

## Rural Urbanization in Japan and Soviet Armenia

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## Rural Urbanization in Japan and Soviet Armenia

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|---|---|
| 1. Comparing Japan and Armenia          | 5. The Urbanization of Dress and Food             |
| 2. Changes in Family Relations          | 6. Changes in Ritual                              |
| 3. Comparative Patterns of Urbanization | 7. Cultural Synthesis versus Cultural Coexistence |
| 4. The Modernization of Rural Dwellings |   |

### 1. COMPARING JAPAN AND ARMENIA

This symposium is devoted to the problems of urbanization in Japan as viewed in a broad worldwide perspective, and to comparison with analogous processes in other societies. In this paper I wish to offer some material on the urbanization of Armenian rural society as the basis for comparison with Japan. The choice of this material owes not only to the fact that it is in my own realm of expertise, based on systematic field work, but also to the fact that it offers a revealing comparison with Japan.

The urbanization of rural society in Japan and Armenia began at about the same time, in the 1860s, when feudal social relations in both places became the object of systematic destruction. In the case of Japan, this process dates from the Meiji Restoration, and in Armenia from the reforms of the 1860s which were carried out throughout the Russian Empire. In both cases these reforms were a reflection of the objective need for long-anticipated changes, precipitated by the implicit development of capitalism within the framework of late feudal society. At the same time, in both cases these changes were little more than limited reforms, initiated from above, which worked to preserve for many years a number of feudal survivals within the newly-formed bourgeois society.

Among other important similarities between Armenia and Japan, we should note the highly homogeneous ethnic composition of both societies, in which over ninety percent (99 percent in the case of Japan) of the population is represented by a single ethnic entity. Thus the problems of heterogeneous ethnic enclaves, minorities, and migrant groups, which have been so common in the process of urbanization in other countries, were practically absent in Japan and Armenia.

Another characteristic common to both countries is the deeply traditional character of their cultures. Both Armenia and Japan have very ancient historical roots and an uninterrupted history of ethnic and social development which can be traced back for more than 2500 years. Both had early traditions of writing, dating from the fourth century A.D. in Armenia and from the seventh century in Japan. This strong continuity is not limited to elite state institutions, but can be found in peasant culture as well.

Among the basic differences between Japan and Armenia, we must of course first bear in mind that Japan from the Meiji era until the present has developed along capitalist social and economic lines, while Armenia since 1920 has been characterized by a socialist political structure which deeply affected its subsequent urbanization. Another important difference is that Japan is an archipelago, and its contacts with other nations, even its closest neighbors, have never been direct in a geographical sense. Armenia, by contrast, was in the early nineteenth century already part of the Russian Empire and has since continued to develop in direct and close political contact with other parts of the empire, above all with the two neighboring countries of the Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaidjan. Since 1922, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic has been an integral part of the USSR, and its social, cultural, economic, and political contacts with other constituent republics of the Soviet Union, particularly with Georgia and Azerbaidjan, are constantly expanding.

## 2. CHANGES IN FAMILY RELATIONS

In terms of the family, the basic unit of society, we may note some close parallels between Japan and Armenia in the processes of change from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. In the early nineteenth century in both countries, the village community was based on kin and on neighbor relations. Patronymic kinship organization played a very important role in the social life of the village. The "azg" of Armenia was structurally and functionally very similar to the *dōzoku* of Japan. Within these patronymic organizations, a number of economic functions were carried out, such as mutual aid in house-building or during the most labor-intensive periods of the agricultural year. It was also within the framework of these organizations that festivals were celebrated and popular religious rites performed. It should be noted, however, that the Armenia *azg* was not as elaborately and formally organized as the Japanese *dōzoku*, particularly in its lack of a strict division between central and lateral families of the sort one finds between *honke* and *bunke* in the Japanese case.

The development of capitalist relations in the countryside can be clearly observed in both Japan and Armenia, and led to the systematic destruction of patronymic organizations, which gradually lost all of their functions and have now practically disappeared from the social scene. The circle of everyday family ties gradually narrowed over time, being first limited to extended families and then more recently to nuclear families. At the same time, the basic orientation of the reproductive

policy of the family also underwent considerable change. Initially, a tendency to have many children prevailed in both countries, although one never finds in Armenia the kind of strict family planning (including the use of infanticide) which existed in even the poorest village communities in Japan. In recent times, the prevailing tendency in both countries has been towards a system of two children per family. These shifts in demographic orientation took place in Japan and Armenia only very recently, and almost simultaneously.

On the other hand, we may note some important differences in the pattern of the urbanization and modernization of family relations in Armenia and Japan. These differences can be seen mostly in the social position of women. In traditional Japanese society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the social position of women was low, but never as low as in traditional Armenian society of the same era. Women in traditional Armenian rural society were forced to conform to a wide variety of humiliating customs of avoidance towards the older male kin of her husband. A woman was obliged always to cover her mouth with a piece of cloth, and was not allowed to talk in many situations. This led to the evolution of a special kinetic speech (*langue des gestes*) among married women. (Remarkably, this kinetic language so rapidly disappeared in the early twentieth century that it could not be properly recorded by ethnographers.)

These patriarchal and feudal social institutions aimed at perpetuating the low position of women began to disappear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, suggesting that certain ethical and behavioral attitudes specific to an urban bourgeois family were beginning to penetrate rural culture. It was, however, only with the establishment of socialist human relations that patriarchal feudal attitudes were completely eliminated. Today, Armenian women are not only technically but in actual practice completely equal with men, as revealed in the large number of women who occupy important positions, not only in the city but in the rural areas as well. Women form an important part of the skilled work force in all branches of the economy, while in medicine and education they outnumber men. Total high school education is a fact for both girls and boys, and those with professional training at the college and university levels are about equally divided between men and women. Women have or at least are able to have their own incomes from salaries or wages, making them economically independent from men.

The disappearance of all former limitations on the free participation of women in social and family life is clearly revealed in the rules of behavior governing the consumption of food. In the early twentieth century, separate meals for men and women were the norm in rural Armenian society. Daily meals were the first to become integrated with respect to sex, but the segregation of sexes was preserved at festival and wedding meals. Today, this type of discrimination has completely disappeared; only in some remote villages, on the occasion of a funeral meal, do men and women still gather separately.

Of course there still remain expectations that women show exterior signs of a respectful attitude toward husbands and elder males in the family, and a demeanor

of modesty and restraint is still considered a sign of *bon ton* for females. These however are no more than superficial and arbitrary rules which mask the absolute economic, ethical, and juridical equality of men and women in contemporary Armenian society.

Turning to Japan, we notice that even in the eighteenth century, there were no such strict and varied rules which humiliated women. The tyrannical attitude of a mother-in-law towards her daughter-in-law, which was to be found in Japanese as well as Armenian families in traditional times, has practically disappeared today, particularly with the tendency towards separate dwellings for parents and their married children, reflecting the shift from an extended to a nuclear family system.

Nevertheless, even though the equality of the sexes has been technically promulgated as law in postwar Japan, there remains a long way to go before equality in fact is achieved. To be sure, in Japan as in Armenia, a respectful attitude towards the husband is in many cases no more than a pretense designed to mask the wife's ethical and psychological leadership within the family. But when it comes to education, access to skilled jobs, or economic independence, the achievements of Japanese women still remain rather modest even when compared to other developed capitalist nations, let alone nations with a socialist regime. The latter can be regarded as the main factor in fostering so radical a liberation of women in Armenia.

### 3. COMPARATIVE PATTERNS OF URBANIZATION

Armenia, like Japan, is a mountainous region with a deeply intersected topographical relief. The majority of the population in the nineteenth century was concentrated in lowland areas where intensive irrigated agriculture is possible. In addition to such lowland settlements, there are also foothill and highland settlements. Armenia is a land with an ancient urban civilization, but as a result of many wars and conquests up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, medieval Armenian cities were left in ruins and urban settlements within the present territory of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic were few and small. Largest among them were Gumri (later Alexandropolis, now Leninakan) and Yerevan. The total urban population in the early nineteenth century number no more than 100,000.

Here we can see a considerable difference from Japan, where foreign conquest was virtually non-existent and where cities developed rapidly in the medieval period in spite of frequent warfare. By the eighteenth century, as a result, Japan already possessed cities numbering in the hundreds of thousands, with Edo reaching over one million.

When Eastern Armenia became an integral part of the Russian Empire, there began a new and peaceful period in its history. The urban population started to grow, although during the nineteenth century most emigration from Armenian villages was directed to such larger industrial centers outside of Armenia as Tbilissi (Georgia) and Baku (Azerbaijan). Only in the Soviet period did there begin a rapid growth of the urban population of Armenia. As a result, Yerevan now

numbers more than one million inhabitants, or nearly one-third of the total population of the Republic. There are in addition several other large cities, such as Leninakan and Kirovakan.

Despite these historical differences in the historical patterns of urban growth in Japan and Armenia, we can detect a certain similarity in the process of urbanization stemming from the highly dissected mountain relief which both countries have in common. This has resulted in a tendency for the majority of the population to become concentrated in a rather limited zone which encompasses the largest cities. In the case of Japan, this zone is the Tokaido Megalopolis, and in Armenia it is the Yerevan-Hechmiadzin-Hoktemberian conurbation. Rural emigration to the cities has resulted in a general depopulation of remote highland villages while the population of the intensively cultivated rural areas in the lowlands adjacent to the cities remains dense and in some cases has even increased.

Modern industry has also penetrated into rural settlements through the construction of industrial enterprises in or near large villages. Thus not only does the rural labor force move towards a developed industrial area, but industry itself also moves to meet the rural labor force. In Armenia, as a result of the socialist reconstruction of modern Armenian society, this process has been directed and organized by state authorities. New industrial enterprises have been planned and built in large villages with considerable labor resources even when they are rather far away from the main industrial centers.

The structure of rural settlements in Japan has suffered much less change than in Armenia, in spite of more intensive industrial development. Most lowland rural settlements in Armenia have been drastically reorganized in plan and appearance. In some cases, the old settlement has been completely abandoned and a new one constructed nearby. Settlements which were located on a foothill slope have been moved down to a level area, where regular planning has resulted in rectangular blocks and straight streets, all completely identical from one to the other, and with architecture and public amenities comparable to medium-sized towns. In other cases, settlements on the slope above a river valley have been moved up to a level plateau to enable this kind of mass construction.

Here we may observe a considerable difference from Japan, where there has been little shift in location or reconstruction of existing rural settlements, and where slopes have been extensively terraced for suburban dwelling construction.

#### **4. THE MODERNIZATION OF RURAL DWELLINGS**

One finds a similar contrast in terms of rural building types. In both Japan and Armenia, one finds in traditional times a wide variety of types of peasant dwellings, reflecting varying environmental conditions as well as differences in social status and wealth. A trend towards the standardization of dwelling conditions has occurred in both countries, but in Japan farmers in many cases prefer to keep the old dwelling house, adding on, modifying, and modernizing rather than replacing.

The interior of the traditional Armenian peasant house had some features rather similar to the rural farm houses of Japan. In the center of the main room there was usually a hearth cut into the floor, the so-called *tonir* (*tandoor*), which incorporates not only the functions of the Japanese *irori* but also such other important functions as the basic preparation of food and the baking of bread. In winter, a small Iranian-type table known as a *kursi* was often placed over the glowing *tonir* and then covered with a blanket, in a manner very similar to the Japanese *oki-gotatsu*, both structurally and functionally.

In Japan, one still finds considerable continuity in traditional forms of behavior, such as those connected with the *irori* and *kotatsu*. In Armenia, however, the break with tradition is more pronounced. The old farmhouse, if it is still standing at all, is used mostly as an auxiliary room for storage or for special kinds of work, and the *tonir* for baking bread is relegated to a special little compartment. In terms of the basic dwelling, a new standard type has spread throughout Armenia. It is a brick or stone building with auxiliary and storage rooms on the ground floor, and living rooms on the upper floor. It is usually square in plan, with each floor divided into four rooms plus a balcony or veranda, and covered with a pyramidal tin or slate roof. There are some differences in plan in accord with climatic variations, but these are minor. Thus in comparison with Japan, the rural dwelling in Armenia shows more of a tendency to standardization and hence a sharper break with the past.

In terms of the urbanization of houses and settlements, we must remember that the concept of "urbanization" can be used in two different ways. Urbanization in its broad meaning is as old as the city itself, in which sense the ancient societies of Sumer, Greece, or Rome were highly "urbanized." This sense of urbanization, however, does not necessarily involve a specifically urban type of dwelling. Both the houses of commoners and the villas of the rich were built in much the same way in both city and country. It was only in Rome that there first appeared the "*insulae*," multistoried buildings with numerous rental apartments, the predecessor of the modern urban apartment house. In Japan as well, urban dwellings tended at least until recently to develop along the general lines of the folk house tradition, although they did differ in some aspects from peasant houses, especially in Kyoto.

On the other hand, "urbanization" can be used in a newer and more narrow sense to refer to a situation in which city houses (and even, as has been the case recently, village houses) are built with industrially produced materials and show few if any features which betray the ethnic particularity of a folk culture. Urbanization in this sense implies the loss of many traditional elements of material folk culture, not only in the house itself but in other such areas as costume and utensils, which are replaced by the features and objects of an urbanized industrial culture which is generally western in style and worldwide in distribution.

The process of the replacement of traditional folk features by urbanistic westernized ones tends to proceed from the periphery of a culture to its center, both in a philosophical and in a very material sense. The change occurs first of all in

externalized and open official spheres of life, while traditional elements are preserved in the more intimate spheres of life such as the household.

This is well illustrated by examples from modern Japan. A Japanese house of whatever rank or style tends to have more urbanistic features in its exterior or peripheral parts, such as fences, gates, facade, and entryway. The deeper we enter into the house and the more we approach its intimate center, then the more we tend to observe features from the traditional culture. It is probably in the sleeping room that such elements are most pronounced, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In many Third World countries we may see buildings of a rather pretentious architecture which are completely modern and urbanistic in all features of their construction but which nevertheless possess a national ethnic mark, whether in the form of an ornament on the facade, in the distinctive silhouette of the roof, or in other details which imitate the national style of traditional architecture. This type of inversion means that westernization in a given sphere is complete and that a need is felt to supplement it by the artificial attachment of specific ethnic markers.

As a rule, Japan is free of this kind of practice—although not completely, as seen in such a building as the Kabukiza in Tokyo. But in Armenia, Georgia, and some of the other republics of the Soviet Union, which are completely urbanized as far as dwelling interior and house construction are concerned, one does find in villages as well as cities the frequent display of these kinds of markers, in the form of ornamental reliefs, frescoes, murals, and door frames. These are placed on the exterior of the building, most often on the facade. This kind of practice suggests that urbanization in the sphere of house construction is more advanced in Armenia than in Japan.

## 5. THE URBANIZATION OF DRESS AND FOOD

Turning the problem of urbanization in the sphere of costume, it is necessary to begin by introducing the analytical distinction between the “base” of a costume and its “accessories.” The base is the minimal acceptable part for a given costume, and all the rest are accessories. Thus in a European man’s costume, the trousers are the base, and such items as shirt, vest, coat, jacket, hat, and shoes are accessories. A base may in extreme cases be worn without accessories, but never vice versa. Hence one can conceivably wear trousers without shoes or shirt, but one can never wear shirt and shoes without trousers.

In traditional Japanese costume, the kimono is the base, while all other such items as *hakama*, *haori*, and *zōri* are accessories. The general rule is that an ordinary, everyday base may sometimes be supplemented by accessories of a higher ranking, but not vice versa. A *haori* of *haregi* (festive) style, for example, may be worn over a kimono of *fudangi* (everyday) style, but hardly anyone would put a *fudangi haori* over a *haregi* kimono.

Thus in the 1920s in Japan, a Japanese costume (*wafuku*) base might be supplemented with Western costume (*yōfuku*) accessories, which at that time ranked higher



on the scale of prestige. Hence one saw people wearing a kimono with western-style shoes or hat. In postwar Japan, the situation has changed; western and traditional elements are no longer combined in one costume, or if they are, then a western base tends to be supplemented by a Japanese accessory, such as wearing *geta* with trousers, or a *nenneko* over a blouse and skirt. This is admittedly rare, but it does occasionally happen.

In general, it can be concluded that in modern Japan, traditional costume is still alive and is even regarded as ranking higher on the prestige scale than western dress. As a consequence, traditional Japanese dress is much more expensive than western dress. At the same time, such traditional items as the yukata are preserved in the intimate spheres of life.

In Armenia from the beginning of the twentieth century until World War II, traditional dress was gradually replaced by western-style dress. Today this replacement is complete, and folk costume is seen only on the stage when popular folk songs or dances are performed, or on rare occasions when worn by some of the oldest women in the villages. Some accessories of folk costume, however, particularly belts made of silver plates, are considered a fashionable and prestigious supplement to western-style ladies dress. Hence in the sphere of costume as well, urbanization is more advanced than in Japan.

Food is perhaps the most conservative element of any traditional material culture and it usually preserves its ethnically specific features the longest. In the everyday life of the Japanese household, traditional food (*washoku*) still prevails over the various intrusions of western-style food (*yōshoku*). Western food is most widespread in the exterior, open spheres of life, such as an impromptu street meal while shopping or traveling, or for a prestigious banquet.

Even in these cases, however, traditional Japanese *washoku* is not only available but in fact widespread. The division between *washoku* and *yōshoku* in Japan is rather strict, and a synthesis or blending of the two styles, although sometimes possible, is rare and limited in scale. One reason for this is the difference in eating utensils, both in the use of chopsticks versus forks and in the differing forms of plates and cups.

Modern Armenian food includes dishes of highly diversified origin. In addition to traditional Armenian dishes, there are borrowings from Georgian, Azerbaidjanian, and Russian cuisines, as well as western-style types of food like hamburgers and spaghetti. All of these different types of cuisine can be combined with each other both on an everyday level and on festive banquet occasions. Only in the sphere of sacred food, as for sacrificial and funeral uses, are there certain taboos (such as the insistence on boiled foods, to the exclusion of fried and roasted food), and the traditional Armenian forms of food prevail, although even here their prevalence is not absolute.

## 6. CHANGES IN RITUAL

Let us turn to the impact of urbanization in the sphere of ritual. In the case of

the Japanese, ritual life has changed considerably since the Tokugawa period, but these changes have tended to involve the modification of the ideological contents and social functions of traditional festivals and rituals, while the rituals themselves, their dates and names, remain largely unchanged.

The urbanization of culture goes alongside the development and consolidation of a nation itself, and is a prerequisite for the cultural homogenization of any given nation, resulting in the gradual fading away of local differences. This transition from local heterogeneity to national homogeneity can be realized in many ways. Local traditional elements of culture may be abandoned and in their place new urbanized western elements may be introduced. In other cases, westernization may not necessarily take place, but unique local features may be replaced by a certain nationwide standard which is itself of traditional origin.

So, for example, modern Georgian banquet food is in general more conservative and traditional than in Armenia, and as a rule does not include western dishes. At the same time, its high level of urbanization is revealed by the fact that a certain standardized set of dishes is a virtual requirement for any festival or banquet meal. This standardized set is derived from both Eastern Georgian and Western Georgian dishes, which in traditional times were never combined.

This kind of process of standardization is seen in Japan in the case of the Japanese language, whereby in the course of national consolidation various dialects were increasingly replaced by a standard language (*hyōjungo*). Similarly, local variations of the dwelling interior were replaced by standard norms, including such features as *tatami* and the *tokonoma*. Local variations of wedding, funeral, New Year's, and other rituals were also in many cases replaced by standard urban norms common to all Japan. An important role in this process was played by the ideology of the so-called New Lifestyle Movement (*Shin seikatsu undō*), which was launched in 1955 as a way of improving and democratizing Japanese daily life. Some new rituals such as western-style weddings and funerals, and some new festivals such as Christmas were adopted, but these neither replaced the old system nor were they incorporated into it: they were simply added on to existing practice.

In Armenia, the twentieth-century changes in the traditional system of rituals and festivals were far deeper and more substantial than in Japan. Completely new festivals were introduced, some of them specific to Armenia, and some common to the Soviet Union as a whole. Many of the latter, such as May Day (May 1), Women's Day (March 8), and Soviet Army Day (February 23), have acquired a deep popular character in addition to their official meaning. The New Year's festival has also changed considerably, and now includes both traditional features and such western accretions as Christmas trees and Santa Claus (known as Grandfather Frost in the Soviet Union).

At the same time, numerous traditional religious festivals in Armenia have lost their former importance. Easter has preserved its form, but has acquired some new functions and contents. Rites of passage have also become urbanized and westernized. Rites of childbirth, of marriage, and to some extent of funerals have changed

considerably, and in most cases they have lost their former religious character.

Meals connected with rites of passage in Armenia have also changed considerably. In traditional times, such meals were prepared for all kinsmen, especially those of the same *azg*, and for fellow villagers. Today, however, they have acquired a broader social character, reflecting business and service connections of the household members. They have become more than ever a tool for the expression of the prestige and social rank of a family, much as in the case of contemporary Japan. But unlike the case in Japan, festivals in Armenia do not have such explicit commercial importance, as seen in the sales of gifts, in publicity, and in the selling of special festival objects. Nevertheless, the homogenization of rituals and festivals on a nationwide scale is even more pronounced in Armenia than in Japan, where local festivals flourish and where various local ritual peculiarities still exist.

In Armenia, there was nothing like the New Lifestyle Movement in Japan, and the creation of modern rituals under direction from above has tended to be oriented towards traditional features. At the same time, however, there is spontaneous evolutionary change which follows the general lines of urbanization and, in part, of westernization.

## 7. CULTURAL SYNTHESIS VERSUS CULTURAL COEXISTENCE

In summary, there are many common features in the patterns of cultural urbanization in Armenia and in Japan. To a large extent, these coincidences reflect an invariant worldwide model of modernization, urbanization, and westernization, common not only to Armenia and Japan but to all nations of the world. But there are also a few features which are special to the cases of Japan and Armenia, features which are related to the mountainous geography which they share, or to the earlier existence of widespread local variations among different geographical areas.

The differences between Armenia and Japan are also quite significant, and may be reduced to three major factors: 1) the difference between the capitalist and the socialist way of life; 2) the insular and isolated geographical position of Japan in contrast to the integration of Armenia with its neighbors into the framework of a larger political and social organization; and 3) the fact that Japanese culture has its roots in East Asia, with no common sources of origin with western civilization, while Armenian culture shares its roots and origins with all countries of Europe, in the sense that it goes back to the Mediterranean culture of ancient times.

Thus the origins of the Armenian cultural tradition are much more closely linked with westernized worldwide urban industrial civilization than are those of Japan. This fact has obviously facilitated the process of cultural synthesis in Armenia and has left no room for the continuing coexistence of two opposed styles of life, "Japanese" (*washiki*) and "Western" (*yōshiki*), which one finds in Japan.