Multiethnic Japan and the monoethnic myth

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Japan's monoethnic myth

Japan is a society with many ethnic and social minority groups and a large majority population of heterogeneous origins. Anthropological evidence describes a migration from Southeast Asia and later from East Asia, probably over land bridges that once existed. The early settlers in the Jomon era included the Ainu and Ryukyuan peoples, and were followed by immigrants of the Yayoi era. The Ryukyans lived in Okinawa and the other Ryukyu islands, and had their own distinctive language and culture and strong ties with China before their independent kingdom was forcibly incorporated into the expanding Japanese nation. The Ainu maintained their ethnic characteristics by moving north, but the Yayoi-era people either exterminated or absorbed the Jomon, people with whom they came into contact. It was these Yayoi people who eventually formed the Yamato state in the fifth century.

Invasion and migration from China and Korea continued until the ninth century, by which time nearly one-third of the aristocratic clans in the Chinese-style Heian capital (present-day Kyoto) were of Korean or Chinese ethnicity. Immigrants
were well received as they were recognized as bearers of a superior cultural tradition, not only as nobility but as craftsmen, priests, and educated professionals. Their traditions in literature, art, and religion were absorbed and became a foundation on which much of Japanese culture was based (Sansom 1958).

The sixteenth-century plunder of Korea by military forces under Hideyoshi included the capture of artisans and scholars who were brought to Japan en masse for their advanced skills in pottery and printing. In more recent times, large numbers of people from Korea and Taiwan, who were at that time colonial subjects and Japanese nationals, settled in Japan or were pressed into prewar or wartime labor there. Despite efforts to repatriate them after the war, many stayed in Japan but lost their Japanese nationality when the postwar San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952 designated them as foreigners. The Allied Occupation brought hundreds of thousands of people to Japan, mostly American men, and the maintenance of military facilities has led to the continued presence of a significant number of American military personnel. Most of this population has been transient, but some have left behind offspring while others have settled permanently in the country and married Japanese women.

In today's Japan, in addition to at least twenty-four thousand Ainu and a million Okinawans, ethnic minorities holding citizenship include recently naturalized persons from various ethnic backgrounds, particularly Korean. In addition, there are persons of mixed ethnic ancestry, such as the offspring of Korean-Japanese or American-Japanese parentage. There are also nearly a million resident foreigners, the majority of whom are Koreans, with smaller numbers of Chinese, Filipinos, Americans, and others.

In recent years, the ethnic composition of foreigners in Japan has changed dramatically with a flood of workers and students from around the world seeking opportunity in Japan. Businessmen, laborers, entertainers, and English teachers have flocked to Japan to participate in the economic miracle. Students, mainly from China and other parts of Asia, are also rushing to Japan in rapidly increasing numbers to fill the government's stated goal of 100,000 by the year 2000, although many use their student status simply to enter the country to work. Some of these newcomers choose to stay in Japan for extended periods or permanently. Ironically, these immigrants include former Japanese nationals (and their descendants) who once left Japan to seek their fortune elsewhere. Aided by favorable treatment in the new immigration law of 1990, their U-turn has already reached 150,000 and is growing.

The largest minority in Japan, the burakumin, are physically and linguistically indistinguishable from majority Japanese but exhibit the political and cultural traits of an ethnic group. They are the as many as three million descendants of the eta, a subclass legally distinguished during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) and until their emancipation in 1871. The atomic bomb survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the hibakusha, and their descendants are a new
minority group who, like the burakumin, may be plagued by fears that they are genetically defective or contaminated.

In all, about five percent of the Japanese population, or some six-million persons, are minorities who suffer much the same fate that ethnic and other minorities do in America and Europe (De Vos, Wetherall, and Stearman). While they each have their own unique history of separation and oppression, and distinct cultural, class, or genetic background, all have encountered barriers of discrimination in employment and marriage. This discrimination limits their opportunities in life and encourages those who can hide their identity to "pass" as majorities. Most of Japan's minority groups have higher rates of unemployment, welfare, and crime, and lower levels of income and educational attainment, than the majority population.

Side effects of the monoethnic myth

Of course, the popular image of Japan is not that of a multiethnic society. We have been told by scholars and casual observers alike that "the Japanese" are a "homogeneous people" who are uniform in appearance, opinions, and lifestyle. We may have heard Japanese people begin to describe their shared characteristics by the words wareware Nipponjin or "we Japanese," as though they could speak for all Japanese. Many Japanese and non-Japanese have explained to us how the Japanese all come from a single ethnic background and form one great, intimate family with a special capacity for unspoken, common understandings and harmony and a unity in purpose that is all uniquely Japanese.

This belief is a consistent and notable feature of the self-awareness of many Japanese. Japan's monoethnic myth is believed at all levels of society in Japan, and abroad as well. It is so pervasive that the obvious evidence that falsifies it is often blatantly ignored. Even in discussions of Japanese minorities, most people continue to talk of the homogeneous society without sensing the contradiction. This image is so strong that the language that most of us know and use defines "Japanese" as a race and the society as monoethnic.

Japanese political leaders have believed for some time that Japan should be a monoethnic society and have used force to try to make it into one, both on the surface and much deeper. Ainu and Ryukyuans were subjected to assimilation policies meant to destroy their language and culture. Around the turn of the twentieth century, these policies were extended to Japan's colonial minorities, first in Taiwan and then in Korea. Denial of the right to use ethnic names and languages, as a method of destruction of ethnic identities, was an integral part of Imperial Japan's policy of assimilation following territorial expansion (De Vos, Wetherall, and Stearman 1975).
Present-day leaders, most notably former Prime Minister Nakasone, continue to endorse the theory that a strong and dominant Japan is generated from a clear identity as a monoethnic people with a special spirituality and culture. Nakasone's intellectual mentor was the nationalist philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro, who believed that Japan's military aggression was part of a destiny imposed upon the nation, much like the nineteenth-century "manifest destiny" philosophy of the United States (van Wolferen). This theory reappears in present times through writing that suggests that Japanese are uniquely qualified to lead the world in understanding peace and harmony. Japanese are constantly reminded that they are special and fortunate to live only among themselves, and therefore able to enjoy a supposedly easy communication, trust, and understanding, without the allegedly terrible problems of multiethnic states.

The roots of this mythology of homogeneity seem to go back to the beginning of the Yamato state around the fifth century. When written records replaced oral transmission, the commonality of origin with mainland people was denied and a legend of a single, unmixed Yamato people of unique, indigenous origin was developed. The people were said to be of divine ancestry and the imperial line directly traced to the sun goddess. From its inception, Yamato identity implied uniqueness from the rest of mankind (Lee and De Vos).

The kokutai ideology that dominated from the mid-eighteenth century until the end of the war also stressed that the ancient racial qualities that supposedly have made Japan a uniquely great and harmonious society are derived from the unbroken imperial line. Nationalists claimed that Japan was a kazoku kokka in which the state is a family with the emperor the father and the subjects his children, and in which all Japanese should work together in absolute unity.

Ironically, during the prewar period, while the superiority of the state and the Yamato people was emphasized, it was not taught that the Japanese were a single, homogeneous ethnic group (Kamishima). Because the Japanese empire included gaichijin (nationals of colonial origin) like Taiwanese and Koreans, and non-Yamato naichijin Japanese nationals of the home territories) such as Okinawans, it was accepted that the Japanese were an ethnically mixed people. Korea was officially viewed not as a possession nor as a colony but as a dominion and therefore simply an extension of Japan (Steele). Assimilating and incorporating Japanese minorities into the Yamato people was considered an important national task.

In postwar Japan, this ideology of superiority was transformed into a more acceptable form that stressed simply the uniqueness of the people. Phenomena such as the mass of Nihonjinron literature on Japanese identity emphasize the special uniqueness of the Japanese almost to the point of characterizing them as a different species of human (Dale). The unquestioned description of Japan as a tan’itsu minzoku kokka (monoethnic state) is another expression of this ideology. Scholars and intellectuals, as well as the nation's political, business, and media elite, commonly base their discussions of
Japanese culture, society, and national character on the assumption of a widespread belief in the myth of monoethnicity or social homogeneity.

Rather than a reality, the monoethnic state is a modern state ideology and a myth made more realistic by the loss of the colonies but contradicted by the remains of the colonial period and other more indigenous minorities. Japan's leaders insist on the monoethnic myth because they believe in its power to unite the Japanese majority. They also believe that it helps Japanese people to forget the recent past of imperialistic Japan by denying the physical remnants of former colonial subjects of Korean and Taiwanese ancestry who live among them. Viewing Japanese who do not fit the stereotype as foreigners is another way to deny and distort the multiethnic society that exists, and is an effective way to preserve the images and feelings of oneness among the majority. In either case, all members of Japanese society can be thought of as being basically alike, only if those who are different are either said not to exist or are assigned to the status of outsiders. [n 1]

Painting Japan as a monoethnic country also functions as a cover for discrimination and prejudice. If there are no minorities, there can be no discrimination. Of course, discrimination exists, but its open acknowledgment is thought to be troublesome in a society that prizes external harmony, and so discrimination is either denied or is labeled as something less insidious. The very word "minority" is often reserved for other, supposedly less fortunate societies.

Compared to countries like the United States, Japan appears to be, and certainly is, relatively monoethnic. However, a comparison with China shows a country that openly acknowledges its minorities in its constitution and public policy, and even in its national flag. Although Japan's minorities constitute a larger percentage of the population than China's, the fact that minorities do exist and are subjected to discrimination is conveniently denied at all levels of society. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in its most recent statement to the United Nations Human Rights Committee on discrimination in Japan, acknowledged only the Ainu people as an ethnic minority. [n 2]

Legal measures have contributed to the monoethnic myth by restricting access to Japanese citizenship. Until 1985, a Japanese woman married to a non-Japanese was not permitted to pass on citizenship to her children. Many persons of mixed ancestry therefore started life as foreigners in Japan and a few as stateless individuals. The present nationality law still does not grant citizenship to all persons born in Japan, so that second- and third-generation Koreans are numerous among the 600,000 Korean residents. Neither born nor raised in Korea, they continue to hold a Korean passport rather than that of the only country most of them have ever known.

Most resident foreigners, including Koreans, could become Japanese through naturalization. The reason many do not want to is partly related to the way the government seems to equate nationality with ethnicity, but is mainly related to
their own ambivalence about the difference. Some older Koreans who already
resented the colonization of their country were further alienated by the postwar
Japanese government's stripping them of their citizenship, and refuse to apply
for it now as a foreigner. Kim Chan-Jong, a Korean nonfiction writer who resides
in Japan, perhaps expresses the complex feelings of many Koreans when he
claims that even third- and fourth-generation Koreans in Japan don't want to
become Japanese because of the history of brutal rule and forced assimilation in
names and language (Samson 1992, 2). [n 3]

Although neither the Nationality Law nor the Family Registration Law places
ethnic restrictions on the names of naturalized or natural citizens, there is
extra-legal pressure to give up one's Korean name when becoming Japanese.
Naturalization procedures only specify that one should try -as much as possible
to choose a Japanese-like name, and an example is provided showing Kim
becoming Kaneda. However, local officials have been known to harass and
refuse applicants not conforming to this “suggestion,” leading many Koreans to
reject naturalization as a process that they claim forces them to surrender their
ethnic identity to become Japanese. This extra-legal pressure to assimilate thus
continues to assure that Japan appears to be a monoethic society of “one race,
one language, one culture,” composed only of Yamato Japanese and some
marginal foreigners (Wetherall 1986).

Minority groups contribute to the myth of homogeneity by their own silence.
They seek invisibility by adopting common Yamato names for social usage.
Some people do this under pressure, such as at times of naturalization, while
others change their names simply to avoid discrimination (De Vos, Wetherall,
and Stearman 1983). Other minorities attempt to disguise their origins by moving
away from easily identifiable minority communities. Minorities quietly endorse
the myth by their unwillingness to publicly declare themselves ethnic minorities
and insist on the right to live as they choose.

Some minority group organizations also silence those who have written or would
write about them by condemning what they see as stereotyping that contributes
to negative images. In some cases, they censor and intimidate those who
publish anything that they feel is not favorable to them or does not endorse the
terminology that they have decided is acceptable. This is especially true of the
Buraku Liberation League, which has used denunciation tactics and careful
watchdogging of any references to burakumin. For example, they attempted to
stop sales of the book that introduced Japanese minorities to many foreigners,
*Japan's Invisible Race*, edited by George De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma. Most
recently, the group attempted to censor passages in the Japanese translation of
David Kaplan and Alec Dubro's *Yakuza* and in *The Enigma of Japanese Power*
by Karel van Wolferen.

This censorship has pressured some publishers to delete references to
burakumin in Japanese translations of English literature. The publisher of van
Wolferen’s book who is also publishing a translation of Michael Crichton’s *Rising
Sun was apparently intimidated enough to ask the author if he would object to deleting the lines in which reference is made to burakumin. The Japanese translations of books such as Edwin Reischauer's *The Japanese* and James Clavell's *Shogun* were partly or entirely stripped of their references to burakumin, despite translator's statements that they are complete and accurate. [n 4]

Concerns over "political correctness" and attempts to completely control the images presented and terminology used have limited the amount of non-ideological literature on the topic of minorities. For example, after showing initial interest, a major publisher rejected a colleague's scholarly book on minorities because of the author's insistence on including burakumin. In another case, a writer's proposed article on Japanese of mixed ancestry was rejected by a newspaper supposedly because the topic was "too sensitive." Japan Air Lines recently canceled an already printed in-flight magazine and then reprinted it without a story that mentioned burakumin (Wetherall 8 November 1992, and personal communication). This suppression of information contributes to the ignorance that some Japanese claim of the minorities within Japan.

The aversion to any mention of minorities in official publications and pronouncements, including government-controlled public-school texts, and the reluctance of some publishers to deal with minority topics, inhibit but do not stop the flow of minority-related presentations in the media. Television, newspapers, magazines, and books routinely cover many minority issues, and the ignorance of minorities that some Japanese claim is due more to lack of interest than to absence of information. Unfortunately, data that is incongruent with our stereotypes or ideologies often has little cognitive impact, and despite the abundant evidence contradicting it, the monoethnic myth survives.

Non-Japanese contribute to the myth by equating majority Yamato Japanese with all Japanese. This is done partly for convenience, and at times for mobilization of hostility for aggressive purposes, such as in wartime and in the present trade difficulties (Dower). Struck by the seeming uniformity of people in Japan, and lacking information about minorities, non-Japanese are also intimidated into unquestioning acceptance of the myth by both Japanese and foreign apologists alike, who insist that comprehension of things Japanese is beyond the abilities of those outside the Japanese family. The prevalent focus on how the Japanese are different from others has also made foreign observers vulnerable to the inevitable characterization of Japan as homogeneous. Although there are Japanese who swear that they can easily identify a minority person, because a large percentage of Japan's minorities are "invisible" or lacking in clearly distinguishing physical markers, they are able to blend in with the majority and add to the image of Japan as a monoethnic society.

The monoethnic myth is credited with giving majority Japanese a secure sense of belonging and safety. It is also seen as providing impetus for the masses to subjugate personal desires and individual will and sacrifice for the group and for the country. This myth is regarded by many as the philosophical foundation of
the immensely successful postwar economic recovery. However, as in all consciousness-altering substances and philosophies, there are inevitable side effects. The ability to see reality as others do becomes impaired. Feelings of being different easily lead to a sense of inferiority and compensating assertions of superiority. [n 5] Beliefs about being unique often nurture an inability to relate to others. Besides making the lives of minorities more difficult, the monoethnic myth contributes to what a number of recent writers refer to as Japan's separateness in the world.

Japanese are often accused of being racialistic and racist. Excessive concern about race is not necessarily racism, but it is potentially close. The tendency to homogenize and to deny differences among Japanese, while maximizing the differences between Japanese and gaijin (foreigners), is dangerous because exaggerating differences between one's group and others, while also blurring the diversity within one's group, is a way of thinking that leads to prejudice. The constant distinguishing between Japanese and non-Japanese is extended far beyond cultural differences into the realm of human physiology. Statements by people at many levels of society indicate beliefs that Japanese and non-Japanese have different human gestation periods, body temperatures, intestinal length, brains, and general body composition (Taylor 1983).

That such racializing is closely related to prejudice and discrimination is not often recognized. Since there are not supposed to be minorities in Japan, these topics are not legitimized. They are associated with South Africa or the United States, but rarely with Japan. Discrimination is practiced openly and without apology, as though it required none. In explaining his unwritten policy of hiring only "pure" Japanese, an employer is likely to justify his action as an attempt to avoid konran (confusion). The right to practice discrimination in housing might be defended by realtors as atarimae (proper, reasonable), or tozen (natural, deserved, matter-of-fact), or simply as shikata ga nai (it can't be helped). Discriminatory practices can even be dignified as shukan (social custom) or tetsugaku (philosophy). That they are a social custom and philosophy of discrimination is not stated and is perhaps not noticed by some. In this way of thinking, discrimination is not recognized as morally reprehensible; in fact, it is not recognized at all. As a Japanese social activist once lamented about the difficulty of fighting discrimination, "most people don't even know what discrimination is."

Another side effect of the myth is the tendency to stereotype and denigrate minorities in foreign countries. Media representations heavily stereotype blacks as both childlike and hypersexual, and as natural dancers, natural musicians, and athletes. These images saturate all forms of popular mass media such as sensational weekly magazines, comics, and television, but are also found in award-winning literature and in the works of internationally acclaimed writers (Russell). Black stars are popular, but blacks in general are viewed with a mixture of fascination and repulsion, and through a condescending eye that regards them as unsuitable for the "higher" cultural and intellectual roles.
The series of statements, well publicized in the United States, by top-level Japanese politicians about American ethnic minorities indicates another type of negative tendency to which some Japanese are vulnerable. [n 6] These statements target and scapegoat minorities as sources of weakness in American society because of their putatively lower intellectual ability and moral behavior. Widespread criticism in the United States and threats of economic boycotts that came in reaction to these remarks have led to calls for more education in Japan regarding ethnic minority struggles and the nature of a multiethnic society. Japanese leaders publicly agreed that education is needed while also excusing themselves for their ignorance, which they ironically attribute to living in a homogeneous society.

Obsession with the myth means denying the reality that Japan became what it is today because of the contributions of people from many ethnic backgrounds. Ignoring the existence of former colonial subjects of Korean and Taiwanese ancestry and their descendants who live among them may help majority Japanese to forget the war and deny the related evils of the Japanese militarist leaders and common soldiers, but denial of the multiethnic nature of Japanese society and the recent past also causes continual problems with Japanese minorities and with Japan's closest neighbors. Nearly fifty years after the end of the war, scarred victims emerge from the closets, such as some of the hundreds of thousands of tortured sex slaves, savagely used by the Japanese military during their years of aggression in Asia. Their anguished plea is for Japanese people to face reality honestly and reflectively. Through their testimonies they sow the seeds of what could be a new spirituality that may help Japan to avoid developing what minority scholar William Wetherall warns could be "a reputation as a state so hypnotized by its own myth, and so banal about its evils, that it cannot do what is morally right" (1993, 5).

Education and multiethnic literature

In Japan today, there is a wide range of efforts to educate people about the multiethnic nature of society. Minzoku kyoiku (ethnic education) has existed in the form of Korean schools since the end of World War II, and there are still more than one hundred schools ranging from kindergartens to universities. Groups of public-school teachers have developed their own educational materials and activities of ethnic education about Koreans and Okinawans which they utilize in after-school programs. Although its methods, results, and the teachers' abilities and attitudes are sometimes criticized, dowa kyoiku, officially approved education about burakumin, is carried out in public schools in localities with organized buraku.

There are teachers who on their own initiative try to teach students about minorities, and some find the ethnic literature of the United States to be useful in humanizing their students. Others find that in teaching about racism, prejudice,
and discrimination, and about minorities, it is more helpful to use Japanese examples. Although some students are uncomfortable, and some say that they believe it is better not to talk about such things, others are very interested, and the use of Japanese examples brings the topics close to home and does not permit the distancing that hinders self-reflection.

Multiethnic education also means discussion of the contributions of minorities and the strengths of diversity. Many people remain ignorant of the indebtedness of what are now glorified Japanese cultural traditions to the ancestors of present-day ethnic and social minorities. In the United States, information on Japanese minorities and Japanese ethnic literature is slowly being introduced amid the increase in interest in Japanese minorities. At this time, however, there is still very little published in English and most of what is available is dated.

Japan's minority literature offers a rich source of insight into the life of the country's minorities. Ironically, some of the most famous literature on minorities has been written by majority Japanese. Haitani Kenjiro's moving story of an Okinawan Japanese community in "mainland" Japan, Taiyo no Ko (The Child of the Sun), is one example. The Broken Commandment (Hakai), a novel about the burakumin translated into English, was authored by Shimazaki Toson, a well-known writer who was himself not from a buraku. Sumii Sue's numerous books on the burakumin are yet another example of fictional work about buraku life written by a non-minority. One of Sumii's volumes has recently been translated into English as A River with No Bridge, thirty-one years after it was first published.

Sumii has waged a personal battle against the evils of caste and class distinctions that she traces to the emperor system. At the age of ninety she has just published the seventh volume of her series and hopes to complete an eighth and final volume before her death. Although generally considered to provide fair and accurate images, some of this literature by majority Japanese has been criticized by minorities as being either defeatist or "too beautiful." The aforementioned Buraku Liberation League has attempted to rewrite the climactic lines in Shimazaki's book and the corresponding scene of the movie made from it by making the hero unapologetic and defiantly proud. They also heavily criticized a film version of Sumii's novel for fostering prejudice, until at her suggestion they made their own version, which was released in 1992.

The minority roots of some of Japan's authors are not widely recognized because it has become a general media practice to refrain from indicating a person's minority status when that fact is not essential to the story. This practice in recent years seems to be an enlightened way of not racializing the people of Japan, but it is also a way for the media to avoid controversy by not disclosing the background of persons who are passing.

Nakagami Kenji was a writer of burakumin themes who derived his passion from his own background, but his minority origins are rarely mentioned. One of
Japan's most respected postwar writers, who won the Akutagawa literary award in 1976 at the age of twenty-nine, Nakagami used his roots as a basis for some of his earlier stories and later expanded his themes to other people who suffer social discrimination in Japan. He once remarked, "My writing is done to tell the perspective of a minority," and before his death at the age of forty-six warned that if Japan did not open itself to the world, "in fifty years Japan--intent on preserving the purity of Yamato blood--is going to be hated by the whole world, like South Africa." [n 7]

Perhaps the most famous minority writer is Chin Shunshin, born and raised in Japan of Taiwanese parents who were originally from Fukien. Chin's stories and novels feature recurrent themes of China-Japan relations, including Chinese people living in Japan. Chin, who is a former college professor, expresses his background, experience, and education in the form of the historical novel. He is the only winner of the Triple Crown in detective fiction, capturing the Naoki Prize, Edogawa Rampo Prize, and the Japan Mystery Writer's Association Award. One of Chin's most popular novels, *Murder in a Peking Studio*, is now available in English translation. Chin has expanded his writing to include other related topics such as the history of the Ryukyus, work that has been adapted for "Ryukyu no Kaze" (Ryukyu Wind), a docu-drama series on national television.

Tachihara Masaaki, born in Korea as Kim Iyun Kyu, was a writer whose ancestry on both sides of his family was mixed Japanese and Korean. A student of Japanese arts such as noh and tea ceremony, Tachihara has been lauded as one of Japan's most original contemporary writers. His difficult experiences as a person of mixed ancestry in colonial Korea and wartime and postwar Japan are expressed in his award-winning work "Cliff's Edge." This story demonstrates how a national obsession with the myth of the purity of the Japanese race causes problems for persons of mixed ancestry. "Cliff's Edge," along with "The Archer' and "Torchlight Noh," have been translated into an English volume, *Cliffs Edge and Other Stories*, and a Tachihara novel, *Wind and Stone*, is also available in translation.

Some other notable writers of Korean ancestry include Ijuin Shizuka, who won the Naoki Prize, and Akutagawa Prize winners Lee Yang Ji (I Yan Ji) and Lee Kai Sei (I Fay Son). Lee Kai Sei was born in Sakhalin of parents from what is now North Korea. He was later educated in Japan and nurtured as a writer by Tachihara. Lee is the editor of a literary magazine for Japan-resident Koreans and has spoken out on the issue of monoethnicity, asserting that "in Japan resident Koreans clash with the 'monoethnic Japanese' [because] this country is a very poor country regarding other ethnic groups" (Taylor 1992).

Okinawan Japanese writers have come to national attention mostly through the works of the poet Yamanokuchi Baku and later award-winning novelists Oshiro Tatsuhiro and Higashi Mineo. Yamanokuchi's background and experience reflect the complexity of ethnicity in Japan, as he is a Yamato Japanese born and raised in Okinawa and who later lived in the main islands. Although he
may have had formative experiences as a *Yamatunchu* (Yamato Japanese in Okinawan language), it was as an Okinawan that Yamanokuchi wrote of prejudice and pressures to assimilate for Okinawans and also for Koreans. His work on the prolonged American occupation of Okinawa also became a theme for Oshiro and Higashi. Their writing depicts the struggles of Okinawans trapped in the liminal state between the American military occupiers and their former Yamato Japanese compatriots. Oshiro's "The Cocktail Party" and Higashi's "Child of Okinawa" have been published in English translation in *Okinawa: Two Postwar Novellas*, and the poems of Yamanokuchi are forthcoming.

Some other minority writers include Abe Yoshio, Hirano Imao, Ogino Anna, and Uenishi Haruji. Abe was a Kibei Nisei born in the United States of Japanese immigrant parents and educated in Japan. His writing expresses his wartime experiences as an internee in America's concentration camps for persons of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast, his postwar adventures in the United States, and his later years in Japan. Hirano was a well-known scholar and writer of Japanese and American ancestry. He was a deeply involved advocate for persons of mixed American and Japanese ancestry born during the postwar period, and wrote fiction on this topic. Uenishi Haruji is an Ainu Japanese writer whose work has been nominated for literary prizes, and Ogino Anna is an *Akutagawa Prize* award-winning novelist who is French Japanese.

Though by no means an exhaustive summary of minority literature in Japan, this brief review at least illustrates that there is no absence of writing that expresses the experience of being an ethnic or social minority in the country. Unfortunately, very little of this minority literature is available in English. The translation of more minority works would help the outside world recognize the diverse nature of Japanese society through the eloquence of such literature.

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**Accepting reality and respecting diversity**

Although it is differences that catch our senses and interests, recent research suggests that in many ways common people in the United States, Europe, and Japan may not be so different after all, especially in present-day societies. Some scholars who have up to now stressed differences between Japan and the world now believe that this has been overemphasized and that we should begin looking more at similarities. Focusing on the variety in the Japanese population, such as differences by region, gender, age, social class, and minority-majority status, can help to show that even in its differences, Japanese society is essentially like that of other countries.

Groups of international scholars are attempting to present accurate images of multiethnic Japanese society through the cases of Koreans and, more recently, Okinawan Japanese. Perhaps even more than Koreans, Okinawan Japanese who are citizens can fill an important role in helping majority Japanese to respect
diversity beginning at home. Despite lingering prejudice among Yamato Japanese and ambivalence about being Japanese among Okinawan Japanese, there are signs that Okinawa's existence will loom larger in the general image of Japan as a whole. In recent years Okinawan ethnic pop music has drawn a wide following around the country; their high-school baseball team in the summer tournament captured national affection and admiration for its success in competing with mainlanders; and Okinawa's tropical beaches and golf courses are attracting more and more mainlander tourists. In 1992, the twentieth anniversary of Okinawa's reversion to Japan from U.S. control stimulated extensive national media coverage of Okinawan themes. Increased interest in ethnic things among young people has also led to a greater awareness of Japan's own ethnic group of Okinawans. This new acceptance has instilled in many Okinawan Japanese a fresh pride and resolve to expose the nation to their culture.

Ironically, Okinawans have felt so much pressure to assimilate over the years that it is questionable how much distinctive Ryukyuan culture is really left. Perhaps it is only in its present diluted form that it is no longer perceived as threatening and therefore has become an object of romantic interest to the Yamato majority. Central aspects of Ryukyuan culture, such as its distinctive languages, are unfortunately lost past the point of widespread revival. However, Okinawan Japanese who have become much like other Japanese are attempting to hold on to such symbols of their heritage to maintain their ethnic identity.

Although many Okinawan Japanese would simply like to be seen as Japanese, there are those who are determined to reverse the assimilation trend, and leaders such as the eminent scholar and present governor Masahide Ota believe that the deep roots of Okinawan identity have not died. Ota has written extensively on Okinawan history and identity, particularly the wartime experience of Okinawans and the peaceful and harmonious history of the people. His assertion of the right and need to preserve a different historical consciousness in Japan is based on a belief that respecting differences among Japanese is the best way to develop the ability to respect differences between Japanese and others throughout the world. [n 8]

Changing consciousness also means changing words, discarding those describing a mythical monoethnic Japan and substituting newer, more realistic ones. Is it not more accurate to call Japan a multiethnic country rather than a homogeneous or monoethnic one? Although we may qualify it in comparison with certain other countries, to simply describe Japan as ethnically homogeneous perpetuates the stereotype and denies the reality. To treat Japan in this way is to fail to recognize the struggles and existence of millions who have a heritage that is not included in the monoethnic image of Japan.

"Japanese" should be used to mean the people of Japan, as defined in the constitution by citizenship and without regard to ethnicity or race. At present, the
use of "Japanese" as a racial label denies the citizenship of those who are not majority Yamato Japanese. Some people say that to call such a person "Japanese" goes against the commonly understood use of the word and even the dictionary definition, and that in reality, the person can never be accepted as such anyway. Still, the fact is that there are Japanese of various ethnic backgrounds, and we are challenged to accept and legitimize this reality through our use of appropriate words. It may seem strange to call someone with a name like Chu Kyo Haku a Japanese, but it is realistic and respectful if that person is, in fact, a Japanese as defined by the law of the land.

In describing Americans, terms like "Japanese American" denote both a person's Japanese ancestry and his or her American citizenship. There is no valid reason why such terms cannot and should not be used for Japanese as well. This means developing a new vocabulary of terms like "Okinawan Japanese," "Ainu Japanese," or "American Japanese." Words like "Okinawan" and "Japanese" are not mutually exclusive, and using them as if they were denies minority citizens full membership in Japanese society and implies that majority Japanese are the only true Japanese. By using multiple identity labels we acknowledge minority Japanese the right to assert their ancestry while maintaining full recognition of their status as Japanese citizens. In the same way that the Han are recognized as a majority population in China, the Yamato could be recognized as Japan's majority as they already are in the languages of Okinawans and Ainu.

This need to reconsider the use of the word "Japanese" becomes more apparent when placed in an American context. In the same way that "American" should not be used as a racial label meaning the Euro-American majority, so should "Japanese" not be used as a racial label meaning the Yamato Japanese majority. While this is well known in the United States, the same understanding has not generally been applied to Japan. It isn't that Japan should be like the United States, but that it is like the United States—in its always having been and in its becoming increasingly more so—a society of heterogeneous origins.

In reality, the Ainu have been largely assimilated, but they continue to exist, to experience discrimination, and to fight for the protection of their culture. Despite almost one hundred years of forcible assimilation policies imposing direct rule and Yamato education, language, and culture, many Okinawans maintain a distinct ethnic identity. Although most Koreans are largely acculturated into mainstream society, many continue to cling to emblems of their ethnic identity, such as their Korean passport and their Korean name. Despite more than a century of legal liberation, burakumin are still subjected to investigative efforts to identify their origins and encounter subsequent discrimination in employment and marriage. Although all minorities suffer less oppression and enjoy more freedom in modern Japan, as do minorities in other relatively free countries, the elimination of most legal barriers to equality does not protect them from prejudice and discrimination in society at large.
As a scholar who has played a leading role in exposing the reality behind the monoethnic myth through his study of Japanese minorities, George De Vos has observed modern societies around the world move from an insistence on assimilation to a recognition of ethnic diversity:

Japan has been for me the extreme of one polarity of collective social illusion that still insists on mythic homogeneity as the essence of citizenship. . . . History, in Japan and elsewhere, to the degree that it is becoming freed from patriotic mythology, is beginning to document diversity in the background of those comprising the present-day Japanese political state there is increasing acknowledgment that citizenship and ethnicity must be distinguished. . . . Minorities are still denied separate recognition within a truly multiethnic Japan. Past forms of coercion are no longer attempted, but necessary dignity cannot be accorded properly as long as there remains a social insistence that homogeneity is the ideal, if not the actuality, of today's Japan. (1991, 1)

Myths are powerful, as they distort and conceal in their extreme simplifications and falsifications of reality. By ignoring a great mass of information they identify essential order, purity, and blessed simplicity. Myths can be elevating to a nation, enabling people to cohere, to energize, and to compel themselves to defy rational limits. Yet, myths can be disastrous, causing a nation to lose touch with reality and with its shared humanity with others. Japan's myth of monoethnicity has both these powers, constructive and destructive.

The monoethnic myth has served the national state as an ideology uniting the Yamato majority in a common illusion of oneness. However, it is disrespectful to minorities and denies their essential contribution to the development of Japanese society. Belief in the myth impedes acceptance of the diversity that exists among majority Japanese, among all members of Japanese society, and among all the world's citizens. The monoethnic myth is a patriotic hymn dissonant with the often heard romantic rhapsodies of internationalization and globalism, the realization of which demand both a tolerance for differences and an understanding of shared humanity.

Notes

1. In a speech before atomic bomb survivors in 1983, then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone made this remarkable statement: "Japanese have come to the present living on these islands some 2000 years with no different ethnic peoples present, our same Yamato ethnic people have come [to the present] living hand in hand. Because ours is a country where such a good aspect remains, robberies and murders are the fewest in the world." In the audience, however, were some of the many Korean Japanese and Korean permanent residents who were victims of the bomb. When informed later he simply remarked that "I didn't realize that there were any foreigners in the audience." Those who do not fit in his monoethnic ideology are simply ignored or called foreigners.

2. The position of the Japanese government is illustrated by its 1980 assertion to the United Nations regarding minorities and their freedom to practice their own religion and speak their own language: "There are no minorities in Japan to which Article 27
of Section III of the International Covenant on Human Rights refers."

3. Some Korean children are raised to believe that the assertion of their Korean identity honors the suffering of their ancestors and requires the maintenance of their Korean nationality.

4. For a more complete discussion, see van Wolferen (74) and Wetherall, "The Burakumin Debate" and "Best Not to Mention."

5. In a 1987 survey done by NHK, the semi-national broadcasting company, nearly 80% of people sampled indicated that they felt the Japanese ethnic group or race (nihon minzoku) to be a superior one.

6. Nakasone’s now famous statement in 1986 compared the "intelligent society" of Japan favorably to that of the United States where "there are many blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans, and seen on an average [America's per capita level of intelligence, as gained through education and the mass media] is still extremely low." When his remarks became an international issue, he explained that he had meant only to say that Japan had an easier time becoming an "intelligent society" because, unlike the United States, it was a monoracial state. In 1988, Finance Minister Michio Watanabe made the following remark: "Japanese, when bankrupt, seriously think of night escape or family murder and suicide, but over there [in the United States] where credit cards abound, there are a lot of blacks, [and they think] 'We're bankrupt already. Tomorrow we don't have to pay a thing back.' And that's it."

In 1990, justice Minister Seiroku Kajiyama made international news with this comment: "Bad money drives out good money; like in America where black [people] move in and white [people] are driven out, this is becoming a mixed neighborhood." The area he was talking about has seen an influx of laborers from other parts of Asia, and the bad money refers to Asian prostitutes.

7. Following the author's death, while reports in English described him as a descendant of an "outcaste" family, Japanese language reports referred only indirectly to his roots in Kumamoto, "an area with a dark past" (8).


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