

CONCEPT OF KOKUTAI AS NATIONAL ESSENCE IN THE FOUNDATION OF JAPAN'S IMPERIAL SUBJECTNESS IN LATE XIX — FIRST HALF OF XX CENTURY

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Abstract

In this research, I examine the concept of kokutai as a mode of state mythology that functions as an ideological basis of imperial subjectness of modernization period Japan. To aid the research, I analyze two of the most important sources of kokutai: Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) and "Kokutai no Hongi" (Cardinal Principles of the National Essence of Japan) Ministry of Education pamphlet (1937); beginnings of its creation in the works of School of National Disciplines and the Mito School are also studied. The research shows that the concept of kokutai provides an argument for Japanese nation's exceptional and supreme status, as well as Japanese emperor, divine heritage as a father of the nation, through ancient Japanese mythology.

Keywords: concept of kokutai, empireness, state ideology, modernization, Japan

1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from late XIX and lasting into mid-XX century, Japan oversaw a tremendous rise in national self-conscience in its most radical form, reflected in the concept of kokutai, or the idea of national essence. During this period, the country was aimed to become the leader of the Asian region by any and all means. Consolidation of the forces was aided by the shaping of imperial subjectness, of which kokutai became the foundation. Concerning the controversial situation of local revival of nationalist ideas in modern Japanese society, I deem it necessary to revisit the basis of this tendency.

2. METHODOLOGY

Methodological analysis is founded by the works in theoretical mythology by Ernst Cassirer, Roland Barthes and Christopher Flood, imperialism and empireness is founded by works of J. A. Galtung, E. W. Said, I. V. Gudova.

One of the first researchers to address the notion of political myth, a subdivision of which is imperial myth, was Ernst Cassirer, who was interested in the methods of operation of a myth in a totalitarian state. In the «The Myth of the State» he gives a never before seen detailed characteristic of how political myths work [Cassirer Ernst (1946).The Myth of the State.P. 277–296], which are defined by him as mass-adapted scientifically grounded ideas. E. Cassirer suggests that society created machines for reproduction of the values of civilization as well as the «thought machines» which function akin to a plane's operation principle.

The topic of myth's function in XX century culture was elaborated by Roland Barthes. In the book

«Mythologies» he gives a characteristic of a myth as a word that represents a semiotic system or a system of signs. A myth can be understood as an emotionally weighted sign system that is comprehended by the reader as a system of facts [Barthes Roland (1991) *Mythologies*. P. 110–130].

Intersection of a political and sacred myth is studied by Christopher Flood, and English politicalologist, in his book «Political Myth. A Theoretical Introduction» [Flood Christopher G. (2002) *Political myth : a theoretical introduction*], where he gives a detailed explanation of a political myth. In his idea, political myth functions similar to a sacred myth, but lacks the sacred status and acts as an instrument of creation of historical images that fit the aims of the myth's creators.

Another basic point of this research is the concept of imperial subjectness, based on the idea of cultural imperialism. According to Johan Galtung, cultural imperialism strives to exert dominance of the Center over the Periphery in various spheres of social life, like any other form of imperialism [Galtung Johan (1971) *A Structural Theory of Imperialism*]. According to Iulia Gudova, imperial subjectness is comprised of following elements: «imperial consciousness, imperial ideology (imperial idea, mission, values, strategy) and imperial propaganda (imperial myth), all that which is created, legitimated and introduced by the agents and zealots of the empire» [Gudova Y.V. (2017) *Culture of Empire, Imperial Culture, Cultural Imperialism: Discussion of Methodological Approaches*. P. 178].

For the analysis of kokutai itself, following Japanese studies researches are utilized: S. Yamaguchi, T. Tominaga, J. S. Brownlee, K. Antoni, C. Kleine, A. Mesheryakov, G. Komarovski.

3. CONCEPT OF KOKUTAI AS JAPAN'S NATIONAL ESSENCE

Giving a definition to this concept, leading researchers of Japanese culture see it as a presentation of Japanese people's unity. They define kokutai as a basic political principle of Japanese statehood and as an expression of Japanese nation's character as a whole [Hettling Manfred, Scholz Tino. (2007). *Distance and continuity: coming to term with the past in Germany and Japan after 1945*. P.97]. If we utilize custom concepts, we'll see that, for example, Klaus Antoni understands kokutai as a political principle as well, but defines it as a heart of Japanese nation [Antoni Klaus (1998). *Shinto und die Konzeption des japanischen Nationalwesens (kokutai)*].

Modern Japanese researchers like Yamaguchi Satoshi and Murakami Shigeyoshi define kokutai similarly – as a spirit of the nation, which is formed by the distinct status of Emperor as a connection link between Gods and the tangible world [Yamaguchi Satoshi. *English-Japanese Shinto from an International Perspective*. P. 54–58; Murakami Shigeyoshi. *Kokka shinto: (State shinto)*. C.140–141]. Sueki Fumihiko, on the other hand, directly names the kokutai-based Japanese ideology of the 1930s Japanese fascism, and characterizes kokutai as a concept based on the continuous dynasty of Japanese emperors [Sueki Fumihiko. *Hihon shu:kyoshi (History of Japanese religions)*. Tokyo, 2006. C. 209–210].

As for the Russian researches in the field, leading specialists in Japanese culture and history research, such as Alexander Mesheryakov, V. Molodyakov, G. Komarovsky, define the concept of kokutai as a ground for Imperial Japanese statehood. A. Mesheryakov considers kokutai to be the reason behind the formation of not only united Japanese tradition, but of the meaning of being Japanese in general [Mesheryakov A. N. (2009). *Being Japanese. History, poetics and scenography of Japanese totalitarianism*]. V. Molodyakov proposes to translate the word 'kokutai' not as 'national essence', but rather as a state organism, the essence of which is the notion of that «grand Japanese empire is ruled by an unceasing and timeless dynasty of emperors on behest of the state founder» [Cardinal Principles of Kokutai (2002). Translated by V. E. Molodyakov. P. 339]. G. Komarovsky notices a tight interconnection of the concept of kokutai and religious and ethical tradition: the cult of ancestors entwines itself to the cult of Emperor, while Confucian ethics becomes the basis for state relations [Komarovsky G. (2002). *State Shinto*. P. 280].

3.1 Establishing of the Kokutai Concept in the Works of Kokugaku School and Mito School Researchers.

The establishment of concept of kokutai begun during the Edo period (1600–1867) and was connected to the investigations of Kokugaku school researchers. Among the most influential are the four wise men: Kado Azumamaro (1669–1736), Kamo-no Mobuchi (1697–1769), Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), and [Yamaguchi Satoshi (2012) *English-Japanese Shinto from an International Perspective*. P. 44–53]. The ideas of this school were connected to the notions of resurrection of national tradition, and the purge of Buddhist and Confucian influence through linguistical and literature analysis of ancient texts. The most notable reimagining of ancient writings of mythological chronicle is provided by Motoori Norinaga. He is notable for translation of «Kojiki», a mythological chronicle, to modern Japanese language, as well as

conceptualization of Japan's distinct path based on examples from, and references to ancient Japanese mythology. One of leaders in shinto research, Yamaguchi Satoshi, points to that fact that Motoori Norinaga's concept states that «...Japan was the most excellent nation in the world because of the supremacy of Amaterasu-Ohmikami and her descendant, the Emperor, ...» [Ibid., P. 48]. According to the research of Klaus Antoni, development of kokutai is directly connected to the Kokugaku school and the point of view of Motoori Norinaga. As K. Antoni points out, Motoori Norinaga's primary mission was to purge the Japanese mythological tradition of later influences; Chinese in particular, that have left a deep trace in the spiritual sphere of Japanese culture. Chinese ideas and principles have been rejected due to their foundation in human concepts and notions, which are limited and, therefore, cannot grasp the true meaning of things. Norinaga's opinion on this is that only Japanese folktales are capable of keeping and passing on to the following generations the factual events of the Age of Gods [Motoori Norinaga (2002). *The soul of the god of Nabi*].

In an article «Shinto during the Tokugawa age», Russian researcher A. Nakorchesky [Nakorchesky A. A. (2002). *Shinto in the Tokugawa era*] puts the tradition of main members of Kokugaku school under scrutiny, describing various teachings and shinto reformations of that period in great detail. He points out to the close connection between Shinto and Confucian traditions. Although the followers of Kokugaku school were striving to purge shinto of Buddhist and Confucian religious influences, Mito school and Hirata Atsutane, as well as other representatives of late Kokugaku school, were filling the empty spaces in the establishing shinto teaching with Confucian ideas of duty, political hierarchy, etc. These ideas later were developed into the basis of the notion of kokutai, as inherently Japanese.

K. Antoni distinguishes the Mito school as a separate tradition thanks to its input and effort in the establishment of kokutai notion. School representatives do not strive to clean Japanese religious tradition of foreign influences, but rather enrich it with Confucian ideas: primordial Chinese ethical categories of piety and social loyalty transform into inherently Japanese virtues. Antoni accents that «at the base of Emperor and Japanese nation's divine descent, considered a fact in national shinto, are divine virtues, immanent components of the Japanese as a nation» [Antoni Klaus (1988). *Mythos und Ideologie im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im kaiserlichen Japan der frühen Shōwa-Zeit*. P. 42]. Thus an argument is provided that the ethical standard is primordial to the Japanese nation and therefore mandatory to follow. These ethical standards will later form the basis for kokutai.

3.2 Concept of Kokutai in Meiji and Showa Era Writings

The concept of kokutai, or national essence, is represented in several state documents and official sources starting from the modernization of Japan during Meiji era (1867–1912). A structured and more elaborate elucidation of the concept was performed during Taisho (1912–1926) and first half of Showa (1926–1945) eras. The parts of the concept are partially represented in Emperor's Speech of 1868, Meiji Constitution of 1889, but completely the concept is laid out in theses of State Rescript on Education of 1890 [Shiryō · Kyōiku Chokugo: Kanpatsuji oyobi Kanren Shoshiryō (1974) (*Sources for imperial rescript on education: the time of its promulgation and other related materials*). P. 3–11], and a complete elucidation was provided in Japan Department of Education leaflet titled «Kokutai-no hongi» (*Founding Principles of Kokutai*), printed first in 1937 [Mombushocho. (1937) *Kokutai-no hongi* (*Cardinal Principles of Kokutai*)].

3.2.1 Imperial Rescript on Education (1890)

In 1890, an Imperial Rescript on Education is published, the text of which is considered to be canon of national shinto, and which contains the grounds of the kokutai concept, Japan's national essence or national political system. The rescript begins with the statement of fact of the divine origin of State of Japan. The virtues inherent in Japanese people stated are their loyalty to the system and filial piety. Later on the rescript characterizes the moral ideal of a subordinate, which establishes itself in four forms of relationship: 1) towards relatives – filial piety, warm feelings towards siblings, harmony amongst spouses, loyalty to the friends; 2) visual appearance – humility and moderation in behaviour, well-intentioned attitude towards everyone; 3) internal image – study and development of arts and, through it, development of one's own intellectual capabilities and moral properties; 4) towards the state – cooperation with public good and providing support to the public interest, abiding of the Constitution and laws; it's also implied that a citizen must support and guard the well-being and prosperity of Emperor's Throne, and provide any and all aid necessary to help the state. [Shiryō · Kyōiku Chokugo: Kanpatsuji oyobi Kanren Shoshiryō (1974) (*Sources for imperial rescript on education: the time of its promulgation and other related materials*). P. 3–11].

First comments to the Imperial Rescript on Education were made by one of the leading ideologists of the

second half of the Meiji era, Inoue Tetsujiro (1855-1944) [Antoni Klaus (1990) Inoue Tetsujiro (1855–1944) und die Entwicklung der Staatsideologi in der zweiten Hälfte der Meiji-Zeit. P. 99–115]. According to his position, the rescript holds the basics to the new type of national moral system, which can be described by the following proverb: loyalty to the government, love to the country. National moral code builds itself on patriotism and people's morals. Law and morals are considered to be a state method of unification. Five Confucian virtues are cited to be the basic rules of morals, which will form the foundation of social mechanism's regulations. On the grounds of divine origin of Shinto and Confucian virtues, a nation is built by the standards of domesticity a family-state. Under the influence of this ideological model Japanese nation indeed started to consider itself a one big family. As K. Antoni remarks, Inoue Tetsujiro considers Shinto to be a purely national religion, with the innate meaning consisting of the cult of ancestors, in adoration of the elders. This becomes the real basis for modern day and age domesticity. Thus Shinto becomes a means for unification of the nation and provides ways for exporting the national idea outside the country and into the outer realms. This rescript solidified the representation of Japanese nation as a single, indivisible entity. It was given unified, standardized values, which it then had to utilise as a foundation to build its entire life upon.

3.2.2 Organ Theory as the Basis of the Kokutai Concept

If the rescript merely formulates the general points regarding moral appearance of the Japanese, supplementary commenter works to the «Imperial Rescript on Education» represents a substantial and detailed basis for the points that concept of kokutai is built of.

The final edit of «Kokutai-no hongji» text, as well as the official state position on the national essence were issued in 1937. This was preceded by a discussion on the topic of the clearing out of the essence of kokutai in 1935, during which a preexistent and widely accepted definition of kokutai, dubbed organ theory, that was also included in the ministry-approved teaching programs, was criticized. The author of the discussion was one Minobe Tatsukichi (1873-1948), who was also a professor at Tokyo University, he drastically changed the understanding of the kokutai concept by giving power to the government itself, not exclusively Emperor, who was downgraded to the role of supreme authority figure from a solitary ruler. His thesis was that the government is provided with the right to govern and manage the state, conditioned by the Constitution and therefore not to be ambiguated with the notions of supreme authority and national rights originally tied with the definition of kokutai [Tominaga Takeshi. (2005). *Tennō kikan-setsu to kokutai-ron (The Theory of the Emperor as an Organ of Government and the ideas of Kokutai)*. P. 85].

This definition, however, was no longer pleasing the authorities due to its scientific and biological style and did not count in the emotional component in superior-subordinate relationship. During the discussion, the government issued clarifications that criticized the organ theory and affirmed the true position of Emperor and his authority. For Minobe Tatsukichi, the repercussions were inevitable and irreversible, with him being removed from office and his research works banned and taken out from circulation. The kokutai concept, however, took on a whole new official reading as a brochure developed by the Religious Culture of the People Research Center and published by the Ministry of Education, titled «Cardinal Principles of Kokutai» (Kokutai-no Hongi, 1937).

3.2.3 "Kokutai no Hongi" (1937) – Cardinal Principles of the National Essence

The text of «Cardinal Principles...» [Monbushocho. (1937) *Kokutai-no hongji (Cardinal Principles of Kokutai)*] defines the position of the state towards Emperor and his authority, and calls for preservation of innate component of Japanese culture represented by kokutai. The aim of this commentary was to present the tradition of Japanese national essence as the most ancient, generated during the Age of Gods, when the world was created and original order of statehood was established. Since national essence comes from the Gods, it therefore requires no transformation, but rather preservation and support. To support this position, the text often cites the ancient mythological chronicles, «Kojiki» and «Nihon Shoki», as well as the first poetry anthology, «Man'yōshū». To further ground the concept, ideas and citations of the members of Kokugaku school, such as Motoori Norinaga, are provided, Emperor Meiji poems are cited, quotations of his decrees and the First Constitution of Japan are given.

Canadian researcher John S. Brownlee, giving a characteristic to the text of «Kokutai-no Hongi», points out religious and metaphysical aspect of the narrative. The concept of kokutai is based on citations of ancient mythological chronicles in the same way a religious manifesto would cite The Bible. He emphasizes that said text was created on the request of the state and has a precise purpose: «Its effect surely was important, helping to inspire the Japanese nation to the utmost effort in World War II, and reinforcing the belief of the Japanese people, their leaders and its Emperor in the truth and importance of the Kokutai» [Brownlee John S. (2000) *Four stages of the Japanese Kokutai [national essence]*].

A rather interesting scientific opinion on the concept of kokutai was proposed by German researcher Klaus Antoni. The issue of Japanese national essence is addressed in his paper «The Myth and Ideology» [Antoni Klaus (1988). *Mythos und Ideologie im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im kaiserlichen Japan der frühen Shōwa-Zeit*], where he compares the correlation between myth and ideology on the examples of National-Socialist Germany of the 1930s-1940s and of Imperial Japan's concept of kokutai starting from the Edo era. This paper makes an attempt to define the foundation of concept of kokutai. K. Antoni finds out that, originally, Japanese national essence positions itself on following aspects: militaristic foundation established in the idea of bushido, and people-nation base linked directly to the notion of national essence. Since Meiji period, due to the downfall of the samurai class, the militaristic foundation of bushido loses its importance, redefining the notion of kokutai into a postulate of absolute unity of Emperor as a father of the nation, and nation itself. This allows the concept to be supported with citations of ancient mythological chronicles.

Another researcher, Christoph Kleine, in his paper «Religion at the service of ethical and national identity constructions» [Kleine Christoph (2002). *Religion im Dienste einer ethnesch-nationalen Identitätskonstruktion: Erörtert am Beispiel der "Deutschen Christen" und des japanischen Shinto*], also touches upon the topic of concept of Japanese national essence, kokutai, this time from the grounds of transformation of religious thought in Japan, precisely from the moment of the establishment of State Shinto Doctrine. Ch. Kleine takes the directive from 15th of December, 1945 «Absolution of State Assistance, Support, Preservation, Control and Spreading of State Shinto» [Shinto directive from 15th of December, 1945 (SCAPIN-448)], which for the first time openly represents shinto as a form of militarist and ultranationalist propaganda, as the starting point. Ch. Kleine points out that a religiously overtone doctrine that State Shinto was propagating was present in Japan since the Meiji era, as a form of myth about the land of the gods with Emperor as the leader, where the powerhouse was represented as the concept of national essence, or kokutai.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The concept of kokutai includes a wide variety of topics and presents itself as more of a system of political myths or a state mythology of late XIX—early XX century Imperial Japan, considered to be an imperial ideology. The concept itself includes all the topics peculiar to the political myth: ideas of a perfect society and its mission; moral standards of a perfect citizen; world model, presented through sacred points in time and space; mythological perspective on historical events and personalities.

It is possible to speak separately of the myth of Imperial dynasty's perpetuity as the descendants of Amaterasu the Sun Goddess, and of the myth presenting Japan as a land of the gods or a land that follows the path laid out by the gods. Also, as a separate myth, one can single out the myth of the Emperor Meiji, who brought Japan Empire back on the path of the gods, as well as the myth of the First Emperor Jimmu, the unifier of the nation.

This leads us to the conclusion that the concept of kokutai has originally been planned as a state mythology that underlies the imperial ideology, and after that, is realised in imperial propaganda, which allows it to bear fundamental postulates of imperial conscience.

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