Of Saké and Scotch: A Comparison of Japan and Scotland

By Catrien Ross

Among the first hints I had that Japan and Scotland might somehow be linked was when I stood at a crosswalk in Hiroshima, where I had been sent on assignment by a Japanese trading company. By coincidence my task was to introduce handcrafted Scottish products to Japanese consumers and I had spent the prior summer buying samples in Scotland for the Hiroshima fair. When the traffic signal changed I heard the loud playing of "Coming Through the Rye," a folk song made popular by the famous 18th-century Scottish poet, Robert Burns. I was so surprised and delighted that I did not immediately cross the street, but instead stayed listening to this unexpected echo from my home country.

I began to encounter Scottish melodies everywhere. At a Japanese garden in Ryogoku, Tokyo's sumo headquarters, closing time was announced by a medley of Scots tunes including such favorites as the "Skye Boat Song," "Loch Lomond," and ending, of course, with "Auld Lang Syne." Today perhaps the most widely sung song in the world, "Auld Lang Syne" is used in Japan by department stores, restaurants and even libraries to herald the winding down of business hours. It has also become the Japanese standard for graduation from schools and universities. Although the translation is far from the original, the Japanese version still retains the poet's sense of life's changes, with its inevitable partings, and friendships never to be forgotten.

Obviously something in the mournful pentatonic scale used in Scotland appeals to the Japanese, who, like the Scots, love to sing and be sung to, and the sadder the theme, the better. While Japan has its ubiquitous karaoke bars (an opportunity for everyone to stand up and sing), Scotland has its *ceilidh*, (pronounced kay-lee) the informal get-together where all gathered take turns singing and drinking the evening away.

My sense of Scottishness was again underscored when I traveled to the Tohoku area, Japan's so-called north country. Tohoku is akin to the Scottish Highlands—Scotland's far-flung north. In both countries the geography of these northern regions has nurtured a hardy and tenacious people with a living tradition of fishing and farming. During my stay with a Japanese family in the Iwate town of Hanamaki, I stepped out early one morning to a scene that could have come straight from Scotland: grey light over a tawny, autumn landscape; a hint of frost on the fields, and distant purple hills.

In my several visits to Tohoku since I have continually renewed this familiar feeling. Even the people seem similar in character and outlook. Like the Highland Scots, Tohoku people can be retiring or even taciturn, with a fatalistic acceptance of the land and the sometimes harsh environment. But this stalwart, often stubborn nature seems tempered by a readiness to appreciate life's pleasures and a willingness to share the fruits of hard effort. Scottish Highlanders, especially, are renowned for their abiding hospitality, shades of which I have sampled time and again in Tohoku, which deserves to be much better known to foreign visitors and indeed, the Japanese themselves.

Island roots; island links

As island nations both Japan and Scotland are open to the sea and the seafaring life, which have figured prominently in shaping their historical, cultural and social heritage. Islands by their very nature seem to invite outside influences and major religious thought, for example, has come from overseas—Christianity from neighboring Ireland to Scotland; Buddhism from nearby China to Japan. The ensuing economic structure has incorporated trade and commerce activities geared to the sea and, not surprisingly, goods by ship have always played an important role for both the Scots and Japanese. Before her shipyards were shut down, Scotland was known throughout the world for her shipbuilding expertise, a field in which Japan, too, excelled.

A life dependent on the sea also determines eating habits. Fresh fish is plentiful, as is shellfish, but although the Scots do cook with seaweed (*dulse*), they have never developed a taste for that Japanese speciality, sashimi, or raw fish. Where farming is concerned, available arable land, particularly in mountain areas, is scarce and therefore prized. Japan cultivates rice, soba (buckwheat) and wheat. Scotland grows potatoes, barley and oats. Thus in Japan I can sample herring with buckwheat noodles while in Scotland fresh herring is traditionally fried in oatmeal and served with potatoes bursting out of their jackets.

Unfortunately island nation mentality, although quaint in the short-term, can be an extremely unpleasant national trait. Insular thinking can create suspicion of foreigners and an inflated view of native superiority. Japan has long been accused of just such xenophobia, with its historical periods of closed mind to the outside world and persisting shoddy attitudes toward non-Japanese, particularly in Asia.

To a lesser degree Scotland also displays such negative aspects of insular judgement. Strong caution over outsiders is commonly found in rural or outlying island communities, and this can be carried to ridiculous extremes. What's more, due to geographical and historical considerations Scots people generally see themselves as divided into Highlanders and Lowlanders, as well as Islanders and Outer Islanders. Where one comes from is a critical and long-remembered point that can affect degrees of acceptance. Such outlooks can make the Scots seem very parochial—a criticism which has often been levied against the Japanese, for whom community ties are vital and

insider relationships paramount.

In a lighter vein, this awareness of who is an outsider or insider can make for some enjoyable parrying at the domestic level. Just as there is rivalry between Tokyo and Osaka, for example, there is a longstanding competition between Edinburgh, Scotland's national capital, and Glasgow, its industrial capital located in the West. The people of Edinburgh regard themselves as genteel, refined and very definitely born to the purple. They turn their noses up at Glasgow, which they consider too loud, too brash, too rough-and-tumble—in short, a commoner.

Glasgow puts on no such airs. Admittedly boisterous, it exudes energy as a bustling, intensely democratic city where open friendliness is the rule. Glaswegians see Edinburgh as staid, stuffy, snooty and snobbish—in other words, upscale and uptight. But although I grew up in Glasgow, which in recent years has undergone a remarkable facelift, I must admit that Edinburgh is truly an elegant city. Along the same lines people of Tokyo and Osaka must grudgingly acknowledge one another's good points: the former as the vigorous national and economic capital; the latter as the thriving mercantile heart of Western Japan.

Another likeness between Scotland and Japan is belief in the importance of school and university education. The Scots have always thought highly of educating their youth and Scottish universities are among the oldest in Europe. In the past an entire village would pool its resources to send its brightest student off to the big city to pursue further studies. Scotland has never developed the notorious public school system, with its unfortunate class distinctions, so prevalent in neighboring England.

Like Japan, Scotland has its version of national examination hell, although it is much tamer and kinder to students. I remember long hours of required study every night, but the Japanese-style cram school is unknown and the Scots child is still able to look forward to the weekend. On Saturdays and Sundays I could hike the Scottish glens or play outdoors with friends.

Japanese children, by contrast, seem condemned to an indoor life that stresses rote learning and endless book handling. Analytical skills are not encouraged and few children in modern Japan grow up with any deep awareness of nature or self-reliant outdoor activities. Play for play's sake seems to be unheard of in Japan, with the Japanese mother continually pushing her child—especially the boy—to study for a future goal of secure employment in some large company.

Although my high school curriculum was considered taxing, including the Classics, it made room for periods of music and art, subjects which are more and more looked down upon in Japanese schools, which deem them frivolous. Yet liberal arts studies can give graduates an outlook on life which may prove essential in a world which has now been fractured by too much specialization. For the sake of children and the future everywhere, perhaps we should encourage generalists, and a broader, humane view of life.

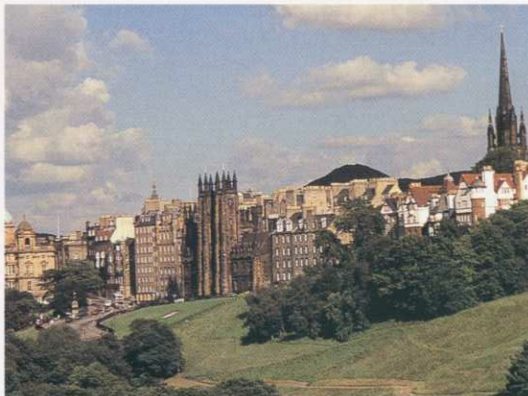
Speaking of living, one of the most enjoyable aspects of Japan is the small neighborhood atmosphere one finds even in a large city like Tokyo. This sprawling megalopolis which boasts a population in excess of 12 million comes across as a convoluted warren of streets and districts, each exuding a distinct flavor and character. My daily shopping in Japan reminds me of growing up in Glasgow, where I always shopped at tiny, neighborhood stores—the grocer for basic supplies, the fruiterer for fruits, and the butcher where freshly-slaughtered sheep and cow carcasses would drip blood onto the sawdust floor. Then there was the newsagent for newspapers and magazines, the chemist, or pharmacist, the fishmonger, and the typical 24-hour general supermarket usually run by hard-working Indian or Pakistani families.

Of course, in both Scotland and Japan, eating and drinking go hand in hand. Here mention must be made of Scots whisky, or Scotch. In Scottish Gaelic it is known as *uisgebeatha* (pronounced ooshke-bey-a), or the "water of life." Uisgebeatha was corrupted first into usky and finally into whisky, which basically requires mountain air, malted barley, and clear stream water flowing from dark Scottish soil.

Japan, too, reveres its national drink, saké, brewed from rice and known in Japanese as the "king of medicines." In addition both nations love beer, of which, like whisky and saké, there are numerous varieties, with Scotland offering a large selection ranging from light lagers to the mysterious heather ale of ancient times.

After-work socializing is an accepted part of Japanese organization life, and the *sarariman*, or white-collar worker, can be found most evenings commiserating with colleagues in crowded *izakaya* or *nomiya*. These small, drinking establishments are familiar and welcoming for patrons who frequent them regularly. The Scots, too, routinely visit their neighborhood pubs to quaff beer and discourse loudly and long with friends on sundry topics.

Love of drinking and eating is highlighted in Scotland on New Year's Eve, or Hogmanay, the year's most important celebration. The festival-loving Japanese also consider New Year to be the "festival of festivals," and both countries have longstanding rituals to bid farewell to the



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old year and ring in the new. One common custom is the use of fire, which in Scotland's northeast is showcased in huge fireballs which hefty men whirl through the streets. At Kyoto's Yasaka Shrine, people on New Year's Eve light a rope at the shrine's fire, then twirl these ropes through the streets, carrying them home to light the first kitchen fires of the year. Both the Scots and the Japanese spend New Year's Day with family and friends, with special dishes prepared, and much eaten and drunk.

In fact, the longer I live and work in Japan, the more I identify additional similarities, tied to native beliefs as well as historical events, between the Scots and the Japanese. In both Scotland and Japan, for example, there is a warrior tradition, with the sword and swordsmanship greatly valued. The Japanese samurai character is expressed in the cherry blossom, which suddenly opens to the sun and equally suddenly is shaken by wind to the ground; Scottish fighters fall like "flowers of the forest," the title of a lament mourning the dead.

What's more, the Scots and the Japanese are known to be superstitious yet pragmatic, sentimental but technologically competent. Scotland, for all its undercurrent of melancholy, has produced some outstanding engineers and Japan's high-tech prowess is well-documented. In fact, one writer has described the Scots as "metaphysical and emotional, skeptical and mystical, romantic and ironic, cruel and tender, and full of mirth and despair." Such dichotomies constantly face analysts of Japanese society and culture.

Different strokes; different folks

But having pointed out the likenesses, it is worthwhile to note the differences. One of the most remarkable is the Scottish capacity for original thinking and independent action versus the Japanese emphasis on compliance and group dynamics. A Scot, for instance, will willingly forsake home and country for a belief or principle. It is unthinkable for most Japanese to endure dreaded expulsion from the group for the sake of a personal creed. Indeed, most Japanese I have met tend not to have very strong opinions or philosophies (which might disturb the greater harmony), whereas many Scots will argue passionately for a perceived truth.

Yet both countries arose out of agricultural and fishing communities that experienced prolonged periods of civil strife caused by warring factions. The clan system existed in both Japan and Scotland, with families and like-minded groups pledging mutual allegiance to a certain Scots chieftain or a Japanese lord. Scotland finally lost its independence as a nation when it was defeated in battle by England in 1745; Japan's internal power struggles ended with the victorious Tokugawa Ieyasu, who established the so-called Edo period (1603-1868). Throughout much of its history Scotland has been an egalitarian society loosely founded on Celtic ideals of equality, and as such has never shown interest in conquering other peoples (unlike England, which is another story entirely). Japan, on the other hand, has had forays of what other countries have termed imperialism, with World War II effectively ending Japanese military expansion. Scotland's democratic tendencies have bred individualists; Japan's stratified society has created conformists.

More strikingly, Scotland has bequeathed a legacy to the world all out of proportion to its small size. In this tiny country intellectual vigor has been considerable, with many Scots achieving international fame: Adam Smith, David Hume, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, James Maxwell, Robert Louis Stevenson, Andrew Carnegie, Alexander Fleming, to name only a few. Of course, deeper world understanding of Japan has been severely hampered by the language barrier which has kept much of Japanese thought veiled. As a nation, however, Japan seems singularly lacking in strong creativity and originality, Nobel prize winning authors like Oe Kenzaburo notwithstanding.

A country poor in land and natural resources, Scotland has never enjoyed the economic prosperity recently achieved by Japan. Nursing a continuing grievance as a conquered nation Scotland tends to harbor the perception of lost opportunity. Many Scots dwell in maudlin memories of ancient glory. After its devastating defeat in World War II, Japan looked aggressively to the future, essentially (if too hastily) ditching whatever did not fit into the new mold, including its cultural memory. For both Scotland and Japan an ideal, strategic solution is probably a balance between the two approaches. When an individual or a country has lost the way (a current criticism of both Japan and Scotland), past memories can reveal not only our nurturing roots, but also recall our deepest dreams and aspirations as human beings.

An itch for foreign lands is another peculiarity of the Scots, whose wandering nature takes them all over the globe, often to the most unlikely places. Most Japanese are only truly comfortable in Japan, surrounded by the habitual and customary; it is the rare Japanese who ventures alone into the wider world.

But similarities and differences among people make up our world community, and are of enduring interest to a writer like myself, Scot or no. Although there are aspects of Japanese society I find bewildering and sometimes disturbing, I can just as easily criticize Scotland as well as the United States, where I lived for several years. Indeed, unflattering comparisons between America and Japan are all too common and provide fuel for an endless commentary on the respective pros and cons of each nation.

Comparing Scotland and Japan is much more manageable and, in my view, logical, given our island heritages. And knowing that I can hear beloved Scottish songs wherever I turn in Japan gives me hope that, as a Scot, I will continue to feel right at home in my adopted country for a long time to come. JJTI

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