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Getting to Know Me: Personal Resynthesis in a New Culture

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Personal Resynthesis in a New Culture

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INTRODUCTION

On 31 August 2001, I boarded an airplane en route to a new life. As it rumbled through takeoff, the plane carried me – armed with two years of language, history and culture studies – to Tokyo, where I would study for the fall semester. Although understandably nervous, I looked forward to the challenges the upcoming semester would bring – a foreign language, a unique writing system, and a different social environment. As it turned out, the new interactions, friendships, and relationships I faced all involved a level of complexity that I could not figure out in such a short amount of time. I had difficulty adjusting to the various roles I filled: host daughter, student, and American woman, among others. In this essay, I will explore the complexities behind my experiences and observations as I seek answers to the questions that marked my stay in Japan.

Speaking of her time in Japan, Dorinne Kondo (1990:22) discusses similar emotions: “Persons seemed to be constituted in and through social relations and obligations to others. Selves and society did not seem to be separate entities; rather, the boundaries were blurred.” As my plane landed, my literal entrance into the Japanese culture ushered in new “social relations and obligations to others” in which I would become involved. As I slowly adapted to a new environment, this led to a changed, questioned self-identification. Although I had studied the Japanese language and culture during my previous two years of college, adopting them as my own and understanding them as instinctively as I do my American ideas did not come easily.

Whereas Kondo notices that Japanese social relations constitute persons, Ward Goodenough tackles this general topic from a slightly different perspective. He discusses role and social status and delineates their socially constituted definitions. “Rights and their duty
counterparts serve to define boundaries within which the parties to social relationships are expected to confine their behavior" (Goodenough 1969: 312). Like Kondo, he views the self as a malleable set of shifting identities. "A social identity is an aspect of self that makes a difference in how one’s rights and duties distribute to specific others" (Goodenough 1969: 313). Therefore, one’s personal identity, as linked to one’s social identity, changes according to the surrounding social situation.

Learning a culture employs a process by which one internalizes the "normal" at a level not always perceptible to the full consciousness. "A great deal of social learning in any society is learning one’s duties to others" (Goodenough 1969: 313). Thus reading all about a culture does not constitute the same kind of understanding that comes with living it. This first struck me as an area of dissonance in my life during regular dinnertime conversations. In spite of the fact that I could at least marginally participate in the conversation, I encountered difficulty in how to employ the language in a manner that fit my role and relative social rank. My thoughts and opinions, suddenly stained by my age and gender, automatically took a backseat to those of my host father and mother.

Beyond the difficulties of communicating in a foreign language, I became embedded in social structures that, paradoxically, presented communication barriers themselves. Moreover, learning to understand the social forces at work during dinnertime conversations did not directly translate into instant cultural adjustment. It instead entailed a slow process of cultural re-adoption and changes in my "self-awareness" (c.f., Hallowell, 1967 [1955]). "...[T]he phenomena of self-awareness in our species is as integral a part of a human sociocultural mode of adaptation as it is of a distinctive human level of psychological structuralization" (Hallowell,
1967 [1955]: 75). This same self-awareness meant that my present experiences — specifically, interpersonal interactions — did not concur with those I knew from past prototypes.

"Since every individual's course of experience is unique, every human brain contains, at a given point of time, as a product of this experience, a unique organization of generalizations. ...It is used by its holder as a true and more or less complete representation of the operating characteristics of a 'real' world" (Wallace, 1956: 631). Here, Wallace refers to what he calls the "mazeway," a cognitive framework that comprises past perception (observations and experiences) that an individual utilizes to conceptualize the self, the body and the world. By this process of self-world construction, life as perceived in Japan did not correspond to my past experiences, resulting in confusion.

Kondo states this idea most succinctly, "'Self' is constituted culturally..." (Kondo 1990: 35). The title of her book, Crafting Selves, alludes to "...the historically and culturally specific, discursive production of selves in the domains of work, family, and community" (Kondo 1990: 78). That plane ride that carried me over the Pacific Ocean to Japan introduced me to the complexities that self, culture, and identities create. Physically moving myself across the world for a semester constituted only the outward changes I faced. The real challenge, I quickly discovered, presented itself through the multiplicities embedded in my attempt to adjust to a new culture.

A discussion about culture and social environment comprises several dimensions, and they will vary, depending on the theory followed. Here I will explore the ways in which I felt changed by being in Japan. This cultural environment, once deconstructed into smaller parts of the whole — role, social status, and hierarchical position — can explain how one experiences oneself in a particular culture. Therefore, I will discuss each category in turn so as to deconstruct
the cultural construction of the individual and personal identity, relating it to my own experiences in Japan.

ROLE

First of all, in a broad sociocultural sense, a role”...connotes not only overt actions and performances but also covert expectations held by an observer...[It is] the behavior expected of the occupant of a given position or status” (Sarbin 1991: 546). Implicit in this phrasing are several components: expectations, perception, and demands. Expectations come from cultural beliefs concerning actions that an individual should take when in a given role. My identity as a college student in the US, for example, carries with it the expectation that I will do the readings for class, study for exams, ask questions if I have any, and be proactive in my education. Perceptions vary according to the situation; this requires attention to social clues that will point to possible behavioral styles out of a continuum of possibilities. In my college student example, I behave differently in a large lecture than in a discussion-style seminar, although I remain a student in each classroom setting. Or, based on the atmosphere among my classmates and the professor’s grading style, I can act competitive or cooperative within the parameters of my student role. Finally, demands can constrain behavior and perception in that they possess a normative quality. As a student, I address all my professors by the title “Dr.” and treat them with more respect than I do my peers. I raise my hand to wait my turn to speak, and I do not walk in and out of the classroom as I wish.
No individual fills only one role in any society; every person fills many slots that depend on factors such as setting, group composition, age, and gender, etc. I found that physically moving from the US to Japan symbolized the literal redefinition of the roles that I filled. Being a Caucasian American carries a very different meaning in Japan as opposed to in the US; I went from being the majority to being the ethnic "other." My big eyes and naturally curly hair became a source of fascination that I had never previously considered possible. In this superficial example, my role dramatically switched from an average American to that of an outsider. My appearance never changed, but my cultural environment did. I had moved into many changed roles in Japan that, for me, entailed different expectations, perceptions, and demands.

When I met people who did not know that I had studied Japanese, they invariably were surprised when I understood and responded to their queries: what is your name?, where are you from?, and the like. I had some social difficulty due to my struggles with the language, and I did not fit neatly into the category of either "Japanese" or "other." They knew that I could understand their conversation but would not necessarily be able to respond appropriately. This sometimes put new acquaintances on shaky footing, as both parties were unsure as to how to approach the other. Also, in public, I occasionally became the target of stares, whispers, and comments. More than once I heard the epithet baka gaijin, "stupid foreigner," thrown in my direction. This phrase equated my looks with an assumed inability to speak Japanese; thus, even as an outsider who had studied the language, I often did not meet the expectations of those around me.

At school in the US, I have become accustomed to being perceived and treated like an autonomous adult. American college students are accorded all the rights and duties of adult citizens; we can vote, serve in combat, and most upperclassmen can purchase alcohol. In Japan,
however, college students are still considered children, even if they live on their own. I lived in an apartment for the first month of my semester in Tokyo, and my おやさん (landlady) looked after us (her five tenants) as though we were her own children. She stressed that she wanted to take the place of my mother, who was so far away in America. On my first day in Tokyo, she took me out to introduce me to the city. She also arranged semi-regular brunches, to which she invited all five of her tenants upstairs to her home, to converse and to check up on us. She worried about us when we were sick and cared for us as though she were our mother.

Within the first two weeks that I spent there, I came down with a bad cold, with aches, fever, chills, headache, and other miserable symptoms. Frustration with the language had begun to set in, and I was thoroughly fed up with the torrential rains of the typhoon season. That Sunday I was to have lunch with my landlady. One of my roommates informed me that we were to have うなぎ; bleary-eyed, I said that that was fine. What I really wanted, however, was to go home and have some soup. My landlady had remembered that I was eager to try new things and that I had never before eaten うなぎ. I found out what うなぎ was on the way upstairs, and the last thing I felt like doing was eating eel. When my landlady learned that I was sick, she insisted that I clean my plate because eel is good for you. I understood that it would have been extremely impolite to refuse the gesture, especially from someone in a maternal role in relation to me, so I ate everything that was placed before me. Not only did I feel better after having eaten (which was credited, of course, to the うなぎ), but eel later became one of my favorite Japanese foods.

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1 Here is a quick lesson about the transliteration used in this paper. Japanese words are all pronounced phonetically when they appear either in romanized form or using a -kana syllabary. Consecutive vowels are pronounced individually; there are no diphthongs in Japanese. A bar that appears over a vowel indicates a double vowel (e.g. "ō" will be pronounced "o̞o"). This bar has been omitted for Japanese words that appear regularly in English, such as トキョー (Tokyo).
In that case, I understood that I was to listen to my landlady and to accept her offers and help. However, I encountered much trouble discerning my duties and, to a lesser extent, rights in the various other social settings I encountered. This points back to my dinnertime discussions in which I had the role of host daughter. As a daughter in Japan I had different duties than in the US where I can feel free, as an adult member of my family, to join a conversation with a reasonable expectation that I will be heard. In Japan, however, as a student — and, thus, still a child — I was flippantly disregarded as young, female, and, therefore, unknowledgeable. I never did adjust to this aspect of my role of host daughter and student.

What's more, I found difficulty in casting off one role and adopting another as I switched social encounters. For example, if I were conversing with my host mother and then left the room to speak with my host sister, the transition from daughter to elder sister confused me; it seemed more complicated than transitions between roles in the United States. Or, perhaps my unfamiliarity with each individual role only became more apparent when I had to move from one to the other.

**SOCIAL STATUS**

The term social status denotes who will fulfill a role in culturally constituted interaction with others. It provides a label for an individual, and that label's concomitant cultural meaning helps to classify that individual. Like role, social status is made up of what others in the culture perceive; it is culturally constituted. For example, in the United States, I belonged to the normative majority — a successful, middle class, Caucasian university student. When began to attend classes in Tokyo, this had not changed; yet, my social status had shifted drastically. The
surrounding culture now defined me as other, outsider, American, and female – social statuses altered through the new perceptions of those around me.

Social status becomes important on the macro scale of social interactions. Because it is defined relationally, it has little meaning when a person is alone; but when two people meet and interact, social status dictates how they will address and treat each other. This is deeply informed by culture. Without the underlying mutual understanding of how social interactions should occur, even two people who speak the same language will encounter difficulty communicating.

One example of how culture gives order to our immaterial world and human interactions lies in meeting and greeting others, be they friends or strangers. Americans shake hands, some Europeans kiss on the cheek, Malians offer a drink of water and a seat in the shade, and the list goes on. The Japanese, like many other East Asians, bow. Of course I knew this before my trip, and I looked forward to learning to greet people in such a different way. Since I am obviously not Japanese, very often someone I was introduced to would extend a hand for me to shake, acting under the assumption that I neither spoke Japanese nor knew that I should bow. This occasionally resulted in a comically awkward situation in which I would bow while shaking this person’s hand as I tried to remember and say a polite greeting without stumbling over my words. The times when an outstretched hand did not thwart my attempts to bow only made me nervous. I never totally understood how to gauge how deeply to bow to other people, because bows are directly linked to one’s social status relative to the situation. Generally speaking, the person of lower social rank bows lower than one of higher status.

As a university student in the United States, I have more or less attained full adulthood as culturally defined. While I may still be young, that does not override the fact that I live on my
own and have the same (legal) privileges that are accorded to older adults. In Japan, however, I initially took offense when my host parents referred to me as a child. When I protested, they only insisted further that I was not a “grown-up.” It took a few attempts to explain the reasoning for me to understand this. In spite of my independence and legal adulthood — even in Japan — my student status took precedence and made me a child again. My host father explained to me that I am still a child for two reasons. First of all, I am living with a (host) family and my real family still helps to support me. Second, I am a student, and all students (even graduate students) are considered children.

This highlights the differences between ascribed and achieved identities, which deels with the manner in which one receives an attribute with a social meaning. For example, I am a Caucasian female — two identities that I did nothing to earn, which makes them ascribed statuses. But as a college student in my third year (at the time), I had a particular achieved status that I had worked hard to attain. Both ascribed and achieved statuses come with particular social meanings or rankings that vary in importance according to the social setting. I found that gender and ethnicity, two ascribed identities and social statuses, mattered much more in Japan than in the US. Furthermore, as far as achieved status goes, I found that, in Japan, seniority came with time spent at a particular job and not necessarily with skill. Thus, age (or length of time), an ascribed status, often directly merged with achieved status.

For example, while in Tokyo, I joined the wadaiko (Japanese drumming) club at school. After several weeks of practice, I started to notice that club members stuck together in groups according to when they joined the club, not according to individual skill. Those who had spent three and four years as club members did less work setting up and putting away the big, heavy drums at practice. They also played the most during performances. Likewise, the “younger”
students (i.e., more recent members) tuned the drums, taught incoming students, organized social
events, etc. I eventually learned that the group’s internal status ranking system, like that in many
Japanese companies, depended on time spent as a participating member instead of on personal
performance or particular skill.

With regard to ascribed status, the social status of women in Japan hinges greatly on their
gender. Traditionally speaking, women hold a lower position in society than do men; this still
holds today, for the most part, although there are exceptions and recent social changes. Since a
social status is the basic element in social interactions, and society is vertically arranged in
Japan, the foundation for male-female interactions lies in the fact that men hold a higher status.
Several factors attest to this. First of all, a man’s social status, like his social identity, is directly
tied to his job; women, on the other hand, derive their social status from their husbands.
Moreover, women do not have the same opportunities for career advancement as men, so their
social status as determined by their job will likely still be lower than a man’s.

Also in the realm of work, women’s pay still lags well behind that of men for the same
job (Efron 2001). This difference in salary concretely reflects upon a women’s inferior social
status. Thus, even in achieved statuses, women remain below men. Moreover, women are
frequently hired as part-time workers, a status that brings with it a low salary and no benefits.
Efron cites the statistics that 70 to 80 percent of Japanese women are hired after age 30 for part-
time work (Efron 2001; see also Kondo 1990: 274-277). Women often work to supplement the
household income, especially in Japan’s current faltering economy, and to stay active outside the
house once children begin school full-time. However, employers will not hire a middle-aged
housewife for full-time work, so the only available option is part-time. This, combined with the

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2 In Japan, part-time employees can work up to 35 hours per week (see also Kondo, 326 note 8).
fact that household duties remain a woman’s job, puts many demands and confers few benefits on women.

Yet another indication of women’s lower social status in relation to men lies in their traditional role as “servers.” A woman’s subordinate status appears in her servile role to men; this is especially evident in the hostess occupation in the nightlife realm. Anne Allison (1994) spent years studying his work in Japan, and she drew the conclusion that part of the hostess’s duty is to “…accept the role of subordinate party in a relationship with the man (being a slave)...as females, they rank lower than men in social status” (Allison 1994: 183).

In the household itself, the “good wife” must tend to her husband’s every need. My host mother described what it was like for her mother when she was growing up. The women in her family knelt together on the floor to bow low and greet her father when he returned home from work at night. Her mother would then tend to whatever he wanted; for example, if he wanted a newspaper, he would simply say “newspaper,” and she brought it to him. She served him dinner and made sure his sake glass was full at night. My host mother performed many of these same jobs herself, although to a lesser degree. She (as well as everyone else who was home) still called out the same polite greeting when he returned home from work. (“Okaerinasai” This literally translates to “you have come home,” which is a very polite greeting.)

She served him dinner and his sake, staying up for him on the nights that he returned home late. Often my host sister and I would lend a hand and serve him. At first I found this situation slightly awkward; I was the guest, and, yet, I was playing the “host” by serving my host father. In my mind, our roles had been reversed. I quickly went from feeling awkward to feeling taken advantage of; he could at least say thank you, I thought. I later realized that I was interpreting this in a Western perspective, and, as a young woman, my role, in accordance with
my social status, was to serve him. Also, I was a (temporary) member of his family, so I was not to be thanked for my help. Even after working this out to myself, I had trouble accepting this lower status.

Finally, motherhood, one of the traditionally defining roles for women, diminishes their social status. Her own, previous social identity (or identities) give way to that of her husband, and she is expected to sacrifice everything for her husband and the eventual children. A mother’s servile role parallels that of the bar hostess and Office Lady. This lowered status of the “good wife and wise mother” is described as “three meals and a nap.” “Perhaps this slightly derogatory image of professional housewives indicates a decline in the social assessment of their value” (Roberts 1996: 228), by implying that they have it easy compared with men, who labor outside the home. One Japanese woman, a physician, quoted in a recent newspaper artic’le, noticed that “…her social status plunged when she began walking around with a baby instead of a stethoscope” (Efron 2001: A12). In bitter irony, this woman discovered that the country in which men revere their mothers simultaneously looks down upon that very role.

LANGUAGE

In Japan maintaining one’s status relative to others is crucial to social interaction, and language use explicitly correlates with one’s social status. While this may generally be true everywhere, the Japanese language increases one’s awareness of this pattern. More than simply speaking politely in appropriate situations, one must select the correct verb form, noun prefixes, adjective conjugation, and conjunctions that suit the relative status of one’s present company.
"...[Japan's] roles have been formed and differentiated clearly within the family" (Allison, 1994: 91). Much has been written about the *ie* (family) system as the hierarchical social structure in Japan. *Ie* conflates several concepts that the English language differentiates in separate words. *Ie* itself means "house," "home," or, more generically "place of residence," but not necessarily in the physical sense. For example, the written character that is pronounced *ie* is used in the words for both family (*kazoku*) and landlord (*ōyasan*). Theoretical verticality is implicit in these relationships that derive their meanings from the word and written character *ie*. Stated another way, consanguineous interactions function as a microcosm of the Japanese social structure at large. This has consequences both for one's role and social status.

Language use and acceptable comportment also exhibit differences in social rank between men and women. When I lived in Tokyo, my host father would return home from work, immediately change into his pajamas, and state that he was hungry (if we were not already dining). Almost invariably, he wore pajamas whenever he was in the house, whereas everyone else wore regular clothes. Also, he addressed us by our first names, a usage that would have been an unthinkable social transgression if adopted toward him by any of us women (myself, host mother, and younger host sister). We all called him *otōsan*, a respect-filled appellation. Furthermore, linguistic style delineates one's position within the hierarchy. The difference between men's language and women's language lies not so much in different vocabularies, as in polite suffixes and prefixes that make words longer.³

"In Japanese society vertical relations, such as *kōhai/sempai* ('junior/senior') and *seito/sensei* ('student/teacher'), are extremely important, forming the basic social structural constituents from which Japanese build their social world" (McVeigh, 298). The first dichotomy

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³ The prefix *o-* or *go-* is used in polite speech, more often employed by women than men. If I were to speak about water, *mitsu*, I would have to call it *omitsu*. Similarly for verbs, the longer version is more polite. For example, the verb *de wa arimasen* is a more polite way to say *ja nai*, both of which mean "[something] is not."
that McVeigh mentions, kōhai/senpai, implies any older/younger or senior/junior relationship within a group or organized structure.\textsuperscript{4} In the above description of familial hierarchical relationships as exposed through language, the importance between older/younger members stands out fairly clearly, although gender categories also play a role in them.

Again turning to the wadaiko (Japanese drumming) club, this group, composed mainly of women, closely followed a kōhai/senpai structure that based seniority not on age or year of study at school, but on club membership. I joined wadaiko in September, at the start of my semester abroad. However, the Japanese school year begins in April, so all the incoming freshmen had already been members for five months before I even came to Japan. That I was, on average, three years older than the freshmen, and a junior besides did not matter. However, the actions of the group’s members reveal much about this older/younger relationship. As I have mentioned above, the younger members shouldered the burden of teaching all incoming members (exchange students and otherwise) how to drum, arranging social outings, and helping newcomers to adjust to the group socially. Moreover, younger members actually called older ones senpai on occasion.

McVeigh’s second dichotomy, that of seito/sensei (student/teacher), is, given the importance placed on the educational system, an even more common theme in Japan. The title sensei refers not strictly to “teacher” or “professor,” although that is the most common translation, but to one who is ranked above another often in a relationship further demarcated by knowledge. For example, patients can call a physician sensei. In wadaiko an older woman

\textsuperscript{4} Some older/younger relationships have their own specialized categories; that of seito/sensei (student/teacher) will be discussed later. Others include any relationship within the family, although the same concept of relative age is still communicated through the nomenclature. For example, in English, “brother” and “sister” are simply one’s siblings, while the Japanese language differentiates between older and younger brothers (onīsan and otōtosan, respectively) and between older and younger sisters (onēsan and imōtosan). Here I have only used the formal words for siblings, which would be used to talk about someone else’s family; to discuss one’s own family, there is a separate set of similarly differentiated words.
attended our practices. Although she rarely said anything or gave instruction and seemed to have a close relationship with many of the older members, everyone called her sensei. Therefore, this relationship takes the previously discussed kōhai/senpai relationship one step further by incorporating a relative differential in knowledge.

SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

In all of the above examples, role, social status, and language are all inextricably interrelated. They all work synergistically to form a persona – an identity that combines all salient aspects of an individual appropriate for a given social interaction. Not all aspects of an individual’s identity will be invoked for every social setting; on the other hand, some parts will be inseparable from every potential interaction. When I presented myself in a situation, I brought with my role the fact that I was a Caucasian female. From there, a social status could be discerned – both ascribed and achieved – that carried concomitant language use. All this will obviously all shift with different settings and situations, invoking different aspects of the self.

Assuming a new role requires one to learn the rights and duties that accompany it, whether this means participating as a member of a new culture, a new group, or of a foreign culture. In Japan, I filled roles and statuses before I understood them. My mistakes and misunderstandings led to awkward moments, or sometimes worse. “If two people enter an interaction each assuming an identity that does not match the one assumed by the other, they fail to establish a relationship” (Goodenough 1969: 315). In my attempts to use Japanese – a new language that is very sensitive to social hierarchy – I often insulted other people’s more elevated social status as I slowly got a grip on it. I no longer formed part of the hegemonic cultural
“norm.” I looked and felt like an outsider, and this occasionally led others to forgive my social gaffes.

In the end, study abroad gave me the chance to become a social actor in a foreign culture. In this paper, I have examined some of the confusion I encountered, so as to better understand my time in Japan retrospectively. My understanding of the world and social encounters did not match that of most people with whom I interacted in Japan. On the other hand, I understood that my social position was very low, a fact that I encountered much difficulty in accepting. I perceived my role, and social status as different from how I experienced them. I found little solace in the ubiquity of my situation – which is usually rendered as culture shock – because a misunderstanding of one’s self is just that, no matter how you explain or define it.
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