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Racialization in Japan

Introduction

The notion of race is continuously a misinterpreted idea, which is ambiguous across cultures. Different races living within the same country inevitably brings discrimination and racism, as in Japan. In fact, according to a UN report of 2014 'racism in Japan is still deep and profound, and the government does not recognize the depth of the problem (Brincrest & Gannon 2014, para. 2). This essay will contend that both racism and xenophobia exist in Japan despite the Japanese government claiming that they don't. The Japanese government is ignorant to the reality of this issue. Furthermore, this essay will address how the myth of a homogenous society is related to Japanese ideals of a pure nation. The role of the media is significant in promoting this notion of what it means to be Japanese and assist in creating a toxic environment of fear surrounding immigrants and minority groups within Japan, such as the Ainu and Koreans. Many minorities continue to suffer severe racial discrimination. This environment exacerbates the process of exclusion and notion of a hierarchy, both linked to Grove and Zwi's (2006) concept of othering. These concepts, theories, and analyses of the processes of racialization in Japan will be supported by both primary and secondary evidence, including individuals from the indigenous minority group of the Ainu as well as Koreans who moved to Japan during the Meiji period and generations since.

Japanese ideals and national identity

The Japanese often think of themselves as a homogenous society with little ethnic or racial diversity and a strong sense of national identity. However, as in all societies, such differences very much exist. The main problem with Japan's issue of racism is that the government and citizens fail to believe that the society is racist to begin with. They are in denial. Both Japanese citizens and foreigners think of Japan as being quite unique. The Japanese think of their culture as having a unique identity, and to foreigners it is seen as an exotic culture. One way that Japanese citizens believe they are unique is that they are a homogenous society. Homogeneity can have different meanings and understandings, however when the Japanese are referred to as homogenous individuals living in a *tan'itsu inzoku kokka*, they are normally referring to one nation, one race, and one culture. It is a term that aims to describe the unity of Japanese citizens as a community 'bound together by ties of language or tradition' (Morris-Suzuki 1998, p. 87).

Michael Weiner (1997, p. 1) explains the actions of the Japanese as creating 'a master narrative of racial and cultural homogeneity which precludes the existence of minorities'. This concept of a homogenous Japanese population is emphasized and embedded in historical Japanese texts. These texts express that the minority groups throughout Japan, such as Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos and multiple indigenous groups, have origins that 'have always been Japanese' (Howell 1996, p.104). An example of such is *Nihonjinron*, a post-war Japanese genre promoting homogenous identity through suppressing historical facts. It is literature such as *Nihonjinron*, which builds upon the myth of homogeneity by influencing readers to form conceptions of what it means to be Japanese. Such discourses shape people's common sense and how they determine social reality. They provide an 'identity kit' for how people think they should act (Gee 1989, p. 6). As expressed by (Neiburg, 1988, p. 72), '(a)ny description that gains recognition will be destined to form part of the thing it describes'. Additionally, according to Weiner (1995), new words were invented and implemented into discourses. This is another way that the Japanese were able to keep this false impression of

homogeneity, as it 'implied that the nation was construed as a people sharing a common language, customs and discrete historical origin' (Weiner, 1995, p. 221). This false front of homogeneity makes Japan appear to be united and have the ability to achieve consensus.

This ideal of a superior Japanese race is connected to the notion of bloodlines, which were viewed as an ultimate tie to national identity. They would use the concept of bloodlines to their advantage, separating themselves from foreigners. As foreigners obviously did not have Japanese blood they were seen to have no real tie to Japanese nationality. Another way in which the Japanese tried to cast an image of homogenous purity, unattainable by other nations, was by drawing on a mythical past to express that the Japanese bloodline originated from the Gods (Dower 1978, p. 217). This pure Japanese race is known as the Yamato minzoku, which added to the idea of Japanese blood being a category of belonging. Japanese culture and identity therefore became incredibly racialised in nature.

Although it is widely acknowledged that education is of high importance in terms of development on a worldwide scale, the content and application of such within Japan is not often examined. The term 'Japanizing' is regularly used to explain the actions taken by the Japanese government to mould the values of citizens. Foucault (1975, p. 137) understands this as 'being submerged into submission without being aware of the disciplinary process underway'. He states that education can abuse 'docile bodies' who are disciplined and do what they are told, creating ideal citizens (Foucault 1975, p. 138). One example of this is through the education of foreign students. Specifically, the Ministry of Education is very specific about how schools should teach 'Japan's magnificent culture and traditions', specifying that they should 'seek to enhance educational content to focus on cultivating understanding and affection for the Japanese nation and its history and fostering the attributes of Japanese people living independently in the international community' (MESSC 2000, p. 174). There were expectations of these international children upon entering the Japanese schooling system, one of which being that they should not be 'internationally minded' and that they must behave 'as Japanese' (Myers & Peattie 1984, p. 102). It was of primary importance for the internationalization to not challenge the schooling system's tradition of nurturing the Japanese nation.

One group significantly affected by this strong push for a homogenous society is the one million 'hidden youths' (referred to as Hikikomori). These individuals have removed themselves from society, making the decision to resist social conformity, and therefore deciding to not attend school or enter the workforce (Borovoy, 2008). One reason behind this decision is that the education system values 'obedience, discipline, self-inhibition and group harmony,' and the hidden youths find it difficult to express themselves in the narrow-minded Japanese society that they believe will inevitably reject them (Borovoy 2008, p. 552).

Along with this myth of a homogenous race come other philosophies of purity and whiteness. In Japanese culture white skin is desirable as it signifies purity. Japan's attitude towards skin colour is therefore very similar to many other worldviews. However, this preference for light, blemish-free skin has been around for centuries in Japan, long before encounters with Europeans in the modern era (Dower 1986). As suggested by Dower (1986), whilst lighter skin was associated with the upper class, those with darker skin were seen as belonging to the lower class that had to labour outdoors in the sun. Ultimately, these ideals of lighter skin create confusion over what it means to be Japanese. According to Ashikari (2005, p. 707); 'the notion of Japanese skin works as one medium to express and represent Japaneseness' and as having a lighter skin tone is a common symbol of culturally valued 'cleanliness', darker skin is therefore considered 'less Japanese'.

This preference for lighter skin to distinguish oneself from darker, lower-class individuals lead to the popularity of applying makeup products to simulate the appearance of lighter skin, a method that can be traced back to the eighteenth century in Japan. Upon the emergence of

skin whitening products the marketing term 'Bihaku' arose, meaning 'beautifully white' (Dower 1986, p. 46). This phrase is used throughout the media, engraining in people's brains that white skin is desired by society. As stated by Dower (1986, p.45) there is an old Japanese proverb of 'white skin covers seven flaws', meaning that fair-skinned women are beautiful despite having unattractive facial features. Therefore it was believed that having lighter skin could make anyone more attractive. The aesthetic ideals of Japanese people have been further influenced by Westernization. For example, being bombarded with images of Caucasian and light skinned faces in the media and advertising makes having light skin desirable and what one finds attractive. According to Morris and Suzuki (1998), the Japanese often see the lightness of their skin as superior to that of white non-nationals. This notion of westernization has therefore brought about the idea of an ethnic hierarchy and therefore the notion that racial mixing is seen as an 'unnatural' process that produces 'inferior human beings' (Morris-Suzuki 1998, p. 356).

Non-acceptance of immigrants in Japan

Japan has a cultural and political climate that is still deeply inhospitable to foreigners. Currently, especially in countries such as Japan, which are outside Europe and North America, there is little research on the topic of discrimination against non-nationals. Although Japan's population consists of many foreigners, totalling 2.13 million in 2010, the majority being from China and Korea, Japan nonetheless has a declining population that needs to be addressed (Brincrest & Gannon 2014 para. 6). Despite this fact, there are very strict immigration controls and there is no discussion taking place over how immigration can play a role in tackling the problem. Even so, as stated previously there's a significant amount of foreigners residing in Japan. With this comes discrimination.

According to opinion polls Japanese citizens are concerned about the declining population, however the responses to the question of 'what should be done to secure the labour supply' did not match up with these concerns (Burgess 2014). The top two answers were to encourage more elderly people to work, and to increase the amount of women in the workforce (Burgess 2014, para. 10). Shockingly, only 37 per cent responded saying that accepting more foreign workers could solve the problem (Burgess 2014, para. 10). Furthermore, rather than embracing diversity the majority of polltakers noted that they would expect immigrants to assimilate and obey Japanese customs. Ultimately, this demonstrates that citizens generally support the no-immigration policy. This policy has remained hardly changed since 1899, when it intended to both prevent unskilled labourers from entering the country, and prevent foreigners from being able to become Japanese citizens (Burgess 2014, para. 8). Additionally, as argued by Morris-Suzuki (1998), the policy aims to prevent foreigners from staying long or settling down. This no-immigration policy falls under the notion of what Paul Gilroy (2005) terms post imperial melancholy. This concept encompasses clinging to the idea of a homogenous nation with closed borders. To be closed to immigration means that Japan is losing the opportunity to increase its population, which could cause it to fall further into debt.

There are many reasons behind why Japanese people do not openly welcome immigrants. These reasons prevent a discussion from starting at the national level on the subject of immigration. Firstly, there is a fear that immigrants will cause social disruption. This is partly the result of what Japan shows in the media and discourses of immigrant issues in Europe and in the United States. Instead of presenting positive aspects of immigration and positive attributes of immigrants in these societies, the coverage mainly consists of the negative aspects. As we live in societies dominated by the media, it has the dangerous power to influence people's attitudes, prejudices, and their ability and want to act and change policies. According to Bent Sorensen (2005, p.8) 'media policy and coverage often contribute to a racist vision of social reality by suppressing positive information about groups targeted by racists. Generally, the media in the news about ethnic, cultural, religious minorities and migrants in Europe focus on negativity, problems and crime'. Furthermore, the fact that words such as "entrants" and "foreign workers" are used more in media, legalities, and

popular discourse than the word “immigrants” emphasises the nation chooses to display immigrants as temporary beings. This is very subtle yet effective racism.

Secondly, another obstacle hindering the acceptance of immigrants in Japan is the thought that they might spark an increase in the rate of unemployment for Japanese citizens. This is particularly a concern for the youth. Finally, another obstruction is that it is believed by many that an influx of immigrants will cause the crime rate to increase. This however is also wrong. It is the media that is involved in this instance as well, promoting the idea that immigrants will increase crime rates and disrupt social order and the traditional harmony of Japanese society. For example, reports on the rise of crimes by foreigners cause people to draw a link between an increase in foreigners and the crime that they are exposed to. This style of reporting leads to a perception of foreigners as criminal, whilst most would be unaware of the reality of the marginalization faced by foreigners on a daily basis simply because they are considered outsiders.

Promoting such negative images of foreigners still continues. For example, in the Annual Crimes in Japan report the Japan’s National Police Agency devote a portion to crimes committed solely by foreigners (Sorensen 2005). Again, this spreads fear and individuals then believe that an influx of immigrants will most definitely cause crime rates to increase. Interestingly, a 2006 Cabinet Office survey about public safety expressed that 84.3 per cent of Japanese believed that it was deteriorating, with the main reasoning being that ‘crimes committed by foreigners had increased’ (Burgess 2014, para. 7) In reality, since 2005 the amount of crimes by foreigners has decreased, however such evidence is far from advertised.

Minorities in Japan: Koreans

The largest minority, totalling approximately 800,000, that faces racialization in Japan is Koreans (Hicks 1997, p. 3). 1910 marks the annexation of Korea by Japan, and the beginning of when Koreans truly began travelling there. In fact, between 1909 and 1945 the population of Koreans in Japan spiked dramatically from less than 1,000 to 2,100,000 due to labour shortages in Japan and a major unemployment problem in Korea (Hicks 1997). Specifically, it was during later stages of the Pacific War that Japan began the process of forcibly migrating Korean workers to the nation as they had labour shortages (Mitchell 1967). However, after their defeat in 1945, the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers (SCAP) took control of Japan (Mitchell 1967).

It was expected that all Koreans would leave for their home country after this defeat, however by the end of 1946 roughly 650,000 Koreans stayed rather than abiding by SCAP’s repatriation programs (Mitchell 1967, p.100). As the Japanese government was unsure of what to do with the unexpected amount of Koreans that decided to stay in 1946, they introduced an assimilation policy into Japanese society. These Koreans that had settled and decided to stay in Japan were ordered by the Japanese government to register as alien residents in 1947, and between 60 and 80 per cent of those wanting to stay in Japan did so and legally became ‘alien’ residents of Japan (Mitchell 1967). Therefore, these ‘aliens’ are legally bound to the legislation of the Alien Registration Law. Following, a few years later the legislation of 1952 disadvantaged Koreans by preventing them from legally being able to own property, one of the many exclusionary legal actions taken against the Korean population (Mitchell 1967). Although many other generations of Koreans have since been born in Japan, as the Japanese nationality law legislation was founded on a *jus sanguinis* principle, following generations have also been legally restricted and disadvantaged (Mitchell 1967). For example, they have been constrained from having an automatic right to becoming a Japanese citizen, can play no role in the democratic political arena, and have been denied access to state welfare provisions (Mitchell 1967). The Japanese government refused to give Koreans either Japanese citizenship or rights as foreigners, hence the alien status. However, this status was incredibly complicated. For example, authorities banned Korean schools from being built as they claimed that it was inappropriate for Korean children to be educated as foreigners since

they were Japanese (Gee 1989). However, at the same time Koreans were unable to vote as 'aliens' as they did not possess a Japanese "koseki" (family registration) and were therefore not seen as "true" Japanese nationals (Gee 1989).

On the surface it seemed that Koreans were given some freedom by being able to obtain Japanese nationality, however this was only through the process of naturalization, and until 1984 this required them to do "soshi-kaimei". This term means that they had to adopt Japanese names instead of using their Korean ones (Setsuko et al. 1992). The majority of Koreans denied this dehumanizing process, however 10 per cent accepted this deal and are currently naturalized Japanese nationals (Setsuko et al. 1992). The Emperor of Japan was aiming to make everyone 'forever Japanese', by assimilating all the races that populated Japan's colonies through the implementation of 'aggressive assimilation policies' (Myers & Peattie 1984, p. 110). This caused Koreans to struggle to preserve their culture and traditions. For example, Korean history and language classes were banned, historical Korean documents were burned and thrown away, and if anyone wanted to register their name anywhere such as in a schooling system they were forced to adopt Japanese names (Myers & Peattie 1984). Additionally, during this occupation of Korea the Japanese government labelled the Korean language as a Japanese dialect and proceeded to ban the speaking of Korean in public places. Furthermore, in Korea some farmers were forced off their properties and others were required to meet produce quotas to then be sent to Japan.

The policy's aim to assimilate all of Japan's colonies is related to the notion of biological affinity. Specifically, as there are separate races that the Emperor wanted to unite, this means that they are obviously biologically dissimilar and the Japanese therefore saw all others as inferior and easy to manipulate. As stated by Myers and Peattie (1984, p. 124), it was common knowledge that 'excessive contact with the populations of 'Japan overseas' (Japan's colonies) was to be avoided'. The Koreans who stayed in Japan are often labelled *zainichi kankokujin* by the Japanese, which means 'Koreans-resident-in-Japan', as their perceived superiority increased and made them unable to see Koreans as permanent citizens (Myers & Peattie 1984). Despite not being officially recognized as citizens of Japan by the Japanese state, they are constantly viewed and treated as temporary residents. Even individuals who are second and third generation Koreans living in Japan often express that although they are born there, they have progressed into adulthood feeling excluded from society. They claim that homogeneity is not harmonious, but rather something that they feel excluded from. It is therefore understandable how in this situation many find it difficult to properly assimilate and gain a foothold in Japanese society.

Koreans suffered from racism in many ways during this period. Regardless of their situation in life, they suffered from racial discrimination based on their country of origin. Therefore, hearing the Japanese Emperor Hirohito's radio broadcast announcing the end of the Asia-Pacific War in August of 1945 would have been emotional for all Koreans. One man, anonymous in an interview, expressed 'we are saved! My own country has become free and we can now become independent! No more discrimination' (Oguma & Kang 2008, p. 147). The news of the liberation was a relief for so many, however not for all. For example, 22-year-old male Kim Gyon-naku had complicated feelings upon hearing the news. As the assimilation policy had banned the teaching and speaking of Korean, if he decided to repatriate he would not be able to understand the Korean language back in Korea. He exclaimed that 'because (he) spoke only Japanese at school and at work ever since (he) arrived in Japan, (he) had forgotten the Korean language' (Oguma & Kang 2008, p. 148). This means that although he does not feel at home in Japan, he would feel as if he did not belong in Korea if he was to return. As there was a large amount of Korean youths who moved to Japan with their families, now grown up, the decision of whether to move to Korea was incredibly complicated for many.

Minorities in Japan: Indigenous Ainu

Ethnic tensions between Japanese citizens and minority groups have been a consistent problem in Japan's history, for example the indigenous Ainu group. This population faced extreme exploitation and discrimination, of which many Japanese deny. Primarily, as Japan claims to be a unique homogenous society of racial purity, admitting that minorities exist in Japan would be a contradiction. Therefore, many choose to ignore the existence of minorities. In fact, a report in 1979 from Japan to the United Nations communicated this sentiment that 'minorities did not exist in Japan' (Siddle 1996, p. 40). The Ainu are an indigenous group that primarily lives on the northern island of Hokkaido, land that had been both Japanese and Russian's interests (Siddle 1996). It fell under the control of the Japanese and they were therefore forced to flee as Japan colonized the land. Under the Japanese government's policy of assimilation they were forbidden from practicing their traditional customs and required to live by Japanese daily customs instead. This act was passed in 1899, labelling the Ainu 'former Aborigines', therefore claiming that the Ainu people had been officially and supposedly successfully integrated into the Japanese population (Siddle 1996, p. 183). This law, which illustrated the Ainu population as a 'dying race' in need of 'protection' (Siddle 1996, p. 185) was revoked in 1997. Despite this success, it was replaced by the Ainu Cultural Protection Act, which does a poor job of alleviating racial discrimination, failing to reference the human rights of the Ainu, which is clearly a key part of the issue. Furthermore, although the government recognized the Ainu as indigenous people in 2008, the resolution did not recognize that the Ainu had been forced to become 'Japanese' in the first place (Winchester 2009) a clear yet obviously intentional error.

This discrimination still continues, and it is a major social problem as the assimilation process has been far from smooth since the beginning. The Japanese have always seen themselves to be superior and slowly eroded the identity and traditions of the Ainu population. For example, the Meiji government's assimilation policies of 1899 led to the banning of the Ainu language altogether (Siddle 1996). Additionally, the children were given Japanese names and forced into Japanese schools (Setsuko et al. 1992). These policies made many Ainu feel that they had to hide their identity due to the discrimination they faced, feeling belittled and ashamed of both their language and culture.

Once again, this myth of a homogenous society still exists and is carried by those in power, despite the clear conflicts between the Japanese and the Ainu. For example, 6 years after recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous population Masaru Onodera, a member of the assembly group led by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) remarked that it is 'highly questionable' that the Ainu can be labelled as indigenous people (Winchester 2009, para. 19). Furthermore, he reportedly said, 'our ancestors have not done reckless, unreasonable things to the Ainu. I wonder if it is correct to embed such a masochistic historical view in Hokkaido' (Japan Times 2014, para. 6). In light of historical facts this view is unacceptable. Controversially, three months prior to this incident Yasuyuki Kaneko, who is also a member of the LDP, tweeted that the Ainu are disrespectfully 'taking advantage' of the administrative services (Japan Times 2014, para. 8). Whilst the Ainu are trying to make efforts to preserve their identity this comment has the potential to stimulate prejudice against the population.

It is clear that whilst it may appear to some that people are slowly coming to accept distinct identity and culture of the Ainu, through these refusals to accept them as an indigenous group even six years after passing the legislation of 2008, Japan still has hints of racism. One cannot speak on behalf of all Japanese people, however it is apparent that Japan consists of a society in which very diverse values coexist. One theory that can be linked to the assimilation policy and the treatment of the indigenous Ainu population is the concept of othering. Grove and Zwi (2006) introduced this theory to explain how migrants are received in other countries upon arrival. The identity that is given to foreigners of 'the other' is a form of social exclusion and disempowerment. Othering reinforces notions of normality, such as what it is to be Japanese, and features the differences of 'others' as a point of deviance. Othering highlights that there are distinct groups of 'us' and 'them', and emphasizes how there is often

a separation between the two. According to Anderson (1991, p. 6), the use of the word “we”, whether it be in the media or official documents, constructs an ‘imagined community’. Anderson (1991) outlines that what is essential to note is that using “we” means that there is a “no-we” category, known as “others”. This includes everyone else and therefore diverse groups of people, from Koreans and Brazilians, to indigenous minority groups (Anderson 1991, p. 10). Therefore, as the governmental expression in official documents has created the binary of “we” and “others,” the Japanese citizens’ expression of “we” automatically draws a line with the opposite, “they, foreigners.” As a result, those in the “we” category fail to realize their systematic discrimination against foreigners living in Japan (Kunihiro, 2003).

Another theory that helps us understand the exclusion of the Ainu minority group is social Darwinism, a term discussed by Weiner (1995). Through Social Darwinism Weiner draws on Darwin’s concept of natural selection and its connection to the human species. Weiner claims that ‘Darwin applied the laws of natural selection to human populations, ascribing the steady decline in native populations around the world to competitive forces and increased contact between civilized nations and barbarians’ (Weiner 1995, p. 225). Darwin’s concept helped shape negative feelings held by the Japanese towards the Ainu during the modernization of Japan. If Darwin were to apply his theory of natural selection to the case of the Ainu population he would state that they were unfit to survive in a modern industrial society, and that this led to their exclusion and the process of othering which were ‘natural and inevitable’ (Weiner 1995, p. 228). On the other hand, the Japanese were superior in comparison and were capable of adapting as Japan became more modern and technological.

It can be concluded that although a desire for a homogenous and united Japanese nation exists, the strategies to gain support have had dire consequences that are evident within the society today. The Japanese were indoctrinated in a way to be obedient and what it meant to be Japanese was engrained in their brains from early on in the schooling system, let alone constantly emphasized through the media. Such sources influenced the opinions of citizens towards minority groups and immigrants, resulting in exclusion and the process of othering.

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