ILDIKÓ FARKAS

The Japanese Nation Building in European Comparison

Abstract

According to the secondary literature of past decades, many features of Meiji Japan (1868–1912) that had been regarded as 'traditionally Japanese' have been proven to be 'invented traditions' of an era of building a modern nation and a national consciousness as part of the process of modernization. The creation of a nation state based on a strong nationalism followed the European developmental pattern, but was built on Japanese cultural traditions. One of the aims of this paper is to trace back the sources of this process, suggesting that pre-modern and culturalist conceptions of community were also used. This paper suggests that in this respect, the Japanese cultural movement of nation-forming shows similarities not with the nation states of Western Europe (where nationalism was strongly attached to modernity) but rather with the 'national awakening' movements of the peoples of Central Europe, which have not yet been dealt with in the secondary literature.

Why a European comparison, and not Asian?

This question can generate another question: where does Japan belong? Japan today is a highly developed industrial, or rather post-industrial country and society, with a Western-type democratic state and institutions, a member of the G8, and one of the most developed countries in the world. But there is no doubt that, at the same time, considering its location, history, culture, religion, traditions, it is very different from the West and strongly connected to Asia – albeit not entirely. Although some aspects of its culture originate from Chinese or Buddhist civilization (Confucianism, Buddhism, Tao, the writing system), Japan shows significant differences compared to East Asia in its social structure, history and culture. "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"[1] – so, in some respects, it can be seen as a kind of 'mixture' of the Western and the Chinese civilizations. Or, and not only according to Huntington, but also to several Japanese and Western social scientists[2], Japan is a separate civilization, in Huntington's view one of the eight great civilizations of today's world in the sense that "a civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural

---

[1] Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', p. 45, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, p. 45.

[2] The most well-known of these is Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization; A Comparative Review,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

identity that people have".[3] So Japan can be considered either a periphery of Chinese civilization or a civilization itself, connected to some extent to China/Asia, but separate from them in some respects. Some of these differences can be seen in culture: *Shintō*; in society: the family system; in history: medieval feudalism, its independent (not colonial) statehood throughout its history, its successful modernization during the 19th century; the fact that Japan became the first (and for a long time the only) independent modern state in Asia, having developed on a separate path from Western civilization. These characteristics taken together signify a great many differences, and may provide sufficient arguments for the view that Japan is not unambiguously a part of Asia. Japan's geographical-political situation could be characterized as a periphery of Chinese civilization for a long time, which means that in some periods Japan could have been integrated into a China-centered East-Asian world (for example, in ancient times), but sometimes followed a different development independent from the Asian course. Especially after the 19th century, the path of Japan's development differed from the Chinese pattern. Japan was secluded until the 1850s, then after the arrival of the Western powers to the region, it did not become a colony, but achieved domestic development and formed a strong nation state with a homogeneous culture. Japanese modernization – or the foundation for it – had started before the Westerners arrived in Japan and influenced its development. The nation- and state-building process of the Meiji period followed the Western model, but the foundation upon which it was built had been laid in the Edo period.

Regarding our topic, the national issue, and especially the question of nation building, again important differences can be seen between Japan and other Asian countries. Asian nationalistic movements for independence were a direct reaction to colonization. In this case, Asian countries like China, Vietnam and India had experienced long periods of colonial history under European rule, and nationalistic movements rose up in an attempt to throw out foreign influence and gain independence. For example, in India it was British rule that unified the country, and British education produced educated Indians, familiar with Western ideas, who actually created Indian nationalism. This means that the national awakening in India began with the modern period, and that it was a consequence of colonial rule, of getting to know Western ideas (the Enlightenment) and their influence.[4] Even if it created a national culture that was not Western[5], but attached to the history and traditions of pre-modern times (thus maintaining a historical continuity), it was still closely connected to the modernizing course of revolutions, and did not originate from India itself without outside influence. In the case of China, national identities, ideologies and movements arose only after the arrival of the Western powers, under the influence of Western ideas (colonization). Hobsbawm[6] argued that Eastern (Asian) nationalism was the product of Western conquest and influence, and nationalism – just like many other characteristics of modernity – was the result of a dual revolution (industrial and social-political). This

---

[3]   Huntington, 'The Clash…', p. 24.

[4]   S. S. Pujari, S. S. Narayana, *Indian renaissance – National Awakening*, http://yabaluri.org/ TRIVENI/CDWEB/indianrenaissancenationalawakeningjul84.htm (accessed 16.06.2013).

[5]   See more: Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, United Nations University, 1986.

[6]   Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848*, New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 144.

statement is not true of Japan, however. Compared to other Asian empires, where modern national ideas and movements started to emerge and spread after the appearance and impact of the Western powers on their territories, national movements in Japan began long before the Western powers appeared there. As Japan was closed to Western influence until the 1850s, it had very limited contact with Western ideas. After opening up, Japan did not become a colony, but took the influence of the western World and started a modernization policy that was so successful that at the beginning of the 20th century Japan became the only modern state in the world which did not emerge from the roots of Western civilization.

Nation and national identity in Japan

Interpreting the process of Japanese modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries still poses a challenge for social sciences and humanities. Among the various aspects and viewpoints have been developed during the long course of examining Japan's modern development, the question of Japanese nation-building (and nationalism) was also involved, thus connecting this issue to the comprehensive discourse on nationalism.

The Meiji state was modelled on European/Western patterns: a nation state (with the political notion of the nation) with modern institutions was created after a course of 'modernization from above', industrial and social 'revolution'. This was the consequence of Japan's immense effort to 'modernize' the country technically, industrially, politically, socially and institutionally, so as to 'catch up' with the developed Western countries. The creation of a nation state based on strong nationalism followed the European developmental pattern. In line with the modernist theories of nationalism, we can perceive the necessary components of a modern nation and national identity. According to these (Hobsbawm, Anderson, Gellner, Breully[7]), the nation is an artefact of modernity to which it is inextricably linked. The nation and nationalism is described as a political program which holds that groups defined as 'nations' have the right to form territorial states of the kind that have become standard since the French Revolution. A nation is defined as a body of individuals that have been initiated into a common high culture by the processes of industrialization and the institutions of modernity. The political rather than the cultural characteristics of the nation are emphasized. Anderson famously characterizes it as a limited, sovereign imagined community that came into being with the advent of print capitalism, the death of traditional religions and their idioms. A nation is thus seen as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Nations and nationalism are products of modernity which have been created as means to political and economic ends. All these can be applied to Meiji Japan. I do not wish to list the economic, social, political, cultural reforms and measures that transformed Japan into a

---

[7]   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Eric Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 1–14; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, John Wiley & Sons, 2006; John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State,* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.

modern state, which were the essential parts of the process of 'modernization from above', realizing an industrial, social and political 'revolution', after which a nation state could be achieved on the basis of the Western models. All these are analyzed in details in the secondary literature about Japan.[8]

Invented traditions (?) in Meiji Japan

According to this interpretation, nations are 'imagined communities', which became possible on a mass scale only relatively recently when individuals living in a region came to be able to construct a collective and unified image of themselves through the printed word. These 'imagined communities' are established through common stories, myths, and the shared experience of life. All these factors imply that without 'national character' – that is, some sense of a common culture, shared values, and similar traits – the modern nation-state could not exist.[9] This 'national character' is sometimes referred to as 'myth', on the basis that a nation is socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that group. However, we should be careful interpreting the phrase 'imagined communities', because it does not mean that such cultural units are not real; on the contrary, it emphasizes that the members possess a deep mental image of their communion. What people think they are determines their identity, so these mental images become objective facts of forming social reality. Hobsbawm describes this process of social construction as the 'invention of tradition'.[10] He and other modernists argue that many cultural practices, customs, and values which were thought to be old are actually of quite recent origin. This process is very important in the emergence of the modern nation-state. However, we should keep in mind that the word 'invention' does not mean introducing false or completely unknown things, as these 'invented traditions' are never completely invented. They had to fit into the historical experiences and collective memories of the people of the community in order to be accepted and internalized.[11] In Meiji, commoners took up the myths of the emperor and *Shintō* that were "completely alien" to the majority; these "inventions" were workable because they were seen to have been part of Japanese life in the past.[12]

---

[8]   Some of the important works on the modernization of Japan: William G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985; Ann Waswo, *Modern Japanese Society 1868–1994*, Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1996; Janet E. Hunter, *The Emergence of Modern Japan*, London: Longman, 1998; Marius B. Jansen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan V*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Peter Duus, *Modern Japan*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998; Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 2000; Elise K. Tipton, *Modern Japan. A Social and Political History*, London–New York: Routledge, 2002; Marius B. Jansen (et al. ed.), *Japan in Transition. From Tokugawa to Meiji*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

[9]   Chris Burgess, 'The «Illusion» of Homogeneous Japan and National Character: Discourse as a Tool to Transcend the «Myth» vs. «Reality» Binary', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 9–1–10, March 1, 2010: http://japanfocus.org/-chris-burgess/3310 (accessed 16.06.2013).

[10]   See more: Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions'.

[11]   Burgess, 'The «Illusion»…'.

[12]   W. Dean Kinzley, *Industrial Harmony in Modern Japan: The Invention of a Tradition*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp. xv, xvi.

The modern nation-state (be it Japan or any other) relies on the construction of a coherent set of national traits to function as an 'imagined community'. According to the secondary literature of the past decades, many features of Meiji Japan that were regarded as 'traditionally Japanese' have been proven to be 'invented traditions' of an era of building a modern nation and national consciousness (such as state *Shintō* or the emperor cult[13]). The use of history in order to construct and legitimize a sense of a commonly shared culture is a pattern which has been observed in different countries. The national identity is constructed in more or less the same way in different societies or nation-states; however, the material used to construct a sense of national identity naturally varies. The Japanese discourse on national identity is not unique, but the historical materials it draws on and the national culture it helps to (re)create are.[14]

The question that arises here is: what uniquely Japanese materials were used to construct Japanese national identity in the Meiji period, and where did all those mythical or once living traditions come from? And so we arrive at the main theme of our paper. In the Edo period (1600–1868), in a still closed country, a cultural movement called *Kokugaku* was started in the 18th century which focused on Japanese classics, on exploring, studying and reviving (or even inventing) ancient Japanese language, literature, myths, history, and also political ideology. 'Japanese culture' as such was distinguished from Chinese (and all other) cultures, and the 'Japanese nation' was thus defined. This process of 'imagining a community' took place *before modernization*, and not after, or as a consequence of, modernizing Japan. And this process, before modernization, is our main concern here.

The antecedent of modernization: the early modern Edo period

During the Edo/Tokugawa period (which realized 250 years of peace, the longest such period in Japanese history), Japan remained relatively isolated from the world, so Japanese culture developed internally with very little outside influence. This period is now called 'early modern', and regarded as the antecedent of modern Japan, as historical and social sciences acknowledge much more continuity between the Edo and Meiji periods than used to be supposed. Actually, the foundation for Japan's future economic, social and political development was laid in this period.[15] The establishment of a national market, the victory of a money economy, increasing urbanization, an improved communications system, the impoverishment of the samurai class and the enrichment of the merchants, the rise of a new artistic and literary culture appropriate to town dwellers rather than courtiers, monks or soldiers, the increasing fervor of religious nationalism focusing on the person of the emperor,

---

13 Stephen Vlastos (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998; Kinzley, *Industrial Harmony in Modern Japan…*; Ichikawa Midori, *Invented Tradition in Shintō: a New Construction of the Emperor as a God of the State*, Indiana University, 2000; Helen Hardacre, 'Creating State Shintō: The Great Promulgation Campaign and the New Religions', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1986, pp. 29–63; Helen Hardacre, *Shintō and the State, 1868–1988*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

14 Burgess, 'The «Illusion»…'.

15 See more: Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion. The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan*, New York–London: Free Press, 1985; Nakane Chie and Ōishi Shinzaburō (eds.), *Tokugawa Japan. The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1990.

the propagation of a series of new religious sects – these are some of the enormous social and cultural changes which went on in the period, many of them directly leading to the Restoration of 1868 and the new Japan that arose thereafter.[16] Intellectual development also paved the way for the formation of new ideological and political concepts.

Many factors that modernist theories presuppose as the roots of modernization were already present (or slowly being formed over time) in the Edo period. The modernist criteria for creating nations include a strong central political authority, general education and cultural homogeneity – all of them now proven characteristics of Edo Japan. The shōgunal government effected a strong political authority; general education was accessible to not only the upper layers (*bushi*) but also the lower layers of society in the towns and in the country as well[17]; and although regionally and socially divided, a general culture was formed and spread during the period. The *terakoya* and *han* schools (in the country also) provided education for the commoners[18], and thanks to this system the Japanese population had achieved a high degree of literacy at the end of the Edo period. Due to the lack of reliable statistics, only estimates about the literacy rate can be made, but it seems that 40–50% of all men and at least 15% of all women nationwide were literate and possessed basic calculation abilities.[19] As a comparison: the literacy rate in Europe in 1850, with the Industrial Revolution already well underway, was 50–55 percent[20] in the most developed countries (England, France, Belgium); while in the southern peripheries, such as the Balkans, southern Italy and Russia, it was well under 10 percent.[21]

Anderson argues that 'print capitalism'[22] – that is, the emergence of mass production and consumption of vernacular literature, and the development of literacy needed for that – made it possible to create nations as 'imagined communities'. In Japan, the last phase of the Edo period is known for its high level of literacy, almost as high as in the most developed

---

[16] Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion…*, pp. 11–12. However, he states that, naturally, there were relatively constant values and ideas throughout the period – broad structural features of family, polity and social class – which distinguish this period from the preceding and following ones.

[17] Katsuhisa Moriya: 'Urban Networks and Information Networks', in *Tokugawa Japan. The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan*, Nakane Chie and Ōishi Shinzaburō (eds.), Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1990, pp. 118–119. For Edo period education, see the works of Ronald Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967; and Richard Rubinger, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007.

[18] According to Dore, on the basis of *terakoya* enrolment figures, they postulate approximately 40% of male children and 15% of female children receiving some kind of formal schooling by the end of the Tokugawa period. See Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan*, pp. 291–295.

[19] Ronald Dore, 'The Legacy of Tokugawa Education', p. 100, in *Changing Japanese Attitudes toward Modernization*, Marius B. Jansen (ed.), Rutland, Vermont–Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1985, pp. 99–133.

[20] Watanabe Hiroshi, *A History of Japanese Political Thought*, Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2012, p. 445, note 10.

[21] Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution…*, p. 136.

[22] Anderson states that a nation as a group forms an imagined community that emerges with a common language and discourse generated from the use of the printing press. Books and media are printed in the vernacular (in order to maximize circulation). As a result, a common discourse emerged. Anderson argued that the first European nation-states were thus formed around their "national print-languages". Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 224.

parts of modern Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. More and more people became literate, and together with the necessary administration, highly organized even in the rural territories, and the spreading influence of city culture, the people's interest in the world around them created a demand for mass publication. "To satisfy that demand, early modern Japan developed an extensive publication industry and an elaborate communication system that produced and disseminated new information – political, economic, and cultural – throughout society".[23] Literature, books, pamphlets etc. spread widely, in the countryside as well, forming the components of a common culture: history, language, myths, ideas of origin and traditions. This way, another criterion – according to the modernist theory – for nation building can be regarded as having existed in Japan: a mass vernacular literature, which together with 'print capitalism' was able to discredit the ideas of traditional rule. That is exactly what *Kokugaku* did with the feudal rule of the shōgunate, creating the vision of a dynastic realm, with people being subjects of the emperor alone. This idea helped to form a homogeneous state with no power divisions, and mass vernacular literature was a truly useful tool to spread this idea.

Nation building in the 18th and 19th centuries: *Kokugaku*

Kokugaku (国学): in the two characters used, the first, *koku*, means country or nation. The second *gaku* means studies or school, so literally it means 'national studies'. In practice, *Kokugaku* was far more complex than this definition suggests: it served as a means of distinguishing between what was genuine Japanese culture from what was Chinese or Indian (or European) culture.

In several works of the secondary literature, *Kokugaku* is called or defined as "Japanese nativism".[24] However, even scholars of Japanese studies do not agree on this.[25] I personally share the view of Mark Teeuwen: "Following the lead of H. D. Harootunian's *Things Seen and Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism,* it has become an established convention in Japanology to translate the term *Kokugaku* as 'nativism'. One of Breen's main points in his 2000 article was to question this identification. He noted that while most *Kokugaku* scholars had a nativist agenda, they were far from alone in this. Nativism, classically defined as the ambition to revive or perpetuate aspects of indigenous culture in response to a perceived threat from other cultures, did not originate with the emergence of *Kokugaku*, nor did it expire with the demise of this school in the Meiji period. Rephrasing Breen's argument, we could say that we need to recognize that even in the nineteenth century, not all nativism was *Kokugaku*, nor was nativism all there was to *Kokugaku*".[26]

---

[23] Katsuhisa, 'Urban Networks…', p. 97.

[24] Harry D. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; Peter Flueckiger, *Imagining Harmony: Poetry, Empathy, and Community in Mid-Tokugawa Confucianism and Nativism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011; Mark McNally, *Proving the Way: Conflict and Practice in the History of Japanese Nativism*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2005. (However, he emphasizes that not all nativism was *Kokugaku* by focusing on the efforts of Hirata Atsutane.)

[25] John Breen, 'Nativism Restored', *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 55, No. 3, Autumn, 2000, pp. 429–439; Mark Teeuwen, 'Kokugaku vs. Nativism', *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 61, No. 2, Summer 2006, pp. 227–242.

[26] Teeuwen, 'Kokugaku…', p. 227.

Some theses and interpretation of *Kokugaku* can be regarded as nativism or can show nativist traits, but on the whole, as we will see further on, it was a far broader intellectual movement on one hand (including literary, linguistic and historic interests and activities); and on the other, a far narrower concept (than nativism in general) concerning its time span, aims, and circumstances.

In the early modern period, Neo-Confucianism[27] was the main current of scholarship, and one of its main tenet was the study of the classics, which eventually led Japanese scholars to the investigation of Japanese classics, and thus a specifically Japanese tradition and thought by means of Japanese documents, to contrast it with the study of Buddhist writings or Confucianism based on the Chinese classics. Eventually, the philological investigation of Japanese historical works or classical literature came to be referred to as *Kokugaku*. This began in the 17th century as a tradition of textual study focusing on specifically Japanese sources, in contrast to *Kangaku* (Chinese studies) or *Yōgaku* (Western, or *Rangaku*, Dutch studies). Its task was to study ancient Japanese literature by means of scrutinizing the exact meaning of ancient words. As an academic discipline, it relied on philology as its methodological tool to bring out the ethos of Japanese tradition freed from foreign ideas and thoughts. They drew upon ancient Japanese poetry to show the 'true emotion' of Japan. So 'national learning' originally referred to an intellectual trend which rejected the study of Chinese and Buddhist texts and favored philological research into the early Japanese classics.

The most important scholars included Keichū[28] (1640–1701), who performed philological study of Japanese classics and interpretative study of classical language and of the *Man'yōshū*. Kada no Azumamaro[29] (1669–1736) is famous for his theological studies of ancient teachings and faiths (*Shintō* studies), and also for his studies on ancient court and military practices, and an interpretative study of classics. Kamo no Mabuchi[30] (1697–1769) pursued the interpretative study of *waka* poetry and classical language, and of the *Man'yōshū*, and studied ancient morality as well. Motoori Norinaga[31] (1730–1801) conducted philological studies of ancient morality and literary criticism of *Genji monogatari;* also studied ancient morality centered on *Kojiki*, and carried out research on *Shintō* and the ancient Japanese language. Hirata Atsutane[32] (1776–1843) studied *Shintō* mainly for political purposes, dealt with the doctrine of 'national character', and studied ancient history and morality also.

Over the course of the Edo period, the aim of *Kokugaku* studies shifted from the scholarly and philological study of ancient texts to the quest for a unique native ethos and spiritual identity, free of Buddhist and other foreign traits, and identified more or less with *Shintō*. It displayed a discourse that aimed at restoring the classical world of ancient Japan. They

[27] Byron H. Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1982, pp. 137–143.

[28] Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation:* Kokugaku *and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 49–52.

[29] Wm. Theodore de Bary, Tsunoda Ryusaku, Donald Keene (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition II*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 1–9.

[30] *Sources of Japanese Tradition…*, pp. 9–15.

[31] Earhart, *Japanese Religion…*, pp. 144–147; *Sources of Japanese Tradition…*, pp. 15–35.

[32] Harootunian, *Things Seen…*, pp. 199–204.

tried to re-establish Japanese culture before the influx of foreign thought and behavior, so they turned primarily to *Shintō*, the earliest poets in Japan (the *Man'yōshū*: the earliest collection of Japanese poetry from the 8th century), and the inventors of Japanese culture in the Heian court.

From the start of the movement it had political and religious implications as well. The first scholars (like Keichū) raised society's interest in classical literature, but they did not found an organized school of thought. However, Kada no Azumamaro sought to establish such a school of thought and social recognition for *Wagaku*, and as early as 1828 he submitted a memorial (written in elegant Chinese) to the *Shōgun*, a 'Petition for the Establishment of a School of National Learning'.[33] Kamo no Mabuchi wrote his thesis 'A Study of the Idea of the Nation' in almost pure Japanese in 1765, and he first formulated the political implications.[34]

Motoori Norinaga, arguably the most influential of them[35], made linguistic claims about the 'difference' of ancient Japanese into the foundation of a theory of Japanese cultural uniqueness and superiority. His work, *Kojikiden* (Commentaries on the *Kojiki*) transformed Japanese conceptions of their own history and culture and made the *Kojiki* a central work in the Japanese cultural canon. The problem was that the *Kojiki* was written entirely in Chinese characters, but Norinaga insisted that it was possible to discover the ancient language within this complex system of inscription, and actually he rewrote the *Kojiki* in what he claimed was the ancient language using *kana* (the Japanese syllabary). The *Kojikiden* takes the form of an annotated version of the new text, with two or three lines of the *Kojiki* typically followed by ten or more pages of annotations. Norinaga's conceit was that he was only revealing the original meaning of the text, and not 'interpreting' it. In the *Kojikiden*, Norinaga defined the contours of a new theory of Japanese history, culture, and personal cosciousness that challenged the assumptions of Confucian doctrine. He used his concept of the ancient Japanese language to assert a theory of original cultural identity.

Norinaga made the 'ancient language' of Japan (*Yamato kotoba*) which he found in the *Kojiki* the basis for a new vision of Japanese community. He used *Yamato kotoba* to distinguish China and Japan, showing ancient Japan as a natural community distinct from the Chinese states, which were artificial and legitimized by power. He saw the emperor as occupying a special position in relation to the gods, the language and rites. He initiated new strategies that determined the new *Kokugaku* discourse which appeared in the 18th century, highlighted language as the primary "bearer of identity and difference", focused on the "origin and nature of cultural difference", and created new political vocabulary focused on the emperor. These strategies enabled a new vision of Japan.[36]

The main teachings of *Kokugaku*, as popularly understood, were that Japan and the Japanese people constitute a distinctive national entity (*kokutai*[37]) marked by spontaneity,

---

[33] *Sources of Japanese tradition…*, pp. 5–9.

[34] Ibid.*,* pp. 9–15.

[35] See several chapters in Burns, *Before the Nation…*, especially pp. 68–101.

[36] Burns, *Before the Nation…*, pp. 220–223.

[37] Marius B. Jansen, 'Meiji Ishin The Political Context', in *Meiji Ishin: Restoration and Revolution*, Nagai Michio – Miguel Urrutia (eds.), Tokyo: United Nations University, 1985, pp. 5–6;

natural goodness and innate divinity. These unique characteristics are revealed in early Japanese works such as the *Kojiki*, *Nihongi* and *Manyōshū*, which predate the foreign and polluting influences of Buddhism and Chinese thought. The Japanese national character is naturally pure, and this true Japanese spirit needs to be revealed by removing a thousand years of negative Chinese learning. This approach was popularized by Hirata Atsutane in the 19th century, who was important as a systematizer and propagandist; thanks to him and his disciples the ideas of *Kokugaku* became very widespread in the early 19th century. "After Hirata, *Kokugaku* ceased to be a type of scholarship, and instead acquired the rudiments of a nativist movement".[38]

The findings of *Kokugaku* scholars inspired a popular movement for the restoration of a Japanese 'golden age', paved the way for the return of imperial rule, and called politically for the overthrow of the shōgunate and the restoration of direct rule by the divinely-descended emperor – an objective achieved in the Meiji restoration. These ideas succeeded in gaining power and influence in Japanese society. These ideas were not restricted to any one intellectual movement, but were indeed widespread, especially near the end of the period. The effect of accepting the *Kokugaku* message would be to make men revere the emperor above all else and hope for or work for his restoration. In this way the thoughts of *Kokugaku* influenced the *Sonnōjōi*[39] philosophy and movement: the slogan *sonnō* (revere the emperor) typified the new emphasis on the emperor, and the term *kokutai* (national body) expressed the new concept of the state. So, the political implications of the *Kokugaku* doctrine were the establishment of a strong centralized monarchy, toward which every Japanese owed absolute allegiance, and the destruction of the shōgunate or any other power which stood between sovereign and people.[40] Among others, it led to the eventual collapse of the Tokugawa regime in 1868, the subsequent Meiji restoration, and the building of a strong nation state.

Kokugaku thinking influenced Meiji government policies in relation to *Shintō*, state *Shintō*[41] and the ideology of *kokutai* developed from this thought, and has effects even today, in 'Nihonjinron' debates, which remain at the center of Japanese self-definition in the 20th century.

The invention of the Meiji period based on *Kokugaku* ideas

When the Japanese began writing (6th century), they wrote in Chinese, as they had adopted Chinese culture and ways of thinking. It is thus almost impossible to determine

---

Marius B. Jansen, 'Japan in the Early Nineteenth Century', in *The Cambridge History of Japan, V. The Nineteenth Century*, Marius B. Jansen (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 111–115; Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early-Modern Japan: The New Theses of 1825*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 126, Harvard University Press, 1999; *Sources of Japanese Tradition…*, pp. 90–93.

[38]   Hardacre, *Shintō and the State…*, p. 17.

[39]   The term first appeared in Aizawa Seishisai's work, *Shinron*, in 1825. He was a Mitogaku scholar, close to the Tokugawa family and the official ideology of the Tokugawa order, which means that the tenets of *Kokugaku* were so influential that they not only reached the anti-Tokugawa groups but also the Tokugawa followers as well. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, pp. 50–53.

[40]   Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion…*, p. 102.

[41]   Hardacre, *Shintō and the State…*, pp. 42–58.

what Japanese culture was like before Chinese culture began to influence. It was *Shintō* which embodied the spirit and character of the ancient Japanese for *Kokugaku*. However, almost nothing was known about *Shintō* before the arrival of Chinese culture, and after the arrival, *Shintō* was integrated into Buddhism in practice and ideology. So the *Kokugakusha* (the *Kokugaku* scholars) set about recovering the original form of *Shintō* in order to purify Japanese culture. Most of what we know as *Shintō* and most of what we consider to be uniquely 'Japanese' was largely an invention of the *Kokugaku*.[42]

Talking about 'inventions' may not be the most expedient way of interpreting this process. These 'inventions' contained old cultural heritage, forgotten – but once existent – tales and literary forms and language parts. Thus, some kind of continuity can be found in all these changes, which according to many scholars of Japanese studies[43] can be taken as the key factor in understanding Japanese development – the high rate of continuity in the changes. Bellah also rightly focuses on the paradoxical ideas of tradition and modernity that coexist in Japan society even today.[44] Seemingly radical changes could occur quite easily and rapidly (and did so several times during the history of Japan), which can be explained with the assumption that there was much more continuity during the changes than was apparent. Accordingly, *Kokugaku* of the Edo period can be seen as a key factor of mediating continuity during the changes. What Meiji scholars 'invented' as traditions were revivals of the *Kokugaku* tenets, that is, they were not entirely inventions, as they contained elements of old cultural heritage. Meiji scholars used *Kokugaku* conceptions of Japan to construct a modern nationalism that was not simply derived from Western models, and was not purely instrumental.[45]

The new Meiji government attempted to put the teachings of *Kokugaku* at the center of its education policy, and to abolish the old institutions of the Tokugawa regime which emphasized Confucianism and Buddhism. This attempt ultimately failed due to various kinds of resistance and internal struggles between the *Kokugaku* schools, but it gave a stimulus to the movement of Westernization-modernization. The early years of Meiji saw the rapid and abundant importation of Western cultures into Japan, which in fact stimulated the people to reflect and reconsider their own national culture, as well as the revival of the *Kokugaku* movement.[46]

Among the several recent books dealing with *Kokugaku*[47], let us look at Susan L. Burns' brilliant and thorough analysis. She emphasizes the importance of this intellectual

---

[42] Ibid., pp. 42–58.

[43] See more: Tadashi Fukutake, *The Japanese Social Structure*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1989.

[44] See more: Robert N. Bellah, *Imagining Japan. The Japanese Tradition and its Modern Interpretation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.

[45] Burgess, 'The «Illusion»…'.

[46] Uchino Goro, 'Early Modern *Kokugaku* (National Learning) and the New *Kokugaku*: Their Growth and Significance', in *Cultural Identity and Modernization in Asian Countries: Proceedings of* Kokugakuin *University Centennial Symposium*, Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University, 1983, http://www2.Kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/cimac/uchino.html (accessed 12.06.2012).

[47] Recently published books on *Kokugaku* (interpreting it mainly as nativism): Burns, *Before the Nation…*; Harootunian, *Things Seen…*; Flueckiger, *Imagining Harmony…*; McNally, *Proving the Way…*; Breen, 'Nativism Restored', pp. 429–439; Teeuwen, 'Kokugaku…', pp. 227–242.

movement, stating that *Kokugaku* scholars made the early Japanese texts the means to articulate new forms of community that contested the social and political order of their time. Against divisions such as status, regional affinities, and existing collectivities such as domains, towns, and villages, they began to make 'Japan' "the source of individual and cultural identity".[48] Japan came to be constituted as the primary mode of community.[49]

Burns sticks to the modernist theory, that no nations existed before modernization, and emphasizes that *Kokugaku* is not the predecessor of Japanese nationalism. She states that modern Japanese nationalism is obviously a construction; however, the new *Kokugaku* discourse engendered new conceptions of Japan, and these visions of Japan predated the introduction in the 19th century of Western concepts of nations. What *Kokugaku* scholars collectively produced in the late Tokugawa period was "a complex and contentious discourse" on the nature of Japan, an attempt to make 'Japan', rather than class or domain or village, into "the source of individual and cultural identity".[50] Much of what concerned *Kokugaku* was directly related to language. As Burns notes, "the ideal of an original, authentic, and enduring 'Japanese' language was a powerful means to explain and thereby constitute cultural identity".[51]

Here a remarkable new idea appears in Burns' interpretation: the concept of 'cultural identity'. Actually, Burns starts her book by citing Miroslav Hroch (whose views on 'culturalism' will be dealt with later on), and builds on his theory interpreting the changes in communities of a society.[52] Burns cites Hroch's thesis on the effect and importance of social changes and crisis in changing the frames of communities. She interprets the *Kokugaku* movement this way: a new national consciousness of Japan emerged out of the dramatic changes that took place during the Tokugawa period, as these changes caused a crisis that challenged the social and political order authorized by means of the ideology of virtue, a Confucian ideology. The *Kokugaku* writers responded to this crisis with alternative concepts of community. Burns invokes Hroch's theory that national consciousness arises in the context of dramatic change[53] – not necessarily connected to Western modernization. Against the modernist theories, Burns also follows Prasenjit Duara's[54] thesis that modern Asian varieties of nationalism were not simply borrowed from the West but made good use of pre-modern and culturalist conceptions of community.[55] Meiji scholars used these *Kokugaku* conceptions of Japan to construct a modern nationalism that was not simply derived from Western models and was not purely instrumental. This way, Burns leaves behind the modernist (solely political) concept of nation and gets into culturalism as an explanation and interpretation of Edo-period

[48] Burns, *Before the Nation…*, p. 220.

[49] Ibid., p. 3.

[50] Ibid., p. 220.

[51] Ibid., p. 12.

[52] Ibid., p. 19.

[53] Samuel Yamashita, 'Before the Nation: *Kokugaku* and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan. By Susan L. Burns. Book Review', in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Winter 2006, p. 216.

[54] Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

[55] Yamashita, 'Before the Nation…', pp. 215–220.

nation building. The way that she concludes some culturalist explanation and turns to a theory basically made to explain *non*-Western national development shows the shortcomings and limited possibility for interpretation of the modernist theories concerning non-Western type of development. All the 'problematic' topics and concepts of the Edo-period nation building – the importance of language as the primary bearer of national identity, the notion of cultural identity, a sense of modern (!) national identity without modernization (that is, without capitalism), the formation of national identity and thus of the nation before formation of a modern nation state (which happened the other way round in Western development, and was thus regarded as '*the* way of development') – can be found in the debates and discourses about the national development of another region: Central Europe. This is how we arrive at the Central European comparison of Japanese nation building. Let us examine first whether the theories interpreting Central European national development or providing different development patterns can be applied to Japan, and may perhaps offer a more satisfying explanation for these issues.

Central Europe and the Central European concept of modernization and nationalism

There is certainly a third, central region in Europe besides the western and eastern zones.[56] According to Huntington[57], Europe is divided culturally, with a fault line between two great civilizations, Western and Orthodox Christianity (and Islam), which had been formed by the year 1500. The peoples on the 'border zone' or 'periphery' to the north and west of this line (today the territories of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia) are Protestant or Catholic; they shared the common experiences of European history – feudalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French revolution, the Industrial Revolution –, and can thus be regarded as an organic part of Western civilization.

Central Europe seems to be a historic region (*Geschichtregion*) as well.[58] Robin Okey wrote about Central Europe: "Given this background the history of the lands of central/eastern Europe (…) affords an understandable pattern. Crucial to it are the attempts of a clutch of small and medium-sized peoples to assert their identities against more powerful neighbours on their flanks. (…) In short the geographical region of Central Europe, (…) has created the possibility for a historical region, whose different sectors have moved towards disintegration or fusion according to the flux of events".[59] There is a long-standing association of Central Europe with a German sphere of influence.[60] Okey states that Central European development has common characteristics, e.g. the German element in east-central European urbanization, the military expansion of the Teutonic Knights, the colonization

---

[56] Jenő Szűcs, 'The Three Historical Regions of Europe: an Outline', in *Civil Society and the State*, John Keane (ed.), New European Paradigms, London: Verso, 1988, pp. 291–333.

[57] Huntington, *The Clash…*, pp. 29–30.

[58] See more: Zlatko Sabić, Petr Drulák (eds.), *Regional and International Relations of Central Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

[59] Robin Okey, 'Central Europe/Eastern Europe: Behind the Definitions', in *Past and Present*, No. 137, November 1992, p. 105.

[60] Ibid., p. 107.

and 'Germanization' east of the Elbe and then the Oder, the role of the Holy Roman Empire; that is, in short, the hegemony of German civilization in these lands.[61] By 1800, German had already become the chief language of polite society, the language of science and culture.[62] Okey acknowledges that the role of socio-economic change, of 'modernization', in the process is undeniable; yet, he thinks that the historic roots of these nationalisms may be underestimated[63], and that the national revivals, which changed the map of central Europe, are still an under-researched field.

Miroslav Hroch, a Czech historian and political scientist, now internationally renowned for his work on the formation and evolution of the national movements of Central European nations, has significantly contributed to the establishment of comparative history as a research field in East-Central Europe.[64] He defines the nation as a large social group integrated by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness. "Now the «nation' is not, of course, an eternal category, but was the product of a long and complicated process of historical development in Europe. For our purposes, let us define it at the outset as a large social group integrated not by one but by a combination of several kinds of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, historical), and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness (…) among them, three stand out as irreplaceable: (1) a 'memory' of some common past, treated as a 'destiny' of the group – or at least of its core constituents; (2) a density of linguistic or cultural ties enabling a higher degree of social communication within the group than beyond it; (3) a conception of the equality of all members of the group organized as a civil society".[65] Although the national unit is here characterized by social and political relationships, it is still a subject that exists *a priori*. Hroch emphasizes that there can be more interpretation of the concept of the nation, and the political concept of the nation may be just one of the possibilities. "We also need to bear in mind that the word 'nation' (…) has different connotations in different languages. In English, 'nationalism' is understood to imply a struggle for statehood, but this is not the case in German or Czech. In 18th-century definitions one can already see a difference between a 'political' concept of the nation in English and a 'cultural' one in German and Czech".[66] We can add to this statement that this cultural concept of nation is relevant to the whole of Central Europe. Hroch states

---

[61] Ibid., p. 108.

[62] Ibid., p. 112.

[63] Ibid., p. 117.

[64] See more: Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe, Die Vorkämpfer der nationalen Bewegungen bei den kleinen Völkern Europas*, Praha, 1968; Miroslav Hroch: *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

[65] Miroslav Hroch, 'From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe', in *Mapping the Nation*, Balakrishnan, Gopal (ed.), New York and London: Verso, 1996, p. 79.

[66] 'Learning from Small Nations. Interview with Miroslav Hroch', in *New Left Review*, 58, July–August 2009, pp. 49–50, http://newleftreview.org/II/58/miroslav-hroch-learning-from-small-nations (accessed 16.06.2013).

several times that modern nations came into being essentially by two roads.[67] One of them is the 'Western European way', when the state was, at the start of the national formation, an established continuity of political independence, and the internal transformation of the state or of its society from a corporate to a civil society led to the process by which this society began to define itself as a national society. This type of development was absent in Central Europe. A different type was typical here, which had a sub-variety in the form of a literary 'national culture', not connected to the state. "The development towards a modern nation in this area assumed the form of a national movement, that is to say, a struggle to achieve the attributes considered necessary for national existence".[68]

Many works have been written lately about the similarities of Central European development in the 19th century. Tomasz Kamusella documented and explained the rise of 'ethnolinguistic nationalism' as the dominant political force in Central Europe.[69] In his work, more specific attention is given to the similar nation-building role of languages (4 languages: Hungarian, Polish, Czech, Slovak – the nations of the 'core area' of Central Europe), as he states: "The history of politics of language in Central Europe is identical with the political and social history of this area between the mid-19th century and the turn of the 21st century".[70] These four languages were all subordinate languages over much or all of the period before 1918, and became state languages over much or all of the period thereafter. A Hungarian cultural and literary historian, Csaba Kiss Gy., has written a work comparing the similar motives and symbolism of Central European national anthems from the 19th century, thus giving a thorough comparative analysis of the parallel ideologies and cultural movements of the nations of this region.[71]

Catherine Horel also argued in her book on Central Europe[72] that in a region where political conditions did not favor the emergence of nations, culture became the primary core of political identity, reviving historical traditions and mythical figures. The specific geopolitical identity of the perceived 'bridge between West and East' placed the region in the imagined periphery of both 'Europes'. Her concept of Central Europe (today: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia) coincides with Huntington's theory of civilization referring to this region as the territory of the periphery and the border of Western civilization.

Modernists argue that nations are a by-product of industrialization, and see capitalism as a necessary condition for nationalism. However, as we have seen concerning the Central

---

[67] Miroslav Hroch, 'National Romanticism', in *Discourse of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770–1945), Texts and Commentaries, Vol. 2, National Romanticism – The Formation of National Movements*, Balázs Tencsényi and Michal Kopecek (eds.), Budapest-New York: CEU Press, 2007, p. 8.

[68] Ibid., p. 9.

[69] See more: Tomasz Kamusella, *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

[70] Kamusella, *The Politics…*, p. 7.

[71] See more: Kiss Gy. Csaba, *'Hol vagy, hazám?' Kelet-Közép-Európa himnuszai* ['Where are you, my homeland?' The anthems of East-Central Europe], Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2011.

[72] See more: Catherine Horel, *Cette Europe qu'on dit centrale: des Habsbourg à l'intégration européenne, 1815-2004*, Paris: Beauchesne, 2009.

European development, nationalist ideas and movements were (and are) far more complex phenomena, and their interpretation need more complex systems of thoughts. Let us now examine two important theories of these attempts at challenging the modernist view of linear development.

Ethnosymbolism

Anthony D. Smith proposed a synthesis of traditional and modernist views, referred to as ethno-symbolism, suggesting that nations reach back to the myths, structures and memories of a pre-modern era (ethnic nations) in order to (re)construct or transform this communities into the modern phenomenon of the nation. Smith acknowledges that we may not find 'nations' as such in pre-modern periods; however, he does identify a number of looser collective cultural units which he calls 'ethnies'[73], which are more than just race or ethnicity, but "named units of population with common ancestry myths and historical memories, elements of shared culture, some link with a historic territory and some measure of solidarity". Smith lays special emphasis on the 'vital' role of myths and symbols which, far from being 'false' or 'illusory', generate a real emotional attachment for members.[74] Smith argues that nationalism draws on the pre-existing history of the 'group' to form a sense of common identity and shared history. This way nationalism is not just an illusionary belief of an imagined community, but builds on the pre-existing kinship, religious and belief systems of a group. A nation is "a named population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for its members".[75] According to Smith, the preconditions for the formation of a nation are as follows: a fixed homeland (current or historical),high autonomy, hostile surroundings, memories of battles, sacred centers, languages and scripts, special customs, historical records and thinking. Those preconditions may create a powerful common mythology. All these preconditions were present (or were formed and expressed) during the nation-building process of Central Europe and Japan as well.

Smith sees Japan as a good example of an ethnie or ethnic nation.[76] 'Ethnies' are more than just race or ethnicity, they combine cultural and genetic aspects which emphasizes the organic unity of the Japanese people/nation as a community bound together by ties of language and tradition. The existence in pre-modern Japan of a sense of Japanese identity based on a perception of cultural distinctiveness[77] has been noted by other scholars also. The Meiji elites had a great deal of material to utilize in the process of reconstructing a fragmented ethnic community into a cohesive modern state.[78] Japan is a good example of a nation state being born from an ethnie with an organic pattern of development.

---

[73] Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, p. 57.

[74] Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, pp. 15–16.

[75] Smith, *Nations…*, p. 57.

[76] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991, pp. 26–27, 45–46.

[77] Burgess cites here: Yoshino Kosaku, 'From Ethnie to Nation: Theoretical Reflections on Nationalism', pp. 151–152, in *Japan in Comparative Perspective*, Hidehiro Sonoda and S.N. Eisenstadt (eds.), Kyoto: International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, 1998. pp. 147–155.

[78] Smith, *National Identity*, p. 105.

In this respect, the Japanese cultural movement for forming a nation shows astonishing similarities not with the nation states of Western Europe (where nationalism was strongly attached to modernity and the existence of a state) but rather with the 'national awakening' movements of the peoples of Central Europe, which have not yet been dealt with fully in the secondary literature. Anthony D. Smith presents his theory about the alternate, ethnic conception of the nation in Central Europe and in Asia, but makes no further distinction among different Asian developments compared to Central Europe. In the ethnic-genealogical concept of 'nation', lexicologists, ethnographers and philologists played a central role in the early nationalisms of Eastern Europe and Asia[79]; their linguistic, historic and ethnographic research provided the materials for the blueprint of the 'nation-to-be'. "By creating a widespread awareness of the myths, history and linguistic traditions of the community, they succeeded in substantiating and crystallizing the idea of an ethnic nation in the minds of most members…".[80]

In Central Europe and in Japan, in the shadow of a cultural and/or political 'monolith' (China for Japan, and the great empires in Central Europe), before modernity, ethnic groups or communities started to evolve their own identities with cultural movements focusing on exploring or even inventing their 'ancient' culture, thus creating a new sense of community, the nation. 'Japan' as a social and cultural identity began to be imagined before modernity, and so did the nations of Central Europe.

Miroslav Hroch's ABC pattern of national development

Another pattern of comparative approach is linked to Miroslav Hroch, who intended to describe Central European national awakening by an abstract schematization of national development through different phases. Hroch emphasizes that the national movements did not remain the same from their beginning; on the contrary, they went through different phases. "The earliest phase was the period when (…) the ethnic group, its culture, past, state in nature, customs and so forth, became a subject of academic interest. In this phase, basic linguistic norms were sought and formulated and historical contexts were traced; in short, the potential nation was defined in a scholarly fashion according to the individual features that distinguished it from other groups".[81]

Hroch defined three chronological stages in the creation of a nation. At first, the nation exists at a cultural level; second, the nation is politically implemented; thereafter, the people internalizes the nation. That is, Phase A is the "period of scholarly interest", Phase B is the "period of patriotic agitation", and finally Phase C is the "rise of a mass national movement". Both Hroch and Smith locate the materials for the building of a nation in its mythic past and, while not denying the *createdness* of the nation, they affirm the nation's continuity and its material existence. For Smith and Hroch, then, the nation seems to represent a continuity with the past rather than a rupture with it.

Hroch's work has influenced scholars of nationalism mostly through its phase theory of how individual national movements develop over time. Hroch's work provides scholars with a solution to the problem of inter-disciplinary communication: it offers a useful terminology for classifying and describing various sorts of nationalism.

---

[79] Ibid., pp. 12–13.
[80] Ibid., p. 12.
[81] Hroch, 'National Romanticism…', p. 9.

In my opinion, considering the Japanese *Kokugaku* activity, this ABC theory can be applied to the case of Japan as well:

A. In the phase of the scholarly or academic interest, the *Kokugaku* scholars started to study ancient Japanese texts and wrote scholarly essays on ancient Japanese poetry, literature and language (Keichū on the *Man'yōshū,* 17th c., Kada no Azumamaro on *Shintō,* 18th c., Kamo no Mabuchi on *waka*, 18th c.) and founded schools for 'national learning'.

B. At the beginning of the 19th century, in the cultural movement phase (*Kokugaku*), views about ancient Japan and ancient Japanese ethos, tradition and language (including Motoori Norinaga's views on *Kojiki* and ancient Japan) spread all around the country thanks to the publications and especially the schools for 'national learning' in Edo, in other cities and in the countryside also, among samurai, city dwellers and wealthy land proprietors as well.

C. In the national movement phase, the political implications of the *Kokugaku* ideas popularized by Hirata Atsutane (in the 1820–30s) became known throughout the country, and political aims connected to it were expressed, such as the *sonnōjōi* movement lying behind the political struggles of the *Bakumatsu* (1853–1868) period.

Hroch's work has informed scholars with a wide variety of geographical specializations, and the ABC theory has inspired various theoretical discussions. Roman Szporluk reformulated Hroch's phases into 'academic, cultural, and political' stages. Tomasz Kamusella has added a Phase D to refer the moment "when the nation establishes its own nation-state in fulfillment of the equation of ethnic nationalism: language = nation = state." Kamusella documented and explained the rise of "ethnolinguistic nationalism" as the dominant political force in central Europe.[82] More specific attention is given to the nation-building role of languages, which were all subordinate languages over much or all of the period before 1918, and became state languages over much or all of the period thereafter. The role of print and this way the spread of vernacular literature in the formation of these nations and societies is unquestionably of key importance.

Here we can re-emphasize that *Kokugaku* also placed special importance on the language. Motoori Norinaga made the 'ancient language' of Japan (*Yamato kotoba*), which he stated he had found in the *Kojiki,* the basis for a new vision of Japanese community. The idea of an original and authentic 'Japanese' language was a powerful means to constitute cultural identity, and the same process was a characteristic feature of the national awakening movements of Central European nations.

Japan and Central Europe

If we look at Okey's analysis again about the determining location of Central Europe and its effects on its development, and change the names of 'Central Europe' to 'Japan' and 'German' to 'Chinese', we can see a description of the relation between the Japanese and Chinese cultures: "Given this background the history of the lands of central/eastern Europe (Japan) (…) affords an understandable pattern. Crucial to it are the attempts of a clutch of small and medium-sized peoples to assert their identities against more powerful neighbours on their flanks. (…) In short the geographical region of Central Europe (Japan), ... has

---

[82] Kamusella, *The Politics of Language…*

created the possibility for a historical region, whose different sectors have moved towards disintegration or fusion according to the flux of events (…)".[83]

In this respect, I think that the Japanese cultural movement of forming a nation shows similarities not with the formation of nation states of Western Europe (where nationalism was strongly attached to modernity) but rather with the 'national awakening' movements of the peoples of Central Europe. The end of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century was a period of national awakening in Central Europe[84], and also in Japan. The concept of the 'nation', defined as a people united by linguistic and cultural affinities, produced an intellectual revival that laid the foundation for subsequent national movements. The earliest phase was philological, when scholars attempted to record and codify native languages, explored folk legends (and wrote romantic epics) of the ethnic origins, and compiled national histories, sometimes based on legends. The Czech, Slovak, Polish and Hungarian languages were developed just as the Japanese language was studied. In Central Europe, university departments, national academies and museums were founded, associations for cultivating national cultures were organized in the region, first by the elite (nobility) then followed by the middle or lower social layers as well. Vernacular literature was published and spread throughout. The Japanese *Kokugaku* movement shows astonishing similarities with this, founding schools to study and research 'National Studies', that is, the ancient Japanese language, literature, history, customs and traditions; educating people of all classes and spreading all these ideas and knowledge about Japanese culture in Japanese language; creating the sense of national identity. Further research and more detailed study will be needed to prove the similarity of this process with a comparative study of events, the activities of the most important scholars and leaders, and the texts and discourses of the period.

Hroch's ABC scheme was originally created to provide an interpretation of Central European national concepts and nation building movements. However, Hroch's theory includes a broader concept of nation (than the Western model) with cultural and historical implications besides the political, and thus provides a wider, interdisciplinary approach to developmental patterns. For this reason there have been attempts to apply this scheme to non-Western nations as well (studies on Mexico, Pakistan and others have tried to analyze nation building movements on the basis of the ABC pattern[85]). It could be supposed that in this way all non-Western nations share some common traits in their nation-building processes. However, several important differences can be seen between Japan and other Asian countries. In Asia it was European colonial rule that unified territories or countries, and Western education produced educated natives who were familiar with Western ideas (such as the Enlightenment). The great difference between Japan and other non-Western

---

[83] Okey, 'Central Europe…', p. 105.

[84] There are several works on the histories of the different national awakening movements, but few with a comparative synthesis of the Central European movements. See Emil Niederhauser, *Kelet-Európa története* [The History of East Europe], Budapest: MTA TTI, 2001, pp. 112–136; Horel, *Cette Europe…*; Kamusella: *The Politics of Language…*; Kiss Gy., *'Hol vagy, hazám?'…*

[85] See more: Alexander Maxwell (ed.), *The Comparative Approach to National Movements: Miroslav Hroch and Nationalism Studies*, Association for the Study of Nationalities, London: Routledge, 2011.

nations is the *Kokugaku* movement, by which early modern Japanese scholars began to define Japan as a unique social and cultural identity before the Western impact, which meant the "prehistory of Japanese nationness".[86] Cultural movements of nation-building, formation of national identities, ideologies and movements arose in Asia only after the arrival of the Western powers, under the influence of Western ideas, and so Eastern (Asian) nationalism is partly the product of Western conquest and influence. Japan was closed until the 1850s, and after opening up, Japan did not become a colony; but under the influence of the Western world, it started a modernization policy during which the achievements of the *Kokugaku* were utilized. In my opinion it is no exaggeration to say that the *Kokugaku* movement, which defined the national identity and started the building of the nation, was a crucial factor contributing to the success of modernization, to the transformation of Japanese society, and to the building of a political nation state – a similar role to that played by the national movements in Central Europe.

Other similarities between Japan and Central Europe can be seen in another aspect, that of the geo-political location: Japan and Central Europe lay at the peripheries of centers of civilization. They could have become integrated into those civilizations or, at times, been separated from them. In the Middle Ages, Central Europe was a basic region of European civilization based on Christian feudal kingdoms. Japan also belonged to Chinese civilization in the Nara and Heian periods. However, in other periods, and for different reasons (invaders attacked Central Europe from the East, or seclusion in Japan), the development of these regions turned in different ways from the centers. Japan and Central Europe, too, lived in the shadow of cultural 'monoliths', that is, Chinese culture for Japan, and German influence for Central Europe. The consequence of this was that the 'high culture' originated from outside, the language of the officials, the educated (and the science) was 'foreign' (Chinese/German), and their own territory seemed peripheries of the cultural center, and even seemed 'inferior' to it. Against these 'foreign cultural centres', even before modernity, ethnic groups or communities (ethnies) started to evolve their own national identities with cultural movements focusing on their own language, on exploring or even inventing their own 'ancient' cultures, thus creating a new sense of community, the nation. "A self-consciously modern nationalism was constructed by deploying existing culturalist notions of community"[87] before the Western type of modernization. This modernization was achieved and realized mainly 'from above' in Japan and in Central Europe as well, with the political and social (reform!) program of "catching up with the modern West" led partly by the intellectuals and partly by the traditional elite of the nations[88] (and not by the bourgeoisie, as happened in Western Europe).

Finally let me cite a Japanese scholar whose book was published in English last year about the history of Japanese political thought. Watanabe Hiroshi wrote about the national identity that the Japanese had even before modernization, in the Edo period.[89] "It is believed

---

[86] Burns, *Before the Nation…*, p. 9.

[87] Ibid., p. 225.

[88] In the case of Japan, for the role of the samurai in the transition of the country see Bitō Masahide, '*Bushi* and the Meiji Restoration', *The Samurai*, Bitō Masahide (ed.), *Acta Asiatica,* No. 49. 1985, pp. 78–96.

[89] Watanabe Hiroshi, *A History of Japanese Political Thought*, Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2012, pp. 275–278.

today that people in the Edo period only thought of themselves as residents of their domain (*kuni/koku*), and had almost no conscience of being Japanese, but it is a complete misconception. Japan as a whole was also clearly perceived to be a *kuni*, a country." (They used the phrase *Sankoku*, referring to the three countries known to them before the early modern period: India, China, Japan.) By the 18th century, several major conditions for self-perception of Japan as a nation had already been fulfilled. 1. Political unification, institutions of political control unifying the realm; 2. economic integration, a common currency, nationwide market; 3. networks for the circulation of people and information; 4. cultural integration – there was no regional difference in the style of the written language; 5. *sakoku*, or a rigorous distinction between nationals and foreigners – so "even without the experience of personal contact with people from other countries, most Japanese were conscious of being members of a distinct national or ethnic group. There was a lively contemporary debate on the characteristics that made Japan unique."

Of course the circumstances were different, but the result of the national movements of Central Europe was the same as *Kokugaku* had had in Japan. 'Japan' as a social and cultural identity (and also: a nation) began to be imagined before modernity, and so did the nations of Central Europe.