Reconstructing Minority Identities in 21st Century Japan

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INTRODUCTION

In 1968, Shintaro Ishihara (now the governor of Tokyo) stated, ‘there is no other country like Japan, people who are virtually mono-ethnic, who speak the same language which is like no other country’s and which has a unique culture’ (Oguma 1995: 358). Forty years later, similar statement was still repeated by Taro Aso (then the foreign minister of Japan) who maintained Japan is ‘one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture, and one race’.

Conservative government and nationalists have believed in and fostered the image of Japan as a unified, mono-lingual, and mono-cultural nation (Burgess 2007). Yet the truth is that Japan has never been mono-ethnic. According to Lie, such a myth of mono-ethnic Japan is fundamentally a post-World War II construct (2001: 141). Thus, during the long and stable economic boom of Japan from the 1960s through the 1980s the myth of Japan’s uniqueness was propagated widely inside and outside of Japan. For example, the Japan Foundation was established in 1972, during the term of Premier Tanaka. From its inception, its aim was to promote Japanese culture outside of Japan. Scholars and artists of traditional Japanese art forms such as Kabuki, Noh, bunraku, calligraphy etc., were sent abroad to demonstrate ‘the uniqueness of Japanese culture’ (Large 1998: 306). These efforts culminated in 1979 with publication of the Japanese ego boosting book by Ezra Vogel titled, Japan as Number 1 (Vogel 1979).

According to Dale (1986), nihonjinron (theories on the uniqueness of Japanese), which were rampant during this period, implicitly assumed that the Japanese people constituted a culturally and socially homogenous racial entity whose essence was virtually unchanged from pre-historical times. Nihonjinron also presupposed that the Japanese differed radically from all other known peoples. These arguments promoted a kind of cultural nationalism which was hostile to both individual experience and to a notion of internal socio-historical diversity. Yet according to Lie, such a discourse of strong mono-ethnic ideology emerged only in the 1950s, under the 1955 system or the postwar Japanese political arrangements (Lie 2001: 125).

Japan has never been a mono-ethnic nor a mono-language nation. Its inhabitants include the indigenous minorities of Ainus and Okinawans, resident Koreans and Chinese who immigrated to Japan during Japan’s colonial era of the 19th century and more recent immigrants from Asia and South America. Including those who have become naturalized and adopted Japanese nationality, the estimated number of “non-Japanese” is comparable to the 1992 figures for the United Kingdom, a far from negligible minority (Lie 2001: 4).

Besides making Japan “number one,” the economic boom of the 1970s created an acute shortage of labour, and brought an influx of Asian and South American immigrant workers.

1 The Japan Times 2005, Oct. 18. Also then became Prime Minister in September, 2008.

2 Both Ainus and Okinawans were forcefully incorporated into the Japanese nation state in the 19th century. But they are the old inhabitants of Japanese islands. Although there have been constant migrations from China and Korea throughout Japanese history, those who are called ‘Resident’ Koreans and Chinese (Zainichi) are mostly the descendants of migrants before and during World War II. In order to hide their ethnic identity and merge into the mainstream, many of them obtained Japanese names and registered as Japanese but some do not, and have been creating distinct cultural characteristics often with the suffix ‘zainichi’ (foreign residents in Japan). Nowadays, many of the second and third generation zainichis did not speak Korean or Chinese. They are called the Old Comers to distinguish them from those New Comers who have migrated to Japan after the 1970s.
into Japan. Changing demographics alarmed the Japanese government and the public, and for the first time the concept of Japan as an ethnic melting pot was openly discussed: who are the Japanese? How should Japanese identity be defined in a globalizing world.

This paper will discuss the process of reconstructing new identities among minority groups in Japan. Having been discriminated against and placed at the margins of society, the Japanese ‘Dalits’ (the depressed) are now seeking to be included in the mainstream. While accepting the explicit socio-political order and the values of the dominant culture, they are also trying to change this ‘cultural hegemony’ by creating a counter-hegemonic sub-culture. Emerging minority leaders are trying to assure their communities that they both belong and do not belong; to pursue multiple identities and become ‘the Other Within’ (Yovel 2009).

**JAPAN’S ‘NEW’ MINORITIES**

The 1970s-80s was not only the period of *nihonjinron* but also the economic ‘bubble period’. Japan, in short supply of labour, attracted many foreign workers, who are now called the “New Comers.” In 1990, Japan’s immigration law was amended to allow emigrants of Japanese ancestry of up to the 3rd generation to return to Japan as Japanese citizens. Large numbers of foreign-born *nisies* (the second generation) and sanseis (the third generation) have chosen to do so. Faced with barriers and discriminations in Japan, many of them joined civic organizations to force the Japanese government to protect their rights. Many joined existing Japanese working class organizations, changing the faces of the organizations. Thus, 80% of the members of the Kanagawa City Union are now non-Japanese temporary workers who speak Spanish, Portuguese, or Korean3. Their physical features and languages are quite different from mainstream Japanese and they do not (or cannot) hide their cultural identities. To the discomfort of many ‘native’ Japanese, these newcomers are assertive and proud to represent two cultures.

Out of interactions between “Old Comers” and “New Comers”, new self-help organizations have been born, particularly in urban areas. In Kanagawa prefecture for example, non-Japanese migrant workers and their Japanese supporters have started several nonprofit organizations supported by the local government:

4 Some local governments such as Kanagawa prefecture, Kawasaki city and Yokohama city are particularly willing to tackle issues related to non-Japanese foreign workers and work with local nonprofits. The Kanagawa Government launched an advisory board consisting of non-Japanese residents in 2000. Kanagawa Gaokokuseki Kenmin kaigi (Kanagawa Foreign National Residents Council) and the nonprofits Sumai Support Center and MIC Kanagawa were born out of these efforts.

5 Finding an accommodation in Japan has been extremely difficult for non-Japanese partly because of cultural misunderstanding between Japanese landlords and non-Japanese migrant workers. The SSC provides housing information to non-Japanese speakers in seven languages. This station became a hot multicultural venue for young foreign-born *nisies* and *sanseis* in Kansai (Western Honshu) area and has also attracted large numbers of Japanese youngsters.

6 The members of Blendz are Japanese with African heritage. Ainu Rebels are a young Ainu hip hop group; members of KP are descendants of resident Koreans in Japan. Members of Los Lalibres are descendants of Spanish-speaking Peruvian-Japanese and Tensais MCs consist of Portuguese speaking Brazilian Japanese and young Japanese singers.

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3 Satoshi Murayama, personal communication.
who were dissatisfied with mainstream radio programs. FM Y-Y has also proved to be a bridge between foreign-born Japanese mutual self-help groups and the local government by providing public-information announcements and forums, from both sources, in multiple languages. FM Y-Y’s ethnic programs boost the self-esteem of foreign born Japanese and also make Japanese minorities visible to mainstream Japanese society.

JAPAN’S ‘OLD MINORITIES’

Ainus, Okinawans, Resident Koreans and Chinese were the old minorities with distinct cultural traditions. According to historical research, Ainu were not only hunters and gatherers but were also adventurous sea traders who traded between northern Japan and the Asian continent (Amino 2000). Nevertheless, attempts have been made to deprive them of their history, their language and their culture under the false pretense of making Japan “one nation, one language, one culture and one race.”

When Okinawa was occupied by US forces after World War II, large numbers of Okinawans migrated to Japan’s mainland and to South America in a search of economic opportunity. Faced by open discrimination from ‘true’ Japanese, the Okinawans tried to hide their identities. At the same time, fearing the American military presence on the island would wipe it out, they tried to maintain their cultural heritage. In Kawasaki City near Yokohama there are an estimated 40,000 ‘displaced’ Okinawans. In an effort to pass on their culture to the younger generation, they have organized a non-profit called the Society to Study Okinawan Music and Dance. This resulted in the local government designating Okinawan music and dance as an intangible cultural asset of Kawasaki City. In purportedly monocultural Japan, it is rare for a local government to designate a cultural asset originating from an entirely different region as their own. The interest in multiculturalism is also found in the cultural synthesis between Okinawans and nikkeis, the South American returnees. The nikkeis many of whom have some Okinawan ancestry, add an interesting cultural mix to Kawasaki City that attracts youth who throng around multi-ethnic restaurants and shops in the city. The attraction of Okinawan culture is not limited to youth or to Okinawans—the majority of the members of the music and dance association are non-Okinawan.

A similar kind of resurrection of their culture is observable among the Ainu, the original inhabitants of Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. The Ainu became victims of Japan’s modernization policies when Hokkaido was settled by Japanese in the late 19th century. Although they were given protected status as a backward

8 See for example, Asahi.com June 9, 2007, ‘weekend Beat.’

9 According to Okinawan Folk Art and Music association in Kawasaki city, the membership increased 14 times since its start in 1956 and there are non-Okinawan young members who are interested in Okinawan culture and have become members (http://www.city. kawasaki.jp/61/61kusei/kigyoshimin/pdf/06-08. pdf).
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community by the Meiji government, their self-esteem was destroyed by other government policies that encouraged public disrespect towards the Ainu culture.

To escape, some young Ainus moved outside of Hokkaido in the 1960s. Osamu Hasegawa is one. He is now a prominent civic leader of Ainus in the Kanto-Tokyo region of Honshu. Jointly, with members of an urban Ainu association *Lilano kai*, he now owns a popular Ainu restaurant.

After leaving Hokkaido, he became a Christian pastor, hoping to help the poor and the destitute. However, he was fired when he started to work with Japanese ex-untouchables or Burakumin. It seems the conservative non-Buraku Christians of his parish did not want to be identified with the buraku community. He then became an organic farmer and day-laborer. He also became an organizer, founding an organization called the Ainu Liberation Federation. The AFL was modeled on the Buraku Liberation Federation, a powerful Buraku civic organization (discussed below).

Born soon after World War II, Hasegawa is typical of other rebels from the baby boom generation who challenged the establishment with militant political tactics and civic engagements. The baby boom’s children, now in their late 20s and 30s, were influenced by rebellious parents, but nowadays most are often less interested in political action and more interested in expressing themselves through pop culture. For example, all of the above-mentioned hip-hop groups have websites and make political statements through the internet, posting their performances on YouTube.

Regardless of approach, the abovementioned groups do embrace their ethnic identity and actively work to end discrimination. Hasegawa as a youth felt he had to blend into mainstream Japanese culture and only later re-defined himself as a rebellious Ainu. Thanks to his courage and that of other ‘rebels’ of an older generation, today’s minority youth feel free to acknowledge and express their multiple identities on a national and international stage.

For instance, one of Hasegawa’s daughters married a foreigner, an Australian. At a UN conference she made a presentation about Ainus, the aborigines of Japan. She appealed for international pressure on the Japanese government to acknowledge Ainus as an indigenous minority so the Ainu can regain ownership of “taken” land and preserve their cultural heritage. Another daughter married a Korean organic farmer. And Hasegawa’s youngest daughter studies in the US to become a curator to promote Ainu history and culture. Hasegawa does not mind them marrying non-Ainu or non-Japanese. He often quotes his daughter who said “my father is half Japanese-half Ainu. My mother is Japanese, my husband is Australian and he is a quarter Australian Aborigine. So my children have a quarter identity of all of them.” Such statements show ‘the power of new identities’ (Castells 1997) created in a globalized world.

Hasegawa’s restaurant is also a cultural center for urban Ainus who want to regain their self-esteem by embracing their heritage. Hasegawa notes that young Ainus are eager to create a new image of which to be proud. He says intergenerational exchanges are also extremely important in keeping Ainu culture vibrant and attractive. Some Ainu elders in Hokkaido object to the hip-hop music of the Ainu Rebels because it is not ‘traditional.’ Other elders, however, see how the music and dance of the Ainu Rebels have changed the attitude of young Hokkaido Ainus who were previously ashamed to participate in the traditional dances or speak the Ainu language in public. One of the Rebels told her dying grandmother that she is proud of being an Ainu and that her mission as an Ainu Rebel is to popularize Ainu culture among Japanese children, helping them admire Ainu culture and see it as ‘cool.’ This strategy seems to be working. In their appeal to the younger population, both inside and outside of their own community, Okinawans and Ainus seem to be successful. Associating with immigrant cultural organizations, they are helping to create a fusion of multi-cultural hip-hop in the urban areas of Kawasaki, Yokohama, and Kobe. But, this culturally affirming strategy seems to be difficult to achieve by Japan’s other ex-untouchable community—the Burakumin.

The Burakumin

Japan’s ex-Untouchables or Burakumins are the invisible race—physically indistinguishable

10 There are large number of books and papers written about Japan’s Burakumin. In this paper however, I limit my reference to the following two books: Harada, T. (1975), and Amino (2005).
from other Japanese—but historically suppressed as pollutants (eta) and inhuman (hinin). In this regard, they are very much like India’s Dalits or ex-untouchable castes. Although buraku organizations, like the Buraku Liberation League, have a long history and are models for many “mainline” community-based organizations, buraku leaders lament that they cannot now attract young people from their community. Their leaders say that, today, relatively few buraku acknowledge their unique culture and history and many feel ashamed of the community into which they were born. Many youth leave the buraku neighborhood in an attempt to erase their cultural identity and live as ‘nobody.’ When found out, they face discrimination in jobs and marriage opportunities. Marriage partners often face opposition from their parents and relatives and the divorce rate is extremely high. Although the community as a whole has a rich tradition of socio-cultural contributions to today’s Japan, the younger generation dismisses the great achievements of the civic movement led by their parents’ generation.

Buraku history goes back at least to the 3rd century A.D., when they were “assigned” numerous special occupations of hereditary origin. Just like the Indian untouchable castes, the Buraku were essential mediators between nature and culture. They were embodied with symbolic magico-religious powers and were considered essential because they could remove ‘impurities’ and ‘evil spirits’ from the “sacred” space required for Shinto rituals. For instance, the famous Gion festival of Kyoto is conducted in the summer to ward-off epidemics and calamities. In the pre-Meiji era, untouchable (Buraku) ritualists were ‘the purifiers’ who walked in front of the palanquins to absorb the “impurities” and evils that might be present.

Just like the Indian hierarchical dichotomy between Brahmins and Untouchables, the Japanese Buraku and the Imperial Emperor represented the dichotomy between the “pure” and the “impure”; the Emperor was dependent on the services of Buraku to purify his ritual space and the capital. Similarly, many Shinto priests entered their shrines through a symbolic entrance created by sticks held by the untouchable ritualists. While the Untouchables needed political protection from the government, the Emperor and Shintoism needed the Untouchables for purification of the religious space.

In 1873, after the Meiji restoration, the government abolished the eta and hinin status and ex-Untouchables were re-labeled shin-heimin (“new commoners”). By claiming to be ‘modern’ by western standards, the Meiji government removed the magico-religious function of untouchables which had been passed down for hundreds of years. This of course, was one-sided as the emperor remained ‘sacred’ and pure in his own right, just like the Christian God. Thus ended a long history in which the ritual role of Burakumins was essential to Shinto ceremonies.

Although they were considered pollutants and assigned the lowest rung on the social hierarchy ladder, many Buraku services were essential. They were low level watchmen, criminal arresters, and executioners. Some industries such as leather goods, bamboo crafts, and animal butcheries were their monopoly and, often, they were economically better off than other peasants.

Japanese traditional theater such as Noh, Kabuki, and Bun-raku originated from the Buraku community entertainment industry. The famous Burakumin philosopher and Noh performer Zeami closely served the Shogunate. Famous zen gardens were crafted and made by Burakumin as they had the power to transform nature into culture.

The first dissection of a human body in Japan in 1772 is credited to Genpaku Sugita, a Japanese doctor who translated the Dutch book, Tables of Anatomy. However, the actual dissection was done by a Burakumin called Torakichi, as none of the doctors in those days knew much about the human body. As Sugita wrote in his diary, it was Torakichi who showed him details of anatomy by dissecting a body at an execution site. However, Torakichi’s name is never mentioned in the official records of Japanese medicine. The unique status of the Burakumin was stripped away by the “reforms” of the Meiji government. The Buraku people, without education or capital, were soon impoverished. They, along with resident Koreans brought to Japan as labourers, soon constituted modern Japan’s underclass.

**The BLL & the Special Measurement Law**

After World War II, the Buraku Liberation League was quickly formed by Buraku leaders.
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as a grassroots community improvement organization. The BLL initiated a literacy movement for Burakumin and it organized evening classes in neighborhood halls. The BLL also made sure that all the poor people could get into decent public housing. After the Japanese government established the Special Measures Law (SML) for the Assimilation Project in 1969, Buraku welfare projects (such as the construction of public housing in the Buraku neighborhoods) became common. With strong backing from the Japan Socialist Party, the BLL developed tactics called kyudan or “denunciation” in which it openly, and sometimes violently, confronted non-Buraku people and organizations that were against BLL policies and measures (see Neary 1997 and Upham 1987). The government and most media turned a blind eye to these denunciations, as the buraku issue had become an embarrassment to a supposedly democratic country. Once the buraku issue became a taboo subject, the gap between the non-buraku and the buraku was exacerbated. The Special Measures Law, which was won by the political tactics of the BLL, improved the living standards of the community, but it also fostered a culture of dependency, corruption and mismanagement in their community organizations. When the government terminated the SML and assimilation projects in 1992, buraku neighborhoods had little economic vitality. As youth assimilated into the ‘homogeneous whole’, neighborhood population dwindled. Those who acquired a stable job left the neighborhood to educate their children and get assimilated into the mainstream society and erase their buraku identity.

Achievements of Community Development by the Buraku People & the BLL

Despite the problems and controversies, between 1950 and 1989 the BLL created remarkable examples of progressive community building, which proved to be an inspiration to later community development efforts in non-buraku communities (cf. Uchida 2006).

For example, in buraku community development and “liberation” projects, the residents themselves were encouraged to participate. This was new and different in Japan, where most community development programs were led and dominated by local government bureaucrats. Participants drafted neighborhood-assessment white papers and, based on their documented findings, negotiated with the local government about what was to be done. The community assessment activities included community-building workshops for residents, grassroots research activities and field visits to more advanced community-building neighborhoods. These programs were later adopted by non-buraku neighborhoods, but few non-buraku community leaders will acknowledge they used buraku communities as their model.

Some of the measures the government took to help the community are also notable and progressive. For example, the Special Measures Law allowed local governments to loan money from the central government to finance low-rent public apartments and provide low-interest housing loans in buraku neighborhoods.

However, as the quality of life in buraku neighborhood began to improve, the population dwindled. And, when the government tightened its budget, the community ended up being split between middle-income and low-income sectors. When many of the former started to move outside the community to hide their buraku background, the poorest were left behind. Losing their most successful and talented people, the neighborhoods began to deteriorate.

Over time, the community became disillusioned with the BLL tactics of denunciation and the tendency of some BLL leaders to use the threat of these tactics to divert government funds into their own pockets. More legitimate community leaders began to search for new ways to pursue their goals of economic independence and buraku self-esteem.

Kyoto’s Sujin Machizukuri Council led by Masao Yamaguchi is one example. This neighborhood leader and amateur historian, was appointed director of the Kyoto Branch of the BLL in 2000, following a highly publicized embezzlement scandal. After sorting out the organization’s finances and forcing the involved staff

11 BLL has its origin in the pre-war civic organization called Suiheisha (Levelers’ Association) started in 1920. Initiated by Burakumin youths and non-Burakumin intellectuals, the establishment of this left-wing organization prompted the pre-war Japanese government to reconsider their policies towards buraku neighborhood (see Neary 1997).
to return embezzled funds, he left the BLL. He along with a few other local leaders interested in community development began the Sujin Machi-zukuri Council.

Working closely with the Kyoto city government, this civic organization invited non-community members (such as the director of the Kyoto Police Department, lawyers, accountants, and university professors) to become board members and made the organization’s operation transparent. The Council, working closely with city government, encouraged private developers to build mixed-use shopping centers that included market-rate housing. The model of mixed-use development has made the area more livable and has attracted a younger generation of residents that includes non-buraku people. The Council is also trying to develop theaters and museums featuring the neighborhood’s multi-culturalism and rich folk tradition. These cultural assets include not only buraku culture, but also that of resident Koreans, Ainu and Okinawans.

CONCLUSION

Japan is not mono-cultural. Even though opinion makers such as the media and elected officials have denied it, Japan has a rich multi-cultural history. It also has a history of discrimination against fellow Japanese, whether “native” or “naturalized,” who are physically and linguistically indistinguishable from the general population. At times, opinion makers and thus the public deny their existence, at other times they denigrate them.

The understandable anger felt by Japan’s minorities has too often been turned inward as they felt ‘ashamed’ of their heritage and tried to hide it through denial or self-destructive behavior. Recently, though, there has been something of a transformation. Ainu youth are rebelling against negative stereotypes by incorporating Ainu traditional arts and culture in popular music and hip-hop. No longer ashamed, they are proud to be Ainu and other Japan youth are embracing them, challenging the cultural hegemony of the mainstream.

For Burakumin, reclaiming their cultural heritage as something positive as opposed to something to hide is proving more problematic. They have much to be proud of, not least of which is a history of community organizing and community building that has been copied by “mainstream” activists. Still, many buraku youths find it easier to meld into the mainstream, hiding their heritage instead of embracing it. Today’s buraku organizers see it as their task to bring buraku heritage out of the shadows and into the light, and along with it a sense of self-worth for the buraku people. If they are not successful, buraku culture may one day be a little more than a footnote in Japan’s history and the Burakumin will lose recognition of the cultural history they owned.

Japan’s Buraku are, of course, not alone in struggling with multiple identities. The Marrano Jewish community in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) provides a historical reference point. There, in medieval times, Jews were forced to convert to Christianity. Yovel (2009) explains how they and their descendants survived with multiple-identities.

The Marranos suffered from such social stigma and discrimination that even their economic and political success would not allow them to embrace their Jewish identity. They behaved as Portuguese or Spanish ‘Catholics’ in Europe and used their European names while doing business abroad, including in India. At the same time, they maintained their Jewish names within the Jewish community and maintained the Jewish Marrano network to support their businesses and their Jewish identity. Outside of their community, they were rejected by ‘religious’ Jews as renegades and despised by most Christians as Jews with ‘impure’ blood. Yet, like a person who switches hats according to the needs and situation, the Marranos carried different identities and cultures; they incorporated Iberian lifestyles into their Jewish life; living as ‘Spanish’ or ‘Portuguese’ outside Iberia, and as Jews at home. They had not a single identity, but created a new culture mixing Jewish and Christian symbols and lifestyles.

Many central features of modern Western and Jewish experience can be traced back to the Marranos “split” identity, according to Yovel. He describes them as ‘the Other within’, arguing that the Marranos contributed to the dissolution of a single pattern of being Jewish, giving in return: Christian Jewishness, nostalgic Jewishness, social Jewishness or selective Jewishness12.

12 Footnote on Following Page
The history of Marranos shows that Buraku-min experience can be ‘uniquely’ Japanese and yet universal: their forced multiple identities can be turned into a positive asset. This could be a powerful strategy for Japan’s minorities in the 21st century.

12. According to Yovel, just like Marranos who chose to ‘Judaize’ the customs for social or nostalgic reasons, many secularized Jews in today’s United States still choose to remain within a Jewish social framework but with little or no religious faith. Prominent Jewish intellectuals express such split identity more or less like Marranos. For example, Derrida calls himself a ‘non-Jewish Jew’ and Freud calls himself a ‘Godless Jew’ (2009: 366-367).

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