*** TWENTY SEVENTH AUSTRALIA-JAPAN RELATIONS ESSAY CONTEST 2009 ***

Japan, like Australia, is geographically isolated from its neighbours. Do you think this is reflected in traditional Japanese culture and thinking, and why or why not?

A farmer looks across his rice fields, and sees his land, his labour, his joy. From where he stands, the fields look like perfect squares of green, but he can see each individual rice stalk, quivering in the southern wind. The farmer and his rice fields show no traces of the flooding and the droughts they've experienced. They show no signs of the toiling and the sweating beyond their shimmering green. They reveal nothing of the endless waiting, the quiet waiting, forever waiting.

Before the emergence of globalisation, Japan's geographical isolation, like Australia's, meant that its sustainability depended on its agriculture and farming industry. It is here, in the rice fields, that we see the birth of a culture.

According to Amanuma[1], a Japanese anthropologist, rice growing has always been Japan's most traditional form of agriculture, and it has since left a permanent imprint on the Japanese identity. Miyazaki, a Japanese psychologist, suggested that the Japanese value for diligence originated directly from the need to adapt to challenging geographical conditions. Japan's climate is characterised by "high temperatures and humidity,"[2] susceptible to a range of natural disasters such as floods, typhoons and earthquakes. Miyazaki suggested that the instability of Japan's geographical conditions cultivated a sense of restlessness and a value for diligence within the Japanese people.

Japan's geography has often been cited as the origin of the "gambari" spirit which is now embedded within the Japanese identity. At its simplest meaning, "gambaru" means "to try one's best," "to persevere". However, it is a word which encompasses a range of nuances and connotations. It has no equivalent in any other language because its subtle implications cannot be translated. Amanuma suggests that the lack of an equivalent indicates that "gambaru" is a word unique to the Japanese, and thus expresses uniquely Japanese values and traits.

Manifestations of the "gambari" spirit permeate throughout modern Japanese society. It is most commonly used as a word of encouragement. For example, instead of wishing "good luck", the Japanese encourage colleagues or class mates to "do their best." This phrase was used

[1] Amanuma, K. (1987). *Gambari no kozo*. [The structure of '*gambari*']. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan. pp. 140
[2] Miyazaki, O. (1969). *Nihonjin no seikaku* [Characteristics of the Japanese]. Tokyo: Asahi. pp. 269 – 272

as a slogan ("Gambare, Nippon!") to cheer on the Japanese soccer team at the 1998 World Cup. Furthermore, in 1995, when an earthquake struck Kobe, the people united to reconstruct their city under a mutual sentiment: "Gambaro, Kobe!" (Let's persevere, Kobe!)[3], reflecting that in times of disaster and chaos, it is the *gambari* spirit which continues to guide the Japanese people.

Similarly, although Australia is a young and multicultural society, its traditional values continue to pervade modern society. At the heart of Australian ideals, are the yearning for an egalitarian society, the support of the "underdog" and mateship. In the "underdog" spirit, Australia celebrates the possibility of success through hard work and determination. Moreover, that characteristic Australian value for "mateship" is often said to be born in Gallipoli, by the ANZACs, but perhaps its origins lie beyond that. Perhaps, it originated from a mutual yearning for companionship in a land which is so vast and isolated. Australian "mateship" is an integral part of the Australian identity, and there are obvious parallels with the Japanese value for loyalty and patience.

Indeed, beyond the surface, there are similarities between Japan and Australia which finds its roots at the most basic level: its geography.

Historically, Australian literature has been characterised by an appreciation and awe for the vastness of the Australian landscape. From Henry Lawson to Banjo Paterson, a recurring feature of Australian poetry and literature is a sense of isolation, which is at once, frightening and liberating. In her most famous poem, *My Country*, Dorothea McKellar celebrates Australia, "her beauty and her terror," "a land of sweeping plains…of droughts and flooding rains."[4] Like Japan, the geography of Australia is marked by its unpredictability and its isolation, instilling common values within the people of both countries. These values continue to propel modern society, and are an undercurrent beneath the veneers of technology and globalisation.

Patience, perseverance and determination are at the heart of the Japanese identity. Tokugawa Ieyasu, who founded the Tokugawa Shogunate, once said:

"Life is like unto a long journey with a heavy burden. Let thy step be slow and steady, that thou stumble not. Forbearance is the root of quietness and assurance forever." [5]

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[3] Obayashi Corporation (1996). *Annual Report* pp. 7 Retrieved August 8, 2009, from http://www.obayashi.co.jp/ir/annual/pdf/ar_96.pdf

[4] Official Dorothea McKellar Website, *My Country*, Retrieved August 27, 2009, from http://www.dorotheamackellar.com.au/archive/mycountry.htm

[5] Ieyasu Tokugawa (1543 – 1616), *Tokugawa Ieyasu*, Retrieved July 30, 2009, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokugawa_Ieyasu

The Tokugawa Shogunate is a hierarchal system which ruled Japan from 1603 to 1868[6], uniting Japan after centuries of war and disharmony. This era is characterised by the period of isolation which lasted over 200 years, locking Japan into itself, removing it from the rest of the world. Japan was not only geographically isolated, but also, culturally and willingly so. It was in these 200 years, that a definitive Japanese culture was born. Much of what we associate with Japan today, such as Geishas, Kabuki and Ikebana were created in this period of seclusion. Significantly, these traditions are renowned for the slow and deliberate pace of their execution. Isolated from the rest of the world, Japan was able to develop its own unique culture which continues to pervade modern society.

However, beyond art and literature, the Edo period gave birth to and consolidated the *bushido* philosophy. The *bushido* is the samurai code of conduct. It encapsulates the very essence of what being a samurai means, stressing integrity, honour, self-sacrifice, patience and loyalty. These are values that permeate Japanese society and characterise the Japanese identity. *Bushido* is embodied in the thousands who have died for their country and in particularly, the *shinsengumi*, a group of people who rejected the domination of Western culture as Japan emerged from its isolation. Dying to protect their society, all the while knowing that swords could be no match for the Western guns and cannons, the *shinsengumi* are now eternalised as a beacon of hope, a symbol of traditional Japanese values. The *gambari* spirit is embodied in these soldiers, who epitomised what it means to "try one's best," and never give up.

Furthermore, this period of isolation consolidated the structure of Japanese people's relationships. According to the anthropologist Nakane, "In Japanese society, vertical rankings of human relationships have developed to a great extent and a seniority system is prevalent."[7] These values originated from the Confucianism imported between the sixth and ninth centuries, and became the basis of the Tokugawa shogunate's feudal system. This strictly defined hierarchy reflects the structure of modern Japanese society and is reflected in the grammatical forms of the Japanese language. The language used varies according to who one is talking to, their status and rank. When talking to superiors, *keigo* (honorific language) is used. Moreover, there are three types of honorific language: respectful, humble and polite[8]. The nuances that differentiate these forms are, at best, awkward to translate into English. However, equivalents are near impossible to find. In addition, this structure is reflected in Japanese companies, where "status, position, and

[6] Ibid.

[7] Nakane, C. (1967). *Tateshakai no ningenkankei* [The ranking of human relationships in society]. Tokyo: Kodansha.

[8] Davies, R. J. & Ikeno O. (2002) *The Japanese Mind* (pp. 84). Canada: Tuttle Publishing. [pp. 188]

salary still depend largely on seniority."[9] Human relationships are an undeniable reflection of values, and this seniority system conveys to us that the traditional values of respect for elders, which originated from Japan's period of isolation, continue to form the backbone of Japanese society.

These values can also be seen in the group consciousness of the Japanese people. In uniting and isolating his country, Tokugawa aimed to offer his country peace, to maintain a harmonious society. This value for cooperation is reflected in the way modern Japanese people continue to be group-orientated, prioritising group harmony over individuality. This has given rise to a set of concepts known as *honne-tatemae*, the private versus the public self. These two words reflect a dichotomy between personal feelings and opinions conflicting with those that are socially-tuned, constructed by majority norms. Individual needs and opinions are often overlooked in favour of maintaining group harmony. However, group-ism maintained the Edo period in a state of harmony and peace, and contributed greatly to Japan's post-war economic growth[10]. This concept is born from a need for co-dependence and group harmony, and finds it origins in Japan's geographical and deliberate isolation.

To enter Japanese society is therefore, to understand the multiple nuances and layers of its structure. Despite globalisation, Japan continues to be a distinctly homogenous society, where 99%[11] of its population are Japanese. However, many Japanese social critics have suggested that since Japan's emergence from its period of isolation, it has embraced Western technology and culture to a point where its own traditional culture, so carefully cultivated, seems lost, or reduced. Western clothes are worn and English songs reverberate throughout shopping centres.

In a world of globalisation and consumerism, traditional Japanese customs and values are often in conflict with economic demands. The Japan we are offered in tourist brochures seems to be divided into two diametric opposites – the traditional and the modern; geishas and tea ceremony on one side, and bullet trains and robots on the other; simultaneously a futuristic world of fast technology, and a world that is still firmly rooted to traditional culture. However, adoption of foreign values has long been part of the Japanese history – charting back to its earlier adoption of Buddhist and Confucian principles. The adoption of foreign culture despite isolation, is thus, something that has characterised Japanese culture throughout the ages.

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[9] Ibid. [pp 191]

[10] Ibid. [pp 197]

[11] Kurkoski B., Sako M., Japan Lifestyle, *Japan Population*, Retrieved August 30, 2009, from http://www.japaneselifestyle.com.au/japan/japanpopulation.htm

Japan's geographical isolation has significantly shaped its national identity, producing a unique culture. The foundations of Japanese society continue to thrive on traditional values of harmony, patience and loyalty. Although it exists in different forms and shapes, these values, cultivated through periods of isolation, permeate throughout the lives of its people, through language and behaviour, in times of war and disaster, in affluent and prosperous times.

Ultimately, the heart of Japanese society is at its rice fields. There, in the green paddies of rice, are the beginnings of a culture. We see a human fragility and vulnerability in the backdrop of geographical isolation and instability. Faced with challenging geographical landscapes, values of patience, loyalty and "gambari" were formed, and from there, a whole civilisation of people was born. Thus, if Japan has lost its traditional values, it need only turn back to these fields to remind itself.

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