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CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: JAPANESE SOCIETY

The *ie* and Groups

Japanese often think of themselves as a homogeneous society, with a strong sense of group and national identity and little or no ethnic or racial diversity. But such differences exist in Japan, as in all societies, as Harvard University professors Theodore Bestor and Helen Hardacre explain in this video series. Rather, what is perhaps most unique about Japanese society is its highly structured approach to managing and resolving these differences.

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Theodore Bestor :: It's very difficult to say exactly why Japanese social relations take the form they do. Why are social relations hierarchical, or why is there a strong emphasis on in-group versus outside-the-group interactions? You couldn't necessarily come up with an historical reason for this, but certainly there are parallels to other sets of social institutions. If you look at the traditional family structure, for example, the so-called *ie*, as it's known in Japanese, it is a kind of a family, a kind of a kinship organization which puts a great premium on understanding hierarchy and rank, that every member of a traditional family stands in a very complicated set of relationships with every other member, but they can all be ranked in some kind of a hierarchical form.

So, for example, the eldest son occupies a social role that is quite distinct from a second or a third or a fourth son. The eldest daughter occupies a rank and position that is quite distinct from younger daughters. Certainly fathers and mothers occupy different ranks from their children and so forth. So, it's a very hierarchically structured social unit, and some people would argue that that's sort of a template for understanding why hierarchy is such an important part of Japanese social relationships.

In another sense, the fact that the traditional Japanese family system puts this great emphasis on defining sharply the boundaries between people who are members of the extended family and people who are going to have to leave — that is to say people who are going to become non-members in the future — is a social template for this emphasis

on in-group, inside-the-boundary membership versus relationships outside or across a boundary to people who are not part of that social group.

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