Poland and Japan: The Imagined Communities?

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Abstract: According to historical literature about Japan and Poland, the XIX Century was a turning point in defining those two countries –– nationhood. Poland was shaping its nationhood in the times of great strife the loss of independence in 1795, the period of "Spring of the Nations" and finally liberation in 1918. In Japan, respectively revolutionary changes had occurred that impacted the core of polity and society. The Shogunate system had been abolished, and in a political vacuum, the Emperor regained seat of his power with the strong notion and necessity for "Westernization". This paper will attempt to shift the discussion from the Western-centric debate of the nation; that is undoubtedly vast in literature and at the same time accenting modernity as the motor of western nations evolution; into the territory of newly established nations (Japan and Poland) and their unprecedented, corresponding growth.

Keywords: Communities, Japan, Poland, Nation, Grassroot development,

Polonya ve Japonya: Hayali Topluluklar?

Öz: Japonya ve Polonya hakkında mevcut literature göre 19. Yüzyıl her iki ülkenin milliyetçiliğinin tanımlanmasında bir dönüm noktası olmuştur. Polonya, milliyetçiliğini büyük sorunların olduğu dönemlerde; 1795 yılında bağımsızlığını kaybettiğinde, "Ulusların Baharı" döneminde ve son olarak da 1918 yılındaki özgürleşme sürecinde şekillendirmiştir. Japonya'da ise devrimci değişiklikler sırasıyla siyasetçiler ve toplumun merkezini etkileyecek biçimde olmuştur. Şogunluk sistemi kaldırılmış ve imparator kuvvetli Batılılaşma ihtiyacı bulunduğu gerekçesiyle tekrar koltuğunu geri almıştır. Bu çalışma literatürde genişçe yer bulan ve aynı zamanda moderniteyi Batılı ulusların gelişmesinde merkeze alan Batı merkezli uluslaşma tartışmasından yeni kurulmuş ulusların (Japonya ve Polonya) görülmemiş benzerlikteki büyümeleri alanına taşımaya çalışacaktır.

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Introduction

From the broad academic perspective, Japan and Poland do not share a significant quantity of similar features on historical, social and political positions. Thus, before beginning the compresence between these two entities, it is crucial to answering this essential question: Where are those two countries placed in the social, political and historical landscape of nation-states?

Poland has a significantly developed economy with a slowly emerging civic society, after the end of the communist era in 1989. In 2004, Poland became a member of the European Union (EU), and by entering this union, it sealed its position as a western hemisphere member-country. With regard to Japan and its position on the landscape of nation-states, Japan is today one of the leading industrial countries in the world that had been implemented by the US occupation forces with western-democratic system and institutions. It has a declining but still important economy which impacts global markets.

Poland and Japan could be regarded as countries on the peripheries in a geographic sense, far away from centres (i.e. Western Europe and China) which propagate culture and knowledge, with the influence of those centres still having a tremendous impact on both communities. Nevertheless, Poland and Japan could develop their own original identity, under the overwhelming shadow of their neighbouring centres of civilization. In the presence of Western (German) and Chinese civilizations, the process of making their own identity will inherently be under their influence.

Poland and Japan created a stand in which both could create own separate cultures that in time transformed into national identity. This article aims to open a discussion concerning Polish and Japanese national identity that has been developing separately, although in the research conducted by Samuel Huntington it is

possible to notice a certain similarity in which both of those nation-states developed. Huntington acknowledge the complexity and vicissitudes of history. Nonetheless, he sees it only from one viewpoint – political. In his respected way Huntington came to an interesting conclusion about Poland and Japan and how they are perceived, but the changes happening in both of those countries at that moment in time in determining their nationhood cannot be solely subscribed as political. Therefore, it is essential to look at Polish and Japanese National Identity from a dual perspective – political and cultural.

Polish National Identity

The symbolical Congress in Gniezno in 1000 sealed Poland's fate as a Christian-Catholic state, and Poland accepted the holy Roman empire as their ally in the idea of European "Universalism" (Janion, 2003, pp. 15-16). However, by culture, religion and history, Poland did not strictly possess all the features and characteristics attributed to a western nation, and this can be attributed its exceptional geographical position, which helped to form and influence Polish national identity.

According to Samuel Huntington's magnum opus, "The Clash of Civilizations," Poland is a member of the western civilisation (Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations?, 1993, pp. 30-31) with the term "Eastern Europe" only being used for the countries that were directly exposed to the influence of the Orthodox Church where it became a dominant religious power (Huntington, 1996, pp. 158-159). Huntington notes that "*Poles say they have been part of the West since their choice in the tenth century of Latin Christianity against Byzantium*". Nevertheless, it is an oversimplification of the situation on Huntington's side. View on the contemporary Polish identity were argued with strong influence from outside through its circumstance. For instance, Poland decided to join the "political religion" coming from Rome to avoid the *Drang nach Osten* (*March into East*) and being absorbed by the Holy Roman Empire afterwards. The *Drang nach Osten*, was developed in 19th Century to justify Germany's need for

fertile land. In the medieval period, this March would have been led by the Teutonic Knights, known for being zealous crusaders who purified the lands from infidels like the Polabian tribes in the past. Polabian tribes were the first Slav communities that experienced the assimilation from the hands of Germans and are regarded as extinct today.

Huntington made some noteworthy oversights in his research looking at the European continent and how it was divided. Huntington was determined to draw borders between western and Orthodox civilizations without distinguishing central European Slavic states as their own unique civilisation, because of his political understanding. He continued to discuss the logic of expansion of western civilisation to the east by its securing a military alliance with post-Soviet countries including Poland (Huntington, 1996, p. 161). The role of NATO in central Europe was to fill the void created by the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and USSR as the leader and protector of the Warsaw Pact. NATO was supposed to guarantee stability, to reduce tension and most notably to block any ambition that Russia may have had to reclaim its former sphere of influence.

A similar thing can be said about the EU – that its central role was to integrate states with cultural commonality and to stimulate economic growth. However, in both these organisations, which originated in the Western states, central European countries were newcomers with their own historical and cultural background. Having been in those organisations for more than a decade, it slowly becoming clear that central European states do not speak in the same voice as the majority of countries in the EU (Kern, 2017), creating a gap between old and new members of the EU. Although EU relations are deteriorating, the military alliance NATO is still grateful for the contribution of Poland and other central European countries (NATO, 2017). The structure of EU and its role overlaps with the military purpose of NATO. Thus, EU is being criticized, and that criticism resonates with the people, because of the cultural and economic impact that EU has directly and visibly has on the lives of own citizens.

Therefore, Poland is not a complete western state. It is a country torn between western "dynamic development" and eastern "persisting" (Kloczowski, 1984). The western dynamism comes from the idea of progressivism that was pushed forward by the societies and Catholic Church in this part of Europe. The "persisting" is an analogy to the Byzantine Empire slowly losing its political and cultural power over its sphere of influence in eastern Europe and hoping to survive in the persistent state in the inevitable march of time. Thus, from the outside perspective Poland looks like a modern and emerging country, but inside, the exposition to the eastern influence of Byzantine Empire, represented by the future neighbor of Poland: Russia, has left a mark of this idea of "persisting" – not changing but being conservative in Polish national identity.

However, Zdzislaw Mach describes Polish national identity as a ritual of sentiment to "return to Europe" (Mach, 2014, pp. 1-3). It is a symbolical term used to describe the eastern frontier of Poland as the boundary of European cultures and civilization, and as a nation – one that was always leaning towards western ideas and principles. For Mach, Poland is a western country whose mission is to defend and block the military and cultural expansion of eastern despotic states (Russia, Ottoman Empire) as the "Protector of Europe". This mythology is strongly felt within Polish people thanks to literature, music and paintings in 18th and 19th Century. Polish national mythology flourished during the post-partition period (from 1795 until the end of World War I) when Poland ceased to exist as an independent state. By securing its cultural and national identity, the mythology of Polish people had to be strongly emphasised in history until 1918, when Poland regained its independence and could continue to develop own unique mythology.

For those myths to survive in the consciousness of Polish people, the intellectual elites (Adam Mickiewicz, Julisz Słowacki, Boleslaw Prus, Henryk Sienkiewicz) who remained patriotic found a way in which they could thrive. Thus, these elites found it vital to educate the masses, so they could become a vessel in which Polish

values would be stored and kept safe in times when there was a risk that they could be forgotten (Davies, 2006, p. 223). In the case of Poland, the masses were represented by mostly peasants living in the rural/agricultural areas. The peasants were potent to subsume Polish identity and became its guardians, especially during the processes of Germanization and Russification that took place in the latter half of XIX Century. Even though the pressure from the Germany and Russia to naturalise any minorities into their empires was efficient, it could not absorb all the people living in any of countries they assumed control over during their era of territorial expansion.

The Polish identity was reduced to an unwanted value and ethics which could not be tolerated in the modernizing German and Russian Empires which solely propagated the idea of nationalism. Nevertheless, the seeds of Polish national identity that were planted by the patriotic elites to the rest of the society started to give fruit by defying the process of Germanization and Russification. Therefore, the Polish had to create their way to endure the systematic process pressed by the authority of the oppressors that formally replaced their culture. The response was in the creation of a nationhood movement from the grassroots level (the masses that the patriotic intelligence would endow with information about their own identity) that could counter the ideology implemented by the Russia and German Empires.

That is why contemporary scholars - led by Miroslav Hroch - are researching on the European nation-formation are trying to transform the map of Europe left by Huntington's strongly politicised theme deeming it as a simplification and inaccurate representation of the reality. To demystify "this map" it is worth looking for scholars whose approach is more holistic and understated in how the Polish and Japanese nation-states came into existence.

Japanese National Identity

The cradle of Japanese civilisation is set in Chinese and Buddhist ideas (philosophy, ethics and values), but at the same time, Japan is a separate entity with its unique history and culture. Huntington did notice this feature: "*Japan has established a unique position for itself as an associate member of the West: it is in the West in some respects but clearly not of the West in important dimensions*" (1993, p. 45) and his further discussion about Japan continues: "*In the seventh century Japan imported Chinese culture and made the "transformation on its initiative, free from economic and military pressures" to high civilization. "During the centuries that followed, periods of relative isolation from continental influence during which previous borrowings were sorted out and the useful ones assimilated would alternate with periods of renewed contact and cultural borrowing." Through all these phases, Japanese culture maintained its distinctive character*" (1996, p. 77) – thus it is conceivable to say, that Japan is a construct that was strongly influenced by two forces, that formed a certain dichotomy of Chinese civilisation and modern western civilisation that meshed and clashed with each other creating this original mixture of a separate civilisation. Therefore, Japanese civilisation was distinguished by Huntington as its unique entity, neither Western nor Chinese. Japan is considered as a country that was greatly influenced by the Chinese Civilization, but the 19th Century reforms and modernisation (that were tremendously successful) made Japan stop any dream of western colonizers to subjugate its land. As a result, Japan became the first independent nation that undertook modernisation on such scale that after its transformation it could compete with western powers on the same level of military and political prowess.

With regard to its national identity and how it was formed, there is a significant difference between Japan and other Asian countries. The nationalistic movement that took place in the colonial domains like China, Vietnam, and India had felt the impact of the colonisation and iron rule of the metropolis based in Europe. These countries were exposed to the western ideas, and their population

receive education from the modern system created by the enlightened Europeans. Even though the national culture was created during the export of the Enlightenment into their colonial countries, they were able to, their own national culture as Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 2016) describes them as searching for their own "pre-modern" identity and maintaining their historical continuity to establish the identity successfully. However, the process of searching for their own identity was directly connected to the modernisation process launched by the external power, in this case, the colonizers.

The modernisation of Japan came from inner need formulated by many factors: a young generation of scholars (Motoori Norinaga, Ueda Akinari, Fujitani Mitsue, Tachibana Moribe) (Burns, 2003) discussing need to reform the whole polity, economic stability, peace and development of centres of learning and schools. The foundation of this change that later would be known as the Meiji Revolution and Reformation had been laid in the Edo era, foreshadowing future economic, political and social development. By creating a national market, urbanisation and communication systems, merchants informally replaced the samurai on the ladder of social classes. There were no major conflicts and wars on Japanese soil for more than 200 years, giving time for literature and art to flourish (McClain, 2002, pp. 54-55). These changes were happening before the revolution of 1868 that gave rise to Imperial Japan. However, Ian Naery states that even though there were some signs of economic prosperity and peace, it formed a new type relation on the strict social hierarchy (merchants replacing the samurai). This caused the erosion of the Tokugawa polity in the process, which was accelerated by the western power interest in this part of the world. He saw the development of the Meiji Revolution more as a political process, without acknowledging the importance of the economic background created during the Tokugawa era (2002, pp. 2-5).

However, the pre-modernisation signs were already visible in the last decade of the Edo era which showed the tremendously improved quality of life. Moreover, Farkas discussed the

importance of literature and especially the ability to read and write in the Edo period, which resulted in a very high level of literacy compared to the European states (Farkas, 2013, pp. 11-12).

The high literacy level in Edo Japan was on par with the Anderson (2016) theory of Imagined Communities that to create national consciousness vernacular literature had to be produced. The research conducted by Yakuwa shows that thanks to a well-developed system of schools during Edo era, most of the people could read at the primary level and knew how to write their names (Yakuwa, 2003, pp. 526-528). This exceptional circumstance for Japanese society aided it to transform into a community seeking knowledge. Books, pamphlets and newspapers penetrated all social groups no matter the geographic location, forming one of the most crucial components of Imagined Communities, that was "printed capitalism" and mass vernacular literature supporting each other in the stimulation of the nation's identity (Anderson, 2016, pp. 68-82).

Vernacular literature helped to spread the pre-modern idea of Japanese national identity, and by the time of the Meiji Revolution those pre-modern ideas became the foundation of a new Japanese nation; The Edo era was deeply founded in the Chinese and Buddhist philosophy to maintain the peaceful stability that lasted for such an extended period had to be replaced with the new idea (focusing on the times before Chinese philosophy and culture entered Japan – nativism) that would bind people strongly in the newly formed homogenous Japanese nation-state under one rule of the Emperor. Therefore, Japan had to denounce its firm connection to the Chinese civilisation and embrace the relentless passage of time by allowing in some parts of the Western concept of modernisation and becoming the first Asian nation-state to transform successfully.

In the case of Poland and Japan, both countries have a specific geopolitical position. By the historical circumstances, both became divided by different set of ideas and values that formulated them. Poland is divided between the western and eastern concepts of

Europe, and by being so, it created an elusive image of a western nation-state that is not entirely accurate. Similarly, it can be said about Japan that initially it was absorbed by the Chinese civilisation and by the end of Edo era, it was looking for its own identity and reforming it before the westernisation process took place in the letter half of XIX Century.

Conclusion

Benedict Anderson argued that societies wanting to change and adapt to modern times need to reflect among themselves and look for their origin in the pre-modern times – Japan to its pre-Chinese times and Poland to its pre-Western (German) times – to find their new identity. In the case of Poland and Japan, it is distinguishable, when looking at these countries' historical and social development, how they were influenced by the neighbouring nations.

Hence, in Poland, we could observe a struggle to keep the flame of national identity burning when Poland was erased from the political map by the neighbouring powers. The idea of the nation as the highest form of community that can be attained was transmitted by the patriotic intellectuals and aristocracy to those at the bottom of the societal ladder.

We also observed a similar situation in Japan where the tranquillity of the Edo period formed a perfect environment for Japanese society to look for their own identity. With the vernacular press and blooming new schools, society became more aware with each passing generation about their own national identity. The turning point was the establishment of the national intellectual movement called *Kokugaku*. The purpose of the *Kokugaku* scholars was to change the Chinese (including Buddhist and Confucian) centric studies to focus more on the nation of Japan and its distinguishing features in culture, religion and education (Burns, 2003, pp. 16-17).

As in the case of Poland where the development of national consciousness had begun from the grassroots level, Japan also experienced the same development process on the grassroots level in the form of *Kokugaku*. *Kokugaku* had a part in reigniting the interest in Japanese national studies and communicating it to the people of the islands. In both instances, Poland and Japan had to transform their communities to address the incoming issues of nationhood in the modern world. The end of World War I and the reestablishment of Poland as a sovereign state and elevation of Japan into an imperial power had its origins in those teachings that had proven to be a binding element for these two homogenous (populace) nation-states. From the historical perspective, the nation-building of Poland and Japan share the same idea in returning to the cradle of own identity and based on it building a modern nation-state.

Even though there is an enormous difference on the social, historical and political level, Poland and Japan adapted similar method of rekindling their own identity, Samuel Huntington looked through this process mainly from a political perspective and did not provide enough explanation to see the importance of the cultural impact in the form of grassroots development. Grassroot development was not a political movement, but rather a consequence of the external political interferences, that ignited Japanese and Polish journey to create own and unique identity.

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