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Japan – The Shaping of the World’s Most Homogeneous Country

The world we live in today has come to be defined by the human race’s unquenchable thirst for progress. Since industrialisation spread across the globe, constant technological improvements have made it easier and simpler to communicate with one another, to travel around the world and experience the various cultures of different groups and societies. The modern phenomenon of mass human migration has resulted in the movement of people on a scale that has never been seen before - the perfect example being the European migrant crisis which saw more than a million people enter Europe by land and sea in 2015 (BBC, 2016). As all other industrial societies have become more culturally diverse as the twenty first century has gone on, Japan, perhaps one of the world’s most technologically advanced countries has remained remarkably monoethnic. This however does not mean that minority groups do not exist, the small number that do in fact face high levels of discrimination. This case study will aim to examine perceptions of race and ethnicity throughout Japan, how government policies and processes of racialisation have shaped these ideas, and what impact they’ve had on minority groups. It will do this by offering a detailed account of the treatment and handling of some of the most persecuted minority groups in Japan: The Ainu, The Burakumin and Korean immigrants.

To give some context to racial groups in Japan, the latest population figure for Japan was one hundred and twenty seven million people. Of this number, just over two million are foreign nationals and over half of these foreign nationals are either Korean or Chinese – Japan’s closest neighbours (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2014). Although between 2000 and 2010 the amount of foreign nationals increased marginally, since then the number has actually dropped, and the figures are still extremely low in comparison to any other developed country.

According to Miles (1982) all racist ideologies share the same core principle, and that is to assign a group and all those identified as part of the group as sharing the same set of negative characteristics, he defines racism as “negative beliefs held by one group which identify and set apart another by attributing significance to some biological or other ‘inherent’ characteristic” (pp.78-79). Following Miles’ theory, for racism to be present there must already be a sense of dominant group thinking, regardless of the reason why one group targets another – be it fear, jealousy or for political gain, the sense of togetherness in this group, and difference to the other, is often what drives them on to discriminate. The divisive rhetoric of ‘us and them’ is one of the most powerful fear mongering techniques, and has been used throughout history to divide groups and wage wars. Before specifically focusing on direct actions against minority groups in Japan, it is important to first examine how through state initiatives ultranationalism and the sense of what it means to be truly Japanese was instilled into the populations psyche.

The birth of national consciousness

The galvanising of a sense of national pride and identity can have hugely profound effects on a country's citizens, and can make actions that seemed impossible plausible. Perhaps the most damning example of this is in Nazi Germany, where through expertly crafted propaganda and a constant stream of anti-Semitic rhetoric the Third Reich convinced the German public that it was in the best interest of their nation to slaughter over six million Jews and rid Europe of the Jewish bloodline. In 19th century Japan policy makers and scholars alike saw the lack of national identity as a potential danger to the nation, and sought to change this.

By the late 1800's the Tokugawa period of ruling over Japan was coming to an end. This is an important milestone in Japanese national identity because during the Tokugawan rule the nation was divided into around three hundred regions, all governed by a different member of the Tokugawa clan. This system for the most part meant that there was very little contact between the citizens of each region, and ultimately resulted in no real feeling of national collectivity - any sense of unity or loyalty was felt more within their direct surroundings, rather than on a country wide scale. At the same time as the falling of the Tokugawan feudal state scholars from around the country began disassociating themselves from the Sinocentric teachings of Confucian scholars which had dictated the moral law in Japan for hundreds of years prior to this (Nakai, 1980). Instead of paying homage to what was essentially a Chinese philosophy, Japanese scholars began to promote a national consciousness, pride and even a sense of superiority among the people (Weiner, 1994). Another key factor in explaining why these nationalistic writings came to the fore was for the purposes of self-preservation. There had been an increasing feeling of anxiety around a looming threat from foreign military powers, and the educated minority saw national unity as imperative if Japan were to have to defend itself from an attack.

From the ashes of Tokugawa hegemony emerged the Meiji state, and from its conception it actively sought to build upon the idea of ethnic purity and superiority amongst the Japanese people. However, creating a relationship between the nation and its people when there was really very little sense of patriotism to start with is not a simple task, and they knew it required the commitment of all the state's apparatus. Through a stream of nationalist newspapers, journals and the adaptation of the national education curriculum, the idea of a monoethnic, biologically superior Japanese race had seemingly been adopted by the early 20th century (Weiner, 1994). This combined with the growing power of Japan on a global scale had given the Japanese people a genuine boost of pride and even a sense of entitlement. At the same time the works of Charles Darwin had spread throughout the world and had begun to be interpreted sociologically rather than simply biologically. Following in many developed countries footsteps across Europe and the rest of the world Japan adopted key Socially Darwinian policies (Law, 2010). Due to a lack of predetermined Japanese identity markers, policy makers in Japan had to look backwards into their past to try and define Japaneseness. Combining the idea of a homogeneous native Japanese race with the newfound scientific racism of the west, the Japanese people seemed to be presented with both the perfect explanation for their supposed superiority over the rest of Asia, and the perfect justification for imperialist expansion.

Following the example which had been set by European countries once again, colonialism was viewed as the best way for Japan to flourish as it apparently deserved. The main argument made was that for Japan to not be left behind in the wake of European progress they must also expand, and Korea was the clearest option. The argument was made that Korean's lacked the business acumen and the natural ambition - which the Japanese were born with - to make the most of their natural resources, "Colonial expansion could absorb Japan's excess population, provide raw materials and offer new markets" (Weiner, 1994, p22). The argument was also made that not only would the Japanese be benefitting by annexing Korea, but Koreans should also welcome being colonised as they could begin life in a

modernised country. In 1910 Korea was annexed by Japan, and then the Japanese were left with the issue of how to deal with the Korean population. They decided as Koreans were not of the same pure blood as the Japanese to give them Japanese citizenship but under the pretence that they were to assimilate into the subjects of the Emperor (Komai, 2001).

As is always the case with colonial discourse, the fundamental premise is that it is the job of the civilised, learned colonisers to come and educate the natives on the ways of modern life, introducing them to the new world (Law, 2010). Depending on the way that this view is approached, the argument can be made that colonisation takes place for the benefit of both parties, or the human race as a whole; but in reality the justification for these acts which more often than not will involve violence and murder is that the group that are doing the colonising are fundamentally superior than the native population. The result of the megalomaniacal nature of colonialism combined with the reaffirming power of Social Darwinism is ultimately the justification of any action in the name of progress.

All these factors culminated in the creation of a monoethnic, biologically superior Japanese nation in the eyes of the majority of the population and those in power. The importance of this is that it is just an *idea* that Japan is a homogenous, single race nation, as will be proved by the discussion of various differing ethnic groups. The creation of this idea of a monoethnic state did and still does have dire consequences for the nation's minorities, which of course do exist. As Lie (2001) argues, by silencing the minority groups it appears as if they do not actually exist, and this behaviour is justified by the ideology of monoethnicity in a dangerous cycle.

The Ainu

The treatment of indigenous groups can give a very telling insight into a nation's policy towards both its history and its minorities. As has been seen across the world, with especially poignant examples coming from North America and Australia, often aboriginal groups will be hunted and persecuted in the battle for new lands and natural resources. What often defines these battles is the confrontation between traditional cultural beliefs and modernisation – which more often than not ends in the near annihilation of native populations.

The Ainu are the only indigenous group to Japan, situated on the island of Hokkaido. It is important to mention here the geography of Japan as it demonstrates the logistical positioning of The Ainu. The most northerly point of mainland Japan breaks off before the island of Hokkaido emerges. Due to it being the most northerly point it is home to the most foreboding terrain and was the hardest area to explore. Before Japanese encroachment, Hokkaido was almost entirely designated to the Ainu except for the most southerly point. This was the case from as early as the 8th century, where there was an agreement struck between the Ainu people and the Japanese court recognising Hokkaido as their homeland (Cornell, 2004). The relationship between the Ainu and the Japanese mainlanders remained intact yet not entirely stable for the next few centuries, with small trade agreements being drawn up that benefitted both parties. There is evidence to suggest that specific state policy on the issue of the Ainu was always discussed with the thought of assimilation in mind. The Ainu were extremely knowledgeable of the tricky landscape and skilled when it came to making the most of the natural resources available on Hokkaido. The state was aware of this and thus understood the importance of maintaining at least some form of working relationship, or integrating the natives (Howell, 2004).

The first real government intervention into the lives of the Ainu was in the early 1500's. By this point southern Hokkaido was heavily populated with Japanese, and could be seen as a mixture of Ainu and Japanese culture. The Matsumae were an autonomous province responsible for the policy making

regarding the Ainu and Hokkaido as a whole. A trade deal was agreed which the Matsumae hoped would make the most of the Ainu's skills whilst ultimately maximising profits for the state. This relationship was maintained and actually flourished for some time, up until the point where Ainu and Japanese alike were both reliant on the trade between groups. This is when the first of the discriminatory policies was implemented; Ainu were restricted to only trading in certain districts (Cornell, 2004). This posed a serious danger to them, as they relied heavily on the traditional means of acquiring food such as hunting and gathering, and when natural food sources were low they relied on trade with the Japanese. This marked the start of what ultimately would be a string of policies which were devastating to the Ainu way of life.

As presiding power was restored to central government rather than the Matsumae, drastic changes in policy regarding the Ainu were adopted. A more forceful technique was implemented to try and encourage the integration of Ainu and Japanese. The state began providing the Ainu with various gifts and forms of help in adapting to Japanese life, such as lessons in speaking Japanese and farming methods. This was done under the acceptance that these were gifts from the state and with the hope that it would push the Ainu towards a cultural move from their traditional ancestral paths towards the modern Japanese way of life. However at the end of the Tokugawa period, the patient approach towards the Ainu was abandoned as the Meiji state did not think enough progress was being made and more importantly, understood the tactical need to secure Hokkaido from a Russian attack from the north. Whereas before immigration to Hokkaido was fairly strictly policed, the gates were opened, and the path was paved for modern industries and technologies to make the most of Hokkaido's land. Before long the Ainu's sources of food had all but disappeared thanks to overhunting and overfishing, and their way of life became almost completely impossible, by 1897 the Ainu population had fallen to less than twenty percent of what it had been in the 1850's (Cornell, 2004).

Although various policies were adopted such as The Aboriginal Act of 1899, they have been largely inconsequential and the Ainu way of life has continued to die out. The state tried to solve the issue of land ownership by giving various Ainu families their own plots of lands to live on, whilst still being owned by the state. This did not take into consideration however the fact that the Ainu are nomadic people by nature, therefore for them to have a permanent residence defeats the object of helping them to live their traditional way of life. Individual Ainu citizens and small groups have tried over the years to offer resistance to the changes implemented on their way of life, but similarly to Japan in the pre-Meiji era, the lack of a sense of unity amongst the Ainu ultimately meant that protests never had the backing of enough people to make a considerable difference (Siddle, 2004).

The last recorded figure of the population of Ainu was roughly twenty four thousand, but it is very hard to gauge a true reflection of the actual number for a few reasons. As Japanese territory expanded into Hokkaido many Ainu and Japanese would have intermarried, making Ainu heritage harder to trace. Another key reason is that many Ainu fear identifying as such due to the persecution they know they will face if they do so choose a life of assimilation instead. Ainu are still severely persecuted in everyday life; children reportedly face high levels of bullying in school, and statistically have a much lower chance of progressing to higher education. This is because the stereotype still persists that the Ainu are barbaric and unintelligent people (UN Special Rapporteur, 2005). While the 1997 law for the promotion of Ainu culture went some way to recognising the Ainu, it still did not recognise them as an indigenous group, and therefore a lot of their rights are still unprotected, and in fact are infringed upon. As well as this, education on their culture and is still very poor throughout Japan, which undoubtedly contributes to the racism they experience on a daily basis.

The Burakumin

The case of the Burakumin people is an intriguing one in contrast to many other forms of racism that are seen across the world because there is no ethnic or visible difference between the Burakumin and the rest of Japanese society. Yet they have come to be classified as a completely separate race from Japanese - even being called an alien race - and are undoubtedly the most discriminated against group in the country. Although many credit the classification of the Burakumin people to the beginning of the Tokugawa period (1603) when the caste system was officially adopted, Japanese society was already split into specific hierarchies depending on citizens occupations from roughly the start of the 10th century, and this Boyle (no date) argues was where the persecution of the Burakumin finds its origins.

In early feudal Japan, the lowest positions in society were held by those with the least desirable jobs, and generally these were the jobs that involved handling death. Although jobs such as the disposing of dead bodies and killing of animals were crucial for a functioning society to thrive, they were viewed as being sub-human, so those in charge of fulfilling these duties were at the very bottom of the social ladder. This bottom sect was then split into two main categories, the '*eta*' meaning outcasts, this group were held in the very lowest social regard and the '*hinin*' meaning non-human (Cangià, 2013), this group consisted of prostitutes, artists and so on and were held in slightly higher esteem than the *eta*. The name Buraku was later given as a definition of the descendants of both of these groups. These groups were quite literally out casted from society, they were considered so worthless that they should not live in proximity to the rest of the population and were forced to live outside of the cities, and subsequently they did not have to pay taxes and had no political representation (Groemer, 2004). If you were born in to one of these castes then you would stay there forever, but interestingly you could be demoted to the level of *hinin* as a punishment for committing a crime and once you had been demoted it was nearly impossible to regain your standing. This is quite extraordinary because so much of the racist rhetoric regarding the Burakumin people is based around the fact that they are biologically inferior, and not regarded as having Japanese blood, when quite clearly this is not a matter of heritage or bloodlines. Some of the measures taken committed to keeping the *eta* and *hinin* segregated from the rest of the people included them having to wear easily distinguishable clothes; this helped to identify the outcastes as they had no real differences in appearance otherwise. As well as this intermarriage between the outcastes and the rest of society was forbidden.

This systematic and political prejudice continued until the Tokugawan rule came to an end and was replaced by the Meiji. On the understanding that they had to progress Japan from a feudal state to a modernised country allowing the trade of business, charging set rate of taxes to all citizens and other features of a westernised society they now had the issue of what to do with the Burakumin. Rather than any direct action to liberate the Burakumin people, the feudal state was abandoned and in principle so were the enforced castes which had defined people's roles in society (Kitaguchi, 1999). The Burakumin now for the first time in hundreds of years supposedly had their opportunity to rise out of poverty. Unsurprisingly, this did very little to change their situation, as for generations people had been taught to despise them and they had been viewed as sub human. The timing is also important as at the time the Meiji state came into power, as aforementioned a whole new idea of what it meant to be Japanese was being formed, and the Burakumin were not included as a part of this. These factors are not things which will just be forgotten straight away – and a lot of the negative connotations are still present today.

Parallels can be drawn between the treatment of African Americans in the USA and the Burakumin in Japan. After their supposed liberation both groups have struggled to fully thrive in a way that suggests there is truly equal opportunity amongst the citizens of their respective nations. Similar to the ghettos that are found in inner city areas across the USA which are populated mainly by African Americans,

and where unemployment and crime rates are extremely high (Alexander, 2010). The Burakumin have also struggled to flourish after such a long period of oppression and often find themselves living in Buraku neighbourhoods which are often destitute and lacking any infrastructure. Statistics suggest that from post war times to now the Burakumin have consistently had a worse standard of life and fewer opportunities in almost every aspect, ranging from education to housing to employment (Wagatsuma and De Vos, 1966). In both cases it can be argued that government policies have not done enough to actively integrate persecuted groups to create a fairer society. Although in 1969 there was a law passed with the specific aim of improving Buraku neighbourhoods and general livelihoods, the government terminated the law in 2002 when it considered improvements had been made (UN Special Rapporteur, 2005). This is despite repeated requests from the Buraku Liberation League for further support in their communities across the country.

Before moving on a mention must be given to the plight of Buraku women. As authors such as Choo and Ferree (2010) have argued, those at a cross section of disadvantages often suffer the worst forms of discrimination and being a female Buraku in Japan is a perfect example of this. Not only would the racism experienced be just as unrelenting but they would also have to struggle with the patriarchal structure of society on top of this, which in Japan is particularly noticeable. Policies implemented in an attempt to counter discrimination also often fail to address the experiences of those who identify as both groups as they focus solely on the majority of the persecuted group and ignore the rest (Crenshaw 1990). The fact that Buraku women do not even have equal rights on the level with Buraku men within their own community means there is a long way to go in their fight for equal rights. Gaining representation within the Buraku Liberation League would be a key first step in securing them.

Korean immigrants in Japan

As mentioned earlier, Koreans and Chinese make up over half of the foreign nationals in Japan. The relationship between Korea and Japan has been an extremely eventful one especially in migratory terms, with large masses of people moving back and forth over roughly the last century. This section will discuss the experience of the Korean's in Japan since the annexation of Korea in 1910.

Once Japan had seized control of Korea, the foundation of the nation changed very quickly. Japan transformed Korea from a fairly primitive agricultural nation to a capitalist production nation to suit Japan's needs. By introducing large industries and practices such as interest rates to Korea in such a short space of time, there was an inevitable backlash. Applying Tonnies (1957) analysis of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* communities which considers the shifting from a pre industrialised, rural community where people have a strong sense of social cohesion; to an industrialised, competitive community with a much wider division of labour, it is a perfect example of what the Koreans experienced. Many Koreans could not deal with this uprooting of all they knew and were faced with a moral dilemma and eventually thousands were forced to leave Korea in search of a new beginning, and this saw a huge number enter Japan between 1910 and 1945 (Weiner, 1994).

The majority of Korean's entering Japan in this period ended up being used as a cheap labour force for Japan's rapid industrial expansion. Typically they enjoyed very few privileges and rights, and out of their desperation would work for much lower wages than the average Japanese person. The superiority complex of the Japanese also played a part in this as many believed the Korean's natural lack of ambition and obedience meant they would do practically any job whilst not providing competition for higher positions with their colleagues (Weiner, 1994). In reality it was the Korean's desperation to earn any money they could which resulted in this. A similar pattern here emerges; the

lowest levels of society are forced to do the least appealing jobs, earn the least money, and subsequently are treated as if they are worth less than the rest of society. To add to the fact they were earning the least money, landlords were generally unwilling to rent their properties to Koreans because of their preconceived prejudices, and subsequently many were forced in to homelessness and further poverty. Migrant work camps were home to large groups of Koreans, similarly to the outcastes of the feudal times they were kept isolated from any Japanese community and there was very rarely any contact where it could be avoided (Kashiwazaki, 2000).

The after affects of this sudden shifting of population and culture is still being felt today, as the many Koreans still living in Japan are having to fight for any rights they can get. In 1952 Japanese citizenship was revoked from Korean workers who had been living there for years, and to add to this in 1959 the government passed a law so that pensions were only available to full Japanese citizens. This has resulted in many elderly Koreans being forced to work until death simply to survive. A lack of recognition of foreign national's rights has resulted in large numbers of Koreans being deprived of even the simplest things such as schooling; the Japanese government does not provide any funding to Korean schools in Japan, and many Korean children that do go to school report bullying and even a high level of physical attacks (UN Special Rapporteur, 2005). Many school children and even those in the professional sphere will use fake names rather than their Korean names of birth to avoid discrimination.

The most despicable example of abuse felt by Koreans at the hands of the Japanese is the experience of the so-called 'comfort women' throughout World War Two. Approximately two hundred thousand Korean women were systematically sent to military brothels for the pleasure of Japanese soldiers (Min, 2003). The majority of these women were young girls taken against their will, but they were taken with no regard for their own lives because they were viewed as being a necessary cost for military moral, once again an example of the Japanese valuing their own people as worth more than other nations. The Japanese government accepted their share of responsibility in this atrocity in 1991 but is yet to offer an apology to the victims, any form of compensation and has not implemented any national educational outlines about this historic injustice (UN Special Rapporteur, 2005).

Conclusion

The issue of race in Japan is clearly a very complicated matter with many levels of explanation, but there are two key factors which go the furthest to explaining how we've come to the situation there currently is. The first of which is the creation of a Japanese national identity. By doing this the policy makers made an outline of what is to be expected from a Japanese citizen, and as we obviously know through the shortcomings of scientific racism, you cannot assign an entire nation of people with a set of characteristics and expect them to actually embody these. This notion of the Japanese people being naturally gifted in certain fields gave the population an undeserved sense of entitlement, and with it the right to feel superior over citizens of other nations, and obviously this manifests itself as racism. However it does seem as though the Japanese people have had a tendency throughout their history to isolate and persecute those who are seen as being the weakest members of their society, and the argument can be made that this stems from such a long running history of being ruled by Emperors. By having this figurehead at the top of the state who is given almost god like adoration and worship, your own position in the system is determined in relation to him, a position which cannot be attained by just anyone. If social climbing is very hard, which it has been throughout Japan's history, the natural tendency is to look down the social ladder rather than up, to discriminate against anyone that is seemingly beneath you, which more often than not in Japan is ethnic minorities. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy as the Japanese believe they are more competent than other races, and then look

towards the bottom of their society and see ethnic minorities struggling to succeed, therefore in their minds justifying their racist views. When in reality the reason they are struggling to succeed is because of the inequality of the Japanese system.

The second factor is that this superior Japanese race is supposedly the only race in Japan. The most damaging rhetoric that has been repeatedly used in Japan is one of a homogeneous, monoethnic nation. This report has discussed only three of the most persecuted minority groups in Japan, but there are still more and Japan is still becoming more multiethnic. But the lack of recognition for this fact is what makes it dangerous, the longer it goes on that the Japanese people are told and believe that they are a monoethnic nation, the longer minorities will have to suffer. By ignoring that there is an issue the issue cannot be solved and minority groups in Japan will continue to have no political representation, which in turn means they will experience a worse quality of life. Unless a change is made the education system will continue to not teach young children about the history of racism in their culture and the Japanese will never progress passed the archaic view that the majority of the nation currently holds about race.

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