

## The Ethnic Landscape of Japan

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### Introduction

The notion that Japan is a racially homogeneous nation is a wide and strongly held one. Despite an estimated total of ethnic minorities living in Japan of between 4 and 6 million [residents of former outcaste communities known as *Burakumin* (2–3 million, Ainu (25,000–300,000), Okinawans (1.6 million, Koreans (700,000–1 million), Chinese (200,000), children of mixed ancestry (10,000–25,000), and foreigners (150,000–700,000) (Lie:4)] there has been no official recognition of the existence of minority populations in Japan for most of the post-war period.

A 1979 report to the UN Human Rights Committee in reference to Article 27 of the international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which concerns the rights of minorities, illustrates the official position on the issue of minority populations within Japan well:

The right of any person to enjoy his own culture, to profess and practice his religion or to use his own language is ensured under Japanese law. However, minorities of the kind mentioned in the Covenant do not exist in Japan.

(Human Rights Committee 12<sup>th</sup> session Document No CCPR/C/10/Add, Nov 14 1980)

There is some dispute in academic circles as to when this commonsense view was created. Writers such as Weiner contend that it was largely created during the Meiji era, and developed during Japan's years of imperialist

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expansion. Others see the creation of the idea of the ethnically homogeneous nation as a more recent, postwar phenomenon in sharp contrast to multi-ethnic imperial Japan. All seem to agree, however, that in the postwar years the idea of a mono-ethnic nation was established as a kind of popular academic dogma through the *Nihonjinron* writings - a genre which aims to define the immutable qualities of “Japaneseness” which make Japan “unique”. The idea of *race*, and the concept equivalency between land, culture and language (dependent upon the absence of minority populations) in Japan has formed a significant pillar of these writings (Sugimoto: 1999).

Cashmore (1988: 267) writes that, ‘the significance of racial labels is ... purely a function of the specific content attached to racial terms at a particular time and place.’ While it is often argued that race is actually a meaningless term, if, as Cashmore goes on to say, “many people believe in the existence of race and so organize their relationships with others on the basis of that belief,” (1988: 270–271) the *idea* of race becomes a powerful force.

More useful in relation to the current position of minorities in Japan than entering into a discussion of the meaning of the terms *race* and *ethnicity*, is an analysis of “the historically specific factors involved in the appearance and maintenance of *racialised* identities and relations,” which have led to the minority experience in Japan being characterized by, “the existence of multi-layered ‘racisms’, systematic exclusions and relative material disadvantage”. (Weiner)

### ***Nation and Japanese blood***

After 250 years of *Bakufu* rule, which itself had relied upon a tenuous balance of alliances between rival lords, the Meiji government inherited a Japan, which had little sense of itself as a *nation*. As Weiner writes, the events of 1868 were a political, economic and social rupture, which the government attempted to ‘redefine to connote linkages with an ancient past’ (Weiner 1997: 1) and to infuse a population, described by Yukichi Fukuzawa (Fukuzawa) as “Several tens of millions of humanity ... closed inside tens of millions of boxes,” with a sense of belonging to a *nation*.

The nation was represented as the *kazoku kokka* (‘family state’) sanctified by

a reinvigorated Shinto with the Emperor at its head, a semi-divine father of a nation of consanguineous unity. The Meiji state sought to establish a doctrine of 'Japaneseness' on which to base a strong sense of *nation* with which to meet the threat of domination by the Western imperialist powers. Japanese intellectuals found support for this in the theories of Social Darwinism current at that time in the West.

Members of the *kazoku kokka* "were perceived to be related 'by blood' to one another and ultimately to the emperor" (Yoshino: 26). In a 1930 edition of the journal *Nihonshugi*, Ihei Setsuzo wrote that the unique qualities of the Japanese nation were identified as a manifestation of *ketsuzokushugi* (the ideology of the blood family). Over 40 years later Kunihiro Masao wrote that, "What makes a Japanese, more than anything else, is 'blood'." (Yoshino: 26)

Yoshino comments that the disregarding of "the historical process whereby many peoples fused with one another to form the *Japanese race* in the past, the expression of immutable or natural aspect of Japanese identity through the imagined concept of *Japanese blood*" and the denial of the existence of minorities have formed the pillars which have supported the concept of the unracial (*tan'itsuminzoku*) homogenous population proposed by the *nihonjinron* literature of the postwar period. The idea of shared blood is also relevant when considering the official stance taken towards the *Nikkeijin*.

Yoshino contends that the term *Japanese blood*, "is socially invented *not* to refer to genetic traits *but* to mould and channel psychological responses concerning 'we'-ness and 'them'-ness. Given an opportunity to think about 'Japanese blood' consciously, the Japanese would certainly deny its scientific value. But the symbolic image it generates, and the collective sentiment expressed in it, still makes it an effective 'boundary marker'." (Yoshino: 24–25)

This may well be true in contemporary Japanese society, however, theories of Social Darwinism were used support the idea of a hierarchy of nations. Fukuzawa Yukichi's 1869 *Sekai kunizukushi*, which sold over a million copies, ranked nations in a hierarchy of barbarian, semi-civilized, and civilized states

(he placed Japan as in transition from semi-civilized to a civilized state). “A corollary of this was the categorization of the other populations as members of equally distinct, but subordinate races.” (Weiner, 1995: 449) Japan’s position at the top of the hierarchy of East Asian nations seemed to be confirmed by the apparent success of imperial expansion. Within Japan itself, the destitution of the poor - technically part of the *kazoku kokka*, they were known as *tenno no sekishi* (children of the emperor) - was viewed as a confirmation of their poor moral characteristics (Weiner, 1997a pp).

While other writers don’t dispute the efforts to build a national identity begun by the Meiji state and continued through to the Second World War, Lie contends, that while national consciousness was certainly growing among the urban population, “the extent of national integration and national identity was limited as of 1945” (Lie, 2001: 121). He goes on to write:

‘More significantly, national identity - precisely at the moment of its widespread diffusion - was inflected by imperialism, which projected a multiethnic vision of the Japanese nation-state. The dominant conception of Japanese national identity in the early twentieth century was multiethnic, not mono-ethnic.’ (Lie, 2001: 121–122)

Lie points to the fact that even in the 1960s, most Japanese had no compelling response to the question of Japanese identity, quoting Ezra Vogel’s view that in the early 1960s, an average middle-class sub-urbanite, “has not had an accurate definition of what is distinctly Japanese” (1971: 87). By the time of the celebration of the Meiji Centennial in 1968, however, the main premises of the *Nihonjinron* narrative were receiving explicit expression. Novelist, now turned outspoken politician (famous for his remarks concerning foreign workers in Japan), Ishihara Shintaro wrote, “There is no other country like Japan, people who are virtually monoethnic, who speak the same language which is like no other country’s, and which has a unique culture” (Oguma 2002 pp 317). Oguma also notes, however, that in 1994 Ishihara wrote “it is absurd that some people argue that Japan is a unique homogenous country”, stating that “the Japanese are a mixture of all Asian nations” (Oguma 2002 pp 346).

The intellectual discourse on *minzoku* (usually translated as *ethnicity*), a word that did not enter popular usage until the latter half of the Meiji period, came to be defined by cultural criteria rather than particular physical attributes that determined *jinshu* or *race*. Increasingly, the usage of the two terms overlapped, and by the end of the Pacific War they were largely interchangeable. Culture came to be viewed as, as Miles puts it, “the manifestation of a primordial or innate essence” and began to function in the same way as biological determinism (Weiner 1995).

### **Ethnic Minority Populations in Japan**

Wetherall and De Vos define ethnic minority groups as those groups, which have “separate national origins, different genetic attributes, or a history of outcaste status based upon ritual pollution” (Wetherall and DeVos). As well as the Japanese *burakumin*, and Okinawans, it is estimated that half a million other Japanese citizens suffer minority status for allegedly genetic and cultural differences - these include Ainu (indigenous people on the northern island of Hokkaido), *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors), *konketsuji* (children of mixed ancestry), *kikajin* (naturalized citizens), and Japanese who have returned to their native land after having spent their formative years abroad. According to the September 2002 edition of *Migration News*, “Japan had about 1.8 million foreign residents at the end of 2001; they were 1.4 percent of the 127 million residents. The largest groups included Koreans, 632,000; Chinese, 381,000; Brazilians, 266,000; and Filipinos, 157,000. Some 685,000 had permanent resident status, and 1.1 million were non-permanent residents, including those permitted to stay as spouses of Japanese nationals.” The population of non-Japanese Japanese can only be estimated as the Japanese government nor sociologists’ surveys recognize ethnic diversity in Japan. This problem is compounded by the widespread tendency for minority members to attempt to “pass” as mainstream Japanese in an effort to avoid discrimination in employment and marriage

### ***Burakumin***

The outcaste population - Japan’s largest and, ironically, it’s least visible

minority group - known variously as in the past as *eta* and *hinin* among other names, but now called *Burakumin*, were traditionally involved in occupations considered impure by the majority population. There is some debate as to when outcaste status developed and as to why the defining factor of such status changed from occupation to bloodline after 1600. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century however, the outcaste population was characterized by, “Large, visible communities, tightly regulated to segregate them from the majority, and regarded with contempt by most of them” (Neary: 1997: 56). The view, based upon ancient myths, that they were not part of the ‘Japanese blood line’, but descendents of slaves brought from the Korean peninsular during the Yamato period (300–365), persisted despite their formal emancipation in 1871. It was not until a 1965 deliberative Council Report that the idea that they were racially or ethnically different from the majority Japanese population was officially repudiated.

Though now considered as physically indistinguishable from majority Japanese and facing no formal barriers to integration and intermarriage, continued identification and discrimination against them offer good grounds to consider them as ethnic group. *Burakumin* living in contemporary Japan can only be identified by his or her place of residence. Japan’s rigid nationwide registration system, and interest in family origins (particularly when it comes to marriage) make life difficult even for *Burakumin*, who wish try and pass in majority society.

*Burakumin* have been the most vocal minority in their pursuit to end discrimination. An extensive 1993 survey showed evidence of improved income levels, educational performance and lower discrimination in marriage. However, the number of *Burakumin* receiving government income support was way above the national average, and numbers going on to higher education were half the national figure. Some question whether improvements indicate a real change in attitudes on the part of the majority or merely reflect the fact that it has become more difficult to determine whether an individual has a *Burakumin* background.

## ***Ainu***

The case of the indigenous people of northern Japan, “dispossessed of their ancestral land and resources by the expansion of a vigorous colonial state” (Siddle: 17), represents the clearest case of “historical amnesia” that characterizes the issue of minorities in Japan. The ‘victor’s history’ has long portrayed Japanese involvement in Hokkaido as *exploration* followed by *development*, rather than aggressive colonialism aimed at exploiting its strategic and economic potential, and employing policies of relocation and assimilation aimed at the eventual extinction of the Ainu.

The new Meiji era concepts of *race* and *nation*, combined with the theories of Social Darwinism in vogue at the time saw the ‘hairy Ainu’ as a ‘primitive race’ doomed to extinction (Nitobe quoted in Weiner:1995:12) in the ‘struggle for survival’. It is perhaps not surprising considering the Ainu’s extreme lack of power and resources that the ‘dying race’ prophecy became self-fulfilling, and that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century they were only barely managing to survive. Wetherall and De Vos wrote in the 1970s that the “present attitude of majority Japanese towards Ainu is one of condescending quaintness ... Like Native American Culture, the remnants of Ainu culture have been commercialized in the face of majority cultural oppression.”

Until recently the ‘myth of homogeneity’ has denied the existence of the Ainu as an ethnic minority, regarding them as either totally assimilated or biologically extinct. “Ascribed in local society a negative, essentialised ‘racial’ identity ... that overrode socio-economic, occupational or gender roles, but denied under the notion of national homogeneity any possibility of a positive ‘Ainu’ self-identification as a minority group, most Ainu existed in an identityless void that could only be escaped by passing.” (Siddle 1997: 26) Indigenous support for the *Ainu Kyokai* diminished as Ainu increasingly tried to disown their heritage. The commemorations which began with the 1968 celebration of Hokkaido’s ‘first’ 100 years of history almost entirely ignored the Ainu, producing widespread resentment and marked the start of a reinvigoration of Ainu consciousness. Terrorist acts committed not by Ainu, but by sympathetic *Wajin* (as majority Japanese are known among Ainu) helped

change perception of the Ainu from an interesting museum piece into an *Ainu mondai* (problem), and moved them from tourist brochures onto the front page.

While the government enacted a large-scale welfare project (*Hokkaido Utari Fukushi Taisaku*) in the 1970s it re-iterated that “we definitely do not take the standpoint that the Ainu are a separate people (*minzoku*) within the citizenry of Japan” (Siddle: 1997: 34). However, a sense of Ainu nationhood was developing, encouraged by identification with the struggles of indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world, and they were attempting to “redefine the relationship with the state in terms of a culturally and historically unique group with distinct rights. The Ainu as an indigenous people were not just another disadvantaged social group in need of state welfare but a nation desirous of decolonisation” (Siddle 1997: 34–35).

The replacement of the 1899 Protection Law in the late 1990s, although a much watered-down version than that demanded by the *Utari Kyokai*, did have a resolution paired with it that for the first time that acknowledged the existence of an indigenous ethnic minority in Japan. However, Siddle comes to the discouraging conclusion that, “within Japan at large, the dominant narratives of national homogeneity and peaceful development in Hokkaido remain secure enough to ensure that despite growing *Wajin* support, the majority of the population still know little, and care even less, about Ainu demands.” (Siddle: 1997: 43).

## Okinawans

The Okinawan kingdom long paid nominal tribute to the Chinese court, even when under the suzerainty of Satsuma’s Shimizu clan. The Meiji government laid claim to the islands in 1872, and in 1879 annexed and made them into a prefecture. Over the following decades Japanese sugar companies disrupted the traditional economy, and the people were subjected to great pressure to assimilate into mainstream Japanese culture.

After 1945 many Okinawans interpreted US occupation forces opposition to the introduction of democratic government at the prefectural level until 1968, as being based on a belief that they were unable to govern themselves when the Japanese were. That similar attitudes were held by the Japanese seemed to be



confirmed by the almost complete exclusion of Okinawan opinion in negotiations over the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972. Creighton writes that "Okinawans, living at a distance from the four main islands of the Japanese archipelago, and generally having lower economic status, are Japanese citizens but excluded from a mainstream Japanese identity," and that Okinawans may have come to regard their skin color, generally darker than mainstream Japanese, accordingly (Creighton: 1997: 228). Many Okinawans, ashamed of their ethnic identity, attempted to pass as mainstream Japanese. In 1985, the then governor of Okinawa, Niishime Junji, stated that he, by all appearances having achieved great success in Japanese society, having attempted to assimilate Japanese identity, had failed.

Although there has been far less overt discrimination against Okinawans since 1972 than before the Pacific war and, helped by expressions of ethnic pride on the part of the large overseas Okinawan population and other indigenous populations, far fewer Okinawans feel ashamed of their identity vis-à-vis Japanese, problems still remain. Creighton questions whether the attitudes of the majority of mainstream Japanese towards Okinawan ethnicity have come as far as those of Okinawans themselves.

## **Chinese**

Contacts between China and Japan go back over 2000 years, and there has always been a Chinese presence in Japan, particularly around the ports of Kyushu and in the major cities around the Inland Sea. Despite China having been the source of much of what can be described as high Japanese culture, Wagamatsu writes that, "present day Japan feels less and less cultural debt" (Vasishth: 1997: 115). Indeed, while a cursory look at mainstream Japanese television programs shows the Japanese fascination with 'idea' of Asia, and China in particular, non-Japanese Asians are often spoken of in derogatory terms.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the traditional Sino-centric worldview was rejected by Japan as its own nativist scholarship strove to assert itself, and it became exposed to Western learning. China's inability to withstand western imperialist designs, defeat by Japan in the war of 1894–5, and the apparent reversal of the traditional teacher-student relationship, seemed to confirm

Social Darwinist assumptions of superiority. Despite the economic success of the small Chinese community in the Meiji period, they were never accorded the respect of their Western counterparts (Vasishth 1997 pp 136). Although, along with other non-Japanese Asian migrant workers they were the first to be laid off in times of recession they came to be seen as a threat to Japanese workers. After 1945, around 60,000 Chinese-speaking residents returned to their homelands (Taiwan and mainland China) while 30,000 remained. The May 1947 Alien Registration Law classified Chinese, along with the other hitherto *daisankokujin* citizens of the empire, as aliens. The law effectively disenfranchised them from a wide range of social and welfare benefits and employment in the public sector (Vasishth: 1997: 132). In contrast with the far more numerous Korean minority, the Chinese minority, supported by a traditional network of guilds and associations went on to become a successful, if not fully respected minority.

### **Koreans**

Despite a long and close relationship between Japan and Korea during their early history, in 1910 Japan fulfilled a long held territorial ambition by annexing the Korean peninsula. In the following years hundreds of thousands of Koreans emigrated to Japan where industry needed cheap labor to replace the workers lost to the overseas battlefields during the Pacific War.

According to the official line the Korean immigrants may well have been the “emperor’s people”, but there was a great deal of mistrust of them among the Japanese - illustrated by the massacre of thousands of Koreans (as well as Chinese and Okinawans) in the aftermath of the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake, after a rumor was spread that Koreans were poisoning the water supply. This incident was echoed recently in Tokyo Governor, Ishihara Shintaro’s declaration after 1992’s annual earthquake drill that Japan’s Self-Defence Forces must be at the ready as, “Atrocious crimes have been committed again and again by *sangokujin* who have entered the country illegally. In the event of a major earthquake, riots could break out.”

Of the more than 600,000 Koreans currently resident in Japan, most are third generation Koreans born in Japan, speak Japanese as their first and often only

language, and by most definitions can be said to be *culturally* Japanese. However, their social, economic and political rights are constrained by their continued alien status. Unemployment rates among Koreans are much higher than for the population as a whole and they are disproportionately represented in the poorly paid and insecure service and entertainment industries, small non-unionized sub-contracting companies and the construction industry (Weiner: 1997b). As a result of a general inability to accumulate wealth, many Korean children have been denied access to opportunities in state sector higher education, and Juvenile delinquency among Korean youth is relatively high, as is Korean involvement in criminal activity.

### **Nikkeijin**

By October 1969, there were reported to be 1,062,293 foreigners of Japanese ancestry, known as *Nikkeijin*, in countries throughout the world. However, in the context of the issue of foreign migrant workers in Japan, the term *Nikkeijin* refers specifically to South American descendents up to the third generation and their spouses, mainly those from Brazil and Peru (also known as *dekasegi* - a word that originally referred to sojourners from remote regions who left their homes to work in urban factories). Around 220,000 Brazilians of Japanese descent had moved to Japan between 1990 and 1999 (Romero: 1999), making them the third largest group of foreign nationals living in Japan after Koreans and Chinese.

In the late 1980s, the booming Japanese economy faced a severe unskilled labor shortage. With fewer young Japanese interested in what are known as *3K* (*kitanai*/dirty, *kiken*/dangerous, *kibishii*/difficult) occupations, illegal foreign immigrant workers, largely from north, south-east, and central Asia, filled this growing void in the Japanese workforce. While industry was concerned that it needed a large low-cost workforce in the face of the higher aspirations of young Japanese combined with an ageing population and low birth rate, the government was concerned about the creation of permanent illegal immigrant communities which it believed could lead to social tension.

As, according to the Japanese Nationality Law which bases nationality on bloodline a Japanese national born in a foreign country must choose one or

other nationality before the age of 22, very few second generation emigrants held Japanese nationality. However, in changes to immigration status in 1985, and in 1990 in the revision of the Immigration Control Law ‘the government tacitly permitted illegal employment’ (Selleck: 1997: 188). The 1990 revision created a new immigration category of ‘long term resident,’ allowing stays of up to 3 years, and opened up the possibility of immigration to *Nikkeijin* up to the 6<sup>th</sup> degree of consanguinity.

Despite the fact that the government had shown little interest in the *Nikkeijin* emigrants prior to 1990, and that the *Nikkeijin* themselves generally had little contact with their relatives in Japan, the official view concerning the *Nikkeijin* is that:

they would like to see the country where their ancestors grew up and wish to visit their relatives in Japan ... [as] ... it will cost money for a *Nikkeijin* to stay with relatives in Japan in order to recover the cost of the visit. The Immigration Control Law was not revised for the purpose of promoting their employment in Japan.” (Selleck: 1997: 204)

In fact, with no restrictions on the activities that can be undertaken in Japan, “these visas can be described as *de facto* working visas” (Selleck: 1997: 189). The changes resulted in an almost immediate huge influx of South American *Nikkeijin*. Generally employed in the industrial sector, and accorded a low social status, they have become what Selleck calls a kind of “migrant labor aristocracy” above illegal foreign workers.

Despite the collapse of the “bubble economy” *Nikkeijin* have tended to remain in Japan longer, and the number returning to Japan more than once is increasing. Indeed, a 1998 report found a broad range of industries in Hamamatsu, in Shizuoka Prefecture, to be “structurally dependent” upon foreign workers. The central government has generally treated the *Nikkeijin* phenomenon and its attendant problems in the same way as it has dealt with other minority populations - by largely ignoring them. It has been left to local governments to take responsibility for all their citizens, whether Japanese or not. The report mentioned above concludes that Japan must “recognize the

long term, structural character of the demand for foreign-born labor in their economies ... and grapple seriously with the challenges of integrating foreign workers and their children as permanent residents and potential future citizens.” (Cornelius & Kuwahara 1998)

Hamamatsu, where over 11,000 Brazilian Japanese were living as of 2001, provides an example of the kind of problems that can be expected to increase as the foreign worker population increases without effective attempts to integrate them into the Japanese community. In *Homi Danchi*, a public housing complex in which 3000 of the 10,000 residents are Japanese-Brazilians, relations between them and the Japanese residents are strained, and there are almost daily disputes over noise, garbage and parking. The involvement in petty crime, stealing cars, and shoplifting of some Brazilians triggered a xenophobic backlash and cases of right-wing nationalists gathering outside Brazilians’ homes, shouting “foreigners go home” have been reported. In 1999, a jewelry store owner was ordered by a district court to pay a Brazilian woman 1.5 million yen in damages after he ordered her out of the store in June 1998, because she was a foreigner. The actions of the owner, who had placed signs in his store saying that foreigners were banned from the premises in an attempt to reduce theft, were ruled to be in violation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, signed by Japan in 1995.

## Conclusion

In 1999, Economic Planning Agency chief Taichi Sakaiya stated that with the prospect of some 35% of the Japanese population being over 60 years old by 2025, and the overall decline in the population after 2007, it is “inevitable” that Japan will need foreign workers in the range of 10 to 30% of the population decline (*Japan ponders economic rescue by immigrants*, The Guardian, Aug 5 1999). It seems clear that unless integration of the increasing number of foreign workers and their families, who are staying for longer and longer periods of time, friction with the Japanese majority community, disenfranchisement of and increased disenchantment among the foreign communities will only increase. Bearing in mind the history of how Japan has dealt with ethnic minorities in the past, the prospects for avoiding increased

ethnic tension are not encouraging.

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