Political Recycling and Conflict Prevention in Japan: Are they Culturally Related?

by

Seifudein Adem, Ph.D.

Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, New York

email: adems@binghamton.edu

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Abstract

The paper examines the role of political recycling—the practice of repeated utilization of former high-level politicians in government—in forestalling or, at least, minimizing conflicts among political players. Drawing upon observations from recent political experiences of Japan, the paper first demonstrates that political recycling in Japan is deeply embedded in the society’s cultural practices rather than in the system of liberal democracy which its leaders espouse. Political recycling in Japan, in fact, exhibits features which are antithetical to liberal democracy. The dynamic relationship between political recycling and conflict prevention in Japan are then explored as well as the implications of the analysis for places in Africa where political conflict has been rampant.

Introduction

In the 1990s Japan changed its prime ministers nine times just in a span of nine years, an extraordinarily high turnover by any standard, and—above all—by Japan’s own. But all the transitions took a characteristically peaceful form. Although fewer changes took place in individual African countries in the same period, the process was invariably less than peaceful and often bloody. Simple observations such as these automatically call to mind a number of questions which, it should be admitted, are easier to ask than to answer. As an African and a long-term resident of Japan, the specific questions I was confronted with included the following. Why does violence mar political change in Africa, but not in Japan? What are the lessons that Africa could draw from Japan’s experience? Formidable questions indeed.

What was most striking to me, as an African, about these phenomena was not so much the high frequency of governmental change in the country, extraordinary indeed though that was, as the smoothness and total absence of violence during the transitions. If we consider the number of governmental changes in Africa in the 1990s and calculate how many of them were marred with violence, the number is distressingly high. If Japan had beaten Africa in the frequency of governmental changes in the 1990s, a period referred to by Japanese political scientists as “the years of trials” (Yoichi 2000), Africa was way ahead in the level of violence associated with power transitions during the same period. Japanese political scientists also called the system in the 1990s a karaoke democracy—a situation in which Prime Ministers and Cabinets changed while policy directions largely remained the same (Inoguchi and Jain 1997: 3). The karaoke metaphor suggests not
merely that political leadership frequently changed, but also that the changes were quick.

The frequency of changes in government in Japan could be misleading, however, as it obscures the fact that high level of institutionalization of peaceful transfer of power had been achieved in the society. But in Africa political change is more often than not a highly fragile process. The situation in the 1990s Japan may thus be described as ordered anarchy while the African condition throughout the same period resembled anarchic order. Even the long-established governments of Africa seemed not to symbolize stability per se, but rather just another form of political instability. To use Ali Mazrui’s (1977: 11) phraseology, the situation in much of Africa reflected a combination of imminent and latent instability representing respectively a situation where one can be certain that political change (of violent nature) could have happened at any time, even if it did not happen for quite a long time; and one in which political change could be delayed for many years, and yet the are the seeds for an abrupt political change inherently existed.

Still, so far as higher frequency of change of government is considered to be one indicator of political instability, Japan in the 1990s and many of the countries in Africa may be said to have some similarities. If one sticks to this yardstick, it indeed appears that Japanese political system has been more unstable than its counterpart in the politically most unstable African countries. But, as noted above, the analogy is useful only to a point. Despite similarities between the two, crucial differences exist in the underlying dynamics. If behind Africa’s ‘stable’ systems was the seeds of instability, behind the façade of Japan’s ‘unstable’ politics of the 1990s was a solid foundation of stability.

The kind of instability which persists in Africa emanates from diffuse sources and is difficult, if not impossible, to get rid of it simply by legislation (Menkiti 2001: 133-149). In other words, the source of Africa’s political instability is more complex and deep-rooted and no simple explanation can do justice to the complexity of its causes. It can be argued that one source is the suppression of an otherwise self-correcting culture and tradition.

The discussion in this paper centers on Japan’s politics and not on Japan’s economics. But this is not necessarily because the former represents a more exemplary sphere than the latter. The widely-shared view is in fact just the opposite. In any case the factors which stimulated my interest in Japan’s politics and culture for present purpose may be stated as follows. In the first place, I sensed that Japan’s politics offers interesting and useful lessons for Africa because of what appeared to me was a shared cultural similarity between the two (Adem 2005). On the other hand, a plethora of works exists on how and what others could learn from Japan in the areas of international economic competitiveness, organization and management as well as education. Contemporary Japan and Africa, representing as they do a postindustrial and pre-industrial economies respectively, cannot be meaningfully compared with one another in these areas. Considering this, some scholars (such as Assuon 1982; Grabowski 1991; Nafziger 2006) have suggested that Africa could learn from the experience of Meiji Japan in the areas of economics and education. To be sure, there are others, for example Óweye (1992), who altogether question the relevance of the experience of Japan to Africa’s development.
Secondly, the notion of a lesson from Japanese politics is fresh in a challenging way. It may even strike some as strange. A good deal of scholarly works dealing with Japan in the past have focused primarily on what could be learned from the Japanese model in such areas as international economic competitiveness and educational system. As for Japan’s political system, it has been characterized by some observers, such as Herzog (1993), as a failed democracy or pseudo democracy. Others have called attention to what they saw as the bewildering characteristics of how it works and the complexity of any attempt at classifying it (Mulgan: 2003). The widespread belief about Japan’s politics is perhaps best captured by that all too familiar cliché: “Japan enjoys a first class economy but a third-rate political system.”

Thirdly, I should like to acknowledge the powerful influence and inspirations from the works of the distinguished African social scientist Ali Mazrui (1996, 2001) who argued that what Africa must do to excel in its modernization effort is not merely try to copy the cultures of the societies that have succeeded but also pay due attention to its own culture. The experience of Japan, it seems to me, is particularly pertinent for stimulation of Africa’s own culture.

Social scientists generally explain change in terms of the nature and state of political structures and institutions in a given society. In a sense intended neither to dismiss nor belittle the usefulness of this approach, I wish to address the issues of political recycling and conflict prevention primarily from a cultural perspective in order to (a) highlight the less obvious but significant forces which seem to be also at work, and (b) suggest the lessons Africa could extract from the experience.

**Culture between political recycling and conflict prevention**

Political recycling is frequent use of the experience of senior former public officials, and the process could be static, upward or downward. Static political recycling is rotating a politician in the same position, as when a prime minister is re-elected. Progressive political recycling refers to an upward movement from lower to higher echelons of decision-making. For instance, if a politician begins his/her career begins as a Diet member and then moves on to become environment minister, finance minister, foreign minister and finally prime minister then we can refer to the process as political recycling.

There is also a type of political recycling in which the movement is downward. Here a good example would be a situation in which, for instance, a former prime minister could come back, some time after his term of office has expired, and serves in a lower cabinet position. There are good number of examples in Japanese political history which represent the three types of political recycling. But political recycling is less often progressive or regressive in a linear way.

We should also clarify the distinction between conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict resolution. As used in this paper, conflict prevention is simply the process of attempting (successfully or unsuccessfully) to forestall or block a serious disagreement that lead to communication breakdown and possibly violence from occurring. Conflict prevention must also be distinguished from conflict management and conflict resolution, both of which are a way of tackling conflicts
after they arise. This study suggests that Japanese are better in conflict prevention than in conflict management or resolution.

What, then, is culture? There are probably as many definitions of culture as there are cultures. For present purpose, I use the functional rendering of the concept, as a set of ideas which provides “lenses of perception and cognition, motives for human behavior, criteria of evaluation, basis of identity and stratification, mode of communication, and a system of production and consumption” (Mazrui 1990: 7-8).

How are political recycling and conflict prevention related? And what is the place of culture in the equation? Highly institutionalized political recycling positively affects the perception of politics. What this means is that once politicians are convinced political come-back is not only possible, but even likely, they will be less pre-disposed to view politics as a zero-sum game. What this also means is that the players will be socialized into believing that today’s loser could wait until he/she becomes a winner tomorrow. All of these have the combined effects of reducing conflict among political actors.

The same phenomenon enhances cooperation among actors. Players tend to co-operate rather than defect because of the realization that they are bound to meet again and that defection would be unprofitable strategy under the circumstances. In his seminal work, Robert Axelrod (1984) has shown that this is indeed the case.

In other words, the practice of frequent public utilization of the experience of senior statesmen after their term of office has formally ended, and in some cases by the very governments that drove the statesmen out of power, has served as a basis for political continuity in Japan thereby institutionalizing the idea that politics is not a zero-sum game. The stabilizing effect of such perception of the political system can be regarded as a spin off result which fosters the desire among key political contestants not only to be good losers but also gracious winners. Other factors, too, could be identified which permit maximum political recycling in Japan. Even prior to the 1990s, governmental changes in Japan were fairly frequent in spite of continued one-party dominance for well over four decades. The average life-span of one government in the postwar Japan has been less than 1. 5 years. The monopoly of political power by Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) also created a large reserve of senior politicians who were able and willing to report for duty upon short notice.

Why it is that some societies have a well-developed system of political recycling while others do not? It is the major hypothesis of this paper that the answer to this question should pertain to culture. There are certain cultural features of a society which are conducive for political recycling, and some societies have preserved them better than others. We can illustrate how cultural tradition sustains political recycling by focusing on two traditions: age and sage.

In 1919 Sayonji Kinmochi was sent to France as head of Japanese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference to, among other things, negotiate the inclusion of a clause about racial equality in the charter of the League of Nations. The delegation was unsuccessful.

Kinmochi was sent to France because, even though he was at the time out of office, he was one of the most experienced and influential statesmen in the country. He had served twice as Prime Minister of Japan. On the other hand, many saw him at the Paris Conference as “an elderly statesman who held no political power to
make immediate decisions.” (Shimazu 1989: 98) What the Japanese failed to realize was that Kinmochi was not perceived by the non-Japanese in the same way at the Conference. In Japan, therefore, he was regarded as “more highly qualified to represent the state than the Prime Minister himself.” (Shimazu 1989: 98)

The Japanese place high premium on age. Gerontocracy is not necessarily the enemy of democracy, but there is a sense in which Japanese political system could be characterized as gerontocratic (cf. Richardson 1974), a phenomenon which is perhaps also a reflection of the demographic realities of the country. Progressively more and more proportion of the Japanese populace has joined the ranks of the elderly. In 1950 the number of persons over 65 constituted 4.9 per cent of the population and the figure jumped in 2000 to 17.4 per cent (see Japan 2003: 15; cf. Campbell 1997: 321-357). Yet although the aging population ‘boom’ in Japan is a modern phenomenon, the elder tradition has a deeper root in Japanese history.

In the elder tradition greater significance is attached to experience rather than ideology. A readily visible manifestation of the resilience of and the resultant continuity in this tradition is the principle of seniority through which party and government leaders are elected to office. The age group of today’s senior bureaucrats and government officials in Japan falls between mature and old. Virtually all of the pre-War as well as postwar prime ministers of Japan were also seniors both in age and experience in comparison to the next in line. The US occupation of Japan after the Second World War, and the subsequent ‘purge’, had indeed attempted to break the continuity in the elder tradition (Baerwald 1977). But after the occupation ended in 1952, “the old power elite” were back on the political scene, beginning with Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama, who had been one of the leaders purged immediately after the war (Kabashima 2000; Fukui 1970). The Average age of the members of the second Koizumi cabinet was 62.7 years. (Yomiuri Shim bun, September 23, 2003). It must be noted, however, that there is a clear trend of shift in Japanese politics towards “injecting new blood into the system”.

On September 26, 2006, Shinzo Abe was elected Prime Minister of Japan. Abe, 52, was one of the youngest men to hold that office in more than six decades. But Shinzo Abe’s party was defeated in the July 2007 Upper House election, a defeat which was not completely unexpected given the steady erosion of popular support for the Prime Minister. What is more remarkable than the defeat of his party, however, was his initial unwillingness to resign even after a bad showing by his party (The New York Times, July 30, 2007).

His clinging to power against the unwritten rules of Japanese politics, however, did not last very long. In a significant move, he unexpectedly announced on September 12, 2007 that he was stepping down. It was said that the timing, if not the decision to resign, was conditioned by health reason (The New York Times, September 13, 2007). Shinzo Abe at last left the leadership scene, saving a tradition which has for long sustained political recycling in Japanese politics. Abe was officially replaced on September 26, 2007 by Yasuo Fukuda, exactly one year after the former officially became Prime Minister of Japan.

As noted above, Abe was also one of the youngest Prime Ministers of Japan, and the first one to have been born after the Second World War. In being so, he had already broken one traditional taboo in Japanese politics—the elder tradition. It may
not be a coincidence that the most vocal voice which demanded Shinzo Abe to resign after the Upper House election of 2007 came from the elders themselves (Japan Times, August 3, 2007).

When former Prime Ministers Yasuhiro Nakasone and Keiichi Miyazawa, both 85, were told that they were no longer needed in the Liberal Democratic Party, the former was adamant that he was not ready to go while the latter accepted, apparently reluctantly, to depart. Nakasone also did eventually agree to retire from LDP (Japan Times, October 28, 2003). What is important to note here is that retirement from Diet membership does not necessarily mean retirement from politics, and here is where political recycling become relevant.

The elder tradition in Japanese politics manifests itself in the utilization of the expertise of senior leaders in past governments, after they were displaced, and then replaced by new ones. Most recent ones include the former Prime Ministers Yasuhiro Nakasone, Keiichi Miyazawa, Ryutaro Hashimoto and Yoshiro Mori. These politicians were assigned key roles on the domestic and international scene by, in some cases, the very leaders who replaced them.

Yasuhiro Nakasone, who was the head of the Administrative Management Agency in the government of Zenko Suzuki (1978-1980) became the Prime Minister of Japan in 1982. Former Prime Minister Keiichi Miyazawa, forced to step down in 1992 amid charges of corruption and scandal, became in 2000 the Minister of Finance under the Mori Cabinet. Under the Obuchi cabinet, Miyazawa held the same position. Miyazawa was not, however, the only former prime minister to return to government as a finance minister. In 1927 Korekiyo Takahashi also became the finance minister after serving as a prime minister from 1921 to 1922. In fact, when Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi suddenly died of illness in April 2000, the man who replaced him, Yoshiro Mori, reappointed all of the cabinet ministers of his predecessor, even though he could have easily brought his cronies into the new government. After Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi replaced Mori, Keiichi Miyazawa was again nominated by the new Prime Minister to represent Japan at the 56th General Assembly of the United Nations; and, not unexpectedly, Mori himself was later sent by Koizumi on an important international mission representing Japan. Before he became a Prime Minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto served as Minister of International Trade and Industry, was forced to step down in 1993 and, in Mori’s second cabinet, he returned as the Minister in charge of Okinawan development. These are just a few illustrative examples of what is otherwise a pervasive characteristic feature of the political system.

It can be said, therefore, that perhaps Japan is unsurpassed in its effective and vigorous use of age and experience. However, examples do exist in other cultures and systems too where senior politicians were vigorously ‘recycled’, but it is safe to contend that such cases are exceptions. Non-Japanese, apparently, atypical cases of this sort include, the case of the French politician, Aristide Briand, who in the Third Republic “was a minister twenty-five times and formed eleven ministries himself as prime minister and was foreign minister twelve times including the solid period 1925-32 (Heater 1994: 130).” The Third Republic was the most unstable in the modern political history of France, in which 94 different cabinets and 44 prime ministers
alternated within a period of about sixty years (Mahler 1995: 209). It can perhaps be said in a sense that Japan went through its own “Third Republic” in the 1990s.

Political recycling also gets its sustenance from the sage tradition. The sage tradition is connected to that element of Japanese cultural paradigm which conceptualizes political leadership as the task of the wisest, emphasizing merit as a basis for political appointment. Like the elder tradition, the sage tradition is not also new in Japan (Marshall 1977). T. C. Smith (1967: 79) notes in this regard, “An administrative regulation in 1787 states that the cardinal duty of group commanders was to recommend from their groups for appointment to office men of outstanding ability, character and skill”. At times, this tradition, of course, does conflict with the elder tradition. Fueled in part by the generation gap, interference by the “old men” had indeed occasionally provoked resentment from the younger people (Sims 2001: 91). But over all the two traditions tend to supplement one another.

The sage is usually one with a wealth of experience who would in most cases also be senior in age. What seems to have come to be more important for leadership in this tradition is the achievement of an acceptable level of formal education generally in the recognized elite universities in the country. Haruhiro Fukui (1970: 62), in his analysis of contemporary party politics in Japan in the 1960s thus described the place of the sage tradition in the LDP: “The educational backgrounds of LDP Diet members are no less remarkable than their occupations, and in fact the two are interrelated. In the population at large, not more than 5.2 per cent of those 15 years old or over have received university or college education and about 22 per cent either liberal arts or vocational education at the intermediary level, while 63 per cent have only primary school education. In contrast, 82 per cent of the LDP Diet members have gone to college or university; less than 15 per cent have left school at the intermediary level, and less than 4 per cent went no further than primary school.”

Fukui went on to say, “...more than half the university and college graduates among LDP Diet members are graduates of the former imperial universities, with an overwhelming majority coming from the University of Tokyo.” He rightly concluded: “the situation is not very likely to change drastically in the foreseeable future” (1970: 62).

Many Japanese prime ministers and senior officials have been graduates also of Keio university which was established in 1868 by Yukichi Fukuzawa, a great Japanese thinker and arguably the most internationalized and most forward-looking of all his contemporaries. And to this day, a similar pattern marks the background of the Japanese political and bureaucratic elite (Takayama and Takayama 2002: 18-19). It can be argued that meritocratic, aristocratic and dynastic elements are intertwined in Japan’s political system.

Meritocracy manifests itself in the fact that the overwhelming majority of Japan’s top bureaucrats are well-educated and well-trained. And when one looks at how these ‘meritocrats’ are selected, then the aristocratic element becomes apparent. As indicated above, the overwhelming majority of Japan’s bureaucratic and political elites are graduates of a handful of select universities, of which the University of Tokyo stands out. And as Ikuta (2000: 37) observed, the system of training and selection of these elites keeps a certain class of Japanese away from the gates of the University of Tokyo:
Nowadays it is rare for children of rural families or modest means to graduate from a local high school and still gain admittance to the University of Tokyo. It is no coincidence that most of the successful candidates become from financially well-off families in major cities or suburbs. In 1989 the average household income of the families of those who were admitted to the University of Tokyo Law department was Yen 10, 850, 000 or approximately $ 78, 000 at that time. Compare this figure to the national average Japanese household income of Yen 5, 950, 000. Such statistics show that the parents of law students at the University of Tokyo are likely to be twice as wealthy as the average Japanese family. Moreover, fathers of successful candidates are well-educated: 70 percent has at least a bachelor's degree; some have postgraduate degrees, 10 percent are University of Tokyo alumni.

Seven out of eighteen cabinet members of the Second Koizumin cabinet were Tokyo university graduates (Yomiuri Shimbun, September 23, 2003). It is this common educational background which thus maintains the sage tradition in the system even as it creates a bond of shared experience (Najita 1980: 5). The direct involvement of intellectuals in public policy issues in Japan has also a long pedigree going perhaps at least as far back as the early 1890s when some faculty members of the University of Tokyo were appointed to the “Imperial House of Peers (Marshall 1977).” Similarly, in the early 20th century, the Japanese emperor had been relying on elder statesmen, or genro as they were then known, for making important political decisions (Sims 2001: 90). In general, senior Japanese politicians either have themselves solid educational background or utilized the expertise of those who have relevant knowledge. However, this is by no means the same as saying that contemporary Japan is ruled by “philosopher kings”.

Critiques may point out that Japan is an ethnically homogeneous society – and that in part explains political stability in the country. While the issue is not irrelevant, it can be counter argued that the only state which has almost completely collapsed in Africa was also the most homogeneous in the continent – Somalia.

It is impossible to simply explain away the Japanese culture of recycling senior politicians and statesmen by saying that marked ideological difference does not exist in Japan’s political free market and that this transforms the zero-sum, win or lose game of politics common in many other places. The logical conclusion of this brand of (in my view, flawed) argument is that it is therefore the nature of politics in Japan rather than tradition or culture, which inhibits conflicts from emerging and, when they do, which make them easily amenable to a win-win solution. Although it is true that “ideological” dissimilarity between different political leaders of Japan is not as pronounced as in other systems, dissimilarity does nevertheless exist. In fact, Morihiro Hosokawa (1993: 108), himself a former Prime Minister, observed: “the different factions within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are in some ways like political parties.” Others have made similar observations: that “LDP is a catch-all party” (Masataka 2000: 14-28) and that it lacks “ideological cohesion” (Kabashima 2000: 97-100). However, even if they belong to the same party, no two Japanese Prime Ministers would share exactly similar views on all policy issues—a simple logical fact borne out by the periodic changes of government.
Conflict resolution in Japan

Conflict prevention and conflict resolution, as already indicated, are conceptually distinct from conflict prevention and conflict management. The link between conflict resolution and political recycling in the context of our theme is not a direct one, but there is a link nevertheless.

We can approach the issue of conflict resolution in Japan by looking at its two dimensions: domestic and international. Japan’s political culture seems, on balance, to favor good rather than right if, for the sake of argument, we disregard the inconvenient fact that what is good and what is right are themselves culturally contingent. Apart from this, even when the means for pursuing a certain end does not generally qualify as acceptable or respectable, it appears to my own biased mind, that it is not always viewed as such in Japan. In the Japanese system of thought, morality usually means establishing harmony, rather than justice (Shillony 1990: 127-137).

One recent, high-profile conflict between the reformist Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka and the Deputy Foreign Minister Yoshiji Nogami illustrates this point. The relatively protracted dispute between the two politicians began in 2001 and was resolved in 2002. The dispute centered on facts and it wasn’t a complex one at all (See The Japan Times, January 31, 2002). The solution for this kind of conflict could have easily been achieved by just determining who was representing facts and who was misrepresenting them. Clear-cut though it may be, this approach to conflict resolution is also likely to vindicate one side and criminalize the other, elevating one to the status of a victor and reducing the other to that of a vanquished. In any polarized conflict pertaining to facts, one side is by definition bound to be wrong.

But this form of “crime-and-punishment” approach to resolving conflict seems to be not the most preferred one in the Japanese system. As B. Shillony (1990: 127) observed many years ago: “[t]he ideal solution of a conflict was not a total victory for one side and a humiliating defeat for the other, but an accommodation by which both winner and loser could co-exist without too much loss of face.” In any case, Prime Minister Koizumi fired both individuals after which Foreign Minister Tanaka had also to resign her Diet seat. Even though this type of conflict resolution is unfair in some respects, it has also a certain advantage. For one thing, by virtue of the way the conflict has been “resolved,” and no one having lost face, both contestants can redeem themselves. And that was exactly what former Foreign Minister Tanaka did. Just about a year after she was removed from the Japanese political scene, Tanaka was able to make a come back as a newly elected Diet member (Japan Times, November 19, 2003).

It is fair to assume that the Prime Minister was aware that in firing both parties in dispute, he was not doing morally the “right” thing. At the same time, there was probably no doubt in his mind as well as in the minds of his compatriots that what he did was a “good” thing not just for resolving the issue at hand but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a way of discouraging similar conflicts from emerging in the future. Following the resolution of the dispute in this way, it seems, the principal protagonists would not also hold grudge for long, as one would expect them to do under similar circumstances but in a different cultural setting. The two
individuals know full well that the door was left open for their political redemption someday. Japanese politics is generally not unforgiving of its technocrats and top politicians; when their expertise is needed, they are politically redeemed, without much ado about it.

The Japanese tradition of conflict resolution, the formula of the victor without the vanquished, sometimes seems to spill over to Japan's external relations despite the distinctive nature of the operational setting in the case of the latter.

Some recent examples. In the second week of August 2004, the Japanese National Television (NHK) reported that a group of Kurdish asylum seekers in Japan filed a complaint against the Ministry of Justice. After the group applied for asylum in Japan on the grounds that they fear persecution if they return to Turkey, the Ministry contacted the Turkish embassy in Tokyo and communicated the personal information of the asylum seekers. The asylum seekers, having not been granted the asylum as their case was pending, were infuriated, and rightly so. But what the asylum seekers did not realize was that such is generally the Japanese approach to cases involving two conflicting parties. I have also heard a story that when the international community was scrambling to save East Timorese from the onslaught of the Indonesian government and Japan was asked to play a part in the process, the first step the Japanese government took was to seek the permission of the Indonesian government for Japan's involvement. Both of these cases demonstrate the excessive Japanese concern with pleasing all sides involved in a conflict. It should be pointed out, however, that, as the cases of the Turkish asylum seekers and East Timorese indicate, even as the Japanese system of conflict resolution system favors the formula of victors without vanquished, if it comes to a hard choice the Japanese wish to see themselves on the side of the stronger.

In contrast to the relatively more activist foreign policy in the period prior to the Second World War, postwar Japan generally chose low profile diplomatic activities with clear and persistent hesitation to get involved in international issues. The reasons which in combination discouraged Japan from active engagement with the outside world include, first, the absence of a longstanding tradition of interaction with the outside world. Secondly, there is the lesson of experience—Japan's major external engagement in the recent past had been imperialistic and, as a result of the defeat it suffered, its memory has been negative. Despite the reluctance to play a visibly prominent role in world affairs, however, Japan has pursued its interests with incredible success.

And here is where, again, the issue of Japanese style of conflict resolution becomes relevant. In the opening years of the new century, the world witnessed two major international crises: the September 2001 terrorist strikes in the US and the subsequent US war in Afghanistan as well as the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. One coming quickly after another, the two crises presented a great challenge to the foreign policy of Japan (Adem Forthcoming b). One of the first suggestions which floated around in Japan as America was about to start bombing campaign in Afghanistan was that Japan should act as a mediator between the Taliban and the US (Japan Times September 21, 2001). Japan had in March 2000 brought together the representative of the Northern Alliance, the Taliban and the exiled king in Tokyo
to broker peace. But the effort failed to produce result. (*Japan Times* November 11, 2001, p. 2)

Similarly, during the US- Iraq confrontation, Japanese officials were sent to Iraq even as the government of Junichiro Koizumi continued to express it support for the US policy. Some Western observers saw in ‘Japan’s dual hedge’ an insatiable and unprincipled economic self-interest (Heginbotham and Samuels 2002: 110-121). Such a characterization seems to capture part of the picture, the moral blindness of Japan’s foreign policy, as perceived by and filtered through the experience of the observers. On the other hand, it does not adequately reflect the cultural dimension of Japan’s external behavior and thus constrains a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. Apparently the way the Japanese see it, the best approach to conflict involving two sides is one in which it is resolved without a loss of face by either side. Japan’s foreign policy toward Apartheid South Africa was also based largely on such a reasoning (See Adem Forthcoming a).

**Implications for Africa: a conclusion**

Three types of socio-cultural traditions have been important in influencing state and society in Africa, wrote Ali A. Mazrui (2001: 97). These traditions are the tribal tradition, the dignitarian tradition and the nationalist tradition. I am concerned here with the tribalist tradition which is itself divided into other sub-traditions. The tribal tradition as a whole, as expounded by Mazrui, is characterized by a greater reliance on experience rather than ideology, history rather than abstract principles, continuity rather than abrupt change. This tradition also manifests itself, among other things, in the deep respect and reverence with which ancestry is viewed. In other words, respect for age and sage are central elements of Africa’s tribalist traditions. What this means is that Africa like Japan has a healthy, if dormant, cultural traditions (see also Presbey 2001). But these traditions have been corrupted by post-colonial African leaders.

Political recycling in Africa is virtually unknown and indeed what we have is its undesirable counter-parts: nepotism and cronyism. In Japan politics is not a zero-sum game of two or more players, as is usually the case in many parts of Africa. If one loses a political contest in Africa, a contest which, for the most part, involves some kind of violence, then that often marks the end of the political future of the contestant at the receiving end. It could also mean long-term imprisonment or even physical extermination for the latter. It was as if political contestants in many African countries just could not grasp that they had won unless their opponents are humiliatingly defeated, and even crushed—both metaphorically and literally.

In Africa the unwritten rule of the game seems to be if you are in a political contest, you have two choices: either to win and exterminate your opponents or to lose and be exterminated. It is almost impossible for the loser to be a winner of tomorrow. This is where contemporary Japanese political culture is at variance with the reality of Africa.

Out of the total of fifty-six or so prime ministers Japan has had since the cabinet system was introduced in 1885, almost half of them were able to make a come back for another term in office. In fact, the first Prime Minister of Japan,
Hirobuni Ito, headed the government for four nonconsecutive terms. Yet the political come back record is held by Shigeru Yoshida who was the postwar prime minister of Japan five times (Takashi 2003). It is the conception of politics as a multiple-sum game, and this is a pervasive conception deeply anchored in and is constantly revitalized by the age and sage traditions, which provides the basis for political stability in Japan. Such a conception, in other words, is both the cause and the consequence of the essence of politics in Japan.

One enabling factor to the vibrancy and healthy functioning of political recycling in Japan is the transient nature of hierarchy. Even though Japanese tend to view things hierarchically, real or imagined, political hierarchy is also seen as transient. It does not therefore bother Keiichi Miyazawa, the former prime minister of Japan, to work as a Finance Minister two years after stepping down as prime minister. The same is true about former Prime Minister Hashimoto and many other ex-prime ministers and senior politicians. More than 50 states appeared on the political map of Africa following decolonization in the 1960s. With the exception of a handful of cases, however, no example comes to mind of leaders who had been at the helm of power, were voted out of office only to come back to re-assume similar or another position in the national government. To the extent political actors realize that the game they are playing is not a zero-sum game, that would restrain them from doing everything to usurp power by all means or cling to power until they are removed by force. Related to the factors of stability in Japan identified above is a careful reflection on the lesson of history, rather than any form of commitment to an abstract ideology or theory.

Political conflicts in Africa are multi-faceted in nature, often manifesting themselves in instability or stagnation, and revealing in both cases that the political process is devoid of vitality. The fundamental sources of these conflicts may be traced to the interplay of different forces, internal as well as external, ranging from the legacies of colonialism, to the ineptness and, in some cases, the wickedness of Africa’s post-colonial leaders. And yet it is hard for me to draw a generalization regarding the relative significance of each of these factors in the deterioration of the African condition except to say that the extent of adversity of the effects have varied depending on places and times.

One recurring symptom of Africa’s problem is nevertheless clear: the absence, or at best fragility, of peaceful political change. Not only is such dysfunctional politics an almost universal feature of African society, the mechanism by which it is produced and re-produced across time and space show a striking similarity. An outstanding manifestation of this is promotion of conflictual politics, a zero-sum game, in which opponents are invariably demonized and prosecuted. Continued perception of politics in these terms on a wider scale only perpetuates instability and damages the system’s capacity for utilizing its cultural resources.

In the corridors of power of African politics, in most cases, those who occupy the highest office are not necessarily the more experienced or the wisest but are almost invariably the most powerful. And those who are powerful have for the most part a military background, either as leaders of guerilla movements, or as defense ministers or senior military officers in previous governments. There is also a clear aversion by certain African leaders to the educated class.
In age too, most of Africa’s leaders seem to be generally young while many of those who are old, seized power when they were young. The identity and the background of these individuals, it seems, also corrupt their nature and condition them to perceive politics only as a zero-sum game. Hence, the cycle of political malaise perpetuates itself ad infinitum, for the individual that manages to usurp political power becomes not only the head of government or head of state, but also he, in effect, transforms himself into an institution. Perhaps it is instructive that in some local languages of Africa, such as the Ethiopian language of Amharic, there are no distinct words for a government, a state and a leader. The equivalent for all the three in the Amharic language is Mengist, with many parents so naming their male newborns. This type of situation itself may well be a reflection of both the widespread perception and aspirations in the society.

Japan has been known for its ingenuity in recycling industrial products. The process of recycling politicians in Japan is also as vigorous and remarkable; but this is a subject least remarked upon. Japan’s political history offers ample examples of the vibrancy and healthy functioning of the age and sage traditions whereby they are effectively mobilized for the good of the society. And these are two of the areas in which Africa could draw upon its own culture and, at the same time, learn how to better utilize them. In the case of Japan, the process primarily relied upon traditions in the Japanese culture and the outcome has been a well-preserved political environment, reduced conflict and positively defined game of politics. Political recycling also contributed in yet another way for the enrichment of the cooperative as opposed to conflictual spirit in the system. As Trivellato (1997: 6) observed in his study of “the Japanese model”: when everyone understands everyone else’s job (because he or she has performed it for a certain period of time) a higher degree of cooperation is achieved.” If Africa’s condition is to improve similar steps must be taken by Africans, drawing on already-existing, if mostly dormant, cultural traditions.

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