of their common spirit purify and clean any outside form of intrusion. Japan is a multiple being with a common will, wearing the national *kamon – Hi no maru –* their national flag.

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