Japanese society as wrapping culture

As a representative of social anthropology, Hendry tries to present Japanese culture from a social anthropological perspective. Anthropologists usually aim to “understand people on their own terms,” and “then translate this understanding back into language which their own colleagues can follow” (Hendry 1996: 2). Hendry also tries to translate her own experience and knowledge about Japanese society into English, but writes in language that is understandable and available not only for other Japanese specialists but for non-specialist readers as well. It is interesting to note that it is difficult to understand not only the cultures that look completely different from ours, but sometimes it is hard to understand even our own culture or sub-culture, when, for example, a lay person tries to grasp the terminology used by some specialist of any particular scientific field.

In Understanding Japanese Society, Hendry notices that Japanese people often like to emphasize and stress their “uniqueness and homogeneity”
to such an extreme that “this concern with self-identity has become almost a national obsession” (Hendry 1996: 5). The quest for homogeneity and uniqueness reaches its peak and is best exemplified by *Nihonjinron* or “theories of Japaneseness”. Of course, to some extent all countries and nations try to emphasize their uniqueness because only the difference from the surrounding countries defines and creates a sense of identity and homogeneity.

It is worth noting that already at the beginning of the 20th century a famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued that “in language [language] there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language, there are only differences without positive terms” (as cited in Lechte 1994: 150). As the meaning or significance of any word in a sentence is established through its difference from other words, an identity of a person or a country is created by the difference it has from others surrounding them. Not similarity but difference is all that matters. Moreover, according to Saussure, the relationship between language and reality does not have any essential bonds and is only arbitrary, that is, it changes depending on historical and socio-cultural changes in a given society. Drawing on this example, we might say that a similar process takes place in identity creation. The relationship between identity as a sign or image does not have any natural or essential bond with a concrete person or country, but is arbitrary and changes according to the changes in their socio-cultural practices.

It seems that Hendry is quite well acquainted with this problem. She agrees that identity is important for everybody, but there is no need for exaggeration, since it leads to exclusionism and reminds of nationalistic rhetoric. She also depicts different aspects of Japanese society as distinct from other cultures, but does not press too much. Her aim is to apply the knowledge about Japan to better understanding of other cultures as well so that this material could “contribute to the formulation of general theory about society rather than constantly falling back on its alleged unique qualities” (Hendry 1997: 7). On the other hand, it is possible to criticize the very ambition to formulate “general theory about society” in the same way and using the same arguments as Hendry used to criticize the discourse of *Nihonjinron* or “theories of Japanessness”, because both approaches have the same strife for generalization and homogenization. The only difference is the degree of abstraction. While *Nihonjinron* gives more attention to
cultural difference and presents Japanese culture as having unique essential qualities that make Japanese people completely distinct from others, “general theory about society”, stressing the common features that different cultures share, seeks even more general and abstract theory about human beings in general. Thus, such a desire is reminiscent of metaphysical search for some universal and essential features of human beings. The tension between these two positions seems to be always present in any communication between different cultures. It seems to be the question of value – what do you “take more seriously”? Both perspectives have their strong and week points, therefore it is important to keep in mind the possibility of the negative consequences that both points of view can produce if emphasized to an extreme and at the expense of the other perspective.

After a short examination of some theoretical and philosophical problems that can emerge when we try to understand other cultures and then translate this knowledge to the readers of our own language community, let us return to the presentation of Japanese society as seen through the eyes of Hendry, which is actually very interesting and revealing. The author draws our attention to the significance that Japanese people give to the wrapping of presents and to the way in which they are presented.

Indeed, gifts and their wrapping play a considerable role in everyday life of Japanese people. It seems that almost everything may be wrapped in Japan, beginning from sugar, cakes and sweets to glassware or any other domestic utensils. Besides, what is appreciated and valued is not only a present itself but its wrapping as well. Sometimes a gift may be put in a very expensive wooden box, which may be covered by some layers of lacquer (every layer gives an additional value to the present), and then neatly wrapped in rice paper. Not only a gift and its wrapping are important, but also the way in which they are presented. The presentation of the gift should be accompanied by a greeting and a bow appropriate to an occasion (Hendry 1997).

According to Hendry, wrapping in Japan, as elsewhere in the world, is generally used for the sake of convenience and to protect goods from outside impurities. However, in addition to such practical reasons, gift wrapping might have aesthetic, psychological or even religious shades of meaning. First of all, wrapping expresses caring for others, indicates social status and prestige of a donor, but at the same time “provides opportunity for individuals to express their taste in choice of paper” (Hendry 1997: 13). Besides its aesthetic qualities, wrapping also conceals what is inside, and therefore introduces an “element of surprise”.

Since gift wrapping is very important for the people in Japan, Hendry argues that the very “wrapping model” might be applied in a broader sense as a kind of an underlying principle to understand different aspects of Japanese behavior. Therefore, she expands the scope of the application of the “wrapping principle” from non-material things to bodily and verbal behavior as well. Therefore, as a gift is literally wrapped or packaged in many layers of different materials, so can the body might be wrapped in clothes. If the word “wrapping” is used metaphorically, we can interpret the walls of a room or a house also as a wrapping of the body. In a similar way the same principle can be applied to the wider spatial categories or units such as city, country or even the world which can be treated as concentric circles enclosing one another. Language and its different forms of politeness might also be seen as an example of wrapping. Social units ranging from a family, school classes or a company to more universal national or global communities might be further exemplifications of the wrapping principle.

According to Hendry, the relationship between the object and the wrapping enclosing it is marked by their reciprocity and, thus they should not be separated but rather treated as complimenting one another. However, we should keep in mind that a preference given to a gift or its wrapping might reveal our own intellectual and cultural bias: “A Western perception of the practice prepares us to regard wrapping as a means to obscure the object inside, whereas in a Japanese view it would seem that the function of wrapping is rather to refine the object, to add to it layers of meaning which it could not carry in its unwrapped form” (Hendry 1997: 27). To say it differently, it seems that people in western countries are more concerned with the search for the essences of the things, so give more attention to “unwrapping” while for Japanese people the wrapping plays a considerable role in understanding the object. It is not only the understanding of abstract essences that matters most of all, but also subtle pleasure added by refined aesthetical aspects of wrapping materials.

The problem concerning different cultural and intellectual assumptions towards wrapping is well expressed in the following paragraph:

It is evidently important not to try to take off the layers of wrapping we find elsewhere, always to be seeking essences, because in this way we maybe throwing out some of the important cultural information we need, perhaps only to find nothing at all – or a strange, significant emptiness – inside. We must try instead to examine our own wrappings, so that we can identify our own prejudices, and not allow these to blind us to an understanding of those of others. It may well be
harder when these are similar, as in the case of gifts, which we also like wrapped, than for a people who are suspicious of things that are too elegantly enveloped. (Hendry 1997: 173)

Notwithstanding cultural differences in attitudes to the significance of wrapping, it is important to note that wrapping in both literal and metaphorical sense is not limited to Japan. Certainly, wrapping of the body and space as well as verbal wrapping play an important role in creation of personal identity or image.

Usually the notions of identity and image are considered to be quite in opposition, the former representing what is a natural or “real” while the latter indicating the acquired, created and fictitious aspects of the self. A similar distinction might be found in Japanese language as well, that is, between honne and tatemae, uchi and soto or ura and omote. There is no need to go into details about different shades of meaning of these words. The only thing I would like to point out is that honne, uchi and ura are associated with “real” reality, while tatemae, soto and omote indicate not natural but rather acquired and thus fictitious side of the self. Indeed, it seems that regardless of our cultural background, we give preference to reality and appreciate the real or true character of any given person. However, I wonder what is left of reality or true self when all acquired specific characteristics of it are “unwrapped”? What do we have when the self is stripped off all additional “clothes” or layers with which the self can identify? What is left is likely to be either emptiness or some most basic biological aspects that are universally common to everybody? Thus, the strategy of unwrapping or the search for essences if pushed to an extreme makes the concept of the self, identity or reality an empty notion.

However, if we look at the distinction between identity and its image from a different angle, trying to link the real self with nature, while acquired and created image of the self with culture, we finally come up with a different picture. What is “natural” in a human being highlights only the most common essential characteristics, needs and instincts, almost all of which could be attributed to an animal as well. In contrast to nature, the notion of culture derives its meaning from a Latin verb colere, which first and foremost means “to cultivate the soil”, and therefore stresses human contribution to a natural state of affairs. In other words, it is a human ability to create or add to something to nature, and then to cultivate and refine these created practices, which separates the world of human beings from the natural world of animals.
It seems that not natural aspects of the self, but rather the creation of new ideas, practices and their cultivation (culture) become the most significant for the people all around the world. Therefore, any kind of “wrapping” by adding or creating ever new layers of meaning to nature might be treated as a transition or translation from nature to culture. In this respect if the meaning of “image” is linked to the notion of culture, the image acquires its positive and creative value, and therefore performs a formative function in shaping the identity of the self.

Wrapping as Amae

Hendry proposes an interesting interpretation of Japanese wrapping when she notices that a Japanese character *tsutsumu*, which is used to express the meaning of “wrapping”, is often associated with “a mother holding a child”. Besides, she adds that “a colloquial word used by Japanese men in reference to their mothers can be literally translated as “bag” (*fukuro*), although it carries an honorific *o* in front of it” (Hendry 1997: 24). The parallel between gift-wrapping and a child “wrapped” in his mother’s body helps to highlight the psychological aspects of wrapping. It also allows to introduce the psychological concept of *amae*, which Takeo Doi considers to be “a key concept for understanding not only of the psychological make-up of the individual Japanese but of the structure of Japanese society as a whole” (Doi 1981: 28).

According to the author of *The Anatomy of Dependence*, the word *amae* is a noun form of the verb *amaeru*, which means “to depend and presume upon another’s benevolence” (Doi 1986: 121). This word basically refers to “the infant’s desire to be close to its mother” after the realization of its mother’s separate existence, and consequently to “an attempt psychologically to deny the fact of separation from the mother” (Doi 1981: 75). Although the concept of *amae* is derives its meaning from the child-mother relationship, it seems that for Japanese people a desire to *amaeru* or “to be dependent on the other’s good will” remains persistent in their adult life. Doi claims that an existence of the word *amae* and a rich vocabulary related to this concept in the Japanesse language, and an absence of equivalents of it in European languages makes the only difference. He agrees that the emotion referred by the word *amae* is not restricted only for the
Japanese, but also available in societies that do not an equivalent to the word *amae*. However, he asserts that the existence of this concept helps to be more sensitive and pay more attention to the emotions and feelings of others.

It seems that the concept of *amae* justifies and supports an old age stereotypical distinction between East and West. According to this distinction, individuality and independence are the human qualities that are the most important in the West, while Eastern cultures are said to value commitment and dependence. Actually, the point is that the notion of *amae* highlights only the importance of our surrounding environment. After comprehension of the fact of separation from its mother, the child also apprehends his total dependence on her good will. In other words, he comes to understanding of “the fact that the exterior world is vital to the survival of the individual” (Doi 1981:70). We could as well agree with Aristotle, and say that a human being is first and foremost “a social animal”, so without some mutual dependence on one another it is impossible to survive at all. And I do not believe that an individual in the West is different in this respect.

On the other hand, the notion of *amae* touches upon the problem of cultural difference. Certainly, Doi employs this notion firstly for understanding Japanese society as distinct from Western traditions, which stereotypically are considered to be emphasizing freedom, individuality and integrity of an individual. After a thorough analysis of *amae* psychology, Doi comes to conclusion that psychology of dependence is dominant in Japanese society, which makes a great difficulty for an individual to define and identify himself without a reference to some collective group identity, but it does not mean that people elsewhere are not dependent on their environment.

Thomas Kasulis in *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* makes a similar distinction when he talks about two types of cultural orientations, that is, between intimacy-dominated and integrity-dominated societies (Kasulis 2002). These two orientations represent two different ways of understanding the self, others and the world around us. In other words, these deeply rooted in cultural orientations determine our worldviews, behavior and values. Kasulis defines Japanese society as an intimacy-dominated culture, while American culture is described as emphasizing integrity as a dominant value.
Beginning his argument on the etymology of the words “intimacy” and “integrity” Kasulis defines the former as “an inseparability, a belonging together, a sharing”, while the latter literally means “untouched, uncorrupted, pure” or, in other words, a person who is “able to stand alone, having a self-contained identity without dependence on, or infringement by, the outside” (Kasulis 2002: 24, 25, 53). However it does not imply that all Japanese are bound by the paradigm of intimacy and all Americans are purely integral individuals. It is only to say that in these respective cultures preference and value is given to different things. Thus, a difference between these cultural orientations lies “in what aspect of our humanness a cultural tradition tends to emphasize, enhance, and preserve as central” (Kasulis 2002: 20). It does not mean that we think differently. We just raise different questions and treat different aspects of the same phenomenon as the most worthy for us.

Conclusion

In this paper I tried to examine two perspectives which attempt to present the underlying principles of Japanese society. Hendry takes an anthropological perspective and claims that people in Japan pay much attention to gift-wrapping, and applies “wrapping principle” to the wider contexts of culture treating architecture, space, time, society and language as layers enclosing as well as providing an identity to an individual. Doi’s notion of *amae* (“desire to depend on other’s benevolence”) is also treated as a key for understanding Japanese psychological patterns of behavior. It seems that their perspectives are quite related and interconnected. First of all, the concept of *amae* helps to elucidate psychological aspects of wrapping and an importance paid to our environment. On the other hand, *amae* as a desire “to be wrapped warm in his surroundings” (Doi 1981: 55) might be interpreted as an extension and one more example of the wrapping principle itself. Moreover, these two underlying principles contribute not only for the understanding Japanese society, but also bring our attention to the aspects not so much marked and emphasized in our own culture. And finally, the distinction between two kinds of cultural orientations seems to be very quite helpful to find a solution to a controversy about the issue of cultural difference and its significance. It seems that the difference that ma-
The main purpose of this paper is to present Japanese culture and its image as unique, and treat these unique features as highlighting some common or universal characteristics and contributing to better understanding of any given culture. Japanese culture is often described as unique and completely different from any other countries, but what is the main difference that makes Japanese culture and their people different from others? And if there is or was such a difference, what function does it perform? Therefore, I would like to present Japanese culture as “unique”, basing my arguments mostly on Joy Hendry’s book Wrapping Culture, in which the author begins her analysis from such a simple and everyday phenomenon as the wrapping of presents and notes that “wrapping” itself understood both literally and metaphorically might be one of the main underlying principles or the key to understanding Japanese society. Also, I want to relate this “wrapping principle” with another underlying principle of Japanese society, which is presented in the concept of amae by Japanese famous psychiatrist Takeo Doi, who also uses this term as “a key concept” to understanding the Japanese character and behavior. Finally, I would like to use these concepts or principles not only for understanding Japanese society, but also apply them to the understanding the problems related to Japanese image and identity.
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