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Reconstructing Tradition. The Debate on “Invented Tradition” in the Japanese Modernization

Abstract

Several scholarly works on Japan explain the specific phenomena of the 19th century Japanese modernization in terms of Japanese tradition and culture. Against this, another trend (based on mainly postmodern theory) denies the validity of these explanations, citing the theory of “invented tradition”. This paper tries to add some thoughts to this debate, examining the concept of tradition in Japanese modernization. The second part of the article tries to demonstrate the utilization (“reconstruction” – by Eisenstadt) of tradition with a specific moment of the Japanese modernization: the founding of the modern state in 1868.

Key words: Japanese modernization, invented tradition, ideological foundations of the Meiji Restoration, Edo-period *kokugaku*.

The question of tradition

In the Meiji period (1868–1912) a nation state with modern institutions was created during a course of modernization of the country technically, industrially, politically, socially and institutionally. It followed the European developmental pattern, but was built on the basis of Japanese cultural traditions had been made in the Edo period.¹ During the Edo/Tokugawa period (1600–1868) Japan remained relatively isolated from the world, so Japanese culture developed internally with very little outside influence. The central question of research for a long time was that what made Japan capable of becoming a modern industrialized country and a modern state, and if – and to what extent –

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¹ See: Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion. The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan*, New York and London: Free Press, 1985; Nakane Chie and Ōishi Shinzaburō (eds.), *Tokugawa Japan. The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1990.

such modernization was made possible by the different aspects of Japanese “traditional” culture or “premodern” (pre-Meiji) society. The Edo/Tokugawa period is called “early modern” now, and regarded as the antecedents of modern Japan. The pluralistic socio-political structure, the growing marketization of the economy, the development of protoindustrial enterprises, the strong cohesion of family units and their openness to penetration by the wider society, and the like constitute important factors in the successful modernization of Japan.² Actually, the foundation for future economic, social and political development was laid in this period. The establishment of a national market with money economy, increasing urbanization, an improved communications system, the impoverishment of the samurai class and the enrichment of the merchants, the rise of a new artistic and literary culture appropriate to town dwellers, increasing fervour of religious nationalism focusing on the person of the emperor – these are some of the enormous social and cultural changes going on in the period, many of them directly leading to the Restoration of 1868 and the new Japan that rose thereafter.³ Intellectual development also paved the way for the formation of new ideological and political concepts.

Against a tendency in many scholarly works on Japan to explain specific phenomena in terms of Japanese tradition and culture, “institutionalists” of various persuasions have totally denied the validity of such explanations.⁴ This latter tendency (on basically postmodern theoretical grounds) in the secondary literature of the past decades on modern Japanese development produced works that took many features of modern Japanese culture having been regarded “traditionally Japanese” to be “invented traditions” of an era of building a modern nation and national consciousness as a part of modernization in the 19th century.⁵ This approach denies the role of the Japanese cultural

² Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative Review*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 427.

³ Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion...*, pp. 11–12.

⁴ Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization...*, p. 311.

⁵ Mainly exposed by Stephen Vlastos in his essay and other essays in the book he edited: Stephen Vlastos, ‘Tradition. Past/Present Culture and Modern Japanese History’ in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, Stephen Vlastos (ed.), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 1–18. Other (less intense, thus more conforming) examples: W. Dean Kinzley, *Industrial Harmony in Modern Japan: The Invention of a Tradition*, London: Routledge, 1991; Ichikawa Midori, *Invented Tradition*

traditions in the modernization process and in the life of contemporary Japan. They do not accept the view developed in the last decades among historians and social scientists of Japanese studies that cultural heritage, traditional values and practises predated Japan's modernization and contributed to its success.⁶ This modernist approach tends to deny the role of the Japanese traditions in the success of modernization,⁷ rejecting the views of Japan specialists who ascribed Japan's successful modernization to the utility of its premodern values and institutions, and refusing the assumption that "traditions" were direct cultural legacies. They emphasize the process of the "invention of tradition". The secondary literature is now rich in volumes and essays on the Japanese invention of tradition, and, fortunately, also in reviews and criticism on these works.⁸

According to the modernist interpretation, nations are "imagined communities" which became possible on a mass scale only relatively recently when individuals living in a region came to be able to construct a collective and unified image of themselves through the printed word (the age of capitalism).⁹ These "imagined communities" are established through common stories, myths, and the shared experience of life. However, all these factors imply that without some sense of a common culture, shared values, and similar traits the modern nation-state could not exist.¹⁰ This "national character" is sometimes referred to as "myth",

in Shinto: A New Construction of the Emperor as a God of the State, Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000.

⁶ Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion...*, pp. 11–12; Robert Bellah, *Imagining Japan: The Japanese Tradition and Its Modern Interpretation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, pp. 1–62. See also: Michio Morishima, *Why Has Japan Succeeded? Western Technology and the Japanese Ethos*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 4–15; Shichihei Yamamoto, *The Spirit of Japanese Capitalism and Selected Essays*, Lanham: Madison Books, 1992, pp. 1–22.

⁷ Vlastos, 'Tradition...', p. 1.

⁸ Reviews on *Mirror of Modernity*: Kerry Smith, *Social History*, Vol. 25, No. 1, January 2000, pp. 119–121; David R. Ambaras, H-Japan (September, 1999), H-Net Reviews: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3406> (accessed 26.05.2016); Ann Waswo, *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 133–135; F. G. Notehelfer, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1999, pp. 432–438.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991, pp. 6–7, 224; Eric Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions' in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 1–14.

¹⁰ Chris Burgess, 'The "Illusion" of Homogeneous Japan and National Character: Discourse as a Tool to Transcend the "Myth" vs. "Reality" Binary', *The Asia-Pacific*

according to the view that a nation is socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of that group. Hobsbawm describes this process of social construction as the “invention of tradition”, which is very important in the emergence of the modern nation-state.¹¹ He and other modernists argue that many cultural practices, customs, and values which were thought to be old are actually of quite recent origin.

It is *important to note*, however, that “invented traditions” are never completely invented; rather, they almost always need to resonate with the inherited experiences and memories of ordinary people if they are to be accepted and internalised.¹² The modernist interpretation of “invention of tradition” can be misleading, as this process does not mean introducing false or completely unknown things. Almost all the critics and even most of the authors of essays emphasizing the “inventedness” acknowledge that invented traditions are not merely inventions. As “traditions do not of course spring up *ex nihilo*; genealogies, if not origins, can be found”,¹³ the question of the origins and history of these “invented traditions” cannot be neglected. This is especially relevant to the case of Japan, because its modernization was linked to not only the global issues but also to the Japanese historical context. Examining the issue of “invention of tradition” without the determining ecological, historical and cultural factors can result serious misinterpretations. In case of Japan, its non-European context of the modernizing experience is relevant to understanding its framing of the past. It was crucial to “the Japanese defining/maintaining a sense of identity during the acutely Eurocentric late 19th and early 20th centuries”.¹⁴

The modern nation-states naturally rely on the construction of a coherent set of common traits that make them possible to function as “imagined communities”,¹⁵ so the invention of traditions can be regarded as the normal consequences of modernization and nation-

Journal, Vol. 8, Issue 9, No. 1, 2010: <http://japanfocus.org/-chris-burgess/3310> (accessed 26.05.2016.)

¹¹ Hobsbawm, ‘Inventing Traditions...’, pp. 1–14.

¹² Notehelfer, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, p. 436.

¹³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Afterword. Revisiting the Tradition/Modernity Binary’ in Vlastos, *Mirror of Modernity...*, p. 288.

¹⁴ Waswo, *Monumenta...*, pp. 133–135.

¹⁵ Burgess, ‘The “Illusion” of Homogeneous Japan...’.

building.¹⁶ The importance of the relationship between the “invented tradition” and the collective experiences and memories (or even unconscious) of the community is often emphasized in different works.¹⁷ The use of history in order to construct and legitimate a sense of a commonly shared culture is a similar pattern observed in different countries, as the historic past provides a wide selection of “value orientations and symbolic representations which can be selected, interpreted and used for the revival, revision and invention of modernized traditions”.¹⁸ Even Vlastos writes in his introductory essay: “I am not suggesting that the historical past played no role in the formation of modern Japanese identity. (...) The point, rather, is that cultural traditions are ‘chosen’, not inherited”.¹⁹ Stating that traditions are “chosen” implies that their origin can be found in the cultural heritage, which can mean that cultural heritage (tradition?) does have a decisive role in forming national identity and in modernization. The term “invented traditions” means rather selecting, choosing, reinforcing, stressing, emphasizing or institutionalizing some of the existing or old traditions, than really inventing new ones.

The important role of the premodern cultural traditions in the modern era can be demonstrated with the case of the greatest cultural and social – and (re)invented in modernity – tradition of East Asia: Confucianism and its role in modernity, which is unavoidable concerning any issues of Japanese and East Asian modernization and “invented tradition” topics.²⁰ A lot of scholars argued that Japanese Confucianism was the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in the formation of Japanese capitalism.²¹ The formation and existence of another (that is, different from Western) type of “non-individualistic version of capitalist modernity” with the characteristics of a network capitalism, supported by family virtues and group solidarity based on the Confucian values of collective solidarity and discipline has been stressed in East Asia. The “specific Asian cultural patterns” are said to influence and

¹⁶ Klaus-Georg Riegel, ‘Inventing Asian traditions’, *Development and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1, June 2000, pp. 75–96.

¹⁷ Notehelfer, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, p. 433.

¹⁸ Riegel, ‘Inventing Asian traditions...’, p. 80.

¹⁹ Vlastos, ‘Tradition...’, p. 12.

²⁰ Riegel, ‘Inventing Asian traditions...’, p. 75.

²¹ Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion...*; Bellah, *Imagining Japan...*; Michio Morishima, *Why Has Japan Succeeded?...*; Shichihei Yamamoto, *The Spirit of Japanese Capitalism*.

decisively direct the processes of modernization in East Asia.²² This clearly shows the importance of the cultural dimensions of the modernization process, for which the Japanese development can be seen to provide an instructive example. With the invention of the slogan “*wakonyōsai*”, Japan could modernize its technological civilization while “accomplished successfully a presumed continuity of its cultural tradition”. This question is important especially for non-Western countries, as these cultures and societies face the “dilemma of changing their cultural directives and horizons without losing their identities”.²³

We can agree on that “invented traditions” are never completely invented, but contain elements of the common experiences of the community, parts of old cultural heritage, in some cases forgotten – but once may have been existing – tales and literary forms and language parts. The national identity is constructed in more or less the same way in different societies or nation-states; however, the material which was used to construct a sense of national identity is different, of course. The Japanese discourse on national identity is not unique but the historical materials it draws on and the national culture it helps to (re)create are unique.²⁴ Creating a nation state with strong nationalism in Japan followed the European developmental pattern, but the basement (Japanese cultural traditions) on which it was built had been made in the Edo period: a cultural movement called *kokugaku*²⁵ can be seen as a key factor of the reconstruction of tradition in the 19th century.

***Kokugaku*: early modern “reconstruction of tradition”**

²² Riegel, ‘Inventing Asian traditions...’, p. 76.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁴ Burgess, ‘The Illusion...’.

²⁵ New works on *kokugaku*: See: Harry D. Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen: Discourse and Ideology in Tokugawa Nativism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; Peter Nosco, *Remembering Paradise: Nativism and Nostalgia in Eighteenth-Century Japan*, Harvard University Press, 1990; Peter Flueckiger, *Imagining Harmony: Poetry, Empathy, and Community in Mid-Tokugawa Confucianism and Nativism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011; Mark McNally, *Proving the Way: Conflict and Practice in the History of Japanese Nativism*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2005; Mark Teeuwen, ‘Kokugaku vs. Nativism’, *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 2006, pp. 227–242; Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; Michael Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period Japan. The Modern Transformation of National Learning and the Formation of Scholarly Societies*, Leiden, Boston: Global Oriental, 2012.

Edo-period *kokugaku* focused on Japanese classics, on exploring, studying and reviving (or even inventing) ancient Japanese language, literature, myths, history and also political ideology. As an academic discipline, it relied on philology as its methodological tool to bring out the ethos of Japanese tradition freed from foreign ideas and thoughts. They drew upon ancient Japanese poetry to show the “true emotion” of Japan, so “National learning” favoured philological research into the early Japanese classics. They tried to re-establish Japanese culture before the influx of foreign thought and behaviour, so they turned primarily to *Shintō*, the earliest poets in Japan (*Man'yōshū*), and the inventors of Japanese culture in the Heian court.

The most important scholars included Keichū²⁶ (1640–1701), who did philological study of Japanese classics and interpretative study of classical language and of *Man'yōshū*. Kada no Azumamaro²⁷ (1669–1736) is famous for his theological studies of ancient teachings and faiths: *Shintō* studies, and also for his studies on ancient court and military practices, and for an interpretative study of classics, too. Kamo no Mabuchi²⁸ (1697–1769) pursued interpretative study of *waka* poetry and of classical language, of *Man'yōshū* and studied ancient morality as well (*kōkokushugi*).²⁹ Motoori Norinaga³⁰ (1730–1801) had philological studies and literary criticism of *Genjimonogatari*; also studied ancient morality centred on *Kojiki*; made research on *Shintō* and the ancient Japanese language.

Over the course of the Edo period the aim of *kokugaku* studies shifted from the scholarly and philological study of ancient texts to the quest for a unique native ethos and spiritual identity, free of Buddhist and other foreign traits and identified more or less with *Shintō*. It displayed a discourse that aimed at restoring the classical world of ancient Japan.

By the end of the 18th century it had political and religious implications as well.³¹ Motoori Norinaga³² made linguistic claims about

²⁶ Burns, *Before the Nation...*, pp. 49–52; Nosco, *Remembering Paradise...*, pp. 49–67.

²⁷ Nosco, *Remembering Paradise...*, pp. 71–97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–155.

²⁹ Flueckiger, *Imagining Harmony...*, p. 155.

³⁰ Byron H. Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1982, pp. 144–147; Bary Wm. Theodore de, Tsunoda Ryusaku and Keene Donald (eds.), *Sources of Japanese Tradition II*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 15–35.

³¹ Flueckiger, *Imagining Harmony...*, p. 173.

the “difference” of ancient Japanese into the foundation of a theory of Japanese cultural identity, uniqueness and superiority. He defined the contours of a new theory of Japanese history, culture, and subject-ness,³³ seeing the emperor as occupying a special position in relation to the gods, language and rites. His work, *Kojikiden* transformed Japanese conceptions of their own history and culture and made the *Kojiki* a central work in the Japanese cultural canon. He initiated new strategies that determined the new *kokugaku* discourse that appeared in the 18th century, highlighted language as the primary “bearer of identity and difference”, focused on the “origin and nature of cultural difference”, and created new political vocabulary focused on the emperor. These strategies enabled a new vision of Japan.³⁴

Hirata Atsutane³⁵ (1776–1843) studied *Shintō* mainly for political purposes, dealt with the doctrine of national character, and studied ancient history and morality also. He took his scholarship “original teaching” (*honkyō* – the term appeared in the preface to *Kojiki* in 712), the original tradition of Japanese antiquity, which was closely related to *Shintō* traditions in the Edo period. His school became connected to political aims and movements, too, with emphasizing “*kannagara no michi*”, “the Way as it is with the *Kamis*”, which meant the ancient way of the Japanese life “as it was in the Age of Gods”.³⁶ Hirata’s teachings with the terms and ideas of “*kannagara no michi*” and “*honkyō*” were definitely different from the philological studies of the earlier *kokugaku* scholars, and offered ideological basis for political movements, too. Actually, the *kokugaku* scholars “made” *Shintō* by distinguishing the cult of *kami* “as a separate, autonomous entity existing apart from another distinct entity called Buddhism”.³⁷ Hirata was also important as

³² See several chapters in Burns, *Before the Nation...*, especially pp. 68–101; Nosco, *Remembering Paradise...*, pp. 160–203.

³³ Helen Hardacre: ‘Creating State Shintō: The Great Promulgation Campaign and the New Religions’, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1986, pp. 29–63, 36. See also: Burns, *Before the Nation...*, pp. 220–223.

³⁴ Burns, *Before the Nation...*, pp. 220–223.

³⁵ Harootunian, *Things Seen and Unseen...*, pp. 199–204.

³⁶ Michael Wachutka, *Restorative and Innovative Elements in Early Meiji Religious and Educational Politic*: http://www.desk.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/download/es_9_Wachutka.pdf (accessed 26.05.2016), pp. 189–190.

³⁷ Hardacre: ‘Creating State Shintō...’, p. 32.

a systematiser and propagandist, too, and through him and his disciples the ideas of *kokugaku* became widespread in the early 19th century.³⁸

The findings of *kokugaku*s cholars inspired a popular movement for the restoration of a Japanese “golden age”, paved the way for the return of imperial rule, as politically called for the overthrow of the *shōgunate* and restoration for direct rule by the divinely-descended emperor. The thoughts of *kokugaku* influenced the *Sonnōjōi*³⁹ philosophy and movement: the slogan *sonnō* (revere the emperor) typified the new emphasis on the emperor and the term *kokutai*⁴⁰ (“national unity”) expressed the new concept of the state. So, the political implications of the *kokugaku* doctrine were the establishment of a strong centralized monarchy toward which every Japanese owed absolute allegiance and the destruction of the *shōgunate* or any other power which stood between sovereign and people.⁴¹ Among others, it led to the eventual collapse of the Tokugawa in 1868 and the subsequent Meiji restoration, and the building of a strong nation state.

What Meiji scholars employed as traditions were actually revivals of the *kokugaku* tenets, which were not entirely inventions, as they contained elements of old cultural heritage. The Meiji elite used *kokugaku* conceptions of Japan to construct a modern nationalism that was not simply derived from Western models and was not purely instrumental, but made good use of premodern and culturalist conceptions of community.⁴² *Kokugaku* thinking influenced Meiji government policies in relation to *Shintō*, state *Shintō* and the ideology of *kokutai*.⁴³

³⁸ Helen Hardacre: *Shintō and the State, 1868–1988*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 17.

³⁹ The term first appeared in Aizawa Seishisai’s work: *Shinron*, in 1825. W. G. Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985, pp. 50–53, Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early-Modern Japan: The New Theses of 1825*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 126, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 100–135.

⁴⁰ Marius B. Jansen, ‘Meiji Ishin: The Political Context’ in *Meiji Ishin: Restoration and Revolution*, Nagai Michio and Miguel Urrutia (eds.), Tokyo: United Nations University, 1985, pp. 5–6; Wakabayashi, *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning...*, pp. 123–135.

⁴¹ Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion...*, p. 102.

⁴² Burgess, ‘The Illusion...’. For the thesis that modern Asian varieties of nationalism were not simply borrowed from the West but made good use of premodern and culturalist concepts see: Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁴³ Hardacre, *Shintō and the State...*, pp. 42–58.

Meiji restoration: modernization with tradition

Let us see now just one example of this “modernization with tradition” in the process of the founding of the modern state. The later *kokugaku* writers played an important role in *Bakumatsu* and early Meiji religious life, exerting a powerful influence upon *Shintō* priesthood and upon the formation of government policy. Although early *kokugaku* was not inherently *Shintō*, by *Bakumatsu* it had become so.⁴⁴ The *Mitogaku*⁴⁵ (the Edo-period centre for Confucian scholarship) also dealt with the history of ancient Japan, and by the time of the early 19th they got connected to *kokugaku* thinkers and theories, developed their ideas centred around the emperor, and thus greatly contributed to the formation of the *sonnōjōi* (“rever the emperor, expel the barbarians”) slogan and movement, and the concept of *kokutai* as well. The writings and teachings of the most important *kokugaku* scholars – Motoori Norinaga, Hirata Atsutane, and the significant *Mitogaku* scholar, Aizawa Seishisai – became known in wide circles in the country.⁴⁶ The copies of their works circulated in the cities and in the countryside as well, among samurais, city dwellers and local elites in the countryside, too; it can be assumed that these works were read by “all the men who carried out the Meiji Revolution in 1868”.⁴⁷ The Hirata’s disciples came from all backgrounds, shrine priests, merchants, and wealthy peasants alike, and his books were sold in their thousands.⁴⁸

Kokugaku scholars had direct personal ties to the Restoration leaders. Iwakura Tomomi (one of the most powerful courtiers and politicians of the early Meiji government) had a group of advisors consisted mainly of leading *kokugaku* scholars (Hirata Kanetane, Yano Harumichi, Gonda Naosuke, Iida Takesato).⁴⁹ He was also connected to Ōkuni Takamasa

⁴⁴ Hardacre, ‘Creating State Shintō...’, p. 35.

⁴⁵ Mito school: Herschel Webb, ‘The Development of an Orthodox Attitude Toward the Imperial Constitution in the Nineteenth Century’ in *Changing Japanese Attitudes Toward Modernization*, Marius B. Jansen (ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965, pp. 167–192; Beasley, *The Modern History of Japan...*, pp. 50–53; Jansen, ‘Meiji Ishin...’, pp. 3–20; Wakabayashi, *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning...*, pp. 51–58.

⁴⁶ Burns, *Before the Nation...*, p. 69; John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 64.

⁴⁷ Burns, *Before the Nation...*, p. 69; Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto...*, p. 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period...*, p. 13.

and his disciple, Tamamatsu Misao, who elaborated the idea of the legacy of Emperor Jimmu (though this theory was also supported by Yano Harumichi, too).⁵⁰ Iwakura strongly supported the scheme of receiving the legacy of emperor Jimmu against other “competing narratives” (like Godaigo’s *Kemmu* restoration), which clearly shows the effect of his *kokugaku* background and education.

Several *kokugakusha* later became officials holding ministerial posts in the new Meiji government.⁵¹ Ōkuni Takamasa (himself an admirer of Motoori Norinaga and disciple of Hirata Atsutane, at the same time closely related to Aizawa Seishisai) and his disciple Fukuba Bisei were the most influential *kokugaku* scholars regarding the construction of the Meiji restoration.⁵² They contributed to the construction of an ideological system about the emperor’s descent from the Sun-goddess, which was to legitimize the imperial restoration, basing it on Jimmu *tennō*’s ancient establishment of the Japanese empire.⁵³

In December, 1867, a group of young samurai activists had an imperial rescript issued in the court announcing the abolishment of the *shōgunate* and calling for a “restoration of direct imperial rule” as it was established in the time of the ancient emperor Jimmu.⁵⁴ In January 1868, *Satsuma* and *Chōshū* samurais with young court nobles established a new imperial government, which meant that all the people of Japan got under direct imperial rule, governed by imperial decrees.⁵⁵ The first pronouncement issued by the new Meiji government – the Grand Order on the Restoration of Imperial Rule – stated explicitly, with regard to the basis of the restoration that “everything is based on Jimmu’s establishment”, which was clearly a result of the strong *kokugaku* influence on early Meiji politics.⁵⁶ The ideology of the imperial myth aimed at legitimizing the imperial rule and the new regime (and also the coup that brought it into being) originated from the writings and theories on *Shintō* and the interpretation of ancient Japanese history and myths of Motoori Norinaga and Aizawa Seishisai. It had a simple but convincing narrative about the Sun-goddess’ establishing the imperial house in

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵² Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto...*, p. 64.

⁵³ Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period...*, p. 13.

⁵⁴ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto...*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵⁶ Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period...*, p. 11.

mythical time, sending her grandson, Ninigi to earth to rule Japan, whose descendant, Jimmu became the first emperor of Japan. It implied of course that the emperors of the unbroken line of the Japanese imperial family were direct descendants of the Sun-goddess Amaterasu.⁵⁷ The basic principle was that the unbroken line of the divine imperial family preserved the unity of the Japanese state and religion during history.⁵⁸

The term “*Fukko Shintō*” – first used officially in April 1868 in a document of the Office of Divinity, stating that “the religion of our Imperial country is to be declared as *Fukko Shintō*” – appeared as the spiritual basement of this concept.⁵⁹ It seemed the revival of an ancient Japanese belief-system, though it was mainly based on the ideology and tenets of the Hirata school of *kokugaku*.⁶⁰ Ōkuni Takamasa and Fukuba Bisei, the main proponents of modern *Shintō*, were also influenced by Aizawa Seishisai’s view on imperial ritual, which included the notion of the shrines as the sites for state rites.⁶¹ As a consequence of this theory, shrines were freed from the control of the so far leading *Shintō* priest families and were placed under state authority. The edicts of 1868 (written mainly by Ōkuni Takamasa and Fukuba Bisei) ordered all shrine priests under the authority of the newly resurrected ancient institution, the *Jingikan*,⁶² which was to be in nominal charge of all shrines.⁶³ Also shrines were separated from Buddhism, and all Buddhist influence was expelled from the shrines. *Shintō* and Buddhism was separated.⁶⁴ The new *Shintō* emphasized the role and significance of the emperor as the sole focus of national unity, and shrines were seen as places partly to propagate this function and partly to worship the emperor. Actually, shrines functioned as a form of ancestor worship, and “by honouring the ancestors of the nation, a community was created that celebrated a shared past”.⁶⁵ The shrines became important symbols of the divine ascendance of the emperors, the unique cultural heritage of Japan as the “Land of the Gods”, and that the imperial system was

⁵⁷ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*..., p. 110.

⁵⁸ Earhart, *Japanese Religion*..., p. 152.

⁵⁹ Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period*..., p. XI.

⁶⁰ Wachutka, *Restorative and Innovative Elements*..., p. 189.

⁶¹ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*..., p. 64.

⁶² Hardacre, *Shintō and the State*..., p. 17–18.

⁶³ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*..., p. 21.

⁶⁴ Yoshiro Tamura, *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History*, Tokyo: Kosei, 2000, pp. 156–158; Hardacre, *Shintō and the State*..., p. 27.

⁶⁵ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*..., p. 22.

legitimized by the *kamis*.⁶⁶ The centre of this new shrine system was Ise, the shrine of the imperial ancestor and Sun-goddess Amaterasu. New cult centres linked to *Ise* were built around the country, performing worship on the newly appointed festivals of Emperor Jimmu.⁶⁷

It is generally acknowledged that the *kokugaku* scholars played an important role in the formation of the Japanese state and in the concept of a national identity in the early Meiji period. Nonetheless, their significance seemed to fade or even disappear after the first years of the Restoration, as in the 1870s the process of “Westernization” became more and more emphasized in not just economic, but also social, political, educational and even cultural aspects. It may seem that at the Restoration, the new Meiji leadership merely used figures such as Hirata Kanetane, together with his popular *Fukko Shintō*, to legitimize the creation of an imperial ideology supporting their programme of institutional change for the new nation-state, and this idea seems to be supported by the fact that a lot of *kokugaku* scholars were involved in the central government for only a few years.⁶⁸ However, their importance can be seen not only in the first measures, as their conception of the imperial system as a unity of worship and rule, *saisei-itchi*, remained the framework of the imperial state until 1945. The new regime of the Meiji state was based on the principle that “rites and government are one”, that the Emperor, as a *Shintō* high priest, performs state rituals (*sai*) while simultaneously overseeing the government (*sei*) as a political sovereign so the imperial office is thus defined by the unity (*itchi*) of these two functions – as it used to be in the ancient times, during the *Ritsuryō* system, which was seen as an ideal form of the imperial rule in Japan.⁶⁹ The restoration of direct imperial rule, ritual and politics, which had long been separated under the feudal *shōgunal* system, united again these two functions in one figure: the Emperor. This characteristic feature of the modern Emperor-system state:

“...Was its creation and gradual formation as a ‘state that unites ritual and politics’, rarely met in other nation-states? Its consolidation as

⁶⁶ Conrad Totman, *A History of Japan*, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005, pp. 407–408.

⁶⁷ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto...*, p. 64; Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period...*, p. 16.

⁶⁸ Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period...*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

well as its creation and formation cannot be told without acknowledging the national-learning scholars”.⁷⁰

Reconstructed tradition in Meiji Japan

The aim of this paper was to look at the “reconstruction of tradition” at the time of the Restoration, but it is indispensable to look, even very briefly, further into the later developments regarding *kokugaku* of the Meiji period. The topic of *Shintō*, state *Shintō* and its “creation” is closely related to the idea of “reconstructing tradition”, but even the brief overview of this process would far exceed the limits of this paper (even without mentioning the ongoing, sometimes sharp debates about it).⁷¹ Thus, we can have a look at the works of Meiji period *kokugaku* scholars and their perception of that time. In his excellent book Michael Wachutka examines and analyses Meiji period *kokugaku*, demonstrates the importance of *kokugaku* influence in the Meiji Restoration, in “creating” *Shintō*, in forming the ideology of the new state.⁷² He also proves that the dichotomy existing between *kokugaku* and modernity must be considered incorrect.⁷³ *Kokugaku* did not “disappear” in Meiji Japan; rather, it counterbalanced the excessive drive towards the Westernization of society, ideology and political life in the process of nation-building and the formation of a new modern identity. The early years of Meiji saw the rapid and abundant importation of Western cultures into Japan, which, in fact, stimulated the people to reflect and reconsider their own national culture and the revival of the *kokugaku* movements.⁷⁴ From the 1880s onward, there was a growing tendency to

⁷⁰ Ibidem. Here he cites Sakamoto Koremaru, *Kokka Shintōtaisei no seiritsu to tenkai*, Tokyo: Kobunda, 1993, p. iii.

⁷¹ Hardacre, *Shintō and the State...*; Sakamoto, *Kokka Shintō...*; some of the newest works: Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto...*; Trent E. Maxey, *The “Greatest Problem”: Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014; Jun’ichi Isomae, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religion, State, and Shintō*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014; Jun’ichi Isomae, *Japanese Mythology. Hermeneutics on Scripture*, London: Equinox, 2010; Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012; John Breen and Mark Teeuwen (eds.), *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami*, New York: Routledge, 2000.

⁷² Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period...*, pp. 9–13.

⁷³ Ibid., p. XI.

⁷⁴ Uchino Goro, ‘Early Modern Kokugaku (National Learning) and the New Kokugaku: Their Growth and Significance’ in *Cultural Identity and Modernization in Asian Countries: Proceedings of Kokugakuin University Centennial Symposium*, Institute for

“rediscover” and/or “preserve” Japanese tradition and values. The most important documents reflecting the “ideology” or it may be better to say, the identity of Meiji Japan around 1890 all show a distinctive Japanese character, going back to *Mito* Confucianism and the *kokugaku* ancestral tradition of the unbroken and divine imperial line. The Constitution (1889), the Imperial Rescript of Education (1890), the Elementary School ordinance (1889), and the Imperial Household Law (1889) were all partly drafted by Inoue Kowashi, a prominent Meiji statesman with strong *kokugaku* educational background, who combined Confucian and *kokugaku* traditions, saying that “the national classics are the father, Confucianism is the teacher” for the nation, and thus both were essential to the governance of the nation. The initial phase of the Rescript of Education contained the phrase “our imperial ancestors from Amaterasu and Jimmu through the unbroken line of historical emperors”, the Rescript promulgating the Constitution and the Imperial Household Law made the same reference.⁷⁵ The Rescript on Education placed the imperial ancestors into the centre of attention again. Inoue Kowashi called the *Shintō* rites as “the foundation of the nation” and the “source of custom”.⁷⁶ The main function of the tradition of the *kokugaku* still living in late Meiji, too, was to counterbalance the excessive drive towards the Westernization of society, ideology and political life in the process of nation-building and the formation of a new modern identity.

Several other *kokugaku* scholars of the Meiji period (Konakamura Kiyonori, Iida Takesato, Kimura Masakoto, Kurokawa Mayori⁷⁷) transformed *kokugaku* from a politico-religious movement to an academic discipline focused on Japanese matters. They played important roles in higher education, in the founding of Japanese studies and research in Japanese history, literature, grammar, language reforms, philosophy, and ethnography.

Conclusion

The special process of “reconstructing tradition”, with the role of early modern *kokugaku* in this development, may be one of the crucial

Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University, 1983: <http://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/cimac/uchino.html> (accessed 12.06.2012).

⁷⁵ Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths. Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 123 and 139.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁷⁷ Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period...*, p. 10.

factors explaining the distinct characteristics of Japanese modernity originating from the Japanese cultural traditions and historical experience and distinguishing it from the Western and also from other non-Western entities confronted with the Western program of rapid modernization. Though the conception of the national community was greatly influenced by Western notions of nationalism, it was formulated in the ideology of the Meiji period in ways different from those of the Western nation-states.⁷⁸ As described in this paper, Japanese intellectuals drawing on early modern scholarly research known as *kokugaku* played an important role into designing Japan as a modern nation-state mainly according to the slogan *wakonyōsai*, which referred to the juxtaposition of Japanese “roots” (that is, its spirituality, its values and its beliefs) and Western technology and knowledge. The Japanese nation was defined as a unique type of collectivity in primordial sacral-natural terms building on the basic conceptions of the *kokutai* as developed by the nativistic schools of the Tokugawa period, which is a distinctive mode of “reconstruction of tradition”.⁷⁹ The Meiji elites claimed to restore an ancient imperial system, however, in fact they combined the different components of the emperor symbols developed in Japanese history from the ancient role of the emperor in a new way.⁸⁰ The centration around the emperor and its symbolical connection with the *Shintō* version of the creation of Japan appears as an important link between the abstract world of the *kokugaku* as practiced in the Edo period and further historical developments (including such as the *kokka-shintō*, the expansionist war politics, as well as the astonishing post-war recovery). This Meiji-period Japanese pattern of economic, political, and cultural modernity was the result of a distinct cultural program closely related to some of the basic features of the Japanese historical experience, which – similarly to various Eastern European and Asian societies – developed as a continual response to the threatening military, economic, and technological superiority of the West, with its cultural and ideological program.⁸¹ With “reconstructing tradition”, Japan could accomplish modernization while seemingly preserving its traditions, thus could solve the dilemma of almost every non-Western country: changing its cultural horizon without losing its identity.

⁷⁸ Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization...*, p. 32.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 429.