

# Japanese Desiring a Big Family

By Masakazu HOSODA

Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian, reportedly defined the appropriate state of a man standing before God as a “single individual.” But Japanese people living in a godless world in the 21st century can hardly become single individuals, can they? There is a certain reason why I ask such a philosophical question unbecoming of me.

This question was prompted when I read a newspaper article showing the results of a nationwide public opinion survey on the theme of “family,” conducted by the Japan Association for Public Opinion Research organized by Kyodo News and local newspapers all over Japan. The results of the survey, carried in the October 5 issue of the Shizuoka Shimbun and other local newspapers, showed that 99% of respondents said they see the family as necessary and 65% wanted to have a large family.

I was absolutely surprised at the survey results because the views expressed were those of Japanese in this Heisei era (since 1989), not those in the Meiji, Taisho and early Showa eras (1868 through around 1930) when the patriarchal family system dominated the country. But such is public opinion in a society that experienced in the past 60 years such challenges as reconstruction from the ruins of World War II, high economic growth, the bubble economy and its subsequent burst, rapid urbanization, and the development of sophisticated technology. I had been convinced beyond doubt that the mindset of today’s Japanese people would increasingly favor a self-independent, solo urban life.

Does the poll indicate a “reactionary” move seeking a return to the traditional family-oriented communal society from an excessive high-consumption society, or reflect nostalgia for the good old days in despair over the moral degeneration in modern society?

Before conducting further analysis in this respect, let us look at the survey results in more detail. The survey asked what a family is. With multiple answers allowed, as many as 98.5% defined the family as “three generations living together” – a greater percentage than that for any other reply – while 93.5% said parents and their children living separately from older generations constitute a family as well.

These answers are quite understandable. What I found interesting are the following answers: More than 65% regarded pets as family members, 48% viewed an



unwed couple living together as a family, 31% saw partners of the same sex living together as such, and nearly 33% considered even people living together in a nursery home also as a family.

A Kyodo News writer of the article said in his commentary that the survey illustrated the following:

“A family-oriented mindset has been hidden and deep-rooted in postwar Japanese society when the trend toward nuclear families seemed to advance irreversibly. Japanese people not only have nostalgia for the good old family but also are giving a fresh look at functions of the family as a living community such as the nursing care of elderly people, child rearing and house inheritance.”

I more or less concur with this analysis. But I would say that present-day Japanese people’s desire to have a large family implies neither nostalgia nor the emergence of reactionary ideology. On the contrary, it seems to me such a desire is no other than an “outcry” for help from people who have no alternative but to seek a new communal system in order to survive the uncertain times with the advent of high-consumption capitalism and an unprecedented information-technology society. Japanese people need a new family so that they can survive a new age. And such a family not only represents the traditional blood relationship but also includes lovers of the same sex, fellow residents of a nursery home, and even dogs and cats. **JS**

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