ETHIOPIA AND JAPAN IN COMPARATIVE CIVILIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE*

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At first blush, it is hard to imagine two societies more dissimilar than Japan and Ethiopia. Consider their religious traditions. With most of its historic peoples adhering to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Ethiopia presents an exemplar par excellence of Semitic religiosity, marked by moral subordination to a commanding supernatural deity—as is its largest indigenous tradition, that of the Oromo. In sharp contrast, Japanese religiosity, which draws from an even more diverse range of traditions—Shinto, Buddhism, neo-Confucianism, and Taoism—has been oriented in ways that sacralize the natural world.

Or consider their economies. With 7% of its labor force in agriculture, Japan ranks among the wealthiest countries in the world; Ethiopia, with a labor force 80% in agriculture, remains one of the poorest. Japan reports a literacy rate of 100%; Ethiopia’s populace is largely illiterate (10% literacy in 1976, about 36% two decades later). Japan’s population enjoys exceptional health, registering life expectancies of 77 (male)/83 (female) and an infant mortality rate of 4 per 1,000, and supporting one physician per 566 persons; Ethiopians still suffer a number of chronic epidemics, register life expectancies of 46 (male)/48 (female) and an infant mortality rate of 123 per 1,000, and get by with no more than one physician for 60,000 people.

Or consider their political records. Japan shows continuous political stability over the past half century. During the same period, Ethiopia witnessed numerous revolts and attempted coups; a rash of civil wars, leading in the case of Eritrea to outright secession; two forcible changes of regime; and, at present, a regime held illegitimate by some sectors of the population and by a vocal expatriate community. Japan has maintained a civil society that permits a wide range of free political and cultural expression, whereas Ethiopia holds more independent journalists in prison than any country outside of China and Turkey.

Their records in the international arena show comparably dramatic contrasts. Japan’s invasions of Manchuria and China in the 1930s helped
trigger World War II and led to severe cruelties toward the peoples of East Asia, including China, Korea, Burma, and the Philippines. By contrast, Ethiopia in the 1930s was a victim of unprovoked invasion by Fascist Italy, pursued through a war machine that rained poisoned gas upon peasants armed with spears. In the postwar era, Japan tended to abstain from international efforts to stem Communist expansion and maintain world peace, whereas Ethiopia, earlier casualty of a dysfunctional system of collective security, played a gallant role in United Nations military actions in Korea and the Congo and, through actions of both Emperor Haile Selassie and her current Prime Minister, performed statesmanlike services in mediating major conflicts in Nigeria, Morocco, Somalia, and the Sudan.

Given such contrasts, a thesis about basic similarities between the two nations would appear fanciful. To note, for example, that Showan Emperor Haile Selassie I (1931–74) was reckoned the 126th monarch of a continuous Solomonid dynasty while Showa Emperor Hirohito (1926–89) was reckoned the 124th monarch of the continuous Jimmu dynasty must seem part coincidence, part pun. Yet even those who link a thesis about parallels between Ethiopia and Japan to the fevered imagination of a comparative sociologist might pause before this fact: earlier in the present century, writers in both countries expressed acute awareness of their mutual affinities (Zewde 1990). Thus, an issue of The Japanese Weekly Chronicle in 1933 celebrated “the spiritual affinity between Japan and Abyssinia,” while in Ethiopia, pre-war Foreign Minister Blattengeta Heruy Walde Sellasie (in Medhara Berhan Hagara Japan [The Japanese Nation, Source of Light]) and post-war Minister of Education Kebbedde Michael (in Japan Indemin Seletenech [How Japan Modernized]) described striking similarities between the two countries. Scarcely noticed among those similarities was the fact that Ethiopia and Japan were the only non-European countries to defeat modern European imperialists (Ethiopia against Italy in 1896, Japan against Russia in 1905). Prior to that, moreover, they had distinguished themselves by withstanding other imperial powers: Japan against Mongols in the 1280s, Ethiopia against Ottoman Turks in the 1580s. Both countries welcomed intercourse with the Portuguese early in the 16th century, whom they then extruded abruptly early in the following century.

Behind those stunning coincidences, I shall now argue, lay societal developments that exhibit strikingly similar trajectories across two-and-a-half millennia, and civilizational forms that are in important respects identical. Appreciation of those similarities may led to hypotheses about patterns of civilizational dynamics more generally as well as provide some considerations to qualify claims of absolute uniqueness.