

## Chapter Thirteen - National Identity

### I. Reading

#### ***My country, right or wrong***

Perhaps it's best to start defining a few words to be sure we are clear about what we mean when we use them:

- nationalism** very strong patriotic feeling, principles, or efforts. an extreme form of this, esp. marked by a feeling of superiority over other countries. advocacy of political independence for a particular country. (国粋主義)
- patriotism** love of country and willingness to sacrifice for it (愛国)
- fascism** an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organization. (in general use) extreme right-wing, authoritarian, or intolerant views or practice. (ファシズム)

Most people agree that it's not a bad thing to love your country and to be proud of your cultural and natural heritage. Of course, when these feelings become extreme, problems inevitably follow: prejudice, racism, bigotry, erosion of civil rights, even genocide and war. Our history books are full of horrible and tragic accounts of events that have resulted from extreme nationalism, so I don't need to cite any here. It shouldn't be that hard to love one's own country and at the same time respect and want to learn about other countries and their people, but some people run into problems when they try.



#### ***What's an American?***

Of course, there are some big differences in the very ideas of what we mean when we say "my country" or "my culture." Japan and the U.S. are both good examples. Japan is an island nation, historically sealed off from other countries, and relatively homogeneous (同種の) when compared to countries like the U.S. The U.S. is a new country, with the idea of immigration central to its identity. The land was owned by Native Americans, who were then joined and pushed back by invaders from Europe, followed by slaves from Africa, and more immigrants from Asia and the Mid-East. While the vast majority of people in Japan are Japanese, a visit to New York may have you asking yourself, "Where are the Americans?" Not only do most people have cultural and biological roots outside the U.S., they frequently intermarry, leaving one with the very good question, "What does being American mean?"

Naturally, the different kinds of populations in these two countries will make people's ideas about their "national identity" quite different. Maybe the easiest way to understand it is to think of the way Japanese think about religion; an individual can consider himself a Buddhist, a Shintoist, and maybe a Christian, too, all at the same time. (By the way, it is *very* difficult for Westerners to understand that!) I grew up in Chicago, a large city whose history is one of immigration. My father was born in Mexico and my mother's parents were from Poland. My mother's sisters all married Mexican men, so nothing was more natural for me when I was growing up than for someone to have multiple nationalities and cultures. I was American, Mexican, *and* Polish, and most of the children around me were from similarly diverse backgrounds.

### **Who am I?**

My background defined how I felt about myself as an American, or, how I didn't. One of the incredibly interesting and wonderful things about becoming fluent in another language and culture is the new self that is born and grows with you the more you learn. The more I studied Japanese, and began to think in Japanese, I realized I was growing a new Japanese self inside me. At the same time, I never became any less "American." Partly because of the unique "melting-pot" nature of the U.S., it's sometimes hard for Americans to see their own "American-ness," especially while they are living in the U.S. I was under the mistaken impression that there really wasn't anything typically American about me. I was an *individual*, after all. Unique. Of course, after living in Japan for a short while, I was quite startled to learn how completely American I was! It was fascinating to finally be able to understand what about me was American, what was Mexican, what was Polish, and yes, what was Japanese...and finally, what was *me*.



It's ironic that one of the great benefits of learning about other languages, cultures, and people is how much you learn about your own country, your own culture, and about yourself. There are few things more ridiculous than thinking that learning more about another language, culture, or people will make you less Japanese (or less American, or less Canadian). The only thing learning will make you less of is less ignorant.

### **How Japanese are you?**

When you look at yourself in a mirror, how much of what you see is Japanese? How much of what you see is *you*? Do you think non-Japanese see the same thing when they look at you? How about when you see visitors from other countries here in Japan? Do you try to see beyond the fact that they are *gaijin*, and try to see who *he* or *she* really is? It may not be possible for you to see how Japanese you are or aren't until you spend sometime outside of Japan. After all, how can a fish understand that he is wet? The idea makes no sense to him, because he doesn't have any awareness of wetness; it's just what "is" or what *seems* natural. The problem is, it's not *natural* at all. It's Japanese, or, in my case, American. It's cultural. Perhaps in this context, you can better understand the situation we discussed in Chapter Two. You are Japanese; but you're also a thinking, feeling, independent individual, too. So am I.

### ***Bonus time!***

When you travel abroad, people will be quite curious about your country and culture. Here are some mistakes and myths that sometimes appear in books or conversations. **Don't repeat them.**

Myth	Reality
In Japan, we have four seasons.	Most parts of the world have four seasons. I especially find this interesting, since for me, the Kansai area of Japan has TWO seasons: summer and "the other one."
Japanese need to eat rice because their intestines are longer/shorter.	Please, be serious.
The rainbow has 5 colors.	The rainbow is a display of the visible light spectrum consisting of an infinite number of colors.
Japanese can't speak English.	PROVE THEM WRONG!!!
Any of your own ideas?	

### II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. How are patriotism and nationalism different?
2. What about you is Japanese?
3. What is your image of the "typical Japanese"? American? Englishman? Australian? Canadian? Others?
4. "A fish doesn't know he's wet." Can you explain what this means?
5. How do ideas about religion differ among Japanese and people from other countries?

### III. Thinking

#### ***New words and expressions***

***What are the main points in this chapter?***

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: