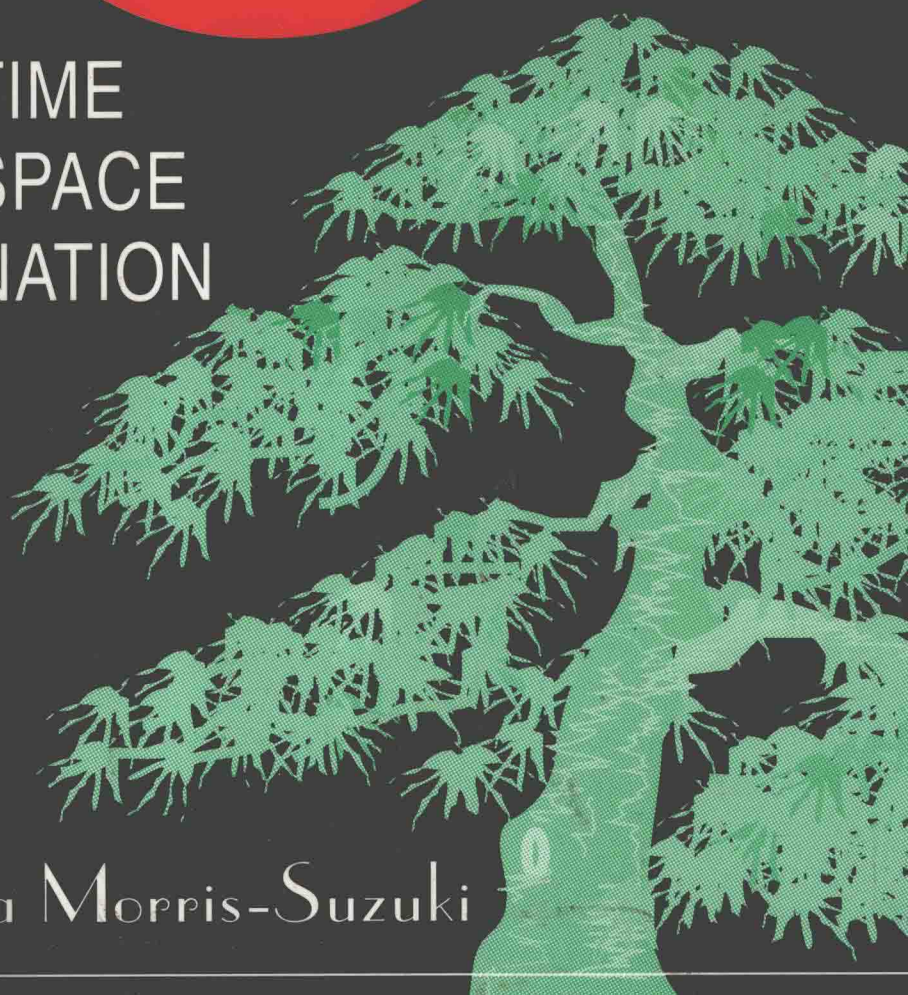




RE-INVENTING Japan

TIME
SPACE
NATION



essa Morris-Suzuki

RE-INVENTING
Japan

TIME, SPACE, NATION

Tessa Morris-Suzuki



An East Gate Book

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RE-INVENTING
Japan

— 1 —

Introduction

Samuel Johnson defined a nation as “people distinguished from other people” (quoted in Fried 1975, 9). His definition is a particularly pleasing one because it exposes the enormous questions concealed inside this self-assertive little word. How do we distinguish between people? Where do we draw the lines? What gives us the confidence not simply to sum up 124 million “Japanese,” 80 million “Germans,” 1.1 billion “Chinese,” or 250 million “Americans” in a single word, but actually to turn these words into actors in the stories we tell: The Japanese are group conscious; the Germans are worried about Russian nationalism; the Chinese mistrust the Japanese; the Americans disapprove of the Chinese attitude to human rights, and so on.

These questions have nagged at me over twenty years of researching and teaching about Japan. In order to say anything at all it is necessary to generalize. So we use conceptual categories which will never be able to capture the fluid, iridescent stuff of reality in all its complexity. But the categories that we commonly use to study a phenomenon like “Japan”—nation, national culture, Japanese society, Japanese people—beg so many questions that they deserve closer scrutiny than they have received so far. Of course, the dividing lines between national, ethnic, and other identity groups have become the subjects of intense debate in the past few years; so much so that I can almost hear the sighs of readers or of casual browsers in bookshops—“Not *another* book on national identity!” But in the midst of this debate, key terms such as “culture,” “ethnicity,” and “identity” are often tossed around with such abandon that they themselves have become obstacles rather than aids to better understanding.

This book, then, is not an attempt to sketch a new model of Japanese culture or to say something novel about the origins and makeup of the Japanese race (*jinshu*) or ethnic group (*minzoku*). Instead, it is an at-

tempt to delve into the categories of thought which underlie concepts of nationhood—the notions of culture, race, ethnicity, civilization, and Japan itself—and discover how these categories have been used in the Japanese context. In the process, I hope to tease out some of the shifting meanings of these dividing lines between people and to consider the political and social implications of their use. It would be possible, of course, to write a whole book about the evolution of each concept in Japan, for all have long, complex, and fascinating histories. In the confines of a single volume, it is not possible to cover more than a small fraction of the historical and contemporary debates surrounding each. But the advantage of looking at several conceptual categories in a single study, however briefly, is that it helps us see the connections between them and to observe the ways in which imagery and concepts flow back and forth between the rhetoric of culture, natural environment, race, and civilization.

A theme running through the book is the relationship between time and space. In defining the boundaries of the nation and creating images of national belonging, governments, academics, and the popular media make use of both spatial and temporal dimensions. The nation is seen as a bounded geographic entity, whose shape is imprinted on the minds of children by maps on the walls of countless classrooms. It is also an environmental space, understood in terms of familiar imagery of climate and landscape. This sense of the nation as a spatially bounded natural entity is often closely connected with ideas of ethnicity: of citizens as sharing a genetic and cultural heritage adapted to the natural environment of the spatial realm in which they live. But nations can also be seen as “time zones,” separated from others by chronology rather than geography. From this point of view, the relationship between “our nation” and others may be understood as a relationship between a more advanced form of social system and more primitive forms. “Our nation” is often assumed to represent the present or future, while “foreigners” represent the past, though sometimes this imaginative relationship is reversed. Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked: “We in India do not have to go abroad in search of the Past and the Distant. We have them here in abundance. If we go to foreign countries, it is in search of the Present” (quoted in Chatterjee 1986, 138; see also Fabian 1983; Wallerstein 1991a). One aim of this study is to explore the varied and often closely interconnected ways in which the dimensions of space and time have been deployed in Japanese debates on nationhood.

The book begins with the notion of Japan itself. Although Japan, unlike some continental countries with constantly shifting borders, appears a readily defined “natural nation,” its frontiers are recent, and in places still disputed, inventions. In exploring the drawing of those frontiers, I try to show how ideas of time and space were used to create an image of the nation and to deal with the relationship between frontier regions, such as the Ainu and Okinawan communities, and the center. The creation of nationhood involves not only the drawing of political frontiers but the development of an image of the nation as a single natural environment or habitat—what the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō called *fūdo*—which comes to be symbolized in the minds of citizens by mountains or deserts, shifting seasons, flowers, mammals, or birds (even though these wild creatures may be ones which most citizens have never seen). Chapter 3 looks at some emerging ideas about Japan as natural environment and about the relationship between Japanese people and that environment.

During the twentieth century, notions of culture, race, and ethnicity—based partly on newly emerging anthropological and archaeological approaches—became key concepts in the understanding of nationhood. The notions were used to define an image of Japan in relation to images of other powerful nation-states (such as the United States, Britain, and France). They were also mobilized to deal with the complex social intersections created by imperial expansion into Taiwan, Korea, Karafuto, and parts of China and Micronesia and by flows of migration into and out of “Japan proper” (*naichi*). Chapters 4 and 5 consider how these new ideas were adopted and developed in Japan and how early twentieth-century understandings of “culture” (*bunka*), “race” (*jinshu*), and “ethnic group” (*minzoku*) continue to color contemporary interpretations of Japanese society. The depictions of the Japanese nation presented both in official writings and in academic and popular debates, although they made frequent use of terms such as “culture” and “ethnicity,” seldom explicitly incorporated discussions of gender. But, as argued in Chapter 6, the images which they embodied were often profoundly gendered and conveyed important implicit messages about the relationship between masculinity, femininity, and national identity. Chapter 7 examines how some of these enduring themes in national identity debates survive and are reworked in contemporary Japanese theories of civilization.

What I am developing here is a criticism of ideas like “culture,”

"ethnicity," and "civilization." But this raises an obvious question. If we abandon notions of an integrated "Japanese culture" or "Japanese civilization," or of a homogeneous "Japanese ethnic group," how can we deal with Japan as a subject of discussion at all? One idea which I use in an attempt to answer this question is the idea of "traditions" in the plural. By "traditions," I mean words, phrases, and bodies of thought which are passed on from one generation to the next and are in the process constantly reinterpreted, reworked, and interwoven. Although I do not think that it is meaningful to talk about a single thing called "Japanese culture," I do think that we can define a multitude of traditions that form the intellectual repertoire of large groups of people in Japan, although they may be interpreted in very different ways by different individuals. These traditions include not only ideas which are readily recognized as "Japanese"—Shinto mythology or the techniques of haiku poetry, for example—but also others whose roots may be traced to societies more recently incorporated into the Japanese state (to Ainu or Okinawan society, for example) or to China, Europe, North America, or elsewhere. A host of such traditions have gradually been assimilated into the domestic repertoire of thought and have become important raw material for contemporary Japanese debates: Confucian notions of the just ruler, ideas about the rise and fall of civilizations, German hermeneutic philosophies and Weberian sociology, among many others.

The particular ways in which these multiple traditions are combined and developed depends not just on political and social developments in Japan itself but also on Japan's relationship with the wider world order. Chapter 8 traces changes in the structure of the twentieth-century world order and relates these changes to shifting formulations of identity in Japan. The final chapter of the book brings the story to the present, when questions of citizenship and political rights are becoming inseparably intertwined with questions of ethnic, cultural, and gender identities. Here I sketch out an alternative way of looking at nationality in a world of global knowledge flows and multiple identities.

Although this is a book about Japan, the issues which I am trying to resolve, in my own mind as well as on the page, are ones with much wider resonances. This problem of distinguishing people lies at the heart of debates about nationhood, citizenship, ethnicity, and multiculturalism in many parts of the world. The concerns of this study are driven by my own experience of a life across frontiers, as a woman

born in Britain, living in Australia, married to a Japanese man, and researching Japanese history; as the mother of a half-English, half-Japanese son brought up in Australia and living in the United States. It could be argued that I have let personal experience shape my intellectual agenda too much: that the problems I speak of here have little relevance to the large numbers of people who are born, grow up, and die in the same regional or national community. But the crossing of frontiers seems to be an inevitable part of present-day society, for in this age of global information flows you do not need to migrate from place to place to be confronted by the ideas, fashions, and values of the wider world. Stay at home and the world—refracted through a host of invisible lenses—will come to you. So the problem of boundaries, frontiers, and dividing lines exists not just “out there” at the geographic limits of the nation’s territory: It exists also in our own homes and in our own minds.

While I was writing this book, Australia was in the midst of a particularly harrowing debate about issues of national identity. The image of the nation as a multicultural society, which, it was generally felt, had been gaining ground over the past fifteen years or so, was opened up to new questioning by a number of public figures, who suggested a need for a “return” to something closer to the images of “British heritage” which had dominated the discourse of national identity in the 1940s and 1950s. Although this revisionism was strongly opposed by supporters of multiculturalism, it made me aware more than ever of the real power of words like “culture” and “ethnicity” to fuel political debate and define the practical lines of social inclusion and exclusion. In countless political speeches, television interviews, and letters to the editor, I noticed how these seemingly simple words carry explosive charges of hidden meanings, historical memories, and implicit stereotypes.

The Australian debate on multiculturalism also reflected in other ways on my attempts to consider the makings of Japanese national identity. One common theme of the debate was that, although racism may be a problem in Australia, “Asians” (or sometimes specifically “Japanese”) are even more racist than “we” are. This glibly repeated statement encouraged me to look more closely at the (undeniably serious) issue of racism in Japan and at the ideas which underpin that racism. But it also led me to wonder whether the people who make such statements are not precisely replicating the mental imagery of the people they claim to criticize. In other words, when Australians (or

Europeans, Americans, etc.) accuse “the Japanese” of racism, does their category of “Japanese” include people involved in the movement for Okinawan autonomy, Ainu indigenous rights activists and their non-Ainu supporters, Japanese citizens of Korean or Filipino origin who are seeking to gain full acceptance as nationals, or those other Japanese citizens who support their struggles? I suspect that the answer would generally be no—after all, they’re not *real* Japanese, are they?

My point is that categories of exclusion—the lines we use to divide people—do not exist only within the boundaries of each nation, but replicate themselves across frontiers like a chain reaction. Exclusivist images of “culture” or “ethnicity” in one nation feed off and reinforce exclusivist images in neighboring nations. At a time when the international mobility of people, goods, ideas, and capital is challenging conventional boundaries of identity, and when notions of nationalism, ethnocentrism, multiculturalism, religious fundamentalism, and cultural relativism are contending with one another, it is more important than ever to go back to Samuel Johnson’s image of the nation and to re-examine the lines which divide. Although dividing lines, categories, and simplifications are necessary to make sense of the world we live in, we can try to erase the rigid lines laid down by fossilized dogmas and to sketch out new boundaries which allow room for intersection, multiplicity, mobility, and change. The process is not an easy one, but a journey through the origins and evolution of ideas like “culture,” “race,” and “civilization” may be the beginning of this process of rediscovery.

— 2 —

Japan

Historians of Japan become accustomed to dealing with slippery concepts. They wrestle with definitions of development, modernization, and Westernization; they worry over the application to the Japanese experience of concepts like feudalism, fascism, and democracy. But in all this the one term which seldom appears to need discussion is the word “Japan.” Japan seems real and self-explanatory: as Delmer Brown once put it, a “natural region” whose isolation and climatic uniformity accounted for the early rise of national consciousness (Brown 1955, 6–7). In the words of a more recent study, “the surrounding ocean serves as a protective moat” shielding Japan both from invasion and migration, so that since the third or fourth century A.D. there has been “very little infusion of other ethnic groups, resulting in a contemporary population that is fundamentally homogeneous” (Hayes 1992, 4–6).

It is only recently that some Japanese historians have started to pull at the threads holding together this vision of a cohesive national fabric and have shown how readily those threads, when teased, unravel. The purpose of this chapter is to take the process of unraveling a little further by focusing on the problem of Japan’s frontiers. I begin with the rather obvious observation that Japan in its present form is a modern artifact, whose frontiers were drawn in the middle of the nineteenth century and have been a source of contention for much of the twentieth. The “moat” surrounding Japan is in fact dotted with lines of stepping stones: small islands which have acted as zones of continuous economic and cultural interchange. The drawing of modern frontiers cuts across these zones and enclosed within the Japanese state a number of groups whose language and history had very little in common with those of (say) Tokyo or Osaka: among them were some 20,000–30,000 Ainu who inhabited Hokkaidō, southern Sakhalin, and the Kur-