

Sitting in a Circle

Thoughts on the Japanese Group Mentality

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An episode over the Atlantic

About 10 years ago I wrote a magazine article entitled "'Kurumaza' o kumu Nihonjin no bukimisa" (The Threatening Pose of Japanese Sitting in a Circle) based on an experience I had on a transatlantic plane flight.

I was traveling from Paris to New York on an American airline, sitting in the back of a jumbo jet filled mostly with European and American passengers. We had just begun flying over the Atlantic when my attention was caught by a stream of loud talk and laughter coming from a few rows ahead of me. What really made my ears prick up was the fact that I was hearing people speak my own language in this unexpected setting. Raising my eyes from my book, I looked forward and found that the source of the noise was a group of seven or eight Japanese, mostly men, who were loudly enjoying a game of cards. They were casually dressed and looked like seasoned travelers: I guessed that they might be working for a fashion magazine or perhaps involved in the television industry. In age they appeared to range from their twenties to their forties. They occupied two rows of four seats each in the center section, and to my surprise, the people in the front row had folded the back of their seats forward and were sitting on them in a cramped arrangement facing the people in the back row as they played their card game.

It had never occurred to me that the back of plane seats could be folded forward, and my first reaction was to marvel at this phenomenon. But what really struck me was the boisterous way my compatriots were disporting themselves while most of the people around them were seated quietly in their seats. Eventually the members of this jolly bunch dropped off to sleep, and the impromptu airborne party came to an end.

I was quite embarrassed to have witnessed this scene of Japanese using even the narrow confines of an airplane to form an inward-looking little circle that carried on oblivious to the rest of the passengers. How, I wondered, did the people seated nearby feel about the noisy Japanese party? Some of them may have thought nothing of it; after all, similarly exuberant groups of Americans may be seen on domestic flights in the United States. Doubtless, however, there were others who looked on with distaste and possibly even trepidation. As I thought about this group and the impression they made as they sat enjoying themselves in their tight little circle, it struck me that "sitting in a circle" was an image that could well serve as a metaphor for Japan and the Japanese in general.

In Japanese, sitting in a circle is called *kurumaza*, literally, "wheel seating." A *kurumaza* formation can put others off, since all they see of the people forming the circle is their backs, which seems to be saying, "The rest of you are outsiders." To be sure, when the *kurumaza* is formed on the ground outdoors, a stranger standing on the outside of the circle can also see the faces of those on the far side. But the attention of those faces is riveted on the others in the

circle. The stranger can be standing as little as a meter away from the ring, and still the group will pay virtually no attention. This obliviousness to others can easily be observed, for example, in the tightly packed groups of revelers that fill Ueno Park in Tokyo for flower-viewing parties under the trees during the cherry blossom season.

The tremendously popular pastime of *karaoke*—singing to a recorded instrumental accompaniment—represents a new form of *kurumaza*. It must have been sometime in the latter half of the 1970s that somebody got the bright idea of putting karaoke equipment in a bar, and in no time it caught on all over Japan. The quiet bars I had frequented succumbed to the fad and were filled with the sound of patrons belting out their favorite tunes.

It is not that I consider *karaoke* a bad thing. I have some close friends who enjoy it, and when I am out with them I may even sing a song or two myself. But for a person like me, whose repertory is limited to songs that were popular 20 years ago, the sincere *karaoke* enthusiasts are like a *kurumaza* group. Unable to join the circle, I cannot avoid feeling like an outsider and a poor sport, even when the people I am with clearly have no intention of excluding me.

Although the virtuoso performers at the *karaoke* bars appear at first glance to be enjoying themselves tremendously, it seems to me that they are as deadly earnest as participants in a major contest. Moreover, they never forget the pecking order of the workplace, which determines who sings when and so forth. I can imagine the exhausted look on their faces when they get home. Within Japan's *kurumaza* social structure, after-hours singing inevitably becomes part of the job.

The *kurumaza* group looks happy and harmonious, but it can take on a more sinister aspect depending on one's viewpoint. At the risk of being called perverse, one might suggest that the circle is a formation in which the members constantly keep watch over one another to make sure there are no defectors or dropouts.

Japan's dramatic emergence as an economic superpower was made possible by the diligence, integrity, loyalty, dedication to self-improvement, and other lofty qualities of the Japanese people—all of which we should be proud. But we also need to realize that the same qualities can lead to exclusionism. This is bound to happen in the future as Japanese companies try to accommodate increasing numbers of foreigners, who are likely to march to the beat of a different drummer. The same people who are so generous and mutually supportive within the circle are liable to turn into frightfully difficult, arrogant, cruel, and intolerant individuals when dealing with outsiders. What particularly scares and alarms me is that I realize that I share this same tendency.

There is no reason to believe that the Japanese tendency toward fanatic xenophobia is a thing of the past. A society that operates on the basic principle of strengthening solidarity through *kurumaza* is a breeding ground for such fanaticism. The only reason we have not seen a renewed outbreak so far is a new-universal attitude best summed up in the saying "Rich people don't fight." But God only knows how the situation may change in the near future.

An inward-facing society

The word *kurumaza* has been part of the Japanese language for several centuries. The well-known *Nippo jisho* (Japanese-Portuguese Dictionary) published by the Jesuits in Nagasaki in 1603 contains the entry "curumazani (the *-ni* at the end means "in"); the phrase "curumazani

nauoru" is glossed as "all the people sit down in a circle." Also, the sample phrase given for the entry "gururito" (an adverb meaning "around") is "gururito curumazani nauoru," which is translated, "to change seats so as to make a human circle or to sit down in that form."

Although I have no concrete evidence for this, I suspect that the word *kurumaza* may have become popular during the internecine warfare of Japan's medieval days. The word conjures up the image of a circle of men with tense looks on their faces—a group of warriors about to go into battle, perhaps, or some wealthy merchants secretly discussing how to protect their interest, or village leaders gathered in council to respond to the exorbitant demands placed on them by some warlord.

Women would not have been part of these serious *kurumaza*. But once the emergency situation was settled, gatherings of this sort would have doubtless turned into festive occasions of drinking, singing, and dancing. At these times, women probably added color to the circle and may even have become its main attractions. And when in due course the country entered a period of extended peace, gatherings of the latter type came to the fore.

In any case, a circular formation in which everyone sits facing the center is the most effective arrangement for unifying the group psyche, securing pledges of solidarity and loyalty, and promoting exclusionist feelings toward opponents. High school baseball and volleyball coaches all use the *kurumaza* when their teams are in trouble.

The circular formation can probably be found to a greater or lesser extent among all people who are accustomed to sitting directly on the ground or the floor. But not every language has a term corresponding to *kurumaza*, which evokes such a marvelous visual image.

The word *kurumaza* is written using the Chinese characters for wheel (or wheeled vehicle) and seat. But the term has never existed in Chinese. I suspect that the lack of such a term in China is related to the fact that since ancient times the Chinese have sat on chairs and worn shoes indoors. People sitting on chairs cannot form a *kurumaza*, which requires sitting cross-legged on the floor or the ground. This manner of sitting is a very effective way of heightening the sense of unity of the group, since all the members have their haunches in contact with the same mother earth. The sensation is very unlike that of sitting on separate chairs, which heightens the awareness of individual differences.

The lifestyle that evolved in the West, like that of China, was uncondusive to the emergence of a term like *kurumaza*. In English, for example, the closest one can come is something mundane like "to sit in a circle" or "to sit in a ring," which has none of the special feeling conveyed by the Japanese term. Though my ignorance of finance and economics prevents me from making any but the simplest statements about such topics, I would venture that the rising tension between the United States and Japan ultimately has roots in the fundamental gap between *kurumaza* and non-*kurumaza* societies. This difference could take generations to overcome, and I fear that it might even result in another serious collision between the two countries.

The Japanese face

We Japanese are now prowling around the United States (and the rest of the world) driving prices up by buying land, buildings, and works of art; at the same time we are doing our best to keep outsiders from penetrating our own real estate and other markets. From the perspective of people who embrace the principles of free trade and open markets, this behavior must be

incomprehensible.

We may not have ill intentions, but by stubbornly refusing to show anything but our backs to those on the outside while maintaining abnormally high levels of energy within our own closed circle, we are bound to put others off. And because our gaze is directed inward, we remain largely unaware of the impression we are creating on the people who are observing us from the exterior.

The face of a people is best revealed not in a country's economic or military power but in the strengths underlying its cultural history. No special research is needed to understand this. If you wander around in a foreign country—any country—you are struck by the distinctive forms of dignity and courtesy manifested in people's facial expressions and actions, as well as by their manner of speaking and listening. These impart a clear sense of the individuality of the culture that has grown on that soil over the centuries. The people before you seem the very personification of their country's cultural heritage.

Foreigners visiting Japanese could make the same observation. To the perceptive visitor, the impressions of a moment speak of centuries of history. The face of the Japanese nation is to be seen at every instant on the millions of individual faces moving around Japan's cities and countryside, smiling or putting on airs. Here is a visage somewhat different, more complex and varied, but in general far more friendly than the one that is abroad, namely that of a people who go around buying up paintings for investment purposes, ostentatiously bidding high prices for works into which struggling artists have poured their souls.

Problems of translation

The structure of the *kurumaza* society and the attendant psychological traits of the Japanese people have slowly solidified in response to historical circumstances over a period of a millennium or two.

Every society has a core of elements that seem strange to outsiders. Even in language, the words and expressions that have played a central role in that people's culture are often the most difficult to translate. For example, it is far from easy to convey the very special culturally tinted nuance of words like *tsuki* (moon) and *hana* (flower) used in Japanese poetry to evoke images of autumn nights and cherry trees blooming in spring; to do so requires explaining the centuries-long process whereby the Japanese concepts of life, death, beauty, and eternity have taken shape in our collective consciousness and found expression in these simple words.

Although poems are in most cases written by people with little worldly power, they offer one of the most important keys to the basic form and essence of a culture. Layers of spiritual history are hidden within even some of the most ordinary words, and poets can use these words to awaken people to the great continuity of time of which they are an integral part. The intrinsic importance of poetry cannot be appreciated as long as poems are considered no more than the frivolous creations of highly sensitive minds.

If poetry is indeed the expression of the core of a culture, then we should be able to discover in Japanese poetry the *kurumaza* structure that is so deeply rooted in the lives of the Japanese people. In fact, we can even say that in a sense the *kurumaza* structure is identical to the most basic structure of Japanese poetry. At the same time, however, it must be noted that the finest fruits of poetry ripen only when this *kurumaza* structure is denied. I have already discussed this question to the best of my ability in my book *Utage to koshin* (The Banquet and the

Solitary Mind), but I would like to consider it again here from a different perspective.

At one time I became aware of and took an interest in the major role the words *au* (to meet, to come together, to be in accord, to fit) and its derivative *awasu* (to bring together, to bring into accord) play in the Japanese language. What brought my attention to this was an observation that the Japanese language scholar Ono Susumu made during a round-table discussion in which we both took part. Ono pointed out that *osafu*, an old form of the verb *osaeru* (to restrain, to hold down), was formed as a compound of the verbs *osu* (to push) and *afu*, and earlier form of *au*. He gives a more precise explanation of the word in his laborious work *Iwanami kogo jiten* (Iwanami Dictionary of Classical Japanese): "To continue pushing, adjusting one's force to that of the other party so as not to move the other party." In other words, this single word—which is still in everyday use—has woven into it the awareness of a relationship in which the performer of the action senses the other person's force and increases or decreases the amount of force applied so as to match it.

Once I began looking at the Japanese vocabulary with this idea in mind, I was amazed at how many compounds contain the verbs *au* and *awasu* or their respective noun forms, *ai* and *awasu*. The use of *au* is not surprising in words like *yoriau* (to get together) and *ochiau* (to rendezvous), where it conveys the sense of "with one another," but there are other words in which the meaning conveyed by *au* is not immediately obvious, such as nouns (using the form *ai*) like *maai* (interval) and *kiai* (*spirit*). These seem to mean more or less the same as *ma* and *ki*, but leaving off the *ai* takes something away from the word's impact. In the word *fuai*, which denotes the visual and tactile feeling of a fabric, the meaning of the *ai* elements is equally difficult to pin down, yet its role is decisive, since without it we are left with the much more general *fu* (style, manner). The addition of *au* or *awasu* to many other words imparts a distinct flavor to the Japanese vocabulary; to list just a few, we have *omoiau* (to be in love with each other); *noriawasu* (to ride in the same vehicle); *miau* (to look at each other, to be appropriate) and its derivative *omiaai* (meeting between prospective partners in an arranged marriage); *ukeau* (to undertake, to vouchsafe); *deau* (to encounter); and *kiawasu* (to happen to meet).

It struck me that the use of *au* and its derivatives, connoting togetherness, accord, or mutuality, in so many diverse situations might be taken as a reflection of the Japanese people's enduring sensitivity to interpersonal relations.

Utage and awase

Around the time I was considering the wide use of *au*, I also became intrigued by the idea of the *utage* (banquet) as an important key to understanding the context in which Japanese poetry developed.

According to the *Genkai* dictionary, *utage* comes from a word meaning "rhythmical clapping of hands," and this derivation seems to be generally accepted. The *utage* is an occasion for sharing feelings and laughter, and it always brings a number of people together in happy congeniality. (Incidentally, the native Japanese word for this sort of congenial togetherness is *matoi*, which comes from words meaning "sitting in a circle," that is, forming a *kurumaza*.) My idea was that looking at the concept of *utage* in the context of poetic and literary creation would offer some clearer insights into the distinctive features of Japanese literature.

The principle of *utage* is the powerful main artery running through all of Japanese culture. It is found in the *utaawase* (poetry contests) and in the composition of *renga* and *renku* (two types of linked verse); in the modern period the same principle can be seen at work in the rise of literary associations and of publications put out by literary coterie and even in the frequency with which magazines carry round-table discussions.

These methods of literary creation display the powerful workings of the principle of *awase* (bringing into accord) as a fundamental property of the *utage*. It is by no means an overstatement to say that the various techniques of bringing into accord set the tone for Japanese literature. They are to be seen everywhere; in the use of *kakekotoba* (double-entendre pivot words), *engo* (associated words), and *honkadori* (adaptations of famous poems) and in the delicate but lively interplay between what precedes and what follows in linked verse; similar techniques can be observed in *no* and the other poetry and prose of the Muromachi and Edo periods, which are richly interwoven with passages from and allusions to earlier masterpieces.

Literature, especially poetry, has provided the Japanese with an absolute aesthetic standard since early times. Since the principle of *utage* and the aesthetic of *awase* were such powerful forces in literature, they must also have affected other aspects of people's lives. To offer just one example, the *byōbu* (folding screens) that were a major element of the room furnishings of the Heian period (794-1185) brought paintings and poems together in a form of visual *utage*. For those living in such rooms, the furnishings and items of daily use were also manifestations of an artistic gathering; art was made part of life as life was fashioned into art.

The ideal informing the arts of *shōdo* (calligraphy), *kōdo* (incense smelling), *kado* (flower arrangement), and *chadō* (the tea ceremony) was always to bring together life and art, and that fundamental guiding principle was always sought in poetry. Within a pyramidal structure with a master at its apex, parishioners strove to create an *utage*, both psychological and real, by seeking a union of spiritual feeling among like-minded people. Within such groups, loyalty to the master was regarded as loyalty to the ideal aesthetic legacy transmitted through the master, and faithful study of the tradition and submission to the master were only natural; the only course for someone who entertained doubts or rebelled was to accept expulsion from the group and work independently. Even today, in circles working in the traditional poetic forms, the master has the responsibility of correcting and repairing students' work as a matter of course, and masters lacking this ability can expect little sympathy if their students look down on them or break away. But since few students have that much critical ability, poetry associations are flourishing today in unprecedented numbers.

From this perspective, we can see that Japan's *kurumaza* society is rooted deep in poetry and the arts. Traditional poetry retains the prototype of the *kurumaza* structure in its most highly distilled form. And since poetry most clearly manifests the basic shape of a people's psyche, we may conclude that the Japanese people's love of forming *kurumaza* derives from a very deep-seated historical necessity. One need hardly point out that the *kurumaza* structure is also maintained today in political and academic circles.

Tradition in individuality

For many years I have been interested in how the traditional *kurumaza* society and the desire for solitude interact within the spirit of the poet, feeling this question to be of paramount

importance in discussing Japanese poetry. *Utage to koshin* (The Banquet and the Solitary Mind) was a sort of interim report on this topic. In that book I examined concepts like *utage* and *awase* that bear on the settings, principles, and methods of Japanese poetry. In mentioning the unbroken continuity of the principle of *awase* from ancient times through the present, I wrote as follows:

"If that [*awase*, or bringing into accord] alone were sufficient to bring forth works, nothing would be simpler. But in reality, awesome works were created only by people who, in the midst of a setting created for the sake of bringing people into accord, became painfully aware of the necessity to return to solitude, like it or not. Furthermore, strange to say, when people withdrew completely into solitude, their works lost color. Only when the will to bring oneself into accord with others and the will to return to solitude were pulling against each other did the work of a poet or writer exhibit true brilliance. I cannot help seeing it this way. What must be kept in view is the point at which the tension between these conflicting pulls hits a maximum; at that juncture we have neither a strict adherence to tradition nor an emphatic assertion of individuality. There is no real meaning in either mere tradition or mere individuality. But the area where the crests of these two waves strike each other always arouses interest, tension, and excitement."

I imagine that my way of thinking reflects the era in which I live. I was in my third year of middle school in 1945, when World War II came to an end. For a youngster who had been indoctrinated daily with the ideology of the Japanese Empire as the Land of the Gods, Japan's unconditional surrender on August 15 was a spectacular turning point, instilling in me an abiding skepticism toward the fictions of our *kurumaza* society. After experiencing the cleansing exhilaration of such a change of values, I came to feel that it was nothing but stupidity to believe anything unquestioningly.

Nonetheless, I never thought for an instant that I could exist apart from the traditions of the Japanese language that had been coursing through my body since even before I was born. From my youth a sense of both the utmost pleasure and necessity drove me to think and, further, to create poems in the Japanese language. I began putting this poetic urge into action after that great turning point on August 15, 1945. For a person like me, the greatest and most difficult task was bound to be that of living within Japan's vast, unyielding *kurumaza* society and, at the same time, working out ways of keeping myself separate from it. This meant discovering the inevitability and the positive value in the lifestyle of an insular and homogeneous people that instinctively takes refuge in the *kurumaza*, while at the same time continuing to nurture feelings that could only cause me to loathe such a lifestyle.

Because of my home environment, I think I acquired the rhythm of the Japanese *tanka* (short poem) quite naturally from childhood, but before long I became infatuated with Western literature and began writing modern poetry. The clash of these two opposing themes was already at work in me. This coexistence of opposing elements has characterized the titles of my works: not only *Utage and koshin* (The Banquet and the Solitary Mind) but also my earliest poetry collection, *Kioku to genzai* (Memories and the Present), and the collection of critical essays *Chogenjitsu to jojo* (Ultrarealism and Lyricism).

To my way of thinking, the great poets about whom I have written at some length, including Kakinomoto Hitomaro, Sugawara Michizane, Ki no Tsurayuki, Fujiwara Shunzei, Fujiwara Teika, Matsuo Basho, Masaoka Shiki, Okakura Tenshin, and Hagiwara Sakutarō, all have lived lives of *koshin* (solitude) in the midst of the *utage* (banquet) and have played out the *utage* in the

midst of *koshin*. And of all the poets who have lived on Japanese islands, they have done the greatest work.

In terms of method, they all attained the heights of the native Japanese language while attempting earnestly to learn from great civilizations from across the seas; they did, in fact, learn from them, and thereby reformed and enriched the Japanese language. Their solitude took lively action in this form and succeeded in elevating the overall quality of "banquet" of the Japanese language.

To cite just one example, the eighteenth-century haiku poet Buson was disgusted at the degeneration he saw in the poets of his day, who were devoting themselves enthusiastically to *kurumaza*-type collective endeavors. Emulating Basho, the great poet of the previous century, he looked to Chinese poetry as the surest way of escaping this vulgarity. In an epitaph honoring Buson, his friend Ueda Akinari called him a "*kana* poet," that is, someone who had written Chinese poetry in native Japanese words, striving constantly to unify native and Chinese elements and, in so doing, adding a new page to the history of Japanese poetry. This appraisal is undeniably a perfect assessment of Buson's true nature. It is also an observation fraught with significance for anyone seeking to gain a perspective on the entire history of Japanese poetry and learn something from it.

The history of this island country—called by one observer a country of "little fish who always want to form schools"—has produced a nation that creates high technology while at the same time preserving the ancient mores with an extraordinary degree of purity. Contemporary Japanese, with their love of *kurumaza*, have no right to scoff at Kakinomoto Hitomaro and Sugawara Michizane as musty figures of the past, for there are many reasons to regard these poets as more internationally minded than the scoffers. That is how I see it, at any rate, and I think that people today have much to learn from the works written by these poets of centuries gone by.

All these remarks may be nothing more than words of nonsense from one who is interested in neither golf nor *karaoke*. Even other poets may view my opinions as the silly prattling of someone infatuated with Western culture. And people may scold me for complaining haughtily about the country whose prosperity supports me. I have no choice but to accept such criticism with resignation.