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Essence of Personal Networks in Japanese Society and Their Transformations

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Networks in One's Mind

Shoji: We are talking today with Professor Ikegami who studies personal networks from the perspective of historical sociology. Professor Ikegami, you discuss communication networks of the

Edo period in your book *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture*.¹ If there is a process of forming personal ties that has been historically formulated and is unique to Japanese society, what would it be?

Ikegami: *Bonds of Civility*, which was originally published in English for the English-speaking audience and is now also available in Japanese, discusses the history of how people socialized with each other in Japan using concepts from network theory. The book sheds light on rich and flexible horizontal personal ties, which contrast with the image of Japan as a rigid and vertical society. Especially, it is fascinating—even from the larger perspective of world history—that numerous small circles enjoying various traditional arts have served a significant social function, helping people form horizontal networks within the framework defined by the shogunate system. Of course, a socializing culture emphasizing horizontal ties is not unique to Japan. Thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Adam Smith were aware of the importance of new types of personal relationships that emerged at that time through the medium of commerce; in other words, the emergence of equal relationships between strangers through the market. Investigation of how people socialized in the Edo period has revealed dynamic interactions and

exchanges of information with a variety of rules of association among strangers as well as numerous places for socializing where people sharing a common hobby interacted with no regard to their social class.

The book is intended for a historical analysis as well as for the construction of a social theory. The social theory not only tackles concerns of our time regarding the historical feasibility of a civil society in the non-Western European world, but it also analyzes highly abstract linkages among personal ties, culture, the state, and networks. It is in this context that the book defines the concept of "publics" as spaces for communication that emerge at intersections of various networks.

This theoretical aspect of the book developed from my rather unique intellectual background. I went to the United States after my personality had fully developed and ended up living there for an unexpectedly long time. When I am in Japan people see me as Japanese, of course, and I can naturally use different honorific expressions depending on whom I am speaking with. However, after going back to the U.S. I start to feel, within a week or so, that my stay in Tokyo was something which happened in a dream. Repeating such experiences, I have come to think that imagined associations exist as a precondition for

personal ties. In other words, a person has many networks in their mind. There is no "one personal identity": a different characteristic of a person stands out depending on the network to which they belong. A different personality emerges, quickly and smoothly, for different personal relationships in a different place in a different culture.

By combining several different networks in one's mind, rearranging them disconnecting them, one attempts to create an intersection with another system of networks. It is at the intersection that the concept of 'publics' that I mentioned before emerges. A person's identity is not something substantive, but rather it is something springing afresh in conjunction with their ties with others. The result of accumulated layers of identities that arise from different situations—the path of one's past or the history of relationships—becomes the identity of a person. If I compare myself now with twenty years ago, I now think about an entirely different set of things. The history of lessons learned from various mentors and friends is embodied in myself.

The "Japanese ways of forming personal ties" relates not only with large-scale phenomenon such as the culture and system of society, but also with what is

happening in the mind of each individual. Also, when it comes to questions regarding publics, which significantly influence the formation of a person's identity, shapes of "publics" in society or how a new shape will be formed, involves a general view of the situation because the social structures such as social culture, the government system, and types of markets are important factors.

Inoue: So is it right to say that many different publics exist outside individuals, and that each person reconstructs their own identity existing inside themselves for different publics?

Ikegami: Yes, but instead of "getting reconstructed," expressions like "spontaneously emerging as the result of stimuli" or "shifting all at once" are close to what I envision. Even over the course of a day we encounter many small publics which stimulate new identities to emerge or existing identities to resurface. At a macro scale, the role of the social system becomes relevant. But, at the level of the smallest unit, dialogues conducted inside an individual are crucial. For example, in an art that emphasizes reaching spiritual depths using one's body such as the Japanese *noh* performance or tea ceremony, there are dialogues between one's body and mind. An infinite number of such publics exist, and if we wonder what they are made of, we must consider

their relationships with the large structure of society.

Shoji: Different personal ties result depending on the accumulation of personal history. For instance, the identity of a person who has been brought up in Tokyo has been influenced by Tokyo's social structure as well as the modes of personal associations in the city, right?

Ikegami: Of course.

Inoue: Then, how should we think about Japanese society?

Ikegami: I am a little hesitant to define "Japanese" characteristics. For example, even if someone claims that certain ways observed in the Edo period are traditions of Japan, in reality the culture and social structure have changed in modern days. As I mention in *Bonds of Civility*, the Edo period saw associations of people sharing a common hobby such as *haikai* (a popular version of linked poetry). Although individual associations are small groups they constituted a significantly large entity by being horizontally linked. The linkage is not necessarily strong, but one could go through a series of links to reach a person of interest. A person merely had to be in the network of *haikai* to be able to travel all over Japan through a series of introductions by people in the network. It

is questionable whether such flexible networks exist in the culture of large corporations in today's Japan. They may still remain in the form of private hobby circles of people interested in picture postcards, for example.

Shoji: Will such a form be path-dependent and be inherited for a long time to come?

Ikegami: Culture is something highly fluid, but once the story and form is constructed, it can have independent influences on society. For example, once established the *iemoto* system (hierarchical master-student structure) or *renga* (linked verse) of *haikai* can continue as a system to some extent even though the background factors and social structure change. Also, since there exists a poetic form like haiku, you can see some lay people cursorily writing some haiku in Japan. Perhaps, Japan has the highest density of amateur poets among modern nations, which reflects the continuity that ensues after some form of culture is established.

Society that Allows Switching between Different Networks

Shoji: So, is it better that we stop focusing on something being unique to Japanese society?

Ikegami: Yes, but having said that, I have

one thing to point out. In the Edo period a class system was well established, if you were born into a samurai family, you were a samurai; if born into a farmer's family, you were a farmer. In principle it was difficult to move away from what you were born to be. However, in reality it was easy to switch between one's networks in Japanese society. In the eighteenth century, Japan did not have a so-called civil society in the political sense, but many places for play or festivity existed where people could disregard their own social class and interact with people from entirely different classes. I think it is a very important concept that people not only lived within the network they were born into, but also had access to different networks or identities. The Middle East has similar places, like the bazaar where people can switch between networks with no regard to their ethnicity or religion. Society that has few such places has a closed-circuit problem, where personal interactions occur only within a cluster, for example in areas suffering from conflict such as Iraq, but Japanese society traditionally has had places for such switching. One graduate student in my university is engaged in creating places for play where people of different ethnicities can interact, but says the switch for them is almost like gambling with their lives. Hearing this, I think that Japanese society has historically been fortunate.

People often have the impression that Japanese society has a vertical, administrative organization, but it may actually be a very recent phenomenon rather than an established characteristic of Japan. I feel this form is very prominent in our society and lives, and that flexible networks allowing switching between networks are hidden in the background.

Inoue: In the Edo period, on one hand, there were strong bonds backed by a vertical society, but on the other hand, flexible publics allowed weak bonds. However, today's vertical society has grown so big that it threatens flexible horizontal networks. Is this a correct interpretation?

Ikegami: Society in the Edo period was in principle a very suffocating one in the sense that the life of even a samurai was largely determined by which family and which dominion they were from. There were few opportunities for an individual's talent and effort to make a difference in their lives. It is for this reason that the hidden, private part of life became important. We no longer have a class system, but it seems that once a person belongs to corporate society, corporate rules determine a large part of their life. This negative aspect of Japan's business culture seems to have grown more serious.

The phenomenon has become increasingly noticeable as corporations have grown since the end of the last war, and society seems to be losing its direction.

Unintended Group Dynamism

Shoji: The blossoming of the *otaku* (nerd or geek) culture in recent years may reflect an increased number of people who in their private life enjoy switching in flexible and free manner.

Ikegami: I suppose there is also a case where people escape into such a life.

Inoue: The *haikai* community also has a sense of a hiding place for those who escape from politics. Can networks, which are separated from politics, such as *otaku* culture or hobbyist circles become socially meaningful and play a reversal role?

Ikegami: I think it's possible. I am not sure if *otaku* culture has such a potential, but history has not been without such unexpected consequences. In the case of *haikai* culture too, people participated not to create civility in place of civil society, but to have fun. They enjoyed building personal ties as well as making new discoveries, which consequently led to the formation of a great number of loose networks behind the superficial, tight structure that society imposed. It is this flexible formation, I think, that was

subsequently inherited as cultural capital by the next phase of history.

Shoji: The special coverage of this issue of the journal (GLOCOM Chijo) discusses *Housuu juku* (a business school) in Saga prefecture as well as a study on the role of venture capital in Japan. These studies take into account discussions about social capital. What do you think about the relationship between dynamism in society and elements such as trust and reciprocity which are backbones for social capital?

Ikegami: Setting clear goals and training entrepreneurs are important activities, of course, but we should not overlook a phenomenon where unrelated activities inadvertently become meaningful. For example, in Western countries people enjoy discussions at a party as if discussions were the "main dish". People may discuss political or local issues, but, actually, they do it because they enjoy the discussion itself. Doing something for the sake of fun relates to *haikai*. No matter what the goal or subject of a discussion, the cultural style based on having fun has an impact on a broad sense of social culture.

Shoji: I myself study policy discussions facilitated by information and communication technologies at local government level. But, the discussions never become active when someone says,

"Let's have a discussion on city planning or local development." On the other hand, when a social networking service (SNS) that can be used without any restriction is offered, hobbyist circles start to emerge, or discussions suddenly erupt if someone proposes to eat out for good food. In this latter case I sense much dynamism.

Ikegami: I think adding a sense of fun works positively in that case. Some graduate students at my university are interested in the same phenomenon and study how Facebook can be used in local movements.

Shoji: Do you think that approaches used in social capital research such as trust, reciprocity and networks are still effective in studying such phenomena?

Ikegami: Participating in various discussions, I think those approaches are useful in conducting an analysis of large structures of the society. However, the issue is the way macro- and micro-level factors are linked. Microsociology has studied the dynamics and reciprocity of small groups, but there is a question about how it relates to meso-level issues. This is a very difficult problem.

Shoji: Mr. Takashi Iba, who studies network theory, commented that the examination of personal networks belongs to meso-level subjects situated between

micro- and macro-level subjects. He has also mentioned that theoretical research does not take personality into account and abstractly represents an individual with a node and links, but once the links are allowed to have different weights and strengths the issues become too complex to accommodate various additional variables.

Ikegami: The question of contingency is also difficult. One of my theories involves publics, that is, the spaces where people interact with one another. To some extent, the relationships in a social structure show what type of spaces exist and how the spaces are structurally associated. We can distinguish the energy and authority a space has, and we should also consider what types of spaces actually have energy or authority. Both energy and authority are important factors. In terms of today's social structure of Japan, the most crucial publics should be the Diet, but no one thinks discussions held at the Diet are necessarily energetic. Instead, *otaku* and pop cultures are full of energy. The lack of energy at spaces socially endowed with authority is a problem.

Virtual World as a Communication Tool

Inoue: In terms of energy, *Bonds of Civility* argues that networks come to possess enormous power when they go

beyond a certain kind of threshold, and that in the Tokugawa Network Revolution the relevant variables were weak bonds and civility. In today's society, what are the variables that are key to going beyond the threshold?

Ikegami: A recent phenomenon I am interested in is Second Life. Even though the membership growth is no longer what it used to be in the U.S. because business and advertisement effects have been below expectations, it has an innovative communication method. Put another way, there are many participants without clear objectives, and the scale has reached a level where someone with an interesting project can call for and gain a sufficient number of supporters and followers.

When Space Shuttle Endeavor was being launched a while ago there was an event where people gathered in a space science museum in Second Life and watched a video of the liftoff. It was really well made with a giant screen set up in the museum, avatars sitting in front of it, and rockets capable of being launched set behind avatars. The event was organized by a retired woman around 60 years of age and volunteers. Recently, documents by Mr. Rosedale of Linden Lab, which were prepared for a hearing at the U.S. House of Representatives, were found to state that NASA created museum, which infuriated the volunteers actually

involved. (Laughing) In other words, something created for fun was so well done that some thought it was done by NASA. The energy of people who do what they love to do while having fun is really tremendous. Gathering people and doing something with them is not an easy task in the real world, but it is quite possible in Second Life. Its difference from SNS or E-mail is probably co-presence, or the sense of being together, as often mentioned.

Inoue: That's an interesting argument. One can also say that by rendering the 3D image of the users' body in the Internet, Second Life draws back users' perception toward reality. A seminar organized by GLOCOM on the possibilities of governance and regulations in the virtual world also paid attention to the concept of co-presence.

Ikegami: I hear that Second Life's membership in Japan is not growing as expected, but it will be interesting if more people use it as a communication tool.

Shoji: Second Life seems to be too complicated to be used more as a communication tool. On the other hand, SNS and online video services enable simultaneous, active communications around some interesting topics and offer higher degrees of freedom.

Ikegami: I think that's a valid point.

What is also interesting is that part of Second Life is administered with the idea of open source. It does not completely follow the open source philosophy, but people can become members for free and create various things as they wish in the Second Life universe. Initially, the company charged for items created by the user, and the bigger and more sophisticated they were, the more expensive the charge became. If the company had stuck with that policy, users would not have created something like the space science museum. Later on, some Americans naturally brought up the story of the Boston Tea Party, claiming that charging taxes was unfavorable in the absence of representation.

Shoji: The famous slogan "No taxation without representation," right?

Ikegami: Users of Second Life reenacted the Boston Tea Party to protest the company's direction, which led to a new policy—while users were to pay for a piece of territory, they no longer had to pay for what they built above it. That, I think, allowed Second Life to take advantage of the energy generated from people's volunteerism. What is interesting from this perspective is that institutional policies are relevant to the motivation behind the creation of publics such as the space science museum. In my opinion, the way Second Life distributes territories

and stimulates users' energy to spring from the sense of having fun explains why it has achieved a certain level of success.

Shoji: Professor Ikegami, what kind of research interest do you have regarding the online services we have discussed?

Ikegami: I am thinking about the possibilities of analyzing Second Life, as well as other services, from the perspective of historical sociology. It has only been four years since Second Life was launched, but I am interested in questions such as what sort of meaning it has as an institution, or who are the skilled users? Successful cases of skillful use of the site show us that they hinge on energetic individuals who lead a social, or playful, real life. It seems in many cases that the driving force is the people who are capable of networking with others even outside the virtual world.

Shoji: Observing a variety of online communities, it seems that successful groups have members who can organize group actions in the real world rather than people who excel in the information and technology field. Also, with respect to anonymity, in the real world participation in a group using a pen name, for example, can be interpreted as a mechanism to temporarily eliminate one's social background. In this context, communications over the Internet are

similar to communications conducted in the real world. What do you think about the characteristics of online communications?

Ikegami: It's hard to generalize. E-mail, SNS, and Second Life are all significantly different even though they all depend on the Internet. Second Life itself is a large public, but it also contains small social groups within the sphere of this larger public.

Different publics within Second Life would bring different experiences. Also, there are users who have multiple avatars and use different ones for different situations. Styles of anonymous communications are not uniform. People in the Edo period too used *haimei* (a pen name) or *geimei* (a stage name) skillfully for their convenience. On some occasions people associated with one another anonymously, but, even when people knew the other's real name, they often used the assumed names as a signal that they had no intention of bringing in outside personal affairs. Similar situations can be observed in Second Life too. Also, some say that E-mail communications tend to become emotional. And there are differences in E-mail communications depending on whether they are done with a mobile phone or a computer. These examples show that the type of technology used can affect the quality of

communications. After certain technologies or publics emerge, implicitly agreed civility, or codes of association, will result through personal interactions. It's interesting that each network produces a certain type of civility.

Shoji: We have learned a lot of interesting ideas today that will help us understand human networks in a social context. Thank you very much for spending time with us.

(Interviewed on April 9, 2008)

Endnote

1. Ikegami, Eiko (2005) *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture*, Cambridge University Press. It has received five awards from the American Sociological Association (as a theoretical work in the field of political sociology and cultural sociology) and from the Association of Asian Studies and others (as a book for Japan studies).