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## HOW VALID IS THE POPULAR IMAGE OF JAPAN AS HOMOGENEOUS AND HARMONIOUS?

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### ABSTRACT

The generally accepted image of Japan is that of a homogeneous and harmonious country. In attempting to assess this image, this article examines its underlying assumptions and draws on a range of examples to show that Japanese society is not free of social tensions and is made up of a variety of minority groups.

The conclusion that emerges from this article is that the prevalent image of Japan, although ideologically a very powerful one, has no support in reality and there are grounds to believe that it has been deliberately cultivated.

### INTRODUCTION

The commonly held image of Japan is that of a homogeneous people and a society based on consensus. This popular image is widespread and can be found in almost any newspaper, magazine, book or TV programme about Japan. The 125 million Japanese are conceived as uniform in size, behaviour and thought. Common visual images include hundreds of *sararimen* (salary men, white-collar workers), all looking alike with black hair, dressed in the same black suits, commuting in crowded trains, walking in the busy streets of Tokyo or singing company songs; flocks of high school pupils dressed in the same black uniform and finally groups of Japanese tourists always together, obediently following a guide.

Western images of Japan have changed over time but the core elements of the image have remained the same over the past fifty years despite all the changes that have occurred in the country. This stereotyped and static image of Japan is reinforced by the fact that it is generated by the Japanese themselves and is used to promote the image of Japan in the international arena as a homogeneous country with a unique culture free of social tensions.

## HOW VALID IS THE POPULAR IMAGE OF JAPAN AS

This article attempts to discuss the extent to which the image of Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious is accurate and why this image is so prevalent in Japan. I shall begin by a brief review of the literature on Japanese society.

#### LITERATURE OVERVIEW

254

Taking an overview of the literature on Japanese society, the themes of homogeneity and harmony in Japanese society stand out, while there seems to be a lack of work on conflict and social tensions. According to Mouer and Sugimoto (1986), there are two different schools of thought on Japanese society. The 'great tradition', or the holistic tradition scholarship which attempts to explain Japanese society as a well integrated totality and minimizes the issue of conflict; and the 'little tradition' or the tradition of conflict-oriented scholarship that underlines the presence of social tensions and variation in Japanese society. The former has been dominant in Japan and has almost attained a monolithic position in the coverage in Western languages (ibid. p.86).

Literature emphasizing homogeneity and harmony in Japanese society has paid particular attention to features of Japanese thought and behaviour which supposedly differentiate them from western cultures, and regards Japanese values and thought patterns as the major independent variable in explaining Japanese society.

Based on the assumption that the Japanese are racially and culturally homogeneous, though quite varied this scholarship literature shares the following core elements: The Japanese are group-oriented people; Japanese society is based on uniformity and hierarchical relations that involve respect for authority; consensus is highly valued; and these aspects are unique to Japanese society.

*Nihonjinron* (literally, discussions on the Japanese) deserves a special mention. This genre of literature is an attempt to define the specificity of Japanese identity. Three themes stand out, according to Dale: the Japanese are culturally and socially homogeneous; they are *sui generis* different, not only from Westerners but also from Asians; they are consciously nationalistic and they cannot be fully comprehended by non-Japanese because they are unique (Dale, 1988). This *nihonjinron* discourse is based on a set of self-reflexive racial, linguistic, sociological, philosophical and psychological ideas which are assumed to be self-evident. Japan's identity is conceived as that of a country of homogeneous people with little experience in dealing with foreigners and which, owing to a long period of seclusion, developed a

unique social culture. Relationships between Japanese people are said to be based upon the goodwill and Doi (1973) created the concept of *amae* (to seek for indulgence, to be passively loved) to explain the special characteristics of the Japanese).

It follows from this discourse that it is necessary to be born Japanese in order to understand the Japanese (Yoshino, 1992). Both because of the 'special' nature of the Japanese language and because communication is said to be contextual and unique, only a Japanese can have an empathetic understanding for a fellow national. This is only possible because they share a common 'racial' background.

*Nihonjinron* presents Japan as a community of people who 'embody a heritage of certain innate emotional and psychological traits which exist together with acquired characteristics imposed by geography and the cultural environment. That combination is further molded by outside stimuli to create what we can identify as the national character' (Shintaro, 1976:76). In the same vein, Yamamoto Shichihei, a major *nihonjinron* theorist, claims that 'Japanese society functions on the basis of a quasi-blood community' (quoted in Van Wolferen, 1990:266). Intertwined with the belief in Japan as an extended family is the image of Japanese society as a harmonious entity, an image intended for both domestic and international consumption. As Van Wolferen (1990:289) puts it, the Japanese are telling themselves and outsiders that they are one big happy family.

The hypothetical harmony of Japanese society is said to have its roots in Japanese history and culture. Some scholars (e.g. Ishida, 1963) see the origins of the Japanese tendency for harmony in rice farming methods, and others like Reischauer (1981) suggest that, because of the scarcity of natural resources and the vulnerability to natural disasters, Japan could not afford individualism. Cooperation and harmony were the only choice for many people living together in a small land and the worst punishment that could happen to someone was to be excluded from the community, probably because there was no possibility of surviving outside it.

From the perspective of some scholars the Japanese tendency to co-operate and not to oppose each other is attributable to Confucian values. These values emphasizing duty, obedience, and loyalty owed to others prescribed codes of appropriated behavior in interpersonal relationships. The Japanese language is a constant reminder of the importance of being conscious of this code.

Other scholars do not focus so much on historical reasons but continuously stress the importance of social interactions for Japanese self-identity and their group-orientedness. The Japanese are described as giving great

importance to interpersonal relationships in order to maintain harmony. The interpersonal psychological dependency ties have been also highlighted in order to explain the high degree of consensus in Japanese society, the concept of '*amae*' introduced by Doi (e.g., 1973) has been considered to be a key concept to understand the Japanese personality structure and 'the glue that holds Japanese society' (Hall and Hall, 1987:65).

**256**

While Doi stresses the importance of primary groups and psychological dependence ties, De Vos (1973) stresses the role of socialization in training the Japanese to sacrifice themselves to maintain harmony and Kawai Hayao (1976) refers to the incomplete development of the Japanese ego due to the fact that Japanese society is a mother-dominated society. A different sociopsychological explanation comes from Chie Nakane who sees the categorization of social relations in a hierarchical structure as the most important factor in accounting for the harmony in Japanese society.

Despite variations in the explanations, in all these approaches, conflict is presented as not appealing to the Japanese or seen as the exception. Therefore its importance is not recognized and is often dispoliticized or explained as a product of a social deviant behaviour or other psychopathological reasons. An example of this interpretation is Doi's explanation for the students movement in the sixties as being mass hysteria. A further illustration of the dispoliticization of conflict is given by Nakane (1973). Arguing that in Japanese society, the ones placed in a relationship of conflict are companies and not labour and management, she denies the existence of opposing classes and interests.

Nevertheless, examples of social tension, open conflict and heterogeneity do exist in Japanese society. The majority of literature on conflict has political associations with the Japanese opposition parties and represents a minority view. It is largely based on the work of Marxist economists and thus interpretations are mainly focused on their political content and generally interpreted in Marxist terms.

The nature of Japanese protest reveals the false stereotype of uniformity of Japanese society and it appears that the level of social conflicts in Japan is not low by international standards (Mouer and Sugimoto, 1981). Numerous accounts of peasant rebellions and city riots exist since the Tokugawa period (1600-1867) throughout the social history of Japan (Lewis, 1990).

Rice riots are particularly relevant to illustrate how popular discontentment and protest have been always present in the Japanese history. Already frequent in the Meiji period (1868-1912) and even before, the enormous

scale of rice riots in 1918 for cheaper rice is the best example of social protest in Japan because they were spontaneous although, not as politically unconscious as was once thought. There is a popular literature on social protest, such as tales of protest and chronicles of social disorder in Japan that gives an account of the social history of conflict in the country and shows the significance to the people who observed and participated in those protests (Walthall, 1986:150).

A survey of the history of the Japanese labor movement provides also many examples of conflict, of which the labor disputes in the 1920s and the shipbuilding yards strike in Kobe in 1921 are just two examples. It should be noted that labor disputes were not always in connection with political or ideological associations. However, the mining riots in 1918, a case of labor dispute for wages and improved working conditions and the right to negotiate with the company management, is a good example of spontaneous riot not concerned with ideologies (Lewis, 1990).

Social protests and movements of ordinary citizens are probably the most notorious example for latent conflict in Japanese society and, according to Mouer and Sugimoto (1986), they represent the prototype for conflict-oriented behaviour in Japan. Many of them have a long history dating from the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) and, although not all of them were natural and spontaneous, certainly the majority of them were unplanned.

Several examples of social protests aimed at social and political objectives have been well documented. There were for example, the large protests in 1960 against the U.S.- Japan Security Treaty (Ampo); the Taisho Democracy Movement which involved workers, peasants and intellectuals and challenged the central government; the Anti-Vietnam War movements and the student movements at the end of the 60s; the struggles between teachers' union and the Ministry of Education. Other less radical movements were, for example, the anti-pollution movement in the early 70s, the protest of the victims of the Minamata ecological disaster, the anti-nuclear and the consumer movements. In addition, there were other spontaneous and independent movements. One of these was the conflict over Narita Airport which delayed the opening of airport for seven years because of the opposition to its construction by farmers helped by students. There were many other cases of spontaneous social disorder like the passengers rioting in Tokyo stations in 1974 described by Van Wolferen (1990).

Another case of citizens' protest was the protest of victims of contaminated blood and their families and supporters. It took nearly seven years to make the drug companies do something, and certainly if they did something as an apology, it was more thanks to the pressure of the citizens than to the government intervention (*The Japan Times*, 15 March 1995, p.1).

Aside from social protests, other expressions of non conformism exist in Japan. Many independent organizations to a certain extent defy the establishment, such as, East Timor support groups helping East Timor people fighting for their independence against Indonesia while the Japanese government was helping the Indonesian government in the form of Official Development Aid. Another example of non-conformism is the independent movement Yamagishi, based on a non-property principle where members live in a community without money and following their own rules, provides a good example of non conformity in Japan.

Numerous cases of violence and repression are also well documented in the history of Japan, of which the political assassinations by military officers in the 1930s, the Red Purges in 1949 and the attacks on Korean residents after the Kanto earthquake of 1923 are some examples. Japan had terrorism problems in the 1970s with the *Sekigun*, a terrorist group, and still has a powerful Mafia, the *Yakuza*.

The criminal activities of the fanatical religious group *Aum Shinjirikyō* (Supreme Truth) further illustrate violence in Japanese society. Several people were killed by this group in 1994 and in March 1995, members of this group released the sarin gas in several Tokyo subways during the rush hour. As a result, eleven people died and more than 5000 others were affected.

The image of Japanese society as uniform and harmonious has also been shattered recently with different cases of serious violence in schools. The suicides of children due to bullying in Japanese schools also reveal aspects in Japanese schools which are not very harmonious.

None of the above mentioned examples support the assumption that Japanese society is free of social tensions, but rather that conflict has always been a consistent feature of Japanese society. Thus, the question to raise is why the image of Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious is prevalent. In order to answer this question I shall attempt to examine the assumptions underlying this image of the Japanese as a racial and culturally homogeneous people. This brings us to the construction of the Japanese identity.

### **JAPANESE IDENTITY**

National identity is artificially created (Anderson, 1983) and, in the Japanese case, is grounded in the idealisation of consanguineous relationships. Given this, it is necessary to examine the political construction of ethnic identity. The importance of common ancestry in relation to national identity is

expressed in the birthmyth of Japan, explained as the product of an incestuous relationship between sister and brother- Izanami and Izanagi. Later Izanagi gave birth to Amaterasu, the sun goddess, from whom the Imperial House is said to descend (Yoshida, 1992:53-58). The Shinto worship of ancestors deepened further the importance of 'blood'.

Furthermore, the construction of state in Japan was based on the idea of the nation as a family. Japan was unified between 1534 and 1582 and the Tokugawa government (1600-1867) consolidated the unification, and made attempts to create an 'ethnic state' (Yoshino, 1992: 83-91). In the Meiji era (1868-1912), ideological efforts were made to create and promote a 'sense of nation' and the state came to be represented as a family-state (Gluck, 1985). The word *kokka*, which means both nation and state, consists of two characters meaning 'family' and 'country' and, as Yoshino (1992:235) remarks, illustrates the historical process in which the state came to be identified with the nation. By the 1930s, the view of the nation as a family sharing racial and cultural characteristics had become the dominant ideology. In 1937, the Ministry of Education published *Kokutai no Hongi* (The Principles of National Politics) stating that 'Our country is one great family nation, and the Imperial Household is the head family of the subjects, and nucleus of national life.' (Yoshino, 1992:92).<sup>i</sup>

Many changes occurred after World War II, but the idea of Japanese identity as coterminous with common ancestry was consistent with the image of Japan as a homogeneous country. According to Dale (1998a: 92), 'uniform country' and 'homogeneous society' are post-war euphemisms for 'racial' purity.

There is a tradition in Japanese scholarship of considering the Japanese as being of unmixed 'blood'. This idea was widely disseminated during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) when there was a conscious effort to preserve Japanese 'purity'. The ideology of 'blood' purity in contemporary Japan has not diminished in discursive power, perhaps because it is endorsed by prominent Japanese scholars. An example of this is Masuda Yoshio of Tokyo University, who speaks of the purity of the Japanese culture as stemming from the purity of 'race' (quoted in Hayashida, 1976:133). In the same vein, the anthropologist Ishida (1974) claims that endogamy has been favourable to Japan.

The significance of the 'homogeneity of blood' in modern Japan has been well documented by Hayashida (1976). Pure blood ideologies are still employed to distinguish people in Japan and blood lineage inquiries are conducted before marriage by private detective agencies.

From the above it may be concluded that Japanese national identity was drawn from the idea that Japan was a community sharing a common ancestry and that 'Japanese blood' retains a strong social meaning for the Japanese.<sup>ii</sup> The Japanese historically formed an image of themselves as a uni-racial homogeneous people and, as previously stated, in the dominant tradition of thought on Japanese society, the Japanese are presented as different from other peoples particularly in terms of their racial and social homogeneity. According to Yoshino (1992:25-26), 'Japanese blood' is first and foremost, a case of social construction of difference. On this point it must be observed that Japanese society has a long tradition of creating and maintaining 'differences'. I shall now examine Japanese society and its treatment of and attitudes towards its minorities.

### MINORITIES IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

In Japanese society, as in any other society, the majority defines what is correct and exerts pressure to bring dissident minorities into line. Minorities are a threat to the uniformity of the social system and the way minorities are perceived (and treated) in Japan stems from the model of Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious. The word *chigau*, for example, is used to mean both 'different' and 'wrong' as Goodman (1990) remarks. However, the image of Japan as a homogeneous country, although ideologically a very powerful one, has been disputed by a number of studies, which clearly show Japan to be made up of a variety of minority groups.<sup>iii</sup>

Among the indigenous Japanese, there exist several groups of people who have historically existed outside of the mainstream. The *burakumin*, whose number is estimated at two or three million, are descendants of the untouchable caste group of the Tokugawa system. They have long been considered not fully human and have remained on the margins of society throughout Japanese history. It was believed that the *burakumin* were 'racially' distinct from other Japanese and, as late as 1950, they were still living in 'special' areas. With the formation of the *Buraku* Liberation League in 1955, and the political mobilisation of the *burakumin*, their situation has gradually improved, but differences between the *burakumin* and the average national citizen are still perceived as significant (Neary, 1997:74).

The inhabitants of the southernmost islands of Japan, the Okinawans, number over 1.3 million people. In 1879, Okinawa (the Ryūkyū Kingdom) was annexed by Japan and since then, the Okinawans have been subjected to repressive policies and endowed with an inferior status. Partly as a result of their own history and partly as a response to the discrimination they have

historically experienced, an Okinawan (*uchinanchu*) identity developed in contrast to the Japanese identity.

Before the Meiji period (1868-1912), the indigenous people of northern Japan, the Ainu, were regarded as barbarians, and later as a 'primitive race' at risk of disappearing. While legally Japanese citizens, the Ainu were thus excluded from the racialised national community as internally colonised 'native' Japanese' (Siddle, 1997:24). After a long history of exclusion, the Ainu mobilised their ethnicity in contrast to the other Japanese (*wajin*) and eventually succeeded in being recognised by the United Nations as an indigenous people in 1987 and improving their standards of living. Nevertheless, there are still significant differences between the Ainu and the average national citizen.

Among foreign groups, the Koreans are a large minority numbering 645,373. Most are descendants of labourers brought to Japan from Korea before 1945 and historically they have been subjected to diverse forms of discrimination. Today they are permanent residents: more than 90 per cent of them are Japanese-born and most speak Japanese as their mother tongue. However, few Korean residents have Japanese citizenship. Because of their political and demographic importance, the Koreans have already received a certain amount of political and media attention, but only very recently have Korean residents been excused from the requirement to undergo compulsory fingerprinting as part of registration and to carry alien registration documents.

Many Chinese emigrate to Japan and currently, the number of Chinese residents is between 50,000 and 60,000, while that of Chinese students and working students is about 150,000. Although Chinese culture enjoyed high prestige in the past, and Chinese residents in Japan are distinguished from other minorities by their affluence, like other minority populations they have a history of exclusion and exploitation (Vasishth, 1997).

Indochinese refugees, though few in number (6,222 in 1990), are scattered all over Japan, and represent a minority group. They are not phenotypically visible but they are segregated from the mainstream of society. Vietnamese 'boat people' also complain of unfair treatment and the 300,000 other Asians, most of them illegal, may also be considered a minority population in Japan. There exists research on undocumented foreign workers in Japan that corroborates the evidence that they experience all sorts of difficulties, but the fact that they are illegally residing in the country places them in a different situation from that of other minorities.

A number of scholars have made efforts to analyse the situation of the minorities in Japan and to assess the prevalent anxieties underlying the discriminatory attitudes directed towards them. De Vos and Wagatsuma

(1967) pointed out that the negative attributes the Japanese ascribe to the so-called 'invisible minorities' - Koreans, Chinese, Ainu and *burakumin*- often parallel those they ascribe to blacks. There is, indeed, a mechanism of 'racialization' underlying social attitudes towards ethnic minorities and this is illustrated by the fact that the Japanese of Korean descent are referred to as *chigau minzoku* (different people) according to Hayashida (1989: 329-343).

262

The idea of 'race' can also be seen in discrimination against the *konketsuji* (literally, mixed blood children) who only have one Japanese parent. It is estimated that over 2,000 of these people are part black and, according to Strong, have experienced more discrimination than their half-white counterparts. The Caucasian-Asian *konketsuji* generally experience a lesser degree of discrimination (Strong, 1978). There are also differences among 'the 100 per cent racially Japanese'. According to Hayashida (1976:122), the *hibakusha* (survivors of the atomic bomb) represent a new 'racial' minority. They are frequently referred to as 'death-trained' and are considered to be an inferior breed because of their exposure to the bomb which darkened their skin.

It is not only on 'racial' grounds that people are categorised and excluded from mainstream Japanese identity. As Stevens claims, Japanese society values order so much that 'marginal categories are created to label and control disorder' (1997:16). Her research in a *yoseba* (day-labourer area) reveals that homeless people and day labourers (most of them of Korean and *burakumin* descent) are socially marginalised due to their transient employment patterns.

There are also minorities who differ from the mainstream in terms of belief. Such a category would include the political fringe, members of social movements and members of religions other than Buddhism and Shinto. Clammer (1997:177-194) calls these 'ideological minorities' that distinguish themselves by adherence to a system of beliefs different from those of the mainstream. Japanese Christians are an example of such a group. People who are not satisfied with the *status quo* and do not fit into categories are also socially marginalised.

Children who have characteristics which appear different from the majority are often bullied at school. An example is the case of children who have returned to Japan from Manchuria, the so-called 'orphans left in China' (*chūgokoku kojishijo*) at the end of the Second World War who have found a relative in Japan. As of May 1985, there were 2,300 such children registered in Japanese schools and 90 per cent of them were experiencing problems according to the Ministry of Education report published in February 1986 (Goodman, 1990:180).

The significance of social conformity in Japanese society is well illustrated by the difficulties faced by Japanese employees from overseas and their families on their return to Japan (1988). Their children, who have received an overseas education because of their parents' work, are marked out as different once they arrive in Japan and perceived as 'problematic' both by the Japanese educational authorities (Ministry of Education, teachers, etc.) and by popular opinion. Interestingly, while competency in a foreign language is ostensibly valued in Japan, in the 1980s little value was apparently accorded to the ability of these particular people to speak a foreign language (Goodman, 1990).

From what has been said so far it seems clear that the claim of Japanese society to be homogeneous has no support in reality. Perhaps most importantly, the dominant view of homogeneity as desirable, assigns negative traits to minorities. Minorities internalise this view of themselves while at the same time resisting it and searching for a positive identity in order to cope with it.

The picture that emerges of Japan is thus one of a closed and rigid society. While this is largely true, it should be noted that contemporary Japan is exposed to foreign influence as never before in its history, and has been changing as a result.

#### **HOMOGENEITY AND HARMONY AS AN IDEOLOGY**

The racial homogeneity assumption has little, if any, scientific support, since the idea of pure race in itself can not even be conceived of with the developments in genetics. Thus, the question here is not the scientific validity for this idea but why this preoccupation with racial homogeneity exists.

It would be too simplistic to assume that this concern is based on pure racism. It seems rather that it is "imagined" to strengthen the Japanese ethnic identity, as Yoshino (1992:120) suggests: "Indeed the symbol of 'Japanese blood' is socially invented not to point the genetic traits as such but to mold and channel psychological responses as regards 'we'-ness and 'them'-ness' (...) The Japanese mode of thinking and behaving associated with the Japanese race [is] itself an imaginary notion in perception of Japanese identity".

Homogeneity is regarded as a symbol of unity, while diversity is more identified with conflict. The association of blood and culture reinforces the sense of similarity and togetherness. Furthermore, the combination of the genetic and cultural traits being shared by all the Japanese makes possible a mutual understanding which leads to consensus and harmony. This common heritage that binds Japanese can be recognised in the idea of Japan as a big family as it is suggested in the following statement of Yamamoto Shichihei

'Japanese society functions on the basis of a quasi-blood community' (quoted in van Wolferen, 1990:266).

264

Support in Japan for the image of Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious comes from established academics, from persons working for the government and from businessmen. Regarding the support of academics, in spite of many criticisms mainly concerned with their dubious academic value, the publishing figures illustrate well their importance to the image (Mouer and Sugimoto, 1986).

Businessmen were also found by Yoshino (1992:169) to be 'one of the most qualified group of commentators on Japanese society and culture'. Leading businessmen promote Japanese-style management and Japanese business culture abroad, emphasizing the importance of *Nemawashi* and *Ringi* systems to promote consensus. The former chairmen of Sony and Mitsubishi are two examples of business leaders active in explaining Japanese culture. Indeed the image of Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious has been used widely to explain Japan to the rest of the world in the context of trade frictions.

It can be assumed that this image facilitates the efforts of Japanese leaders to mobilise the Japanese and one may wonder if Kawamura (in Yoshino, 1992) was right in saying that 'harmony and consensus are, in fact, the neglect of workers's rights and the oppression of unions'; or Dale (1988b:29) in suggesting that *nihonjinron* is merely a 'fictional universe constructed out of the neurosis of intellectuals, and deployed by the state as a means of mystifying the nature of social power'.

The success of *nihonjinron* deserves a special attention.<sup>iv</sup> There is evidence that a form of *nihonjinron* existed already in Meiji period (1868-1912) (Gluck, 1985) but the above ideas gained in importance with Japanese economic growth and it is perhaps no coincidence that Japan's unique social culture is associated with Japan's economic success, which is a source of national pride. As Hall (1996) points out, we need to look at the functions of ethnicity in the dominant discourse and in this regard, it is interesting to note that businessmen are important diffusers and recipients of *nihonjinron*. By stressing the uniqueness of the Japanese, *nihonjinron* raises the consciousness of being Japanese and thereby cultivates ethnic feelings. Given this, it has been interpreted as a way of recovering from the cultural identity crisis generated by the war and threatened by westernisation and rapid social change. As stated above, *nihonjinron* has also been seen as an ideology that promotes the interests of the ruling elites (e.g., Dale, 1988).

While this is probably true, *nihonjinron* has become a 'cultural orthodoxy' and academics in Japan (and elsewhere) draw uncritically on *nihonjinron* discourse and the average citizen takes *nihonjinron* ideas for granted. This is well illustrated by the fact that the majority of the participants in Yoshino's survey (1992:130) on *nihonjinron* expressed 'Japanese identity in terms of well-formulated theories even though they were not professional thinkers'. Indeed, quite often, *nihonjinron* ideas are offered to foreigners in Japan by the average citizen as explanations of Japanese society. This was also remarked on by Goodman (1990) and was observed on many occasions by this researcher during her stay in Japan.

*Nihonjinron* discourse can, of course, be dismissed insofar as it is grounded upon serious theoretical and methodological errors; however, the question of whether this discourse is true or false is less important than whether it is effective in practice. The fact is that it conditions the way in which many Japanese people perceive themselves. Particularly important here is that *nihonjinron* promotes the idea of Japan's social and 'racial' homogeneity.

This leads to the question of the relation between the ruling classes, consisting of the established groups mentioned above, and the dominant ideology. Ruling classes are in an advantageous position for using the system to their advantage; thus, the dominant ideology can be said to be always associated with the interests of the ruling classes.

The ideology of Japan as one land and one people who live in harmony was created and spread during Meiji period (1868-1912) for the purpose of mobilising the nation to catch up with the West (Gluck, 1985). The same ideology was, for example, further spread in 1937 with the Principles of National Politics (*Kokutai no Hongi*) published by the Ministry of Education and distributed all over Japan, stressing the importance of the spirit of harmony by stating that it had throughout history been the source of Japan's growth. This suggests that this ideology has been used whenever there was a need to mobilise the Japanese for a national goal.

In every society there is a tension between the demands of society and the individual and each society has its own mechanisms and institutions to accomplish the necessary social conformity to function. It can be said that in Japan group and hierarchy are the institutions that promote social conformity. On one level, the importance of status and hierarchy of which the Japanese language is a constant reminder and the strict specification of behaviour increase conformity. On a deeper level, dependability is encouraged.

Cross-cultural social psychological research on Japanese behaviour suggests that the Japanese are social-oriented because respond mainly to affiliative needs. It appears that the desire for affection and approval creates

a strong drive to submit the self to the group, and the individual learns how to subordinate his own interests to those of the group. Furthermore, the acceptance of these social rules gives security and emotional rewards. As Kondo (1990) points out, Japanese selves are contextually constructed, relationally defined and the individual, by focusing attention on what others think, develops an inter-personal hypersensitivity which becomes almost a mechanism for social control, in particular because shame, is used as a social sanction. Because of this social structure as Jansen and Reischauer (1995) commented, it takes more daring to be a social rebel in Japan than in another society.

Much of the apparent harmony and tranquillity of Japanese society can be attributable to the uniform educational system. Harmony can only be achieved if people conform to the same standards and Japanese schools teaching children more how to fit in than to stand out, reproduce the dominant ideology.

The above ideas can be summarized by quoting the diplomat Kenjiro explaining the Japanese character to an English journalist '(...) discipline, gentleness and harmony are our strengths. But our people are submissive, used to obeying authority without question. Actions are judged according to their conformity to a set norm' (*The Times*, 17 February 1996, p.7).

### CONCLUSION

The two traditional schools of scholarship on Japan were briefly considered and it was concluded that whilst it is true that there is a tradition of thought which conceptualises Japanese society as one of conflict rather than harmony, this has now been set aside in favour of an image which excludes divergence and disregards linguistic and cultural regionalisms.

As discussed, though a generally accepted belief exists that Japanese society is free of social tensions, there is good evidence that, beneath the surface, such tensions do exist in Japanese society, as in other industrial societies. It should also be noted that the image of Japanese society as uniform and harmonious has been shattered recently with incidents such as that of the sarin gas in Tokyo.

For decades, the official view of Japan has been one of a homogeneous country and within Japan's homogeneity few or no references are made to the descendants of *burakumin*, Koreans, the Japanese-born Koreans and Chinese, the Okinawans, the Ainu, the children of intercultural marriages, immigrants and other foreigners. Moreover, no account is taken of the

linguistic and cultural diversity expressed in different folklore, dialects, etc. all over Japan, which disprove the idea of monolingualism and monoculturalism in Japan.

Examining the assumptions underlying this image it was concluded that racial and cultural homogeneity appears as the necessary condition for an image of a Japanese society free of social tensions. All societies create ideologies which help them to maintain and reproduce the social order and the image of homogeneity and harmony produced in the Meiji period (1868-1912) as the official ideology to catch up with the West, has been used throughout Japanese history as a charter for social action. In this light, it appears that this image is still an element of the dominant ideology in contemporary Japan and, therefore, performs a socio-political role.

As we saw, Japanese identity has been based on the idea of family and this has been promoted in contemporary Japan by the *nihonjinron* discourse. The fact that this discourse is produced and endorsed by Japanese scholars from prestigious universities and is published by reputable companies suggests that few question its validity and it is perhaps no coincidence that it gained in importance with Japanese economic growth.

From what has been said it seems clear that the claim of Japanese society to be homogeneous has no support in reality. It may convey a national ideal but it also has an ideological function as well. By obliterating individual distinctiveness and socially excluding segments of the population deemed to be 'different', the *status quo* is maintained. The conclusion that emerges from this article is that the image of Japanese as homogeneous and naturally harmonious corresponds to the desire of the Japanese ruling classes for them to be so.

To conclude, it should be observed that the image of Japan as a homogeneous country, although disputed by a number of studies, has been a powerful one and has implications on how 'differences' are seen and treated. However, continual economic, political and social changes are taking place in Japan. Furthermore, the dominant discourse has changed since the 1980s and there has been a considerable investment on the 'internationalisation' of the country and Japan is exposed to foreign influence as never before in its history and has changed as a result.

✓  
200

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<sup>i</sup> *Kokutai no Hongi* (Fundamentals of our National Polity) was an ideological tract produced by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 1937 and distributed as a manual for patriotic education.

<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that the invocation of 'race' as family and the projection of 'race' as a kinship is also present among other peoples. See, for example, Steve Jones, *In the Blood: God, Genes and Destiny*, London: Flamingo, 1997.

<sup>iii</sup> The term 'minority' is here used to refer not only to segments of society which occupy a numerical position but also have special traits which are held in low esteem by the dominant segments.

<sup>iv</sup> Seven hundred titles on Japanese culture or on the Japanese were published between 1946-1978 (58 per cent of them after 1970) according to the Norman Research Institute, cited by Mouer and Sugimoto, 1986: 87.