

GROUP ORIENTATION IN JAPAN: ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION TO MISSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Many sociologists and economists attribute the rapid restoration of Japanese economy and social development in Japan after World War II to the strength of group ties and the cooperation of Japanese people. The cooperative commitment of the workers to the company was regarded as one of the primary factors in the success of the Japanese entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the group orientation of Japanese people seems to hinder the evangelization of Japan because it impedes individuals from becoming Christian.¹ In this regard, group orientation in Japanese society holds the key for the Christian mission in Japan. In this article, the characteristics of and reasons for the Japanese group orientation will be explored for the sake of effective missions in Japan.

FRAME THEORY²

Definition

Chie Nakane, a leading sociologist, describes the Japanese society as a vertical society. Vertical society does not mean that its members are all hierarchically ordered. The contrast with the opposite, a

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¹Almost all missiologists refer to the group orientation of Japanese as one of the primary factors for the resistance to Christianity. For instance, Hisakazu Inagaki points out that the lack of individual self-consciousness as one of the characteristics of Japanese group orientation in "Nihon Bunka no Sekaikan," in *Kamino Keiji to Nhonjin no Shukyo Ishiki* (Tokyo: Inochi no Kotoba Sha, 1989), 153. Akira Idogaki also analyzes that the identification of self in the group itself is the substance of Japanese group orientation in *Konokuni de Shuni Shitagau* (Tokyo: Inochi no Kotoba Sha, 1985), 24-28.

²The term and concept are developed by Chie Nakane in her book, *Tate Shakai no Ningen Kankei: Tanitsu Shakai no Riron* (Human Relationship in Vertical Society: Theory of Mono-Society) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1967). This section is basically a summary of her theory.

horizontal society, provides a clear picture of the term. A horizontal society means a social structure which consist of the classes of people based on the individual's common attributes such as name, family, gender, academic career, vocation and so on. It is horizontal because wherever individuals are located, they identify themselves as one group so long as they share the same attributes. Indian caste, therefore, represents a horizontal society which is categorized by similar attributes.³

To the contrary, Japanese society is structured on the basis of frames. Whatever institutions or groups, such as *ie* (household), *mura* (village), *kaisha* (company), or *kuni* (nation) function as frameworks in Japanese society. And the frame that the person belongs to determines his/her primary identification. Nakane provides an example: when Japanese identify themselves socially, they prioritize the name of the company (frame) more than the kinds of job they have (attribute). Therefore, whether they are executives or genitory for the company, the important identification is the name of the company, and not the attribute of their work.⁴ Another example of frame orientation is observed in the traditional type of family in Japanese society. When a Japanese woman is married to a man, she becomes a member of the husband's extended family, not necessarily of their new nuclear family unit. Her family tie with her husband's household becomes much stronger than her own family as she carries the name of the husband. She becomes an "outsider" to her own maiden family, and become an "insider" to the husband's family. She is given a higher authority than sisters-in-law as a full member of the new family. This shows that the name of a family is not an attribute but a frame for the members. Thus the society loses horizontal aspects, and becomes vertical in Japan.

Characteristics of the Frame-Society

While the attribute-society is automatically unified by the common attribute, the frame-society has no bond to unify the diverse members within itself. Therefore, the frame-society requires some external force to create unity within the frame. Nakane discovers the force in Japanese society, the sense of oneness that seeks for the uniformity and conformity of members. The organizational effort to bring individual

³Ibid., 26, 27.

⁴Ibid., 29.

members closer to one another is another expression of the same purpose.⁵

The members in the frame related one another holistically rather than having mere relationship in certain aspect of life. This means the human relationship among the members affects various aspects of personal life. Nakane points out that the characteristics of such human relationships are heavily emotional and tangible. When people relate holistically, unlike the members of a club, they cannot maintain their privacy. Their concern is for whole aspects of the participants even to the extent of controlling individual life. Ramseyer views the group orientation in Japanese society and analyzes that the society itself could become “a tyrant” to the point that the members cannot exercise their individuality and freedom.⁶ The emotional and tangible relationship in frame-society, according to Nakane, depends upon the length of the relationship, the intensity of the relationship, and earliness of the involvement.⁷ Additionally, the homogeneity of the group enhances the group ties. Thus, the uniformity and conformity along with harmony, even though it could be a superficial one, is crucial for the maintenance of the frame. Nakane suggests that the emotional tendency of the members of a group comes out of their preventive control against the fear of diversity. She explains the long- term commitment and loyalty of Japanese company workers from this perspective.

This reveals that the real reason for the life time employment of Japanese company workers is not just their loyalty to the companies, but rather because of the difficulty to give up the established relationship in the old context, or the greater difficulties to acquire a better relationship among a new setting in a short time. Therefore the length and intimacy of the relationship are very significant for establishing a social position, and are called “social capital”.⁸

The frame society is also characterized with an exclusive attitude toward the outsiders. In order to maintain the unity among the members of the group, the exclusiveness seems to be an indispensable guard for the frame society. Nakane compares the Indians and Japanese in their attitude toward strangers. She observes an extreme coldness of the Japanese toward strangers, marginalized class of people as *burakumin*,

⁵Ibid., 35-37.

⁶Robert L. Ramseyer, “When Society Itself is Tyrant,” *Japan Christian Review* 58 (1992): 75-84.

⁷Ibid., 54-58.

⁸Ibid., 57.

and Asian illegal workers or illegal immigrants. While Indians are indifferent to the “untouchables” or other castes, the Japanese show more antagonistic feeling toward outsiders. Thus “we” concept against “they” becomes much stronger in a frame society.

GROUP ORIENTATION IN A FRAME SOCIETY

Level of Social Unit Distinction

As is studied above, the frame society demands holistic involvement of the members in the group. Therefore, Japanese can hardly belong to more than one group with the same intimacy. Relationship for Japanese toward the group demands not only belonging but also devotion of the members. The more the group becomes important for members, the more the individual identity gets blurred. Nakane compares it to the relationship of individual ant and the whole colony of ants: though each ant is an independent organism, it cannot live separately from the group. Groupism, in this sense, is not a mere parallel of individualism as often referred to in Western culture. It is a system whose least indivisible social unit is a group in place of an individual person.⁹ In the frame-society, the group makes decisions, creates norms, moves toward the direction that its inner force drives. Robert Bellah points out six characteristics of value system which are rooted upon groupism in society. (1) Value is realized in groups that are thought of as natural entities. The community (*Gemeinschaft*, *kyodotai*) is the locus of value. (2) These groups are thought to be integrated with the structure of reality and thus are endowed with a sacred quality. (3) There is a divine-human continuity in which the symbolic heads of groups have an especially important place, being especially endowed with a sacred quality. One of their functions is to relate the group to the divine ancestors and protective deities. This pattern applies at many levels, e.g., family (and ultimately the whole country at whose head is the emperor (and above him the imperial ancestors). (4) Individuals exist because of a continuous flow of blessings from spirits and ancestors through the symbolic heads of groups. The individual is obligated to work in order to repay in small measure the blessings he has received and to sacrifice himself for the group if necessary. (5)

⁹Akira Idogaki, *Konokuni de Shu ni Shitagau: Nihonjin to Kirisutono Fukuin* (Following the Lord in This Land: The Japanese and the Gospel of Jesus) (Tokyo: Word of Life Press, 1985), 25-27.

Science, ethics, philosophy- virtually all aspects of culture- are valuable only insofar as they contribute to the realization of value in the group, not as ends in themselves. Ethics consist mainly in acting as one should in one's group; there is no universal ethic. (6) In spite of how completely the individual is merged in group life there is one place where he can be relatively independent; the realm of personal expressiveness, including art, mysticism, recreation and skill. But this sphere does not legitimize failure to fulfill group expectations. It actually helps reconcile the individual to group demands.¹⁰ While Nakane elaborates the characteristics of the frame society, her analysis is limited to the social-structural point of view. Neil Fujita, on the contrary, approaches Japanese groupism from the religious point of view. This will be discussed in the section of the group in a frame society.

Nonseparation of Self and Others

The lack of sense of "self" in Japanese society is also explained from the psychoanalytic viewpoint. Bin Kimura analyzes that the concept of "self" is identified by a kind of energy that is produced only when the "self" encounters the "non-self".¹¹ For Japanese this energy is not just energy to identify individuals but is a force that controls and affects the individual life and society. Kimura furthers the analysis that a Japanese sense of shame is deeper than the surface meaning of the term; "it is a mixture of shame and guilt.... The Japanese do not always act for/against the other's reputation/judgment. They have a guilty sense when they do a shameful thing, as they actually fail the expectation that comes from the energy between person to person."¹²

Hisakazu Inagaki restates this characteristic of Japanese worldview in a phrase "non-separation of subject and object."¹³ He discovers that

¹⁰Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970), 116-117.

¹¹Bin Kimura, *Hito to Hito no Aida: Seishin Byorigaku teki Nihonron* (Between person and person: Pathological Analysis of Japanese Human Relationship) (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1987), 15.

¹²*Ibid.*, 73-78.

¹³Hisakazu Inagaki, "Nihon Bunka no Sekaikan" (Worldview of Japanese Culture), in *Kamino Keiji to Nihonjin no Shukyo Ishiki: Gendai ni Okeru Senkyojo no Setten wo Saguru* (God's Revelation and Japanese Religiosity: Searching for the Missiological Contact Point in Modern Japan) (Tokyo: Word of Life Press, 1989), 155.

the lack of the absolute and transcendent being in Japanese worldview causes the lack of perception as individually created person, rather as one part of the universe which is in itself a “being”. In this worldview “individual” or “ego” as a center of human cognition is not established. This worldview produces a philosophy valuing “genuine experience” which does not require consciousness of ego, and philosophy valuing “intuition” which does not require logos.¹⁴ The strong cohesiveness of the Japanese people, and their value on harmony and uniformity thus can be understood.

Linguistic Contribution in Group Orientation

Carley Dodd and other linguists hold that language functions not only to report information, but also to shape our perceptions of reality.¹⁵ The lack of “self” in Japanese language supports his theory. While the English sentence begins with subject and verb, the Japanese sentence starts with object and verb. In particular, the subject of the first or the second person is omitted from the sentence in most cases. For example, “Would you like a cup of coffee?” becomes “A cup of coffee like?” in Japanese. The response for the question becomes “Yes, like to.” The subjects, I and you, are not expressed in these sentences. Another expression of Japanese groupism is seen in the personification of the society. When Japanese make mistakes which may induce judgment by others, they repeat, “I should apologize to society” or “I cannot face the society” or “I cannot sleep with my feet toward society” (In Japan it is rude to put feet toward somebody). Here again, we see the sense of shame mixed with the sense of guilt. The characteristic of group oriented culture is reflected and enhanced by the Japanese language.

Religious Factors

Adding to the Nakane’s observation of self and group dynamics, Neil Fujita discovers that there are religious, or more correctly, quasi-religious factors, under the aspiration for uniformity in Japanese society. Borrowing a term “Japanism” from Shichihei Yamamoto, one leading Japanologist, Fujita defines Japanism as “a religious mentality which allows different religions to co-exist and to blend peacefully and

¹⁴Ibid., 153.

¹⁵Carley Dodd, *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication*. (N.P.: Wm.C.Brown Publishers, 1991), 48.

which refuses to accommodate any religion or ideology that undermines this peaceful co-existence.”¹⁶ Thus Japanism never assumes any fixed structure, no doctrine, no scripture, no liturgy. This unique Japanese religion does not insist, nor allow any foreign religions, to be the ultimate authority or responsibility for Japanese society. Therefore, Japanese society always lacks the center, like a “donut ring,” says Fujita. Then what controls Japanese society? He explains that a balance within the group is the mover of the society, just as an arch made with stones where each piece is locked tightly together. If one of them is removed, the whole arch collapses.¹⁷

Fujita’s analysis corresponds with Nakane’s idea that an attribute society accommodates a sense of covenant effectively, while the frame society is ignorant of a sense of covenant. In the former society, the attribute itself becomes the standard for the members to participate, but the frame society does not have any standard for outsiders to be accepted. In other words, Japanese society must depend on intuition such as impression or personal preference or favor as the standard for the group participation. Thus the attribute society develops one-to-plural human relationships as its social mechanism, whereas the frame society forms one-to-one. This describes the vertical human relationship within the frame society. Japanese society, therefore, carries vertical nature both its macro structure as a whole, and its microstructure within the frame.

Concept of “We, Japanese”

“We, Japanese” is a common expression by Japanese people when they converse with foreigners. “We, Japanese do not enjoy this kind of dish.” “We, Japanese value the beauty of nature,” and so forth. According to Nakane’s frame theory, “We” indicates the people inside the frame. This is based on the focus on the social and cultural boundary. It connotes a synchronic perspective. Kimura, on the other hand, views it from a diachronic perspective, and explains that “We” indicates not the Japanese who live in this century, but the Japanese including those who have preceded them in blood relationship and cultural tradition throughout two thousand years. In that sense, “We” is

¹⁶Neil Fujita, “‘Conic’ Christianity and ‘Donut’ Japan,” *Missiology: An International Review* 22 No.1 (January 1994), 43-53.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 48.

something above the collection of Japanese individuals. Kimura articulates, "It is a collective identity which penetrates the ancient times and the present, and also to the future in concept."¹⁸

Kimura presents details by referring to a German case. The Germans do not use "We, Germans" except the Nazi remnants. Rather they naturally say "We, Christians" or "We, humans". This is reasonable as humans are clearly distinguished from other creatures in Christian tradition, and as Christianity is distinguished from other religions. Both expressions, therefore, imply exclusivity toward outsiders. Nonetheless, the Japanese seldom say "We, Buddhists," or "We, Shintoists" though both of them are national religions in Japan. Kimura presumes that the Japanese identity is not in either of these religions. He compares this phenomenon to the Jewish case. When people refer to the Jews, it means the believers of the Judaism. The political identity is a religious identity at the same time. In the same way, "We, Japanese" might be a substitute of "We, Japanist."¹⁹ Here again the reality of Japanese religion of Japanism manifests its wide and deep influence upon Japanese mind.

Inagaki calls a society like Japan a natural religious group, in contrast with specific religious group indicating the group of believers in an actual religious system such as Christianity or Islam.²⁰ As he points out, in Japanese society, as a quasi-religious group, each social unit carries religious nature as a part of the whole. For example, *ie* is understood as historical lineage connected by a sense of identity in Japan. It is the reason why *ie* plays the primary role of the rituals for the dead. The Japanese believe that their diligent practice of ancestor veneration helps the living dead to be promoted to gods in the other world. *Mura* (village) also carries a religious nature. *Mura* is not just a political unit in Japan. It is rather a local community united by the rituals for the dead in the level of *Ujigami* (local deity worship). In this, Japanese *mura* is distinguished from that of the West, which is formed on the bases of social covenant of the members. Finally *kuni* (nation) is the largest level of the natural religious group of Japanism. Inagaki points out that there is "a collective unconsciousness beneath the surface of political structure, which pretends to separate state and

¹⁸Kimura, 75.

¹⁹Ibid., 1-19.

²⁰Inagaki, 153-156.

religion in Japan.”²¹ However, it is still debated whether ministers worship at Yasukuni Shrine where the War veterans are worshipped, should be admitted as a public activity or not. It is also debated whether Royal families’ practice of rituals is accepted as cultural and not religious. These are the evidences that Japanese groupism is from a religious background rather than political or national characteristics.

GROUPS ORIENTATION IN THE BIBLE

Concept of Group in Old Testament

Almost 600 references to the tribes of Israel in the Old Testament indicate the significance of tribes in the Bible. The social structure in the Old Testament, especially after receiving the Law, seems to be approximately fourfold: family, household, tribe/clan, and nation (Josh 7:16). The twelve tribes, and other groups under the tribe, carry natures of vertical society in its hierarchical structure within. They are similar to the Japanese institution of family that is framed by the names. Each of the twelve tribes has a structure with the chief of judges, the judges, common people, the slaves and other marginalized people. Apparently tribes are internally vertical groups. Nonetheless, the Israel tribes embrace the nature of the attribute societies, too. Deuteronomy records that God’s command for the marginalized ones and slaves to participate YHWH’s festivals just like His people. Here the structure of attribute group as God’s people is seen above the structural unit of each tribe. Thus, Israel, as a nation, is an attribute society; and the tribes are vertical group framed by their names. The variables of the attribute for Israel are identity as God’s chosen people, priesthood for the nations, and the servant for the nations. As an attribute society, it should have an open structure. Therefore, anybody who holds the same attribute can enter the group and maintain the equal status within the group. In this perspective, Wright discovers that the institution of Jubilee in Israel community is aimed for the restoration of the original status quo as the members of attribute society, rather than for the distribution of wealth. This supports that Israel is to be an attribute society.

If less focus is paid upon the attribute, the attribute society loses its order. The history of the Israelites witnesses it; when the Israel tribes miss their relationship with the central figure, they could not maintain

²¹Ibid., 155.

the peace and group tie. In the chaotic times between the rules of the Judges, one tribe was cut off. When the Israelites depended upon the frame as Kingdom, there were conflicts between tribes (II Sam). These were the times that tribes make the group attribute ambiguous, eventually the nature of the frame society dominates the society.

Group in the New Testament

The macro structure of the Israel nation depicts Israel as an attribute society, and the microstructure of the twelve tribes as frame society. This concept is reflected in the New Testament concept of *ecclesia* and *koinonia*. Jesus initiated the work of restoration of the attribute society of the Israel by His ministries toward the Gentiles and the marginalized. The fact that the curtain in the temple was torn from its top at Jesus' accomplishment of His redemption, was a symbol of restoration of the attribute society for the Israelites. The Apostle Paul was the instrument of God to re-establish the attribute society in Israel through his mission to the Gentile. He explains that he received it from God as a revelation, and he calls it a mystery: the commission to break down the dividing wall between the Jews and Gentiles as common heirs of one body. Thus the members who have the common attribute as the redeemed ones form the *ecclesia* with the structure open to anybody who receives the redemption. Thus *ecclesia* becomes *koinonia*. This *koinonia* is both for the Jews and the Gentiles, for the wise and the simple, for the free and the slave, for men and women (Gal 3:28). Throughout his writings, Paul advocates that *ecclesia/koinonia* should not only be framed by the rituals of circumcision, but be bonded with the attribute of the one gathered by God as a new creation.

MISSIOLOGICAL RAMIFICATION

Understanding the Church Context

Japanese churches within a frame society tend to be frame oriented. As the primary focus of a frame society is on the boundary, Japanese churches might pay more attention to the maintenance of the boundary. This can create less interest among Japanese churches in the dynamics within the frame, because whether members have decisive factors or not is more important than whether they share the same characters or not. Therefore, professing certain creed, participating to church rituals, and observing an uniformed type of behavior are regarded as signs of

Christians. Conversion, in this regard, is understood as a shift of frame from one to another. Therefore, Baptism is a significant step for a Japanese to have a Christian identity. It also suggests that the Baptisms need to receive a holistic support right after the Baptism, which surpasses what they used to receive in the old context. A Japanese church, which preserves more community character, needs to be persistent in it, not allowing modernity to transform her into a club.

Japanese Church needs to be more sensitive to the frames to where the converts originally belong. The evangelism for the converts' family must be more actively carried out. Knowing that most Japanese men regard their company as their primary societies, the Church has to consider Company evangelism, too.

However, Church needs to be aware of the danger of the frame group: a tendency to be exclusive and centripetal. Paul Hiebert and Daniel Shaw discover these weaknesses of a frame group in terms of "bounded sets", and they suggest that the creedal differences should be brought to discussion and understanding.²² Thus churches come to deeper and wider understanding of God's attributes, and they grow.

The boundary should be there to distinguish those who accepted the Lordship of Christ from others. Yet the focus must be kept on the center, Jesus Christ, rather than the boundary itself. This extrinsic center of the society brings the recognition of degree of maturity, say Hiebert and Shaw. It implies the importance of post-Baptismal ministries for new converts as well as advanced ministries for spiritual growth of mature Christians in Japan.

Transcending the Frame

Once Japanese fit to their social frame, it is not easy to come out of the comfortable zone within it. The frame functions as a whole system of life for them, and leaving the frame often means the end of social life. However, Church should not be just another frame for them to transfer into. The task here for a Japanese Church is to present a bigger frame that include the individual's frame. It should provide all the total care for the person just as the old one did. Yet it is not exclusive as the new frame still accommodates the old one. When converts stay long enough to understand the new frame, they will understand that it is

²²Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 107-136.

actually an attribute group.

Christian attributes as the created, the redeemed, and the called, will eventually lead to the understanding the roles of the members as priests and servants for the nations. Japanese Churches need a balance of these two responsibilities. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world, Church must be incarnated into the society. When Church participates the society with an open structure, people will see that Church is a greater frame, and not another one. The transcendent frame of the Church assumes the whole world as her ministry field. It will not minimize the endeavor of the Holy Spirit for His Mission, rather it will resound the message of Jesus Christ—"The Kingdom of God is at hand."

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