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Body – Tradition – Expression. Remarks on Japanese Culture

Abstract

The way the Japanese attribute the meaning to their world and how it becomes understandable to them seems particularly attractive. This attitude underlies the fundamental difference between the European and Japanese culture. A Westerner seeks to fully disclose the world, unveiling all its secrets. Accordingly, various strategies to achieve this goal have been developed in the Western culture, leading to different results. All scientific (philosophical) and non-scientific (commonsense) stands share a common conviction that truth is a Holy Grail of cognition, and that it is equally unattainable. The Japanese have been shaped by three religions: Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism, and these regulate every aspect of their private as well as social functioning. An internal participant has no difficulties to adjust to the requirements of a particular religion. Likewise, the truth also acquires different meanings depending on the context. For an external observer, however, the overlapping of these diverse domains of life creates a problem, as it results in an original but complicated culture.

Key words

Europe, Japan, culture, body, expression

In his book on Japan, Louis Frédéric wrote that

the accumulation of various factors, so characteristic of the entire Japanese civilisation since its dawn and which, until now, has made this civilisation profoundly original, gave rise to the most sophisticated culture one could imagine. (1988: 109)

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At the very beginning it was the Chinese influence which was half-consciously absorbed for many ages, and only later on fully and deeply integrated with the content of Japan's own culture. The adoption of patterns of the western culture in the Meiji period happened much more quickly, but thanks to deliberate involvement of Japanese people became equally effective. However, once Japan joined the international community, its culture proved extremely attractive to the European audience.

Researchers point to several cultural concepts of the body within the Japanese culture. Dominique Buisson described eight types of body, being distinguished according to the function performed, namely: sacred, social, festive, active, embellished, sensual, depicted and, finally, a mortal body. (2003) Certainly, this is not the only possible way of understanding the concept of the body in the Japanese culture, but the aim of this article is not to account for other classifications. For the sake of these remarks I adopt a general, commonsense division of the concept of the body into the individual (private) and social (public) body, while either is subjected to the rigour of traditional Japanese principles. It is the relation between the individual and collective body and these very principles that seems particularly interesting.

The Traditional Body

In the Japanese history of art there are no realistic images of male or female bodies. The *emaki-mono* scrolls of the Kamakura period do not provide much information on the qualities of body and mind of the people of those times. The painterly orthodoxy does not allow any individualisation of the image. Faces of the ladies-in-waiting resemble one another in every detail and are deprived of any personal character, while their figures, hidden under loose robes, do not offer any idea on what the female ideal of beauty of that time could possibly be. A fairly similar vision can be found in the medieval journal of Murasaki Shikibu, whose description of the ladies-in-waiting does not go beyond the stereotype, where to a very detailed account of the clothing the author adds a description of a whitened skin, blackened teeth and contrasting red lips. There is also an interesting passage concerning an unusual situation which is emotionally shaking the audience, but even then the shock has merely an aesthetic character.

As Ivan Morris mentioned in *The World of the Shining Prince*, the body itself was not an object of aesthetic experience. Neither was the female

body perceived within the categories of beauty. A very meaningful passage can be found in Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari*. In a description of two women whose robes had been stolen, the authoress' attitude to nudity can be seen. It can be then assumed that this attitude reflects the general attitude towards a nude body, prevalent in that, and in the following centuries. Murasaki Shikibu relates that upon seeing two naked women, the ladies in her retinue started to panic and – as she compared it in her poetical manner – dispersed helplessly in all directions like frightened domestic fowl. Once the order had been restored, Murasaki contemplatively concludes that 'a naked human body is unspeakably disgusting. Indeed, it is deprived of the slightest charm.' (Morris 1973: 198) Women's reaction to nudity, which surprises us today, or even more astonishing comments made by the authoress reveal an important truth regarding how human body was perceived at that time. Was that an unusual reaction? How did the attitudes towards the body develop in the following ages? These are questions concerning ethics regulating attitudes towards the body in a broader aspect of its social function.

Japanese culture has been shaped by three main religious and ethical systems: Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism, which contributed to the frequently contradictory concepts of the private and public body. Shinto traces the origins of the body back to the Shinto divinities, thus objecting the opinion of its vanity. A body as a gift of gods ought to be respected and protected from profanation. In Shinto, a nude body constitutes a symbol of purity and divinity, and as a consequence human physicality and sexuality is never sinful. Some researchers even joke that the first striptease on the Japanese islands took place already in the mythological times, when goddess Uzume, dancing and taking off her clothes, provoked the sun goddess Amaterasu to emerge from a cave, intrigued. Gods' curiosity is a sign of their human nature. They rule over the Earth and all aspects of its cyclic change, which justifies the number of festivals related to rebirth, harvest and fertility-worship. There is a wide range of celebrations, from the secularised *Hanami* festival, through the trashy and 'muddy' *Hadaka*, to the 'phallic cortege' of the popular festivals related to the abundant harvest, like *Onda Matsuri* (Nara), *Hōnen Matsuri* (Tagata Jinja) or *Tsuburusashi* (Niigata).

Zen Buddhism introduced a different approach to corporality. Its ethics advocates the predominance of the society's interest over the interest of the family. (Szymańska 2005: 135) It was adopted by ordinary people and warriors, to whom it became an active way of life. The latter, having a particular

attitude towards death and therefore also towards life, established some very interesting ceremonials which were further ritualised in the Edo period, subsequently developing into a complex symbolism of interpersonal behaviours. Particularly interesting, mainly because of its consequences to life, is the symbolism related to death. The prospect of dying altered the perception of the world's phenomena and lead to their aesthetisation through the prism of beauty and loftiness. 'A sense of the world's impermanence did not evolve into grief and suffering, but into an aesthetic experience instead.' (Szymańska 2005: 139) The threat of death did not violate the rules of warriors' honorary code, either. For the warriors, death constituted an event which could become 'an object of aesthetic experience.' (Szymańska 2005: 138) This kind of attitude is described by the Japanese term *ukiyo*, which

defines the impermanence and fleetingness in the Buddhist sense. At the same time it contrasted the impermanence of the mundane world with the permanence of spiritual values. In the 17th century, the term came to mean rather the praise of enjoying the ephemeral moments while fully accepting their fleetingness. (Sosnowski 2002: 168)

This perspective marked off the space for pleasures originating mostly in sensuality. The isolation of the 17th century Japan resulted in significant changes including moral liberty. Geishas and courtesans embodied the ideal of beauty and romantic love. Prostitution had reached the peaks of perfection and sophistication becoming a form of art. A famous place of exhibiting those 'works' of art was the Yoshiwara district founded in 1617. Another popular professional group were the *kabuki* actors, who not only performed in the theatre, (Alberowa 1983: 129) but also attracted the warriors who, according to the common view in those times, saw love towards a man as being of a more noble nature and a more spiritual passion than love towards a woman. Beginning from middle ages, Japanese literature had confirmed this image. Over time the long, highly ritualised tradition of expressing and accepting extramarital love became a moral standard. An interesting perspective on how the body was perceived can be found in 'the impressions of ephemeral and fugitive moments' – *ukiyo-e*. (Sosnowski 2002: 169) Its erotic subject matter was well suited for the Japanese morals which then evolved, and according to which the interest in the body resulted from its social role rather than the artistic reasons. The individual character of this role was usually connected with the sphere of love and eroticism and did not go beyond the Buddhist rules.

The third system, Confucianism, propagated the principle of dependency of the hierarchised parts, (Wójcik 2001) modeling crucial social functions like morals, group patterns and individual experience. Highly conventionalised social behaviour, ceremonies and rituals, formally expressed in the etiquette and common law codes, became the essence of Japanese society. Confucianism regulated harmonious interpersonal relations, marking out everybody's rights and obligations, as well as formulating an etiquette of everyday and festive behaviour. Confucian etiquette needs to be understood in a broad sense; it consists of practical ethic regulations which introduce the cult of ancestors, organise the society along the social stratification lines and rule over both private and public life of each of its members. The latter function is of a particular importance since it obliges one to be obedient towards any higher authority or power. In this way proper relationships between a parent and a child, a teacher and a student, a husband and a wife, the older and the younger, a sovereign and a vassal in the old days, and an employer and an employee today are being established. These relationships give rise to particular duties which must be performed from birth to death, and which nobody can neglect.¹ One of the few places where a Japanese can be free from this tight corset of obligations is a bathhouse, where nudity abolishes duties while pleasure directs an individual towards oneself and one's own sensations.² Here, however, Buddhism gets the upper hand, allowing a person to change their attitude towards themselves, their body and another person.

To summarise, it could be suggested that Shinto seems to regulate the human attitude towards nature, Zen Buddhism is concerned with bodily pleasures, while Confucianism defines the social context of human activity. As much as physicality in its nudity gets individualised within the community, the denial of physicality leads to collectivisation of individuality. All the duties, norms and social rules of a Japanese result from his externality, while his appearance becomes property of the group. The appearance belongs to Others, to all, and is a result of their pressure. And it is not only dress but also the behaviour in ordinary as well as extraordinary circumstances. The body is restricted by the conventions of the social behaviour: collectivism in the way of dressing, behaving or reacting. The lack of individuality in clothing results in the lack of physical individuality. Everyone is

¹ Here occurs the interesting and complex issue of *gimu* and *giri* obligations.

² A contemporary pub where people spend free time is another such place, however it generates different reactions and behaviour.

equaled to the symbolic, ritualised group identity. This process of unification in appearance and behaviour begins at the very early age and continues through the entire life soon followed by the unification of personality; the social body becomes an individual body and *vice versa*: an individual body acquires traits of the cultural body.

In Shinto and Buddhism, corporality and sexuality are perceived as an integral part of human nature, hence they are present in many celebrations. However, it is the Confucian ethics that ultimately dominates the social forms of behaviour, establishing clear boundaries of expressing sexuality. Confucian morality does not include the idea of personal guilt, but refers to the sense of social shame related to the sexual abuse of an individual which harms his or her reputation. Therefore the only condition to pleasure that Confucian morality imposes is that it does not violate the law and order or someone's good name. As a result, sexuality became expressed in a more discreet and sophisticated manner.

The Contemporary Body

Attentive observers will surely encounter many unexpected experiences in Japan. Difficulties or even cognitive contradictions arise as one attempts to understand the mutual relations between an individual and a society. Individuality is an expression of community; at the same time community affirms individuality and facilitates its coming into existence. There is a relation of acceptance and complement, which is the opposite to what we face in Europe, where the community negates and transgresses individuality according to its potential energy of destruction. Individuality – which surprises a European – is being referred to community for affirmation, not rejection. But in this sense individuality is not about individualism, but collectivism instead, or diverse collectivism at best. But does that not mean that what we are dealing with is an unindividualised – however diverse – general body? Barthes confirms the thesis, noting that

a Japanese body is headed towards the end of individualism, [...] but this individualism cannot be understood in its western sense: it is cleared from any signs of hysteria, it does not aim at making the individual an original body distinguished from all the other bodies and consumed by the fever of success from which the entire West suffers. Here, individuality is not about restriction, theatre, domination or victory; it is simply a broken, unprivileged diversity of bodies. (Barthes 1999: 163–164)

In Japan, the public body is asexual although at the same time it strongly underlines its sex, which is related to the social status. In Japan nudity has never been exhibited for its own sake; nakedness was exposed for religious reasons, for recreation or education. Japanese sexuality has more to do with immediate gratification than with the western concept of love as a postponed desire and satisfaction. A Japanese does not condemn pleasure itself, since it does not cause any sense of personal guilt, while the Judeo-Christian West perceives sex as permanently related to evil, however different names this evil may be given.

The body of a Japanese shrinks for fear of exposing its nudity, as what is sparingly covered matters far more because of what it suggests. Nudity is accepted predominantly within a family, but also in some public situations, e. g. during common baths.³ In those cases the binding rule says that nudity is seen but not watched. The bath itself does not serve the hygiene of the body, which is performed beforehand, but allows the psychosomatic renewal and the sense of harmony and unification with the rhythms of nature. Still, these are rare occurrences; normally 'a cover' is required, be it clothes or a 'mask' of a fan or make-up.

Japanese images are deep-rooted in the world. Here, the individual body is transformed into the social one. The Japanese attitude towards one's own body is a result of a double relation: to the individual nature and to the general nature of which the body is a part. However, it is hard to reconcile that view with the images in which Japan, seen through the 'cultural' bodies of its inhabitants, becomes a combination of stereotypes. Samurais and geishas may serve here as an example: in both cases a human being is an element of a social body because a man being an individual body, is hiding behind an indifferent mask or make-up, but yet identified and judged by his or her affiliation to the group. (Buisson 2003: 10)

Contemporary Japan has strengthened these perceptions even further, adjusting them to the ongoing social changes taking place internally. Former class structures have been replaced by professional groups, which resulted in the mostly one-class society performing similar jobs or professions and spending their free time and leisure in a similar way. This membership – based on the likeness of thinking patterns, behaviour and

³ Since the end of 19th century as a result of western cultural influences Japanese morality has changed significantly. Public bathhouses (*sentō*) meant for both sexes became rarer and by the 1945 they disappeared completely.

collective judgements – forms a certain organism, a social body additionally reinforced by the aversion to tradition.

Despite becoming commonplace, these images still remain attractive and the Japanese continue to cherish them. They were formed at the time of the country's total isolation during which elimination-based transformations were replaced by evolution aiming towards perfection. It is this unique situation that continues to fascinate strangers and provokes many questions. Was the attitude towards a body a sign of cultural narcissism, which contributed to the development of a highly ritualised and codified form of professional perfection, dressed up in proper clothes, gestures and facial expressions? Could such 'body' express individual desires and fears? Did not the transition between natural and stilted behaviour cause a tension characteristic of art, until the body became an abstract work of art itself? Could it still be beautiful in that case?

The form understood as symbolism and ceremoniousness continues to be present in today's Japan. One reads about it in foreigner's guides to Japan and its particularity still surprises in many places and situations. Despite many changes in social norms which took place in Japan in the 20th century, it can be still felt today that they have not gone very deep. It will suffice to read simplified Japanese *savoir-vivre* advice in social guides for foreigners. How is the *gaijin* supposed to behave being introduced to a Japanese?

It is a very complicated matter. As a rule, it is preferred that the introduction be accompanied with bows. [...] But is the guest also obliged to bow? This we cannot say for sure, since our own opinion in the matter is not exactly clear yet. [...] In any way, we think that a bow will always be appropriate. (Rubach-Kuczevska 1985: 44–45)

But what remains not quite clear regarding foreigners is, to the smallest detail, governed by the social etiquette applicable to the Japanese.

Similar rules apply to nearly all aspects of life in Japan. They regulate private life (bathing, eating, sleeping) and public life, both professional and social (giving and receiving presents, visiting temples, attending funerals or festivals, getting married). Male and female public behaviour as well as interactions between sexes are also governed by social norms and customs.

The only moral sphere of an individual is society so it is the society's duty to maintain harmony and avoid direct confrontation or risk of committing an unforgivable offence, which would force others to express their judgement. Often this principle of shame is taken to extremes: it is not allowed to help a person who stumbled and fell in the street, because it would oblige them to repay the debt which could be too heavy a burden.

In such situations a smile becomes a disciplining element of behaviour, showing what cannot be said. A smile can be a spontaneous reaction, modestly covered by the hand or with a fan, which is a sign of elegance. In Japan good manners require that both, laughter and smile, be covered. From the very early age children are taught to hide embarrassment expressed with a smile caused by a sudden expression of someone's conduct. Usually they do so by covering their mouth with their hand. Frequently though, their lips stretch in an expressive grimace of sternness rather than a smile with all its positive connotations.

It is the first trait of dualism in the attitude towards private and public life, namely the inner and the external, feeling and expressing, thinking and representing. The difference is well expressed by the pair of concepts: *honne* and *tatemae*. The first relates to this which is inner, or private, in the sphere of feelings and thoughts, remaining, however, hidden not out of choice, but because of the social norm prohibiting to express personal feelings or thoughts. This is why the face of a Japanese would hardly ever change under emotion and remain mask-like. The other trait relates to what is external and thus social in the forms of individual behaviour. This is not a matter of choice either, but a social norm. Which form of behaviour is authentic? And is authenticity equivalent to truthfulness?

The Expressive Body

Japanese culture does not attempt to unveil or disclose everything, and it does not apply to the body alone. This attitude has been for ages sanctioned by the three religions present in Japan. The transition from uncovering and covering marks the distinction between the moral norms arising from Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism. While in Shinto uncovering is justified by the sacredness of nudity and the functional sexuality, in Buddhism it denotes a self-justified, artistically sublime eroticism. Hence in Japan, the body in its nudity recalls the source purity, becoming only an appearance rooted in an illusion when covered with clothing. What kind of illusion? The illusion of personality based on difference and distinctness on which the value of an individual is founded in the western society. The appearance refers a researcher to the cultural mask, while illusion points to playing with the mask (uncovering-covering), which is the source of expression. In this way, it is the 'mask' in a broad sense which is related to the important question of expression in Japanese culture.

The most subtle 'mask' is the traditional Japanese clothing, a kimono. Used since ages, it has acquired a new meaning in a sensual game of covering and uncovering. The kimono played an important role creating the atmosphere of charm and temptation. It revealed a few parts of a female body which, since not covered with make-up, were considered particularly sensuous: a peeping ankle, an erotic foot, wrist, hidden smile and finally the most important: the unpainted back of the neck, according to the pattern called 'three feet' (*sambon-ashi*), giving the impression of being wrapped in a thin white net. (Golden 1999: 72–73) The sleeves constituted a vital element of the kimono's eroticism, continuing the subtle game of covering-uncovering with the wrists, influencing the shape, speed and softness of movement, making it more meaningful or spare.

A kimono made a female body an object of temptation and seduction, a fetish through the dialectics of getting closer and turning away. An object not talked about but only approached by the playful imagination becomes an object of desire. Out of the absence-concealment – although not the lack of – the erotic and aesthetic tension arises. The access to the body wrapped in a kimono is protected only by the belt (*obi*), tied in the front or at the back in a knot shaped after a bird or a butterfly. The fetish of the body – so obvious in the western culture – in Japan depended mostly on the relation between openness and secretiveness, between what is revealed and what remains hidden. A kimono and its sensuous symbolism are part of the great traditional Japanese art. The female body 'given' through only a few fragments triggered the desire of unveiling the secret. It was further stimulated by the hair – the seat of soul according to the folk tales and the eternal sign of female beauty. A man instead, was thought attractive not for its sensual beauty but for his social meaning, namely his status and power.

Another equally interesting 'mask' can be observed in the Japanese form of behaviour, to mention only the bow and the smile. A child is taught to bow since birth; at first it 'bows' with its mother, when she carries it on her back and later it bows both in family and public life. Bowing is part of being Japanese; it is visible in the streets, at home, at work and in the shops. Obviously it is very different from a European bow, but the actual difference is hard to tell. The bow *maitre de place*, a bow of any public place (restaurant, shop, hotel, office) is so ritualised that it carries no external meaning. As Barthes very accurately noted: 'a girl in a deep bow, so ritual that it is void of any servility towards the customers rushing to the escalator of a huge store,' (Barthes 1999: 142) cannot be in any way re-

lated to European bowing. What is a bow then? Each of them – performed seating or standing – is a three stage bending of the body, a complex act, happening in time, and differentiated depending on the person to which it is addressed, their sex and social status.

In Japan smile is the first sign of politeness and kindness. It seems understandable and acceptable. Still, such an idea contradicts the facts, because we are talking about a very different kind of smile. Not a sign of satisfaction and joy, but a mysterious and inscrutable expression. If it does not communicate anything, it is just an empty smile, part of convention, it does not carry any meaning. Still, it does play an important role. In Japan a smile works as a double screen: an inner one – controlling the person's emotions and separating them from other people, and an outer one – protecting the individual from the emotions of others, not allowing any close relationship with them. Upon being criticised the Japanese smiles politely as this is the appropriate reaction to blame or reproof, and when the criticism is being repeated, the smile becomes even wider. This reaction seems irrational to a European, but it means only that the person understands the situation and accepts the criticism as valid. In that case, smiling is a way of avoiding shame, since Japan is first of all a country of shame, not guilt.

For a foreigner the expression itself is problematic. A facial expression, or its sudden change showing an emotion does not contain any sense; on the contrary, it frees that expression from any sense, since it is nothing more than an impression. A very apt remark comes from Roland Barthes in his famous description of haiku. (Barthes 1999: 60–61) An expression is a suspension of a meaning, and it makes the observer feel at a loss, which in turn inclines him to raise objections because of being kept away of the energy of that expression. The observer does not 'enter' the expression, does not experience it himself, does not understand it, even though he tries to. A typical reaction of the Westerner is to make a verbal comment which not only brings him no closer to the phenomenon, but destroys it as well, blurring the impression itself. Out of a brief sensation, a flash of experience and an understanding at the same time which exhausts itself, there is a completely strange to it description produced, through which an effort is made to catch and hold to the elusiveness, make it permanent and in this way attribute to it a meaning.

An expression as a phenomenon is allowed in the case of an individual body, but is not accepted in the sphere of a social body. The reasons seem obvious: such body is subjected to the canon of ritualised and formalised

regulations, ruling over every aspect of its collective functioning. Such cultural body does not suffer from any shortage understood as an individual's impossibility to adapt, or a breach of the rules by such individual. And when a shortage does occur, it is removed beyond the established relations. In an extreme situation the shortage can be expelled beyond the frames of social functioning of the individual or group (e.g. subcultures). For a social body the most important category is perfection as a never ending process of self-improvement. It could (and should) be understood as satisfying social expectations. In this case the ritualisation of the body becomes its institutionalisation.

Translated by Marta Bręgiel-Benedyk

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