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Civil Society in Japan and Takefu City's Efforts to Involve Citizens in Community Building

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Civil Society in Japan and Takefu City's Efforts to Involve Citizens in Community Building

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INTRODUCTION

The conference theme is organizational culture, and in this case the habits and shape of voluntary associations. As a rough indicator, the number of "public interest legal entities" in Japan is about 26,000, while the number of nonprofit groups in the USA at the other extreme is almost 40 times that. With a population half that of the U.S., that still leaves the society of Japan with only 5% of the number of organized voluntary associations as the U.S. In this essay I shall seek answers to the question why Japanese involve themselves in voluntary associations less often than people living in the U.S., for example.

To describe and then analyze a group's activities one must consider three main aspects: the group itself, the subject of the group, and the wider public arena that the group moves within. I will focus on the last element, the settings and characteristics of public arenas in Japan, and specifically in the regional town of Takefu in Fukui-ken, about two hours north of Osaka, near the Japan Sea.

Near the beginning of this paper I will describe the mayor's background and the circumstances leading to the city's all-embracing environmental revitalization plan, called Takefu's *kankyō kihon keikaku*. In particular I will draw attention to the points at which citizen involvement is sought out by the city. Next, I will outline factors that discourage and others that encourage citizens to participate in public matters, the so-called "civil society." Finally, by measuring Takefu's Eco-city plan (*ekositi*, spelled in katakana) against the above factors in citizen participation I will conclude with a revised picture of the possibilities for citizen led initiatives in Takefu.

This part of the country along the Japan Sea is called Hokuriku and consists of the four prefectures of Fukui, Ishikawa, Toyama and Niigata. Apart from the last, the first three share things like speech habits, foodways, devotedness to Buddhism, a high per centage of double incomes and multiple generation households, generally low overall population and a *kenminsei* (prefectural "personality") reputation for being serious, hardworking and persevering. Also, the rate of home and car ownership is higher than the national average. This thumbnail sketch of a conservative region of Japan will serve as the backdrop to a brief sketch of the

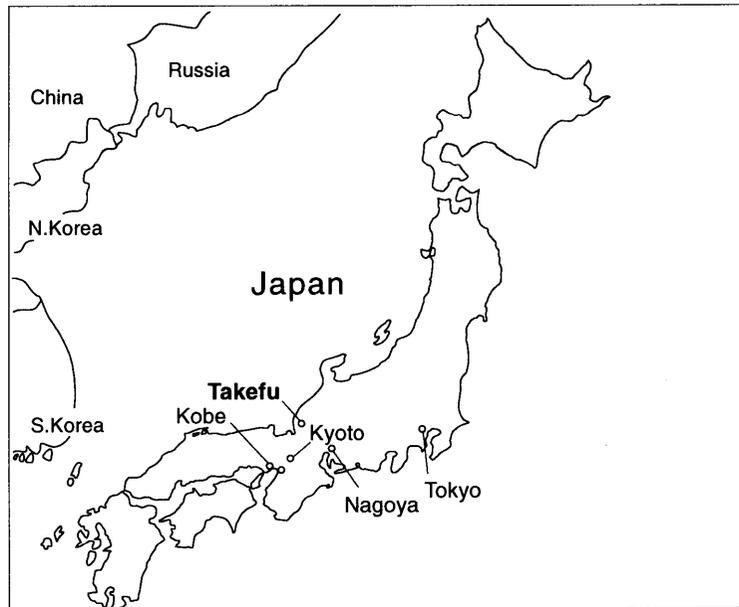


Figure 1. Location of the city of Takefu

regional town of Takefu, population 71,000.

Takefu dates back to around 600 A. D. when written references can first be identified with this location. Because of its situation at the crossroad for goods from the sea to the mountain interior (west to east) and for goods from Kyoto moving north along the coast, the town of Takefu has been a local center for many generations. It is sometimes compared to Kyoto (*shōKyotō*) or Kanazawa in its sedate and confident ways and its conservatism. Besides the age of the townscape itself, other factors contribute to the sense of conservativeness there. The lavish amounts spent when one's daughter marries in Japan are several times higher in Fukui prefecture, and above all in Takefu. It is considered normal for one's children to go to college and find work in one of the big cities, thus leaving the elderly along with the eldest son or in some cases daughter to remain in Takefu. The jobs prized for stable income, either as educator or civil servant are staffed often by an eldest son, and sometimes one who maintains a temple or shrine, as well. So from this brief outline a picture emerges of an old town, one that looks old in its center at least, and one that thinks conservatively in its institutions of education and government at least.

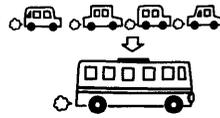
Before introducing the plans by the city of Takefu to invite citizen participation in new environmental practices, it is worth noting the basis for my observations and the limitations of these remarks. In 1984 I worked as an English teacher in the Takefu area schools. In 1988 I returned to renew my connections and to study Japanese. Then in 1994 and 1995 I collected dissertation material, originally on the

subject of the public display of history in local museums. But in the course of events, the efforts of the Takefu Renaissance citizen movement to establish a city center museum developed and later became tangled in a scandal begun by the mayor at the time, Mr. Koizumi [UESAKA 1994, UMADA 1996]. This citizen's movement adopted the role of watchdog and channel for citizen disapproval [MIKI 1995]. Their experiences with the city hall, the local and national media, and with fellow townspeople helped me to understand the shape of the civil society there [WITTEVEEN 1995].

In the end, the scandal was rectified, and in a close election one of the members of Renaissance, Dr. Miki Tokio, a psychiatrist by profession, was elected mayor by 500 votes. Since taking office in May, 1997, Dr. Miki has set in motion a variety of reform efforts. First was the *jōhō kōkai seido*, or system to "open up information" (disclosure of government documents). Next, he established the *rinri kitei*, or Code of Ethics for Takefu's 600 civil servants to make dealings between townspeople and government employees as free as possible from the traditional sense of mutual obligations and gift giving practices. An intensified recycling program was initiated, complete with a "recycle *kan*" (facility) next to the town incinerator for the repair and reuse of *sodai gomi* (durable goods like bicycles, appliances, furniture). A local cable tv system connecting city hall to subscriber households followed the launch of the city's website (www.city.takefu.fukui.jp). Then, in October, 1998, the newly designated Environmental Planning Bureau at city hall released Takefu's Interim Environmental Master Plan. Late in February, 1999, the final draft was published [TAKEFU 1999].

TAKEFU CITY'S ENVIRONMENTAL MASTER PLAN

In several places the plan calls for citizen participation. At 127 pages, plus appendices and glossary, the master plan is full of details, tables and pen illustrations. Seen in outline form the plan divides the city along six lines: global effects (acid rain, ozone depletion, global warming), environmental preservation efforts by local organizations, the local natural resources (water, air, green space and scenery), the historical and cultural landscape, the society's circumstances (population pyramid, economic sectors), and living conditions (noise, air, water polluted surroundings). It divides the responsibilities for protecting these environmental fields between townspeople, business people and the town government. In systematic fashion each environmental category is examined, an inventory is made for each administrative subdistrict of Takefu, and specific cautions and (new) target practices are presented, often with the help of a lighthearted and easy to understand cartoon illustration.



Switching from cars to public transportation for commuting



Use a bicycle or going on foot to destinations



Use less detergent



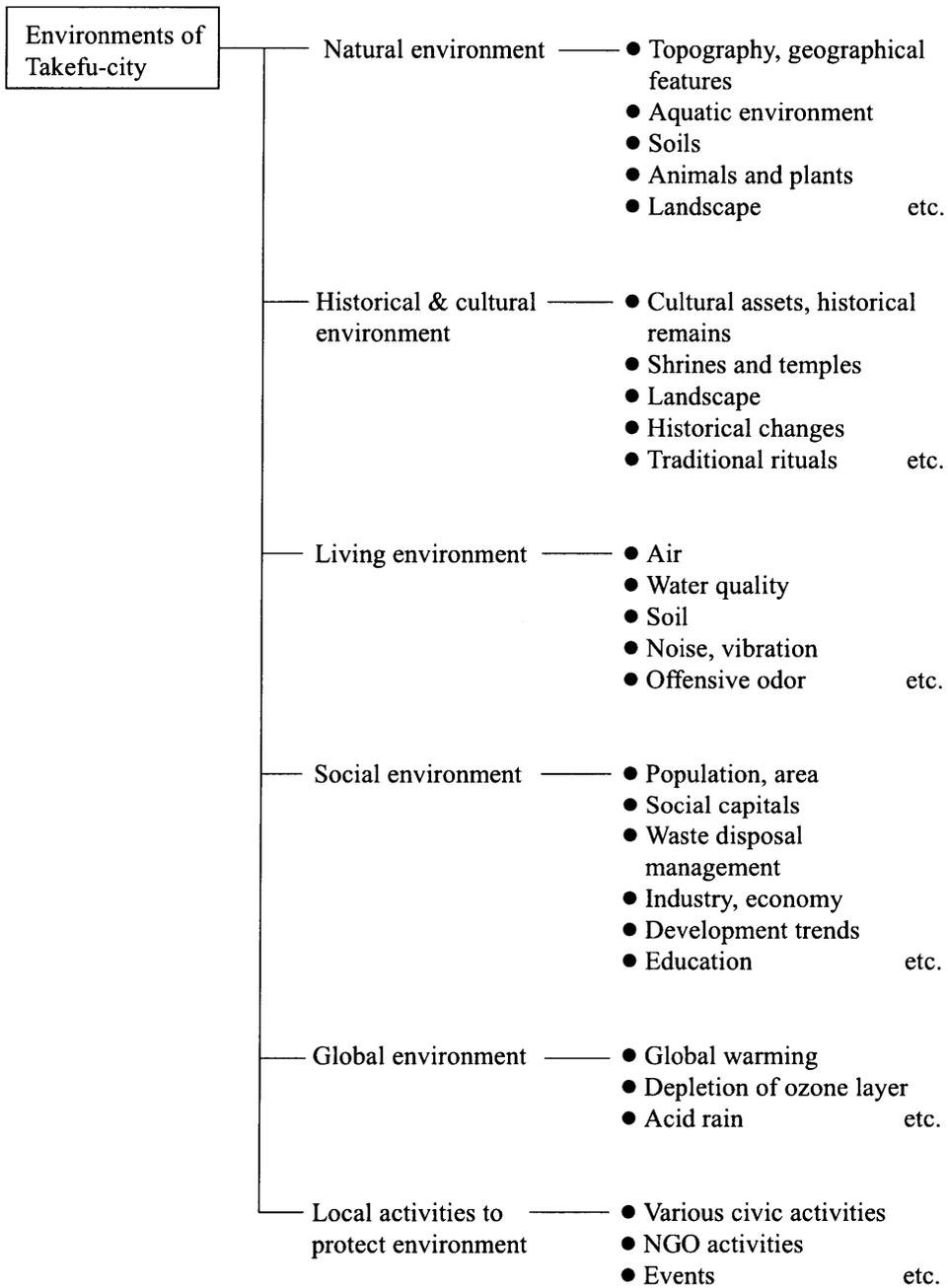
Washing dishes after wiping out oily remains with newspapers

Figure 2. Illustrations to the text [TAKEFU 1999: 110]

The schematic drawing below lists these categories (figure 3). Without dwelling on this chart too long, it is worth noting that local institutions and associations are counted in this wide angle view of the town's total environment (at the bottom: *kakushu shimin katsudō*, NGO *katsudō*, *gyōji nado*). But curiously, the city government is invisible. Possibly the authors take themselves as the active subject of the interim plan and are looking in a wide arc all around themselves. Or perhaps the government, like the roads, news media, and medical institutions are taken as an inert, neutral part of the city infrastructure which does not require the same careful cultivation as do the first six categories.

The illustration at the end of the book (figure 4) diagrams the roles of townspeople (*shimin*), government (*gyōsei*, —*eco* manager, spelled in katakana), and businesses (*jigyōsha*). In principle there is two-way communication and cooperative effort between each of the three players. The drawing makes the citizens' role prominent, but the text says citizens are to function as the eyes, ears and hands of government to realize the carefully laid plans of the city office. The diagram also recognizes the valuable opinions of citizens and calls for local exchanges of information and pooling of ideas.

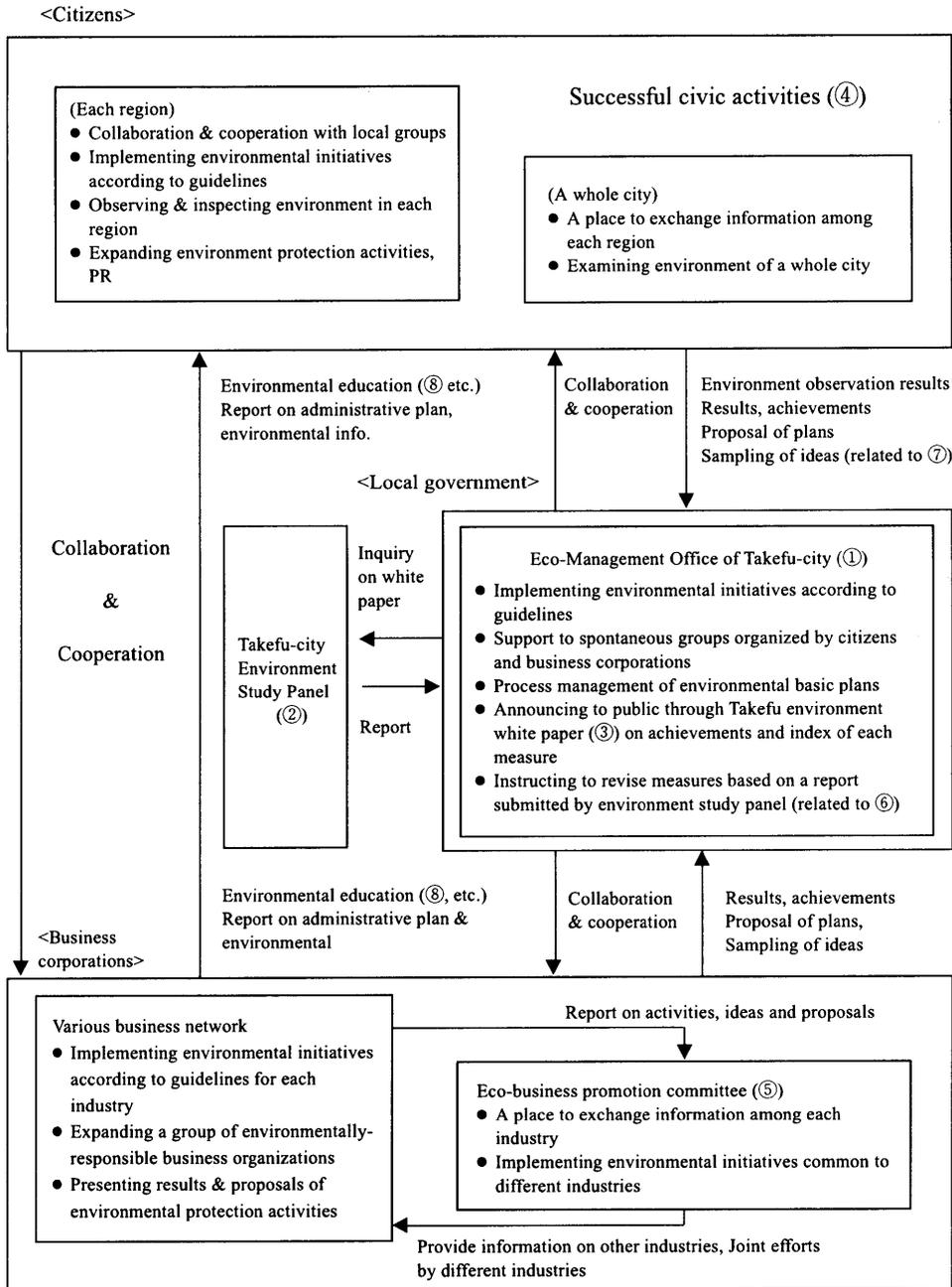
The circle in figure five joins townspeople to the city facilities (hardware) to the administrative apparatus and prevailing cultural values (software). These terms come from the computer age in which hardware spawned the contrasting term



source: Takefu-shi Kankyō Kihon Keikaku (3/99)

Figure 3. “Environments of Takefu City” [TAKEFU 1999: 4]

How the Plan will be Promoted



source: Takefu-shi Kankyō Kihon Keikaku (3/99)

Figure 4. “How the plan shall be promoted” [TAKEFU 1999: 126]

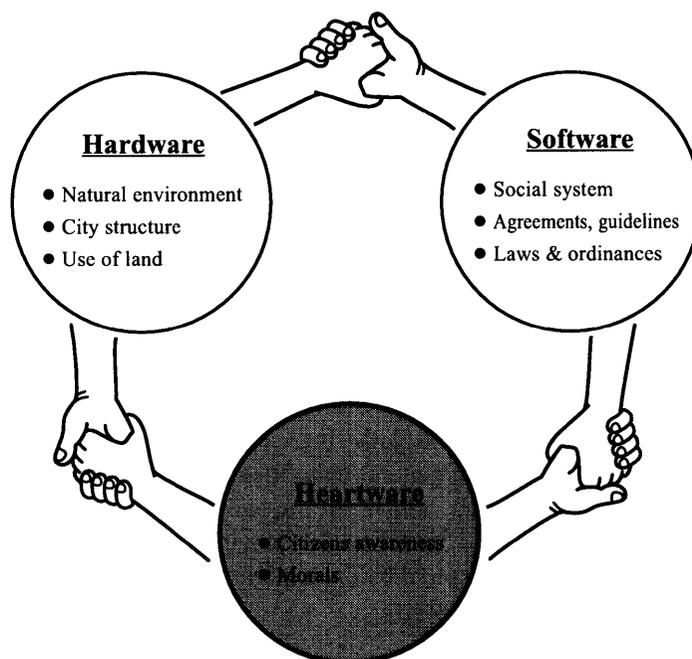


Figure 5. "Heart-ware" [TAKEFU 1999: 16]

software. From this the people in Takefu's environmental planning section coined the term "heartware." It means the love felt for one's city (*ai suru kokoro*) and the fostering of townspeople who are willing to take initiative in improving the city (*katsudō wo ninau hitozukuri*).

In these three figures, the city government acknowledges the place of townspeople in the master plan for its citizens to revitalize the total environment. Citizen groups are counted as (passive) resources that should be encouraged and "protected" as an asset in the social landscape. On the other hand, people living in each district of the city's territory are meant to organize themselves and come up with information and ideas to exchange with city planners and administrators. The question remains, though, how involved are townspeople now; and provided with some opportunities and direction, how likely are they to take an active interest in issues that affect the wider Tannan valley where Takefu is located. This is a question to return to at the end. But in the meantime there are several characteristics of civil society in Japan that will have a bearing on the answer.

Civil society or "*shimin shakai*" was shouted down when Japanese scholars imported the term at the time of the student unrest in the late 1960s [KERSTEN 1996]. But since the middle 1990s the term has been used in the news media, academic circles, and in the national government's publications. Since the time of the Great Kobe Earthquake in 1995 the term has been cited by nongovernmental

organizations, too. In this essay civil society means the actions and discussions by citizens—in groups or singly—that concern public matters of wide consequence. In other words, following Antonio Gramsci [1971], I contrast the voice and actions of the government (political society) with those of citizens (civil society). Problems are expressed in the public arenas of civil society where both civil servants and citizens can talk about matters of common concern. But only the government claims the right to use legitimate force to ensure that certain conditions are met, causing social order to be preserved [KARP 1992].

Political philosophers write of the importance of citizen opinion to vigorous democracy. And pundits say that a democracy that is noisy and apparently disorderly is perhaps the most healthy. By that indicator, citizens in the United States enjoy a sound political body, while in Japan things are sleepy [MCNEIL 1994]. If there are so many groupings and gatherings in Japan, why do so few result in movements that contribute to the general betterment of neighborhoods, towns, and society [ABE et al. 1994; HERZOG 1993]? At the end of the following section is an inventory that suggests some of the obstacles to vigorous citizen participation in local and national issues. It is inspired by the experiences of the Takefu Renaissance citizens movement [WITTEVEEN 1997].

ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCES IN CIVIL SOCIETY, JAPAN AND USA (from Witteveen 1998)

In the course of writing a dissertation I thought a lot about the characteristics of civil society in Japan, learned by observation and from the comments shared with me by members of Takefu Renaissance. The article by Robert Putnam [1995, cf. 1993], called “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” made me examine the place of voluntary associations in the U.S., as well. I also began to wonder about the peculiar character of democracy (BROADBENT, GOTODA, HOFFMAN, ISHIDA, KURODA, MOEN, PHARR), volunteerism (NAKATA, SASAKI, VAN BUREN), as well as ideas of “the public good” and civil society. Considering the dominance of public matters by officials, scholars and journalists in Japan on the one hand, and the identification that private citizens in America can readily make with issues in the public domain on the other, I suggest that it is the religious and historical circumstances of social life, as well as the conventions of public rhetoric in each society that give the contrasting results.

In a nutshell, awareness of “community” in American society shows the effects of immigration, the preponderance of rural communities early on, and a demonstrable religiosity. In the recent past at least, church has been a social venue as well as place for earnest believers to congregate in mutual -many times ethnic and economic - support. Being a nation of newcomers and strangers, but holding in common the moral standards and bourgeois tastes of a small agricultural community (until WW II at least), an awareness developed for what was best for “the community” - religious or residential membership [DE TOCQUEVILLE 1988].

One of the characteristics of the dominant religion in the U.S., Christianity both humanist and sacred, is the fact that believers are joined in their vision of a better world to come. That is, present circumstances should be overlooked to envision some greater good in the future; reminiscent of the idea of delayed gratification, but on a collective scale. Compared with other religions, which are associated with territory, ethnicity, nationality or language, Christians are above all united by little more than their beliefs and preoccupation with bettering conditions in this world. They are taught to envision what good there may be possible in the future; or in the words of the Lord's Prayer, ...Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

The notion of a Common Good or Public Benefit is reinforced in daily consumer experience, as well. Products and popular culture of the U.S. that are ubiquitous, anonymously uniform and without number support this perception of common experience and a shared sense of community in a literal, material way. These same forces of industrialization that give physical reality to a vision of community are part of the "Imagined Communities" that Benedict Anderson writes about in his book about making nation-states [ANDERSON 1983]. By contrast in the civil society practices in Japan, individuals rarely speak out on behalf of a general Public or Common Good, except perhaps in the persistent "*nihonjinron*" literature which dictates an ethnic self-awareness with "we Japanese" as the putative subject. Certainly, where one's social obligations (whether of company, residence, or household) are encroached on - one's *uchi*, then there may be organized outcry [NAKANE 1970: 125]. But by and large it is people with titles of authority, the officials, journalists and academic experts that speak out on behalf of collective interests [LEE 1985]. These are the people who dominate public forums. Another reason people in Japan may feel hesitant to speak out is related to the intense concern with appearances and interpersonal relations. This preoccupation makes it hard to address an issue without implying criticism of the people who are connected to the issue. It is too easy to take things personally in other words.

Authority resides in one's title and in the semblance of decorum [MCVEIGH 1998]. So when necessary, circumstances may be adjusted to create the desired appearance of decorum [UMADA 1996]. In some cases this gap between rhetoric and reality may be quite large, like the differences allowed between *honne* (true intent) and *tatemae* (polite facade). Religion, too, may play a part, as T. R. Reid [1995] suggested in his piece, "Confucius says: Go east, young man."

Confucianism offers the complement to Christianity's "Golden Rule." Instead of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you', the teaching rather counsels people not to do those things which one finds hateful oneself. So in place of moral goodness attached to public outreach, there is warning against disturbing public decorum [MCVEIGH 1995, cf. *seken no me*, a peer pressure against drawing attention to oneself]. An additional barrier to individuals acting on behalf of the Greater Good comes from the nature of Shintoism. Rooted in this world view is the idea of particularism, rather than the universalistic, law-like claims found in

Semitic religions such as Christianity which are meant to apply to all persons in all places at all times. The relativistic, case-by-case reasoning rooted in Shintoism pervades Japanese living and contrasts the absolute, categorical, law-like inflexible permanence expressed in societies shaped by Christianity, for example. The logic of case by case reasoning makes one's own case "special," with no solidarity or common connection to others' cases.

The dominance of public matters by titled individuals (government, media, scholarly) can be understood in light of early modern historical conditions in Japan, as well. During the *Edo* period "public" meant "of the government's prerogative" (*ōyake* or *kō*). That impression lingers still today. All together then the concern with (and manipulation of) appearances, reluctance of individuals to voice opinions, case by case approach and the dominance of public discourse by government, media and academe continue to make civil society in Japan what it is [ITAMI 1994; MIYAMOTO 1994; MIYOSHI 1991, VAN WOLFEREN 1989]. The features of Japanese social life that stand in the way of forming the lateral networks of civil society are listed below for convenient reference.

EXPLAINING THIS LOW ENGAGEMENT OF CITIZENS IN PUBLIC MATTERS

1. Confucianism and the "Golden Rule"

One is obliged not to enter the fray. By contrast the Golden Rule of Christianity emphasizes individual initiative: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

2. Appearances are most important

Titles of authority are shown respect. Guidebooks and classes teach "proper" ways of communicating and expressing oneself. Matters should be handled *kichinto*, that is, "properly" and in the accepted way. Awareness of peer criticism, *seken no me*, exercises a powerful influence on one's actions from the youngest age. Without a precedent, role model or figurehead, ordinary people are especially hesitant to speak out. Finally, for all of the emphasis on maintaining the appearances of social order, the momentum that institutions have by their nature is even harder to alter in the society of Japan.

3. Authority lore and tradition

Authority seems to rest with the title, not with the person who happens to hold the title. Likewise, when there is praise or blame it is difficult to single out individuals. Instead the work and responsibility are spread out. Attitudes toward authority and strategies for handling authority figures begin at home and are reinforced in school, work and the wider society [KIEFER 1970; LE TENDRE 1994; ROHLEN 1983, 1989]

4. Language practices

In Japanese usage the many examples of set phrases (*kimari kotoba*) and indirect manner of verbal persuasion contrast to the discursive traditions of debate and explicit reasoning in languages such as English. As increasing numbers of Japanese become at home in second languages, for example as *kikoku shijo* returnees, the character and manner of public discussion is likely to change.

According to the personalistic nature of speaking in Japanese it is hard to separate criticism of an idea from criticism of the idea's author. Thus high spirited discussion runs the risk of alienating everyone engaged.

Translation of practices and ideas from abroad is normally partial. One sense carries into Japanese without the full shape being felt in words like democracy, public, civil society, and volunteer.

5. Worldview basis

The presentist, case by case way of regarding problems and deciding upon solutions is connected to Shintoism and the impermanent geological world Japan occupies. By contrast, the impression of unchanging and universal, law-like way of judging matters in societies shaped by the semitic religions is rooted in the wide vistas of Southwest Asia.

6. Personal identity

When one's self-definition is transitory and shifts according to reference group, then smooth relations within that group may become more important than the subject matter the group is concerned with. And personality differences may keep otherwise interested people from taking part in the group's activities and discussions.

7. Public rhetoric

Without a title or claim to expertise, otherwise articulate citizens feel constrained from speaking out on matters they care about. In effect it is representatives of government, news media and academics who dominate the public airwaves and newsprint. Furthermore, the gap between rhetoric (*tatema*) and reality (*honne*) is sometimes considerable. So even though a person sees something inappropriate, he or she tolerates the problem far longer than a person might do outside of Japan.

8. The notion of 'the public'

The prevailing image is "pertaining to the public authorities," not an image of citizens as a collective body.

9. Public spaces are limited [MIYOSHI 1989]

The occasions and locations to gather publicly, to view others and to be seen

and heard oneself are few. Contrast this to the legacy of spaces like the forum, arena, *plaza central*, or commons, for example.

POSITIVE FACTORS TO BOLSTER CITIZEN-LED INITIATIVES

10. High level of literacy and education, abundant information and technology
Uniformly high levels of educational content and methods give a common knowledge base to people in Japan. Curiosity and desire for the latest information, as well as familiarity with household and workplace technology should make voluntary associations run smoothly.
11. Organizational lore [BEN-ARI 1997; KIEFER 1970; ROHLEN 1983]
From the earliest experiences in preschool, children learn how to belong to a group, to have a group name, to assign tasks and titles, and to keep records. Groups both temporary and long-term are created for many occasions, although few are engaged openly with counterparts or with the government.
12. Group as motivator
The need to take action or to express oneself is felt more strongly when one is a voluntary part of a group that convenes regularly than when one is alone.
13. Creative energies
The abundant information and educational environment support extremely creative ideas. An ethic of hard work and value put on careful craftsmanship also supports singleminded efforts.
14. Free elections, high voter turnout
Voters are active. Whatever the motivations may be, the fact that people do cast votes means they are accustomed to playing at least some part in public affairs.
15. Centralized organizations for convenient point of leverage
Since institutions are highly centralized, NGOs need not spread their energies widely. Instead, they can focus resources on persuading the decision makers.

THE ECO-CITY PLAN IN LIGHT OF THESE CIVIL SOCIETY FEATURES

Now, with a view to further testing this understanding of civil society in Japan and applying the assessment to Takefu, I shall compare the town's environmental master plan with the above list of positive and negative features that affect the civil society. Used as a checklist, it is apparent that many of the features of social life in Japan mitigate against engagement across and between groups, and against engagement with authorities. So unless the frame of shared interest can be defined widely enough (e.g. as indeed the environment does concern all comers) or the

authority figures can temporarily divest themselves of their titles when speaking with townspeople, then any lateral flow of information, goodwill, or effort is unlikely. The mayor of Takefu has shrewdly used both of these strategies. He seized upon the timely subject of environmental revitalization and multifaceted *machizukuri* which affects many people. And he undertook to reform city hall (open information system) and its employees (the code of ethics) to deexoticize and to decrease the height that townspeople had perceived in their dealings with the city officials. But even with the widest circle of interest drawn to include as many groups and individuals as possible, and even with the efforts to lower the civil servant stature, the bulk of the obstacles to lateral linkages are still left in place.

Two obstacles from the end of the list at least can be changed: providing more gathering places and occasions for meeting, and also redefining the notion of "public." By supplying venues to groups of citizens to meet for little or no cost, and to go further and prompt people to gather in the name of life-long education or other leisure pursuits, there will be ever more chance for acquaintances to be made and ideas to be shared. And by stressing the service component of the civil service to its taxpayers at every opportunity, perhaps the city government will be able to instill a sense of (collective) ownership. In turn this may lead to the idea that the discussions and decisions about the town's shape and future direction do concern all who would contribute to the conversation.

Finally, several of the positive factors in the society could be expanded with a view to encouraging greater citizen participation in the government of the town. The group pressure and pleasures could be and indeed already have been applied to the master plan. The diffusion of personal computers and practice at using the internet could be encouraged to weave more threads in the fabric of local community. Since this medium allows a relatively anonymous exchange of ideas, people can watch and join in conversations initiated by the city, schools or other local citizen organizations [SHIMADA 1994].

The centralized nature of the society means that efforts to affect the course of events can be profitably focussed on a narrow subject or figurehead. Along these lines, the city of Takefu could lead workshop-style gatherings for townspeople to pool experience and to rehearse their "lobbying" and public-relations skills. Lastly, the city can use its broadcasting platform to keep up a steady stream of praise for citizen efforts, thus laying the ideological base of support that would encourage others to put their creative private energies to public use. But above all, and in the end, it may be the wider currents of international economy and the stream of satellite tv that leads to more vigorous civil society in Japan and elsewhere in Asia. That is because the growth of citizen led discussions and action will not come from increasing the number of participation opportunities alone. People must have both the occasion and the motivation to act. In this sense, what before was a stable life course is now steadily being undermined by the mobility of car culture, the insecurity of work and income, and the disembodied long distance media of telecommunication technology that substitutes fax, email and letters for spoken

dialogue and face to face interchange. These developments may lead people in Japan to try and reestablish their sense of belonging in an deliberate, active way; rather than simply being born into a set of statuses based in kinship or residential ties. In other words, when the earlier basis of one's place in society is eroded, then there is added motivation to seek out new forms of association. In this case, people may now feel more inclined to join others on a basis of shared interests. And these voluntary associations are just the sort of fertile ground in which civil society grows by spreading its network of roots laterally.

CONCLUSIONS

What began as an exercise in comparing the general characteristics of civil society in Japan to the Environmental Master Plan of Takefu has become an action plan for the best way for the city to succeed in its aim of citizen participation in the community's government. Usually an anthropologist stops at description and analysis without pursuing implications or applications. But this reckoning of citizen participation in Takefu and the avenues for greater citizen participation that it suggests is not meant to say that people in Japan should form more voluntary associations, or that they will necessarily be better off for doing so. The essay only suggests that greater involvement by citizens in their communities will bring a wider range of ideas and creative energies to bear on the problems of their changing society.

The reform-minded mayor of Takefu is working to revitalize the townspeople's environment by relying on citizen participation. This examination of his efforts leads to a variety of conclusions. First, it is clear that a long list of factors hinder the lateral communication that allows civil society to flourish. However, a few of these factors may be manipulated to support greater citizen participation in public matters. In addition, there are many positive factors that would support increasing numbers of voluntary associations in the society of Japan. Second, this example establishes a datum of the spaces for public discussions and action, inviting others to carry out comparative research elsewhere in Japan or abroad. Third, this study has significance to the anthropology of Japan [KELLY 1992] and to the wider concerns outside this corner of Japan and this discipline altogether.

The study of people's lives in Japan from an anthropological perspective will add to the literature on the interpersonal ties of association found in the organizational life of industrialized society. The subject is timely as well in the wider currents of anthropology, where thinkers are seeking ways to bring anthropology into the main stream of public debate, of government funding priorities, and of curriculum design outside of colleges and reaching to the precollegiate level. A focus on organizational life in Japan or abroad takes the anthropological lens to territory normally claimed by journalists, human relations and marketing researchers. In addition, the comparative, anthropologically informed knowledge of the terrain of Japanese organizational life and the public

arena for voluntary organizations also helps readers and leaders better understand the actions of Japanese in governmental bodies and in the NGOs in international undertakings, whether development projects, relief efforts, or military exercises and multinational assignments.

Many of us come from far away and at considerable expense to study things that hardly seem salient by their routine pattern and everyday nature. Observers from faraway bring a narrow focus and added concentration to their subjects. Perhaps it is a small, myopic eye that intensifies and abstracts this vision, making the subjects seem so significant. Yet thanks to the work of colleagues who are native anthropologists, the sharply focused field of view of non-native anthropologists can once again be adjusted by the perspective that Japanese social analysts bring to the discussion. The papers and discussions coming from this conference in both Japanese and in English have gone a long way in sharing viewpoints.

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