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Unifying State and Nation: Modern Myths and Narratives of Japanese Nationalism in Times of Social Change

Abstract: *Kokutai* (national polity) was notoriously the ideological organising principle of imperial Japanese society in the early 20th century, but the end of WWII saw it replaced by a more nation-oriented view of the relationship between the state and the people. This change led to an interpretation of the nation that prioritises ethnic nationalism, although its key text, the Postwar Constitution seems to invite a more civic interpretation. This paper argues that the change and this inconsistency should be analysed in terms of two modern myths—the myth of *kokutai* and the myth of homogeneous ethnos. The key to the influence of these myths lies in their symbolic representation in the 1889 Meiji and 1947 Postwar Constitutions, and how their historically contingent interpretation formalised relations between the people and the state. These interpretations produced contesting narrative articulations of the myths, among which first statist and later ethnic nationalist narratives emerged dominant, but in both cases remained in tension with other narratives.

Keywords: Myth, narrative, statism, ethnic nationalism, Japanese Constitution

Introduction

On 29 January 1944, Hatanaka Shigeo, editor of liberal-leaning journal *Chūō Kōron* was hauled away from his office by the Special Higher Police, arrested, tortured, and sentenced under the Peace Preservation Law for allegedly seeking to alter the national polity of Japan.[i] He spent rest of the war imprisoned, but was still luckier than many of his friends and col-

leagues, who along with other 'thought criminals' lost their lives to police torture and squalid prison conditions, even while at the same time in the Pacific theatre, young kamikaze pilots were being sent on their last flights in an effort to safeguard that same national polity whose collapse was already imminent.

Still, social myths are difficult to kill and even nowadays discussion of Japan's 'national foundations' has to contend with the spectre of *kokutai,* the idea of national polity that was at the heart of Japan's wartime ideology. It referred both to a conception of timeless Japanese cultural essence linked to the Emperor as embodiment of Japanese unity and to a hierarchical, statist conception of society. This ideology was mostly discredited through Japan's defeat in WWII, which saw it superseded by a more nation-oriented view of society based on an essentialised vision of homogenous Japanese ethnos.

While these two dominant modern myths on the relationship between the people and the state —the myths of national polity and homogeneous ethnos—can be seen as underpinning statist and nationalist orientations of Japanese society since late 19th century, their actual interpretation and impact on society has depended on their narrative articulation in surrounding discourse, which has been itself shaped by historical context. This article offers an analysis of how such key myths emerge from institutional and prior narrative foundations, and how changes in either can alter their interpretation and social significance. In this sense, the two myths are grounded in the 1889 Meiji and 1947 Postwar Constitutions, and in how their historically contingent interpretation formalised relations between the people and the state.

While the myths of national polity and homogeneous ethnos are familiar to any researcher specialising in Japan, their relationship and how a shift between them happened has been less examined. The idea of national polity has been discussed separately in connection to wartime ideology and its formation (Kawamura 2014; Konno 2008; Large 2006; Suzuki 2001; Tansman 2009; Ward 2014), although in more general treatment its discussion can fade into the background within a narrative of the Emperor's centrality to Japanese wartime ideology. Doak (2007) has clarified the ways of conceptualising the Japanese people in nationalist discourse, while Yoshino (1992), Murphy-Shigematsu (1993), Oguma (1995), Befu (2001) and Weiner (2009) have analysed the myth of Japanese homogeneity from different scholarly angles. Building on these and other previous studies, this paper brings together these areas of research and grounds them in an analysis of nationalist narrative-building and meaning-making processes. Although particular to Japanese historical circumstances, both myths share elements with similar myths in other countries, which is reasonable, given that the ideologies surrounding them were adapted from other modern ideologies (see Brenner 2006; Kim 2009). Their comparative analysis may thus also be instructive for contexts outside of Japan: as a vision of a singular, ethnic nation, the myth of homogeneous ethnos is likely to be likewise foundational to modern forms of ethnic nationalism in other countries, while the national polity as *kokutai* expresses an older, more hierarchical view of social organisation, with a distinct religious dimension through links to a ruler's divine right. Given the contemporary resurgence of nationalism around the world, analysis of how these myths develop and change should offer useful material for comparative studies.

The approach this article takes is grounded in the normalising role of modern myths as proposed by Roland Barthes (1991 [1957]), but expands that framework to discuss the relation-

ship between myths and narratives. This view of myth helps to account for how myths are normalised in our discourse, and extending its logic to narratives structured by those myths allows us to see how the meaning of the myths themselves becomes shaped by their narrative articulation. This provides a novel way of analysing the function of myths in nationalist meaning-making processes. The analysis begins by considering how a relationship between state and people can be understood, and how that relationship has been conceptualised in the myths of national polity and homogeneous ethnos. This conceptualisation and its historical development is then examined in detail for both myths, with focus on how these particular interpretations became dominant and how the myth of national polity's collapse paved the way for the ascendance of the myth of ethnic homogeneity.

Central Myths of Nationalism

In terms of mythical narratives, nation can be seen as the conceptualised form of the relationship between the people and the state so that they form three myths influencing each other, with nation mediating and elaborating the meanings of the other two that are more materially constrained. Nationalism, meanwhile, provides a discursive space for these myths where specific nationalist narratives structured by the myths are articulated and gradually feed back into how those myths are interpreted. It also lends an aspect of faith to the nation: faith in this notion constructed as the intersection of state and people, linking it to a secular teleology of its birth, direction, and articulations of its future. This opens a nation to its narrative aspect, placing it within a nationalist understanding of history and positionality in the world. Without this effect by nationalism, nation would remain an abstract concept, but through it, people's actions take on a role within a historical progression, endowing them with meaning in a dis-

cursive space that relates them to a past history and a future ahead, even a destiny. In this way, social practices are collectively performed based on a nationalist narrative structured by the myths of the state and the people as a nation, and as these myths change, so does the performance of the nation.

While we can readily understand ’state’ and ’people’ as key myths in any prevailing social ideology, it may be overlooked how the relationship between these two can be causally influential in itself. The most familiar way to understand this relationship is through the notion of a nation, but this term carries ideological and historical baggage specific to European cultural context where it was initially articulated. In contrast, the issue of a relationship between ’state’ and ’people’ has been a more universal one, and has taken diverse forms throughout history, so analysing it from outside the framework of Atlantic powers can be instructive.

The two key myths examined here have structured Japanese understanding of this relationship, and while the idea of a sovereign nation is certainly present in these modern concepts, it is useful to analyse how it is understood and put into practice, as well as how it has changed. The two myths of national polity (*kokutai*) and homogeneous ethnos (*tanitsu minzoku*) emerged from an encounter between Japan’s evolving traditions of governance and a fast-paced adoption of Western models in the late 19th century, and their development demonstrates how this encounter came to alter the Japanese understanding of society and concepts of state, people and nation over a period of a little over fifty years.

This highlights the contingency of the relationship between the people and the state, and how its representation matters in national meaning-making processes. Essentially, both notions

connect state and people with each other, but the balance differs: *kokutai* views the people through the state, while *tanitsu minzoku* views the state through the people. In the case of *kokutai*, its fundamental idea was the essential and unique nature of the Japanese polity founded on imperial rule, but how that uniqueness came to be understood was dependent on historical and political narratives that were formed around the myth. As for *tanitsu minzoku*, it similarly emphasises the essentiality of Japaneseness and delineates it to denote an ethnic group, but how that ethnicity, group belonging and features of Japaneseness have come to be defined has depended on its articulation through the historical and political narratives. *Koku-tai*, in its most commonly understood form, is connected thus more to statism than national-ism, while *tanitsu minzoku* is linked more to ethnic than civic nationalism.

Symbolic Representation of Nationalist Myths in Japanese Society

Myths spread and gain force by their retelling, and this retelling happens through their articu-lation within a wider contextual frame. They become social facts through our interaction with them and by mediating our interaction with each other, regardless of their actual facticity or falsity—becoming facts in social reality that we relate to, whether we individually want to do so or not, framing our actions and structuring the discursive space in which we operate. As these representations are allowed to sediment in our discourse about ourselves, they can be-come part of our identity, foundational myths about what makes us 'us' and different from others. As these representations are normalised, they become a banal part of our normal envi-ronment, guiding our everyday habits (see Billig 1995) and even taking over our celebrations (see Makihara 2011 on origins of the *banzai*-cheer in the Constitution Festival of 1889, or consider the contemporary custom of players standing to respect the troops during the nation-

al anthem in US football games—both intentionally cultivated practices designed to arouse nationalist sentiment).

In this way, myths about the nation also need symbolic representation and an institutional basis in the social realm. Aside from the use of national symbols like rituals, celebrations, institutions, flags and anthems (but see also Befu 2002 on the complexities in the use of such symbols), more specific examples of this kind of symbolic or actual materiality of the nation in Japanese society include the existence of the Emperor and the imperial household, prevalence of uniforms enforcing a perception of homogeneity and expectations of conformity (cf. McVeigh 2000; Kinsella 2002), practices of *furusatozukuri* in creating idealised shared roots (Robertson 1998; Scheiner 1998), and so on. But as Billig (1995) demonstrates, much of national identity-building is instantiated through regular patterns of practices, even through how people refer to themselves. We have little need to engage in conscious choices or collective acts of imagination if we perform a national identity and its myths through everyday life (see e.g. Billig 1995:93-95), social status (Kayama 2002), and even through ways of making and eating food (Ichijo and Ranta 2016; Palmer 1998.)

As with the *banzai*-cheer's creation mentioned above, these myths may have an origin or a formal instantiation that serves as their basis. For the myths of national polity and homogeneous ethnos, we can recognise the two versions of the Japanese Constitution—the Meiji Constitution of 1889 and the Postwar Constitution of 1947—as foundational representations that provided a formalised center for discourse on the relation between the state and the people. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise that their practical interpretation and meaning came to be elaborated elsewhere: through laws, doctrines, and enforced practices in the

case of the Meiji Constitution and the myth of national polity, and in actual debates and historical situation of the postwar period in the case of the Postwar Constitution and the myth of homogenous ethnos. And further, these high-level concepts came to be disseminated and normalised through a widening range of discourses and social practices like education, art and media representation, celebrations and everyday activities. To grasp what this means in practice, it is best to turn to an analysis of these specific myths.

Kokutai, the National Polity of Imperial Japan

Kokutai (lit. 'national body,' usually translated as 'national polity') was originally elaborated as a conception of Japanese Emperor-centric sovereignty in the early 19th century (Kawamura 2014: 29), being close to the idea of a 'body politic', but over time it evolved into a conception of primordial unity between the people, the state, and the imperial family to produce a holistic view of the Japanese nation. At the root of *kokutai*'s unity is the concept of 'family-nation' of divine origin, with all 'family' members blood-related to one another and ultimately centered on the imperial family and the Emperor in a racialised, imagined community (Yoshino 1997: 200-201).

The holistic vision of *kokutai* was cast into fresh prominence in the foundational relationship between state and people formalised in the Meiji Constitution (1889) and directly articulated as *kokutai* in *Imperial Rescript on Education* (1890). Together, these documents established and codified into law basic elements of a new imperial ideology: the Constitution established its formal foundation, while the *Rescript* named it as *kokutai* and spread it through mandatory

memorisation of the *Rescript* in schools and its ritualised repetition at formal school ceremonies (see Hardacre 1989: 121-124 on societal impact of the *Rescript*):

> Know ye, Our subjects: Our Imperial Ancestors (*waga kōso kōsō*) have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; Our subjects ever united in loyalty (*chū*) and filial piety (*kō*) have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire (*kokutai no seika*), and herein also lies the source of Our education… (*Imperial Rescript on Education*, translated in Gluck 1985: 121)

The promulgation of the *Rescript* turned around the earlier relationship between the people and the Emperor (functionally representing the state): whereas earlier the Emperor had been a subject to the people's entreaties as a living deity, the *Rescript* emphasised that now the people were the objects of the Emperor's expectations (Makihara 2011: 248). This represented a significant shift, as the appearance of the Emperor as the figurehead of both the nation and the state in the Meiji era was a marked change from his relative obscurity in the Tokugawa period. As Fujitani (1996) points out, the Emperor's emergence itself involved an evolving role for the institution that was later presented as the immutable heart of the nation-state, moving from a physically present Emperor touring around the country to stabilise the polity in early Meiji to a physically remote, yet omnipresent and dominating gaze of the Emperor following the promulgation of the Constitution, now centered in Tokyo, yet instrumentally present, for example, through his portraits distributed to schools. The Meiji Constitution formalised the Emperor's relationship to the people by naming them as subjects (*shinmin*) of the Emperor rather than using a democratic term of reference, thus casting the *kokutai* in a direct-

ly hierarchical model. The Meiji Constitution mixed elements of constitutional and absolute monarchy based on Prussian and British models (Bix 2000: 79-80), potentially opening the documents for interpretation towards either direction, but interpretations like Inoue Tetsujirō's (1855-1944) widely influential *Commentary on the Imperial Rescript on Education* (*Chokugo engi*, 1891) gave a Confucian reading focused on loyalty and filial piety as the state's foundation, 'thus laying the groundwork for the family-state ideal that so completely pervaded imperial Japan' (Hardacre 1989: 122).

By the time the Public Security Preservation Law was passed in 1925 to suppress political dissent by making attempts to alter the *kokutai* illegal, the understood meaning of *kokutai* had veered definitively towards a view based on absolute monarchy and divine descent.[ii] Although the exact definition of *kokutai* remained a contested issue through the 1930s and 1940s (see Kawamura 2014: 25-27), its ideological reach in late 1930s and during the war can be seen in widespread adoption and use of the Japanese government's moral education handbook *Kokutai no hongi* (*Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan,* 1937), with a first printing of around 300,000 copies distributed to schools, and as of 1943, approximately 1.9 million copies had been sold (Suzuki 2001: 252). Its beginning statement lays out the idea of divine imperial descent at the heart of the 'national entity' (*kokutai*):

> The unbroken line of Emperors, receiving the Oracle of the Founder of the Nation, reign eternally over the Japanese Empire. This is our eternal and immutable national entity. Thus, founded on this great principle, all the people, united as one great family nation in heart and obeying the Imperial Will, enhance indeed the beautiful virtues

> of loyalty and filial piety. This is the glory of our national entity. (*Kokutai no hongi*, translated in Suzuki 2001: 255-256)

The familial metaphor as organising principle of the nation is clear here, and it gains a mythical resonance from both the Japanese tradition of ancestral worship and the Confucian principle of filial piety. By the time this handbook came to explicate the imperial ideology, most remnants of constitutional monarchy and democratic decision-making had been suppressed, and elections had been purged of candidates opposing the military or the government (Gordon 2003: 196).

To sum up, *kokutai* was an intentionally constructed concept appealing to an invented tradition (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983): it was built on an older idea that was used for a specific purpose, the view it presented was reflected retroactively on the past, it was materially and symbolically instantiated in society through phenomena produced by the state, it was used to legitimise and direct nation-building, it was widely adopted into use despite its unhistorical nature, and ultimately it functioned as an object of belief and unity.

Kokutai's *Evolving Historical Interpretation*

The spread of the idea of *kokutai* through Japanese discourse in the early 20th century shows how fast a myth can be normalised: some might adopt it fanatically, some unreflectively, some critically, and some under duress,[iii] but it can quickly become accepted and begin structuring narratives on society. Functionally, it provided ideological support for the legitimacy of Japan's growing multi-ethnic empire, its hierarchies and the statist ideology of the ruling

cliques, which were often hostile to ethnic nationalisms contesting that legitimacy (for example, see Sakai 2009: 167-168).

Havens (1973) sees divergence between statism (*kokkashugi*) and populist nationalism (*kokuminshugi*) as a key dividing line in Japanese nationalist debates of late 19th and early 20th century, broadly following division in politics between oligarchs controlling the state against their opposition among intellectuals and the press as self-appointed spokesmen of the people (see also Gluck 1985: 60-67). The conflict revolved around the orientation of power in the relationship between the state and the people, with statist views promoting the state and government authority, and the populist nationalism emphasising the centrality of the people. A key issue was the designation of Japanese people as subjects (*shinmin*) rather than citizens (*kokumin*) in the Meiji Constitution. However, the notion of a *kokumin* was from the beginning mixed with an ethnic conception of the nation and national culture (see Doak 2007: 196), and the term *kokumin* itself is perhaps better translated as a ’national’ rather than a citizen. Over time, populist focus on the people became progressively entangled with the notion of race or ethnicity (*minzoku*) due to political controversies surrounding the imperial state’s expansion and the question of incorporating people from newly acquired territories into the nation. Many saw this expansion as a project of the political elites and even as a 'betrayal of the nation by its own state' (Doak 2007: 200).

Of course, a rough division between state nationalism and popular nationalism allowed space for variety of positions. Minoda Muneki, in particular, linked what he saw as the historical agency of the ethnos directly to the authority of the state (Person 2018: 638). This was at least partly motivated by Minoda’s anti-Marxism that aimed to assist authorities in their sup-

pression of leftists, although as WWII broke out, Minoda became increasingly hostile towards the government leadership and his organisation Genri Nippon Society became marginalised (Person 2018: 640, 656). Minoda's ambiguous and complex association with the government exemplifies the state's troubled relationship with ethnic nationalism as 'a necessary basis for the organization of the population that also possessed the capacity to erupt into a populist movement for wresting the banner of patriotism from the hands of officials' (Person 2018: 657).

In practice, though, effective power over the state was held by a statist bureaucratic elite and the military (Kasza 1988: 102-110, 121-137), and it was from this direction that focus on the concept of national polity (*kokutai*) was encouraged as a way of glorifying the state apparatus itself to hierarchically integrate the people into the state. The concept of *kokutai* also functioned as a conveniently ambiguous means of formulating and enforcing ideological unity that legitimised attacks on those who contested the statist elite by branding them as advocating rebellion against the national polity (Kawamura 2017: 118-119). Populist nationalists, meanwhile, were split between those who accepted this constitutional structure of national polity and those who did not (Havens 1973: 578). Still, the idea of *kokutai* became established through educational indoctrination (Hardacre 1989: 121-124), but it was progressively forced to accommodate nationalist interpretations of *kokutai* based on the nation as *minzoku* (ethnos) and *kokumin* (citizens) rather than just *shinmin* (subjects) (see Kawamura 2014). After Japan entered the WWII in Asia, the issue of national unity became pressing, leading to governmental efforts to strengthen people's allegiance to the state by reconciling divergent discourses on the state (*kokka*) and the nation (*kokumin*) into a discourse on the nation-state (*kokumin-kokka*) (Doak 2007: 201-202). The State Mobilization Law of April 1938 articulat-

ed this aim as a necessity: 'An essential requisite for achieving the goal of victory is for the country to do its utmost to secure the livelihoods of the people and to harmonize those aspects of the well being of the state which are necessary for prosecuting the war' (*Kokka Sōdōin Hō*, translated by Havens 1973: 575). This effort to absorb populist nationalism into the state managed to stabilise the relationship between the state and the people in the war situation (Doak 2007: 202), with nationalist elements increasingly mixed with a statist understanding of Japan.[iv]

In sum, *kokutai*'s holistic and hierarchical orientation towards society meant that it emerged as a constructed, elite-driven understanding of society and that it was contested as a statist interpretation of Japanese polity by a nationalist view of society that mixed civic and ethnic elements. Japanese nationalism, in that sense, emerged distinctly in conflict with the state and statist mode of conceiving the relationship between people and the state. Thus, we can also understand the shift away from *kokutai* after the war as a shift away from a statist conception of Japanese nation-state and toward the tradition of a nationalist conception based ostensibly on *kokumin*, with the understanding of *minzoku* mediating the interpretation of what *kokumin* stood for in practice.

Tanitsu Minzoku, or Homogeneity of a Nation

After Japan's defeat in 1945, the concept of *kokutai* as a hierarchical family-nation collapsed, but its central notion of imagined kinship survived, epitomised in the racial metaphor of 'Japanese blood' (see Yoshino 1997: 201). This metaphor has since functioned as a marker of ethnic national identity on differences between 'Japanese' and 'others', exaggerating kinship

and lineage rather than referring to genetic traits (Yoshino 1997: 202). The imagined kinship of blood fed into a myth of the Japanese as a homogeneous ethnos (*tanitsu minzoku*) that emerged as a key post-war myth structuring the relationship between state and people, enabling the people to identify themselves as an ethnic group distinct from others, while allowing the state to treat them as a homogeneous group, ignoring ethnic minorities, class differences, and so on in policy. Yoshino points out that 'Racial, ethnic and national categories almost completely overlap in the Japanese perception of themselves', and the phrase *tanitsu minzoku* conveniently refers to 'the homogeneity of Japanese people without specifying whether one is referring to their racial or cultural features' (Yoshino 1992: 19; see Fukuoka 2017: 351 on similar, more recent results among Japanese youth). In practice, this has meant that

> cultural determinants (religious values, language, patterns of social and economic organization), rather than genetic or physiological markers, have been deployed to signify the existence of an immutable and homogeneous Japanese identity. Within this literature, the Japanese present is transformed by an idealized past, heterogeneity is ignored, and historical memory is suppressed. (Weiner 2009: xv-xvi)

Tanitsu means ’singular’ or ’uniform’, while *minzoku* is usually translated as ’ethnic group’, but has variously conflated cultural, historical, political, and racial criteria (see Weiner 1997: 98-100). The idea of Japanese *minzoku* became central for postwar reconstruction of national identity, overshadowing the term *kokumin* that is formally used to denote the people both as a nation and citizenry.

Filling a Postwar Void on Japanese National Identity

While *kokutai* had provided a dominant frame for understanding the Japanese society in the early 20th century and particularly during the wartime years, it had only provided a general orientation toward legitimating imperial rule, leaving most of national identity-building to be filled by ideological resources outside of it. As Japan was at the same time grappling with an intense encounter with the Western world and its own modernisation processes on both material and ideational level, it went through a long-running public debate on what Japanese national identity and a Japanese subjectivity meant. The first wave[v] of this debate occurred in late 19th century centred around the People's Rights Movement, while the second wave focused around the issue of modernity ran from late 1920s to early 1940s, pausing for a few years during the most intense period of war.

The debate flared up again right after the war when the issue of Japanese national identity in terms of subjectivity became a key debate among Japanese intellectuals (Koschmann 1982, 1996; Iida 2002). In part, it was a debate about subjectivity as tension of individuality and agency in relation to society and institutions, and in another sense, it was a debate on what it meant to be Japanese in contrast to other nationalities, especially after the disastrous defeat and collapse of the hierarchical structure of the empire. The dramatic context lent itself to a groundbreaking debate: 'The focal point of the debate on *shutaisei* (subjectivity), therefore, was the relationship between history and social structure on the one hand and voluntary, creative thought and action on the other' (Koschmann 1982: 610). However, this debate can also be seen as leading to a rearticulation of central myths of Japaneseness as key narratives for a national identity premised on culture and common blood, centered around a conception of homogeneous ethnos.

What partly prompted this was the immediate postwar question of war guilt. Notably, the Japanese people were absolved of responsibility, with either ’militarists’ or ’bureaucrats’ bearing the blame (Yoshida 2018: 10-14; Doak 2007: 113). Even the communists, who also blamed the Emperor, exempted the people from guilt, with communist leader Miyamoto Kenji arguing that the imperial system was a ’corruption of the ethnic nation’ (*minzoku o oshoku*) and calling for a rediscovery of the ’pride of the ethnic nation’ (*minzoku no hokori*) (Doak 2007: 113-15). This narrative dissociated the people from state actors, which required a new articulation of that relationship and the identity of the people. The aftermath of war, delegitimisation of imperial ideology, and tacit support from the Occupation authorities provided an opportunity for change.

There were several reasons why the issue on Japanese national identity emerged in the form of *minzoku* discourse. De-imperialization and loss of the multi-ethnic imperial state encouraged a sense of being a monoethnic nation, while ethnic nationalist narratives could also draw upon earlier idealisations of *minzoku* among prewar Marxists and liberals to cast a vision of a peaceful nation in contrast to the multi-ethnic, militaristic imperial state (Oguma 1995: 339-340). Furthermore, 'earlier liberal distinction between the nation (as *minzoku*) and the state (*kokka*) provided a sense of legitimate national identity through *minzoku* for the seven years of foreign occupation when an independent Japanese state did not exist' (Doak 2007: 252), grounding a revised understanding of Japanese national identity outside of the imperial ideology. While right-wingers and militarists were purged from public positions and prevented from appearing in print by the Occupation, ethnic nationalist discourse was ’able to thrive

through liberals and leftists who led the way in rehabilitating it' (Doak 2007: 252)[vi] and saw it as an extension of the earlier prewar discourse.

Meanwhile, the Occupation authorities' efforts to tackle statist mindset among the Japanese through various social, educational and legal measures (for example, see Dower 1999: 244-251), coupled with the Japanese intellectuals' interest in the ideal of subjective autonomy (Koschmann 1993: 399-401), had a consequence of deepening the long-running divide between the people and the state in a situation where the state itself hardly existed independently of the foreign occupation. Under severely weakened political citizenship, 'ethnic identity' in contrast to the Occupation forces as the Other provided the remaining form for understanding the Japanese nation as a whole (Doak 2007: 155).

All this underlines how an ethnonationalist discourse on Japanese national identity took shape already before the promulgation of the Postwar Constitution in 1947 and provided a prior basis for the interpretation of the rights granted by the Constitution that was more focused on the nation than the individual. We can see this in how the intellectual debate on Japanese subjectivity emphasised the ethnic nature of subjectivity and how even the individual was conditioned by the Japanese character of the nation (e.g. see Sevilla 2017: 24-31 on Watsuji Tetsurō's 1949 *Ethics III* and national ethics as products of its history and milieu). Doak notes that formative for the direction of ethnic nationalism was Shinmei Masamichi's *Theory of Historical Minzoku* (1949), where Shinmei drew on the imperial national theory that had, in an effort to deny subjected people their own independent state, argued that *minzoku* was the essence of national identity (Doak 2007: 254-255).

Under the restrictive conditions of military occupation, the issue of national identity came to be framed around Japanese subjectivity rather than society or politics, and debate focused on defining Japaneseness on cultural and philosophical grounds that further emphasised its ethnic nature over its political constitution. This approach proved normative for the coming decades, establishing a framework for future articulations of identity based on ethnic and cultural features that united the Japanese rather than recognising the heterogeneity that existed among them (also later resulting in the production of so-called *nihonjinron* literature premised on Japanese exceptionality and homogeneity, see e.g. Dale 1986, Yoshino 1992, Befu 2001, Weiner 2009). An identity constructed in this manner worked to harmonise perceptions of the Japanese nation, marginalising elements that did not fit the narrative, and produced a myth of national homogeneity by taking the dominant ethnic group as normative ideal and more or less proceeding as if minorities did not exist.[vii]

A Homogeneous Nation

The debate on what united the people as a nation had been bubbling under the modern debates, and we can trace back the issue of cultural homogeneity from the Meiji period onwards as a drive toward social harmony (see Itō 1998 on the emphasis on harmony (*wa*) and the myth of Prince Shōtoku; see also Weiner 1997) aimed at constituting a statist society where all had a role in working for the collective glory of the state under the Emperor:

> Considering that Our subjects are the descendants of the loyal and good subjects of Our Imperial Ancestors, We doubt not but that Our subjects will be guided by Our views, and will sympathize with all Our endeavours, and that, harmoniously cooperating together, they will share with Us Our hope of making manifest the glory of Our country,

> both at home and abroad, and of securing forever the stability of the work bequeathed to Us by Our Imperial Ancestors. (*Imperial Speech on the Promulgation of the Constitution,* 1889, translated by Ito Miyoji)

This combined with the national identity-building that emphasised Japaneseness, its culture and aesthetics—prompting intellectual debates on tradition and modernity (e.g. Heisig and Maraldo 1994; Takeuchi 2005; Calichman 2008), emphasis on rural communities as *furusato*, nostalgic old home villages (Scheiner 1998; Robertson 1998), construction of Japanese identity through ethnology (Itō 2002) and literature (Marra 1999), etc.—while imperial expansionism positioned the Japanese on top of a racialised hierarchy of the *kokutai*, thus producing a view of Japaneseness as exceptional in itself.

The prewar view of the nation was not, however, particularly homogeneous. The domestic socioeconomic relations were viewed through a Social Darwinian lens, with traditional outsider populations (untouchables and other ethnicities) as well as the urban and rural poor seen as possessing assumed physical or cultural characteristics that separated them from the higher classes (Weiner 1997: 110-12; see also Weiner 2009). Already Kuga Katsunan (1857-1907) pointed out how the restrictive understanding of the people in the Meiji Constitution meant that majority of the population were shut out of participation in public affairs so that they were almost seen as foreigners (Makihara 2011: 253).

This internal othering reflected social stratification of the Tokugawa period that persisted in the hierarchical society of the *kokutai* where the notion of national structure provided a unifying ideal, but did little to curtail the empire's socio-economic and racial hierarchies. These

divisions started to fracture with rural population in late 1920s and 1930s: just as Japan's agrarian crisis under conditions of industrialisation began to gain recognition, cultural resistance to modernisation came to seek Japan's traditional roots in rural village life. This reflected international trends of late 19th and early 20th century nationalism in emphasising rural communities, vernacular architecture and rural culture as romanticised expressions of national identity (see Storm 2017: 176-177). The agrarian crisis also led the increasingly powerful military and Ministry of War to express their support to agricultural communities, mainly due to interest in enhancing Japan's self-sufficiency and the usefulness of rural youth as recruits (Havens 1974: 308-313). The result was a cultural elevation of rural communities as exemplars of Japaneseness, which paved the way for a more encompassing idea of a homogeneous society based on ideology rather than socio-economic hierarchies.

Following the war, due to the narrative of dissociating the Japanese people from the imperial state and war guilt, the myth of homogeneity and Japanese self-conception came to be tied closely to the idea that Japan was a peaceful island nation that had been drawn into war by a clique of militarists (see e.g. Gluck 1993: 82-85). This pacifist conception of ancestral unity imagined a pure Japanese ethnos that had no disputes with foreign peoples due to its isolation (Yoshino 1992: 18),[viii] reinvigorating the idea of social harmony disseminated earlier and connected with historical memories of the Tokugawa period's isolationism. And as the intellectual elite leaned towards a monoethnic understanding of the nation, the public education written and overseen by them also reconstructed Japanese self-image in the same manner (Tanabe 2021: 173).[ix] This offered a deeply revisionist reading of Japanese history, but found fertile ground in the aftermath of a disastrous war and especially through Japan's official renunciation of war in its new Constitution.

The Postwar Constitution

The instalment of a new Constitution in May 1947 represented a foundational break from the *kokutai*, as it stripped away the *kokutai*'s institutional framework and laid foundations for new institutions to take its place. The Postwar Constitution established the nation (*kokumin*) as the source of power and asserted the people's fundamental rights, displacing the national polity as the principle of social organisation with the idea of unified citizenry of Japan as the constitutive power of the nation. This assignment of agency meant that suddenly the people in all forms were raised to the forefront of public memory as 'the new protagonists of history… agents of social and political change apart from the state' (Gluck 1993: 85).

After the war, the Occupation sought to reform the Japanese Constitution based on representative democracy and recognition of basic human rights, with protection for individual rights, gender equality and freedom of thought, speech, and religion. The Japanese public opinion also rejected minor amendments in favour of a real change that would grant freedoms to the public (Goodman 2017: 23-25). The Japanese government's efforts to subordinate constitutional rights of the individual to legislation were rejected by the Occupation, and the final 1947 Constitution disempowered the Emperor, but retained the position as a symbol of the state while placing sovereignty solely in the people. The Postwar Constitution, stating in its Article 14: 'All of the people [*kokumin*] are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin,' even emphasized a civic reading of the concept of *kokumin* by implicitly stating that the Japanese people could include different races. This provided a starting point for disentangling the concept of *minzoku* from the concept of *kokumin*, but it did not repudiate

the idea of *minzoku*, since *minzoku* is not necessarily a racialised notion (see Yoshino 1992: 19).

The choice of *kokumin* as the preferred term for the people in the Constitution was deliberate as it had a more conservative connotation, especially in comparison to its alternative (*jinmin*) that implied a politically loaded, adversarial relationship with the state (Doak 2007: 155; Dower 1999: 381-382). The earlier wartime push to integrate and absorb populist nationalism into the state had meant that even *Kokutai no hongi* had used the term *kokumin* throughout its text, although the vision it espoused of the people was explicitly racial. The recent use of *kokumin* in imperial ideology had therefore rendered it nearly interchangeable with the idea of nationality defined on ethnic grounds, meaning that it had lost much of its earlier connection to a civic form of the nation. Thus, *kokumin* as a term provided enough ambiguity and continuity to be accepted throughout the political spectrum, while leaving its interpretation open.

Still, it was the Left that provided major legitimation to an ethnic interpretation. As mentioned above, in the early postwar period ethnic nationalism was championed by left-wing intellectuals, emphasising the autonomy of the people in opposition to the state (Wilson 2002: 18) in late 1940s and especially in early 1950s, before leftist support for ethnic nationalism declined later in the decade. There was an element of self-reflection in the emergence of ethnic nationalism on the left, since Japan Communist Party was keenly aware of how Marxism had failed Japanese people in the 1930s, with many of its key figures undergoing 'conversions' (*tenkō*) to state ideology, while the Left's immediate postwar turn towards progressive discourses on ethnic nationalism also presaged a movement for national awakening (Gayle

2003: 53), which was in line with the success of Communist revolution in China and Stalinist positions on the role of nations and ethnicity in the international progress of socialism. This was centered on the rearticulation of the idea of *minzoku* in opposition to the state,[x] fuelled by social unrest of 1947-8 and by JCP's declaration of a Democratic Ethnic-National Unification Front in February 1948, where international developments in worsening US-Soviet relations and increasing hostility of the Occupation towards the Left played a role, just as domestic unrest over food, economy, labour relations and 'opposition to conservative and reactionary government' compounded with disappointment in the Constitutional revision (Gayle 2003: 53-54, 62-63). The idea of an ethnic nation as re-establishing its independence from the colonizing power of the Occupation strengthened as earlier confidence in postwar democracy faded on the Left, and the 1948 March Struggle helped through labour action consolidate an image of an ethnic nation standing in opposition to the Occupation as a nation rejecting return to Japan's authoritarian past via 'unfettered capitalism, state control, social repression, and Cold War geopolitics' (Gayle 2003: 55).

This resistance worked to produce Leftist, seemingly progressive narratives about the relationship between the people and the state that emphasised ethnicity and homogeneity as foundational for the nation. The influence of these narratives on the reception, interpretation and application of the new Constitution in legal and institutional context is thus of interest here. In terms of shaping the early interpretations of the new Constitution, political centrality of the Left and marginalisation of right-wing movements until the 1960s meant that the Left was able to advance its views on nationalism through legitimate claims for social reform and significantly monopolise public sentiment (Morris 1960: 203-205, 402).[xi] This also gained force from an influential streak of popular or ethnic nationalism arising from the left-leaning

standpoint that sought Japan's independence from the US and opposed the establishment American military bases on Japanese soil, which set it in conflict with a state nationalist position that promoted the Yoshida doctrine's focus on US-Japan security alliance and economic recovery.[xii] The anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-state and anti-Emperor views of the Left, legitimised by narratives of ethnic national past, reigned strong until mid-1950s, defining the early postwar political discourse on the nation as historically homogeneous and peaceful people.

Minzoku *in the Later Postwar Period*

The myth of Japanese homogeneity evolved further as national recovery took root, the stratified prewar and wartime society giving way to a more egalitarian order burgeoning from 'the occupation reforms, economic change and technological advances linking city and country' (Gordon 1993: 457). By the time Japan was moving into 1960s, consumerism began to influence Japanese identity construction and performance, producing a corollary myth of Japanese as middle class people, cementing stereotypes of a middle class family even as consumer capitalism began to alter intra-familial dynamics with an increasing freedom for youth in consumerist identity-building (for example, see Ivy 1993: 249-251; Gordon 1993: 461-462). In Japan's case, the normative influence of the middle class myth was partly successful in reproducing stereotypical family roles in practice: while the youth became the focus of modern consumerist identity-creation that gave them access to identities separate from the ideals of a middle class family, the stereotypes of the father as a wage-earning salaryman and mother as a homemaker proved enduring in the public imagination, and the labour force participation rates have remained skewed towards men (see Kamiya and Ikeda 1994; OECD 2019). In supporting the idea of national homogeneity, the middle class stereotypes served to

other and marginalise those who fell outside them, particularly the urban and rural poor. And in terms of class structures, they worked to suggest that Japanese were on the whole bourgeois or middle class people, foreclosing paths for class-based politics and reducing areas of politicisation for party politics.

In effect, what came to exist in the postwar period is an entanglement of two concepts, *kokumin* and *minzoku*, conflated in the myth of homogeneous ethnos. Whereas *kokumin* draws its formal influence from the formulation of the Postwar Constitution, and is rooted in earlier debates between statists and populist nationalists, *minzoku* derives its influence from historical exigencies of the postwar situation. It has likely had more influence than the formal conception of *kokumin*, to the degree that even postwar state representatives have often articulated their claims of Japanese nationhood in terms of *minzoku* rather than *kokumin*, echoing wartime governmental efforts to subordinate populist nationalism to the needs of state administration. For example, Ōhira Masayoshi (prime minister 1978-1980) emphasised the excellence of the Japanese in a 1975 speech:

> 'I think that from a world perspective, the Japanese are an extraordinarily excellent people (*hijō ni sugureta minzoku*). Through their long history, they have endured many trials and overcome many perils. Despite defeat they did not lose heart, but built today's state and society… Poor in natural resources, our country's greatest resource is the Japanese people (*minzoku*).' (Cited in Pyle 1996:69)

While this comment of Ōhira's is a rather commonplace example of political rhetoric, it shows how easily the term *minzoku* has been employed even by top politicians in their

speech. In contrast, Ōhira Administration's 1980 report 'Economic Management in an Age of Culture' on efforts to close the gap between the people and the state carefully avoids any mention of the term (Doak 2007: 209-210), indicating that it was still officially seen as politically problematic. A more dramatic example was Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's appeal to the concept of *minzoku* in his effort to resolve the historical tension between nation and state through a revision of the Ōhira report in the mid-1980s, a resolution he remarked could only come through 'a reaffirmation of Japan as an ethnic nation-state (*minzoku kokka*)' (Doak 2007: 211). His comments led to major political blowback within Japan after it was lambasted in foreign media (Burgess 2010: 11). Although Japanese top politicians have since tended to be careful about direct claims of ethnic nationalism, the idea of Japanese homogeneity continues to be evoked despite pushback from mostly non-Japanese commentators; in contrast, DPJ leader Hatoyama Yukio's comments challenging the same myth provoked a domestic social media 'firestorm' (Burgess 2010: 11).

Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's relationship to nationalism also illustrated some complexities of the issue, with Abe being on record for praising nationalism while also actively seeking to distance himself from the label, especially in regards to political opinion outside of Japan (Morris-Suzuki 2013). One way of viewing his position is as rejecting ethnic nationalism in favor of a positively understood, ostensibly civic nationalism (see Doak 2013), which was most explicit in his book *Utsukushii Kuni e* (2006) and its praise of the role minorities can play for Japan (Abe 2006: 85). In practice, his views tended to mix the two, along with a general anti-liberalism, constitutional revisionism and promotion of a conservative vision of Japan (Akaha 2008; Morris-Suzuki 2013). There was a deep vein of pragmatism in his vision, though, since Japan still needs to address its demographic problems, but at the same time,

Abe promoting a vision of Japanese as *kokumin* implicitly marginalised existing minorities such as *Zainichi* Koreans that have been 'permanent residents' in Japan for generations (see Morris-Suzuki 1998: 196-205).

Still, a key reason for the overall reticence of elite politicians has been a public rejection of directly political nationalism due to its association with war guilt and public emphasis placed on Japan's national identity as a pacifist nation, which is seen as evinced by its renunciation of war in the Postwar Constitution's Article 9.[xiii] As has been discussed above, the myth of ethnic homogeneity remains tied to this national identity, resulting in a diffused ethnic nationalism articulated particularly on cultural terms that tend to conflate culture with ethnicity and blood in delineating an authentic sense of Japaneseness. Going deeper into this issue is beyond this article, but the cultural nationalism of contemporary Japan has been discussed extensively elsewhere (Dale 1986; Yoshino 1992; Iida 2002; McVeigh 2006; Shimazu 2006).

Conclusion

The analysis above has shown how contingency of political and social processes from Meiji to Postwar Japan unfolded through contestations over the direction of Japanese monarchy and the formulations of Japanese nationalism, and how these resolved as well as sustained tensions between state direction and popular agency in the construction of national identity. On a more concrete level, the contingency of these outcomes also underlines that while the view of Japan's homogeneous unity was a product of historical circumstances in how the Postwar Constitution came to be interpreted, future circumstances may alter that interpretetation to a different direction. This already happened with the national polity, which came to be inter-

preted in terms of divine descent and as an absolute rather than a constitutional monarchy. What kind of narrative frame becomes dominant around these central myths depends both on the socio-political demand it needs to fulfil and the structural support it can receive.

The interpretation of these myths is at the heart of the argument here, since while myths may ground the core concepts of a discourse, it is up to the interpretative narratives to give direction and historical meaning to them in practice, even undermining the expected understanding of the myths (as in the case of an ethnic interpretation of nation in the Postwar period). It is thus important to examine the counterfactuals of these situations to highlight why certain paths or semantic contexts became dominant, and why it matters. Japan's shift from state-oriented to people-oriented view may not appear particularly striking, but it opened up entirely different ways to conceptualise social and political life in society, thus grounding a major societal transformation.

The importance of interpretation and impact of change in central myths should remind us that despite their apparent stability, both are liable to change over time. This implies that those studying contemporary Japanese politics would do well to consider the influence myths have on the form of contemporary politics and how changes in their interpretation would alter the character of those politics. Since a clear wording of *kokumin* is still in the Constitution, a direction towards civic and inclusive understanding of the nation exists, and may well be of acute importance for Japan due to its current demographic shift and need to accommodate a growing population of immigrant workers in the future.

[i] As accounted by Hatanaka himself in Cook and Cook 1992: 222-227.

[ii] See Doak 2007: 92-126 for a detailed discussion on the shifting interpretation of the Emperor's role and its interplay with evolving views of the nation's moral characteristics in decades following the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution.

[iii] Respectively, the Imperial Way ideologists, population educated into the ideology through schooling, intellectuals like the Kyoto School contesting its meaning, and Leftists who went through *tenkō* and recanted their earlier political views.

[iv] For example, see Nishitani Keiji's 1941 discussion on the need to absorb citizens into the state in order to strengthen the internal unity of the nation-state (Nishitani 1987: 278-282; see also Nishitani 1979: 27). Osaki 2019 also discusses Nishitani's wartime views on the nation and the state in more detail.

[v] First in terms of the encounter between 'the West' and Japan, although as Ichijo 2020 points out, the *kokugaku* scholars had already been wrestling with issues of identity and Japanese subjectivity since the 18th century, albeit mainly in contrast to China as the constitutive other.

[vi] See also Doak 2007: 252-253 on Tokyo University president Nanbara Shigeru's lecture on this topic in 1946 and how it opened the floodgates by signalling the acceptability of discussing *minzoku* identity in the postwar period.

[vii] For example, 'Japan's initial submission to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations in 1980… denied the existence of minority populations' (Weiner 2009:xvi).

[viii] See also McVeigh 2006: 143 for various articulations of essential Japaneseness as a harmonious, homogeneous ethnos.

[ix] Even the separate schooling system of Zainichi Koreans established along ethno-national lines worked to produce an ethnic demarcation of the Japanese nation (see Jo 2015).

[x] From contemporary perspective, this position could be seen as leftist version of populist nationalism, with the pure, harmonious and peaceful Japanese *minzoku* posited against a corrupt, feudalistic and aggressive State.

[xi] See especially Gayle (2001, 2003, 2006) on the influence of Marxist and more or less progressive representations of the nation in the work of Marxist historians like Ishimoda Shō and leftist organisations like the Rekiken or Ehime Women's History Circle. See also Ichihashi 2016 on developments of people's history and history from below in the 1960s.

[xii] Takekawa (2007) examines how this conflict between ethnic nationalism and state nationalism played out in the postwar decades through the respective editorial lines of *Asahi* and *Yomiuri*. See also Kersten (2006) on the development of postwar left, anti-base nationalist positions as part of the evolution of anti-state politics.

[xiii] Takekawa (2007: 75) even notes how *Asahi*'s editorials appeal to the constitutional principles for the Japanese understanding of its postwar nation, national identity and Japan's position in the world. From this point of view, Japan's pacifist position based on its constitutional framework is a point of pride for the nation, even a constitutive element of what it means to be Japanese (Takekawa 2007: 67).

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