

THE JAPANESE MIND

*Understanding Contemporary
Japanese Culture*

Edited by
Roger J. Davies
&
Osamu Ikeno

TUTTLE PUBLISHING
Tokyo • Rutland, Vermont • Singapore

OESTERLE LIBRARY, NCC
NAPERVILLE IL 60540

this role with the responsibilities of the eldest son in other cultures.

3. In Japan, it is still generally expected that a woman will take her husband's family name upon marriage. Compare this custom with that in other countries.

4. In many societies, contemporary social problems are being blamed on the breakdown of the family. Discuss this issue in relation to the importance of patriarchal authority in traditional family life.

5. Discuss the evolution of the family in various cultures of the world.

いとこ取り

Iitoko-Dori:

ADOPTING ELEMENTS OF FOREIGN CULTURE

It is hard to imagine from the present state of industrialized Japan that Japanese society was controlled by samurai until about 150 years ago. It is said that the Meiji Restoration marked the start of modern Japan, but the connection between traditional Japanese culture and modern Japan is often a topic of intense debate. Many economists insist that developing nations can modernize by adopting technology from more advanced nations, much as Japan did in the past. However, it seems that mostly Asian countries (e.g., Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) have successfully modernized in this way, while many other countries have had considerably less success. Moreover, although countries like India and China had contact with Western civilization earlier and on a larger scale, Japan has achieved greater economic success, at least until recently. Therefore, the question needs to be asked why Japan was able to modernize more rapidly than most other countries. In response, it has been claimed that Japan had a good foundation for accepting Western technology because in the Tokugawa period both cottage industries and financial systems were quite well developed. In a sense, this is correct, but it is not enough to provide a complete explanation for Japan's rapid industrial development. In fact, there is another important reason: Japan has a long-established tradition of adopting elements of "foreign culture" and adapting them to Japanese use. The origins of this

tradition can be found in Japanese religious beliefs, and in particular can be traced to the ability to bring into harmony two of Japan's earliest religions: Shinto and Buddhism.

THE PROCESS OF IITOKO-DORI

In Shinto, the concept of deity is found in aspects of nature, such as mountains, waterfalls, stones, and natural phenomena like thunder and typhoons, as well as in the worship of ancestors. This belief system is also found elsewhere in the world, where it is generally known as a form of animism. Of importance for Japan is the fact that Shinto contains no absolute sense of values, such as "the words and rules of God" in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and this has enabled it to coexist with other value systems that have entered Japan from the outside. In the sixth century, the Japanese encountered a more sophisticated religion, Buddhism. With time, however, people noticed that if they believed in Buddhism, the emperor system was denied, for it was through original Shinto myths that the emperor's family maintained its position of the highest status in Japan. This presented a serious problem not only for the royal family but also for the Japanese political system at the time. In the seventh century, Prince Shotoku, who was a nephew of Emperor Suiko, occupied the regency and discovered a way of permitting Buddhism and the emperor system to coexist, along with another belief system adopted from China, Confucianism. He stated that "Shinto is the trunk, Buddhism is the branches, and Confucianism is the leaves" (Sakaiya, 1991, p. 140). By following this approach, the Japanese were able to accept these new religions and philosophies, and the cultural values and advanced techniques that came with them, in such a way that they were able to reconcile their theoretical contradictions. In short, with the acceptance of the coexistence of Shinto and Buddhism, serious religious oppositions disappeared, a feature that was to have a great effect on the Japanese mentality in the coming centuries. Not only were the Japanese able to accept culture from other countries without any religious prejudices, but they also developed the habit of adopting only the most useful borrowings from other nations. This is the process of *iitoko-dori*.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF IITOKO-DORI

People in Japan often find themselves in the unusual position of believing in two or more religions simultaneously. *Iitoko-dori*, then, refers specifically to this process of accepting convenient parts of different, and sometimes contradictory, religious value systems, and this practice has long been widespread in Japan. In modern times, Sakaiya (*ibid.*, p. 144) notes that the number of Japanese people who do not admit to following some form of *iitoko-dori* is only about 0.5 percent of the population.

Iitoko-dori can be seen most easily in the way technology has been adopted into Japan, a process that has had both positive and negative aspects. A good example is the Tomioka factory. In 1868, Japan adopted a new spinning technique from France, and in 1873, a model factory in Tomioka was built. Everything was imported, not only the design and the machines but also the bricks for the buildings, desks, chairs, and so on. In addition, French technicians were employed, and the Japanese workers copied them. As time went on, they tried to "catch up and surpass" the creators of their adopted models, and forty years later, in 1910, the Japanese had improved on the French model and were able to export silk overseas.

The Tomioka factory is also a representative example of the transformation of the Japanese economy from agriculture to industry. Through the process of *iitoko-dori*, the most effective elements of Western technology were brought into Japan and made its own, and this contributed enormously to the modernization of the country. On the other hand, people seem to have thought little of the consequences of these technological adaptations, and as a result, destruction of the environment in Japan has increased so alarmingly that many critics are predicting serious impending catastrophes. So, although the Japanese were eager to adopt aspects of Western culture, especially in terms of science and business, they did not recognize that using technology blindly, a kind of unbalanced *iitoko-dori*, would also result in many of the environmental and social problems that the country is experiencing today.

The consequences of *iitoko-dori* can also be illustrated in the ethical values of Japan, which arise from the country's coexisting religious systems. On the one hand, there is very little religious conflict in

Japan, and even if the Japanese are exposed to new concepts, they do not reject them outright, because they have the ability of *iitoko-dori*, in which the best parts are adopted and used. Thus, when a new religion like Christianity was introduced into Japan, people were open to its precepts, rather than simply denying it out of hand.

In any discussion of ethical values, Christians and Muslims would probably refer to some concept of God in their arguments, and an absolute sense of values is usually the basis for their decisions. But in Japan, the sense of ethical values is relative, and it varies with changes in people's opinions and the context in which decisions have to be made. As a result of a long history of *iitoko-dori*, the Japanese are able to change their sense of values in a short time and with little difficulty, and in this way, it is possible for society to be productively efficient.

However, the process of *iitoko-dori*, which has given rise to relative rather than absolute ethical value systems, has also resulted in serious negative consequences. For example, many Japanese students will not oppose bullies and stop them from hurting weaker students. Even if they know that bullying is wrong, they are not willing to stand up for their beliefs, because they are afraid of speaking out individually without a group consensus to back them. In other words, in Japan, even if people know that something is wrong, it is sometimes difficult for them to defend their principles, because rather than being absolute, these principles are relative and are easily modified, depending on the situation and the demands of the larger group to which people belong.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, *iitoko-dori* appeared as a phenomenon very early in Japanese history, and it has greatly affected the Japanese way of thinking. This process means taking in the most convenient parts of other systems, and it is now part of the cultural identity of the Japanese. It has been one of the most important factors in the rise of Japanese economic power, because new technologies and their underlying value systems are implemented easily. Unfortunately, however, the impact on the environment and on people's lives is often not properly considered. In terms of ethical values as well, the results of *iitoko-dori* are

evident in contemporary Japan: there are few major religious conflicts among the Japanese; on the other hand, it is often difficult for people to stand up against injustice. Hence, we can see that, at least in part, *iitoko-dori* is responsible for the flexibility of the Japanese people, but perhaps what is needed is a closer examination of the consequences of "adopting the best parts of foreign culture" on the lives of people, both within Japan and in the world itself.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Exploring Japanese Culture

1. In Japan, wedding ceremonies generally follow a Shinto style, while funerals are Buddhist. How does this reflect *iitoko-dori*?
2. Many Japanese celebrate Christmas, although most people are not Christian. What is your opinion of this kind of practice?
3. Today, Japanese pop music is greatly influenced by American music, and many English words are borrowed and used in Japanese songs. How do you think this is related to *iitoko-dori*?
4. Japanese homes often have both traditional Japanese rooms with *tatami* (*washitsu*) and Western-style rooms with carpeting (*yōshitsu*). Is this an example of *iitoko-dori*? List other similar examples.
5. Most modern Japanese have a secular attitude toward life even though they observe religious rituals at certain times of the year, such as at *O-bon* and on New Year's Day. In light of this secular orientation, what is the future of *iitoko-dori* in Japan?

Exploring Cross-Cultural Issues

1. Give some examples of *iitoko-dori* in other countries. Are they similar to, or different from, the Japanese model?

2. In Japan, Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism have existed together in harmony for many centuries, whereas in many other countries, religious beliefs are the source of much bloodshed. Discuss this issue with reference to *iitoko-dori*.

3. Why do Japanese people feel that it is not contradictory to go to a Shinto shrine and then to a Buddhist temple on the same day? Can the same person pray to different gods or follow two or more religions in other countries of the world? Discuss this issue from the perspective of *iitoko-dori*.

4. According to Pinnington (1986, p. 22), "when we look at traditional Japanese arts—the No or Kabuki, kendo, waka, haiku, ikebana [sic]—all of them seem highly formal. All of them have their formal patterns which are learnt by watching and imitating the teacher and they all have their own complicated rules and conventions which must be learnt." Moreover, in many modern sports and hobbies in Japan, such as cycling and oil painting, "we find exactly the same attitude." This way of learning, "which emphasises rules, techniques and imitation," has long been "highly suitable for the quick assimilation and adaptation" of foreign elements from China and the West into Japanese culture (*ibid.*, p. 23). As Reischauer (1988, p. 202) points out, in Japan, "scholarly activity has been largely devoted to absorbing large chunks of information from abroad and synthesizing it with what was already known." Industry has stressed the adaptation of already known technologies rather than the creation of new ones, although it must also be noted that many of these adaptations have been so imaginative that they should rightly be judged as creative (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, this approach to learning has led to widespread criticism of the Japanese as simply copying others, as well as to much stereotyping of the Japanese as being "intellectually not very creative" (*ibid.*, p. 200):

Japanese industrial triumphs have been based largely on efficient borrowing or ingenious adaptations of foreign technology rather than on independent scientific discoveries. Political thought, philosophy, and scholarship in the social sciences are to a large extent

the reworking or synthesis of ideas derived from abroad, rather than original creative work. . . . [Japan's past] is studded with prominent religious leaders, great poets and writers, outstanding organizers, and even distinguished synthesizers of thought, but not with great creative intellectual figures. (*Ibid.*)

Do you think such criticisms are valid and fair? How would you respond to them? Discuss these criticisms in relation to *iitoko-dori*.

5. Compare scholarly activity and the acquisition of knowledge in Japan with that in other countries of the world.