

Ethnic Diversity and the Origins of the Japanese

L. Keith Brown

Popular discourse within Japan and stereotypes of the Japanese by outsiders portray Japan as an ethnically homogenous society. Such a characterization contributes to the image of Japan and Japanese culture as unique. Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s a plethora of books and articles was published which extolled the alleged uniqueness of Japanese culture. These writings became known as the *nihonjinron* (“theories of Japaneseness”) literature, and the popularity of these writings led to a “*nihonjinron* boom.”

In the 1980s, Prime Minister Nakasone made a comment that echoed the sentiments of *nihonjinron*. He attributed the Japanese postwar miracle to the harmony that derives from a homogenous society. In so doing, he was contrasting Japanese homogeneity and harmony to America’s alleged heterogeneity and divisiveness, and he was suggesting that America’s economic problems during the 80s, as well as Japan’s economic successes during that time, stemmed precisely from the two countries’ opposing cultural traits.

Sparks flew. Many Americans criticized Nakasone, asserting that he misunderstood the fact that America’s diversity was precisely its strength. Many Japanese also criticized him, especially representatives from various ethnic groups. The upshot was that this event and others in recent years have made it increasingly clear that Japan is not as homogenous, or as unique, as the *nihonjinron* literature and popular discourse would lead us to think.

In fact, there is considerable ethnic diversity in Japan today. Minorities include over 600,000 people of Korean descent who are either Japanese citizens or permanent residents, as many as 400,000 Chinese, and an assortment of other Asians and Westerners. There is also an aboriginal group living mainly in Hokkaido -- the Ainu. There is also the *burakumin* -- a group considered racially Japanese but still discriminated against because of their descent from outcasts who were shunned because of their involvement in ritually polluting activities.

Because the Ainu, the *burakumin*, and many people of Korean descent living in Japan are Japanese citizens, i.e., are Japanese in the full social and political sense, it is important to avoid terms in referring to these various ethnic and other groups of Japanese citizens that suggest that they are anything less than Japanese. Thus I will use the terms Yamato Japanese, Ainu, *burakumin*, and Korean-Japanese rather than

majority, mainstream, or minority in referring to the different ethnic groups of Japan. The Yamato Japanese are the descendants of people assumed to have followed the first emperor when he led them to the Yamato Plain in the Nara–Kyoto region and created the Japanese “nation” in BCE 660, as described in the *Kojiki*, the ancient mythology. Further, there are many permanent residents and other foreigners living in Japan who also must be considered in any discussion of ethnic diversity in Japan.

The Yamato Japanese constitute well over ninety percent of the inhabitants of Japan. Therefore, in a statistical sense it is appropriate to refer to them as the majority, and the other ethnic groups as minorities. However, to the extent that “minority” also implies a second-class citizen, it is a term that I choose not to regularly use in this essay.

However, I recognize that in the power structure of the society, these non-Yamato ethnic groups are generally at a significant disadvantage, as is typical for minorities everywhere.

Ainu

The Ainu are generally considered to be the aborigines of the Japanese archipelago, i.e., the inhabitants of the islands before the arrival of the Yamato, the Japanese people who dominate the society today. This is similar to the status of the American Indians, the original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere prior to the arrival of Europeans and Africans. The Ainu are considered to be racially distinct from the so-called mainland Japanese, though of course they are Japanese citizens. In some accounts the Ainu are considered to be Caucasian, in contrast to the Mongoloid Yamato Japanese, though such biological distinctions are difficult to defend scientifically.

One popular scenario accounting for the origins of the Japanese suggests that the hunting and gathering Ainu occupied much of Japan before the arrival of the Yamato people from the mainland and were gradually pushed north by the more powerful agriculturalists who brought rice irrigation technology with them. According to this theory, the Ainu were either assimilated into the Yamato Japanese culture and gene pool, or else retreated to the northern island of Hokkaidō where the most visible vestiges of traditional Ainu culture remain today.

There are fewer than twenty thousand people today who identify themselves as Ainu. As was the case when the aboriginal peoples came into contact with the Westerners in the New World, the exposure of the Ainu to the Yamato Japanese, Russians to the north, and other peoples in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries left the Ainu population decimated by disease. Today, most who survived have been linguistically, culturally, and genetically assimilated into Yamato Japanese society.

The transition from a hunting and gathering economic base to agriculture, industrialism and urbanism, together with a national policy of assimilation, made the traditional Ainu religious and cultural systems difficult to sustain. As a result, there are no communities in Japan today where Ainu is the common everyday spoken language. There are place names in Tōhoku and Hokkaidō that are used today that derive from the Ainu language (e.g., Sapporo, Oshamanbe) and there are a handful of people who remember Ainu songs and folk epics. Mostly, however, the language and culture persist as the result of a conscious effort to preserve Ainu ethnic heritage, promote respect for the Ainu people and eliminate discrimination against them, and give them and their concerns an appropriate place in national and international political processes.

As is common with many hunting and gathering societies in the northern latitudes, a bear cult played a prominent role in the Ainu ritual cycle. Sacrificing a young bear to the gods for continued well-being and success in the hunt was a foundational component of Ainu religious life. But today, that ritual and the lifestyle that undergirded it has all but disappeared. The bear ritual is conducted only rarely, and then only as a tourist attraction.

However, a thriving folk art industry—of carved wooden bears; colorful clothing; dolls of Ainu in their ritual garb with tattooed lips for the women and extensive facial, head and body hair for the men; model hunting and fishing implements; and other artifacts associated with Ainu culture—is being supported by an active tourist trade. It is perhaps ironic that carved wooden bears have become a popular tourist item, symbolizing the bear cult associated with traditional Ainu culture, for in past times among the Ainu themselves it was considered bad form to carve the image of a bear, for fear that such an image would offend the bear spirit.

The tourism industry focusing on unique aspects of traditional Ainu culture enables the Ainu people to capitalize on their ethnic heritage by producing folk crafts to sell to tourists, as well as to find employment. Most of the tourists visiting the Shiraoi Ainu village and other sites in Hokkaidō are (Yamato) Japanese. Thus the presentation of a very different Ainu culture existing alongside the Yamato Japanese culture intensifies for the Yamato their own sense of ethnic identity, contrasted with the Ainu as the "other."

The scientific evidence for the origins of the Ainu people, language, and culture, and their relationship to the Japanese people, language, and culture, is mixed. The Ainu language is not closely related to Japanese or to any other language of East Asia, inasmuch as tools of historical linguistics available to us today can specify. There are only a few sound correspondences (one of the best indicators of genetic relationships between languages) that may be argued to suggest a relationship of Ainu to Korean and to Japanese, its closest neighbors in East Asia. The difficulty in such reconstructions is

being able to sort out lexical similarities that derive from cultural borrowing with contact over time, which obviously occurred, from those linguistic similarities that derive from a common parent or proto-language in the distant past. James Patrie in *The Genetic Relationship of the Ainu Language*, suggests both a common origin, i.e., a genetic relationship of Ainu, Korean and Japanese, and extensive borrowing, but that the original roots of the three languages are fairly distant. The split between the three, if they shared the same linguistic root, must have occurred on the continent of Northeast Asia before the peopling of the Japanese archipelago, several tens of thousand years ago.

As with the Ainu language, the Japanese language, while clearly not related to Chinese or any of the Sino-Tibetan languages except in the written script (which Japan began to adopt wholeheartedly in beginning in the sixth century, so this similarity in itself is not a basis for their genetic affinity), shows only a few lexical and grammatical similarities to languages of the Altaic language family. In grammar, but not in the sound system or native lexicon, Japanese and Korean are almost mirror image of each other, prompting many scholars to investigate their yet-to-be-proven genetic affiliation. The connection between the Japanese and Korean languages has not been conclusively proven; in fact, it is unlikely that we'd ever know their genetic relationship. Japanese is also said to have some similarities with the Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) languages of the Pacific to the south of Japan. Speculations abound. Further research is necessary, but current historical linguistic methods lose their effectiveness in this case, in which the split between languages, if indeed there was a split from a common ancestral language, occurred many thousands of years ago, as may have been the case with Ainu, Japanese, and Korean.

Culture, Nationalism, and Mythology in the Search for Origins

The archeological evidence for the origins of the Ainu and Japanese peoples is not consistent with the linguistic evidence. Over the past several million years, the islands of Japan have alternately joined and separated from the continent as sea levels receded during the ice ages, then rose in periods between glaciations. The last time Japan was connected to the continent was about thirty thousand years ago, during the same period that the peopling of the New World occurred with migrations across the Bering Strait. It can be expected that with further research, evidence of earlier human habitation in the Japanese islands will be discovered, given that earlier hominid sites have been found on the continent, including the Early Paleolithic sites of the so-called Peking Man (250,000-400,000 years) and the older Lantian remains (750,000-800,000 years) in China.

There was great excitement in Japan when an amateur archeologist in Sendai, Shin'ichi Fujimura, claimed he had excavated, in the 1970s and 80s, cultural artifacts in Japan dating back 150,000 years. His reports fanned the ethnic pride of many people who were eager to accept the idea that Japan and the Japanese people had a long and distinguished history. However, some people were suspicious of the Fujimura findings. In 2000, a national newspaper set out to follow him in his excavations and took secret photos of Fujimura planting artifacts in a Paleolithic stratum that he would later use as proof of the ancient origins of human culture in Japan. The scandal attracted suspicion to all evidence for the Paleolithic in Japan because most excavations of those early sites had been directed by Fujimura. Nevertheless, because of other, more reliable research we can now confidently say that there was human habitation in Japan dating back as much as thirty thousand years; but whether there were people in the archipelago prior to that time is a question awaiting more conclusive research.

Culture has also affected scientific studies of the origins of the Japanese people. The origin myths of Japan, recorded in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, describe the creation of the islands and provide a genealogy of the gods. Central to these myths is the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, supreme deity and ancestor of the imperial line. It is these myths that provide the justification for the emperor's supreme position in Japan as the direct descendant of the Sun Goddess. The emperor today, the 125th descendant of the first emperor of Japan, remains a powerful symbol of the ethnic unity of the people and of the Japanese nation state, except for the Ainu, the Koreans, and the other non-Yamato citizens.

The first emperor, Emperor Jinmu, the great-great grandson of the Sun Goddess, is described in the *Nihon shoki* as beginning his reign on earth in B.C.E. 660. Thus logically, if one follows these creation myths literally, there could be no archaeological remains of human habitation in Japan before creation, before the Age of Gods, and before Jinmu. During the highly nationalistic and imperialistic period of Japanese history leading to the Pacific War in the 1930s and 1940s, the emperor was used as the unifying and motivating force for the Japanese military and civilian war effort. The *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* provided the textual basis for attributing a divine ancestry to the emperor and indeed a unique descent for all the Japanese from the Age of the Gods, giving them racial and cultural superiority over other peoples.

Consequently, prewar archaeological research focused only on the past ten thousand years, i.e., it examined sites only from the Jōmon Period onward, with the assumption that lower strata from older periods would have nothing to offer. Following Japan's surrender in 1945 and the emperor's public admission that he was not divine, archaeologists began to excavate the lower strata looking for pre-Jōmon artifacts, with some success. Such excavations are still going on today.

How to reconcile the presence of the Ainu with these national and ethnic origin accountings has been problematic and has changed over time. In one account, the Ainu were already there when Emperor Jinmu arrived and were forced north and finally into Hokkaidō as Jinmu and his tribe left Kyūshū and moved to more northern areas.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a common ancestry of the Ainu and the Yamato Japanese was proposed. This ideology supported a colonization of Hokkaidō where most of the Ainu lived and an integration/assimilation of the Ainu into Yamato Japanese society.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, as nationalism and ethnocentrism intensified, and as there was more contact between the Ainu and the Yamato Japanese, the Ainu were increasingly seen as different, becoming an "other" to the presumed homogeneous Japanese race. According to Mark Hudson, "a racist view of the Ainu thus became intertwined with an image of them as the primitive aborigines of the islands who had been driven north by Jinmu and the (racially superior) Japanese." Part of the Japanese discourse at that time was that the Ainu were at least partially descended from the dog, inu in Japanese. There is an active movement by the Ainu to dispel these negative stereotypes and gain for the Ainu a more effective voice in the national political process.

The Scientific Evidence of Origins

The following sequence of archaeological periods is generally accepted, though there is much disagreement about dates and other matters.

Paleolithic: Pre-Jōmon, pre-ceramic, polished stone tools—B.C.E. 10,000

Jōmon: Jōmon cord-marked pottery, open kilns, hunting, B.C.E. 10,000—B.C.E. 300 gathering, shell fish gathering, sedentary villages

Yayoi: Closed kiln pottery, agriculture, metal working, B.C.E. 300—300 C.E. evidence of social stratification

Kofun: Large tombs, some larger than the Egyptian 300 C.E.—710 C.E. pyramids, horsemen/warriors, unified polity

Historical Period: 710 C.E.—

Jōmon Period culture is remarkable in that it has left behind the oldest known pottery in the world, dating from about twelve thousand years ago. The cord-marked design that has given its name to the period was impressed upon the wet clay that was then fired in an open kiln. It is highly unusual for a hunting and gathering society, normally

necessarily nomadic, to have the technology to create ceramic pots or the willingness to transport them from one campsite to another. The abundant natural setting of Jōmon Japan, an area blessed with a high biomass, meant that the Jōmon people could settle down in semi-permanent villages of seven to fifteen pit-houses without having to move around in search of game, fruits, vegetable plants, and shellfish or other marine resources. Evidence suggests that Jōmon peoples did not cultivate millet or rice. Indeed, agriculture was not well-developed in Japan until the Yayoi Period.

The pit-houses and other aspects of Jōmon culture also continue into the Yayoi Period, though the introduction of well-developed wet-rice agriculture and metal working had a profound effect on the lives of the people. These new developments may be the product of new ideas coming into Japan, as it is clear that during the Yayoi Period there was significant contact with the Chinese and Koreans across the Sea of Japan.

The artificiality of dividing history into periods obscures the fact that between all these cultural periods from the Paleolithic to the contemporary historical periods there was considerable cultural continuity. What is also clear is that Japan has not been isolated throughout the period of its human habitation, and there has been a flow of ideas and people across the sea for a long time.

One popular account is that the hunting and gathering Ainu are descendants of the Jōmon culture and that the Yamato Japanese arrived from the continent with the Yayoi agricultural and metal-working culture. However, because of the continuities from one period to the next, it is also possible that the Paleolithic, Jōmon and Yayoi are all ancestral to the Ainu, and the militaristic horsemen culture of the Kofun Period represented an invasion from the continent of the Yamato Japanese who unified the nation-state and became the political and military leaders, with the emperor at the top. That the Kofun Period had a highly stratified society is indicated by the massive keyhole-shaped mounded tombs, some measuring as much as 912 feet in length. The ceramic figurines or haniwa that lined the outside of the tombs, exhibit tailored, quilted clothing that suggests an origin from, or at least a relationship with, the nomadic horse-based cultures of the northeastern part of the continent and Korea.

New technologies in DNA and other genetic markers are beginning to offer the promise of answering more concretely questions of ethnicity and Japan's past cultures. Now that DNA can be extracted from fossil materials, preliminary support is emerging for the argument that the hunting and gathering Ainu were the indigenous population of Japan in the Jōmon Period. Yayoi, with its agriculture and metal-working, seems to have been introduced by an outside population coming from the continent. Mitochondrial DNA analysis of a limited sample of Jōmon skeletons was found to cluster with late historic Ainu, and not with contemporary Yamato Japanese, which were similar to Yayoi DNA.

If this model of the peopling of Japan holds up with future evidence, we hope that we will get a better understanding of how much Jōmon peoples contributed genetically to the contemporary population of Japan. We can also assume that there was some intermixture between the indigenous Jōmon people and the invading farmers of Yayoi. The search for a "pure" race is therefore inappropriate.

Questions of ethnicity and history are always hotly debated. The absence of a foreign invasion of Japan for nearly two thousand years, with the exception of the seven-year Occupation by the Allied Forces following the end of the Pacific War in 1945, has allowed the emergence of a self-perception by the Japanese as a homogeneous race. Nevertheless, it is clear that the genetic and cultural contributions to contemporary Japan have come from many sources. Furthermore, the existence of the Ainu, with a distinct culture, has served as an "other" to solidify the Yamato Japanese ethnic identity.

The Ainu-Yamato Japanese relationship poses another important question for peoples in multiethnic contexts. The centuries-old policy of integration/assimilation of the Ainu into mainstream Japanese society has resulted in a situation where there are few people living a "purely" Ainu lifestyle, with a "purely" Ainu identity. Along with the demise of the Ainu language, the hunting and gathering culture is virtually gone from the high-tech civilization of Japan, except for the tourist sites that help to perpetuate an "other" image for the Ainu.

The Ainu experience raises the important question of whether an integration/assimilation policy is best, or whether it would help the minority group more to pursue a separation/independence policy that respects, and highlights, the traditional culture of a racialized group of people, as the creation of reservations for American Indians has done in the continental United States, and as the sovereignty movement is currently doing in Hawai'i. Assimilation is indeed a very complex issue for many ethnic groups and governments around the world.

Koreans

Korea was annexed as a formal colony of Japan in 1910. As with the Ainu, the national policy was one of assimilation/integration, with Japanese being the language of instruction in schools in Korea. At the time of annexation, Koreans became subjects of Japan, i.e., Japanese citizens, which was the case until the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952 when they were stripped of their Japanese citizenship. Following the Peace Treaty, the Japanese policy towards the Koreans was no longer one of assimilation, and charges of discrimination have been frequent ever since.

In 1991 those who had lost their citizenship with the Peace Treaty were given a special "permanent resident" status that distinguished them from other foreigners living in Japan.

Estimates state that there were only about 790 Koreans in Japan at the time of annexation—mostly students, but also some mine and construction workers. After annexation, the movement of people between the two countries became extensive, especially in the last five or six years of World War II when Japan needed laborers. Koreans were hired or came as forced laborers to Japan to work in mines, munitions factories, and other war-related industries. By the end of the war, there may have been over two million Koreans in Japan. An unknown number of Koreans died in Hiroshima from the atomic bomb.

Following the liberation of Korea with the surrender of Japan in 1945, many Koreans returned to Korea. However, a large number stayed in Japan where they had family and businesses. This was especially true of those who had immigrated to Japan before the forced labor build-up during the last years of the war. These Koreans had come to Japan looking for better economic opportunities for themselves and their families. By the time of Korean independence in 1945, they already were established in Japan, and their children were native Japanese speakers.

Today, there are approximately 700,000 North and South Koreans living in Japan, most of whom were born and raised in Japan. By now there are third-, fourth-, and even fifth-generation people of Korean descent living in Japan. Many of them are extremely successful. Some even lead multinational corporations.

In addition there are a number of people of Korean descent who have taken Japanese names and become naturalized Japanese citizens. Together, the Korean permanent residents and the naturalized Japanese citizens and their descendants might constitute as high as one percent of the total population of Japan.

The characterization of Japan as a homogeneous society does not fit with the experiences of Korean-descended people in Japan. However, their situation in Japan has seen some improvement since the colonial days, characterized as it was by mutual suspicion and hostility. Today, Koreans can openly celebrate their traditional rituals and festivals, wearing typical Korean celebratory costumes; and there are schools where their children are taught Korean language and history. Many have become economically successful; and the transfer of money to both North and South Korea is sizeable, having an especially significant impact on the economy of North Korea.

There are limitations on access to government jobs and other benefits of citizenship in Japan for permanent residents. However, numerous court cases are challenging the

constitutionality of local and national government policies that discriminate against the permanent residents in employment with national universities, public schools, and many local governments.

Whether to remain a permanent resident of Japan or become a naturalized citizen is not an easy choice. One very personal requirement to consider is that in order to become citizens, applicants have to legally change their names, i.e., they must adopt a Japanese name.

Certainly passing the Japanese language exam required for naturalization is not a problem for most of permanent residents born, raised and educated in Japan as native Japanese speakers. Moreover, adopting Japanese mannerisms and dress enables these people of Korean descent to easily pass as Japanese. The differences are not physical. Americans may wonder, then, why not become naturalized and live the life of a Japanese citizen. However, in Japan, where the cultural perceptions of a homogeneous society are strong, it is not easy to become a citizen while honoring a cultural heritage that is not Japanese. It is difficult to have things both ways.

Burakumin

Between one and four million Japanese citizens are assumed to carry the stigma of being burakumin, literally "hamlet people" or "ghetto people." The precise number cannot be known because it is illegal for census takers and government offices to identify someone as a burakumin. Physically, burakumin are indistinguishable from other Japanese. There are no physical markers of skin color, blood type, or other features that physical anthropologists could use to identify them, though there were invidious rumors in some parts of Japanese society, and sometimes also believed by burakumin themselves, that there was a slight coloration or mark under the arm that would reveal their status. This spot has never been empirically noted.

Burakumin is not a racial category, but rather is a segment of society hereditarily defined through a historical discourse asserting that they contain a pollution. Their supposed pollution derives from engaging in unclean activities by themselves or by their ancestors. Traditionally, "polluting" activities have been defined by the Buddhist prohibition against taking any form of animal life; thus, polluting activities involve close and frequent association with death and with dead things. For example, people continuously engaged in butchering, leatherworking, mortuary practices and executions (in feudal days) over time became indelibly polluted.

In this incredibly hurtful ideology, once the pollution is sufficient, such as through repeated engagement in the polluting activity, it causes one to become a burakumin, a status that is permanent for individuals, their spouses, and all their descendants.

Pollution is not synonymous with sin. These activities considered to be polluting frequently were essential for the society as a whole. Leather-tanning in the feudal period, for example, included the making of the armor and horse saddles for the high-class samurai. Today, it involves making shoes, belts, jackets, and drums, including the drums used in sacred Shintō and Buddhist rituals. Nevertheless, because of their purported polluted state, the burakumin came to be considered outcasts, and they were distanced from the rest of the society.

Today, burakumin are not tied to their former occupations. Their stigma, however, continues. Discrimination persists in finding marriage partners, getting jobs, finding places to live, and advancing to positions of leadership. The high concentration of burakumin in leather-based industries is said to be one of the reasons that various import restrictions have been imposed on leather goods from the United States, Canada, and other countries where leather is much cheaper. Evidently this is an unstated government policy to support the buraku community.

The government in 1871 banned all forms of formal discrimination against the burakumin. In 1889, any reference to burakumin status was stricken from the family registers, or koseki. The koseki are continuous records of all vital events within a family such as births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and adoptions. They also state the address of origin and the new address when a family changes its official residence. The record of such events in a family over the generations has been of great interest to marriage detectives hired to find out about the family background of a prospective spouse, and to employers before they hire someone for a lifetime, or at least long-term, job.

The koseki no longer carry notations about burakumin and other statuses, such as samurai, farmer, artisan, or merchant as they did in the early years of the system at the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868-1912). The records from before 1889 that did sometimes contain such notations have been impounded or destroyed. However, the residence history of a family in these official documents for the past one hundred and twenty years provides strong indications of burakumin status, as the residential areas, or buraku, of the burakumin are well known throughout Japan.

Over the past few decades, it has become increasingly difficult for non-family members, even scholars, to gain access to the koseki. With continuing pressure from the buraku community itself, including from various activist groups such as the Buraku Kaihō Dōmei (Buraku Liberation League), the national government and many local governments have worked to end the discrimination, protect the privacy of the burakumin, and provide development support for the burakumin, their schools, and their communities. However, in spite of all these measures, discrimination in the important social arenas of marriage and employment persists.

Passing into the mainline society is one obvious option for burakumin, given that they are considered to be racially Japanese and are physically indistinguishable from Yamato Japanese. However, as with those of Korean descent and the Ainu, the costs of passing are high, and it is not easy. To pass, one must reject one's family and community, because any association with a buraku family or a buraku community will "blow one's cover." Nonetheless, it is assumed that some, if not many, do just that. Increasingly it is also possible to work mainstream society by day, and then return in the evening to family and friends in the buraku community, but it is not an open job market, and objections to a marriage between a burakumin and a non-burakumin can destroy family solidarity.

The lesson to be learned from this Japanese case is that racial prejudice can exist even in the absence of differences in skin color or other physical characteristics. We humans have the capability, through culture, of creating out of thin air physical differences, and strong social prejudices, where none exists in the empirical world. Consequently, combating racial prejudice is not easy. It is an elusive target.

Ethnic Japanese Foreigners

During the boom years of the 1980s, Japan experienced a labor shortage, especially in low-paying, manual jobs. In 2005, for the first time, deaths exceeded births, and without a significant surge in the fertility rate and/or mass immigration, the prospects for future labor shortages are high. Mass immigration has not been easy for the Japanese since the end of the war. The strong ethnic identity and the ideology of a homogeneous society led to an assumption that foreigners will not fit in with the rest of Japanese society.

Policy-makers hope that they can enact measures to reverse the declining birth rate, which is now less than 1.29 children per woman. A variety of tax breaks, educational scholarships, and increased investment in daycare centers are being promoted by the government as ways to increase the fertility rate. So far these efforts have met with little success. Immigration thus remains an important, and perhaps the only, option for Japan to find workers to keep the industrial and service sectors of the economy viable into the next generation.

One accommodation to the Japanese aversion to allowing foreign (non-Japanese) migrant workers into the country has been to encourage the immigration of Japanese ethnics, that is, "hyphenated" Japanese such as the Japanese-Brazilians now living in Brazil. In the 1980s, foreigners of Japanese descent were given special visa and other privileges to live and work in Japan. Many came, especially from Brazil, where there is a large Japanese-Brazilian population. From 1908 to 1945, over two hundred thousand

Japanese sailed on emigration ships to Brazil, and their numbers and influence in Brazil grew over the generations.

Emigration from Japan to South America continued for several decades after 1945, but in much smaller numbers.

In the 1980s, the flow was reversed. Toyota and other multinational corporations saw worldwide sales expand at a rapid rate. To expand production, Toyota hired many Japanese-Brazilian workers for its plants in Aichi Prefecture, and by 2005 these returnees from Brazil numbered 280,000, a significant minority in Japan.

The Japanese-Brazilians frequently experience conflicts in identity, language and culture in Japan, problems that can be expected when two very different cultures come into contact. By their own descriptions, Japanese-Brazilians characterize the open, expressive, emotional and warm human interactions in Brazil, including considerable tactile contact of hugging and kissing, as contrasting with the formality and social distance governing interactions among many Japanese. Being racially Japanese does not isolate a Japanese-Brazilian from these cultural differences.

Other foreigners also are contributing to the workforce in Japan, with Chinese being a prominent group. However, registered foreigners, including students, families and others living in Japan, constitute only about 1.6 percent of the total population of 127 million people, a small percentage compared to the 12 percent in the United States, and close to 10 percent in France.

These low numbers of foreigners in Japan contribute to the characterization of the society as being homogeneous. However, that characterization both denies the ethnic diversity that exists in Japan and relegates the non-Yamato Japanese to positions of second class citizens, resulting in discrimination of various kinds. The Japan Committee of the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism in 2006 issued a united call from seventy-one different groups for passage of a strong anti-discrimination law. Ainu, burakumin, and people of Korean descent are leading the way in this effort.

In an ethnically diverse society, pulling all the people together in harmony without discrimination and allowing everyone to enjoy the benefits of citizenship and membership in the nation, while at the same time giving everyone full respect for their different ethnic and cultural heritage, is an important task shared by all societies in this globalized world. Japan is not unique in this problem.

L. Keith Brown

L. Keith Brown is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh. His lifelong research interests have centered on the town of Mizusawa in the Tohoku region, and the changes in lives of the inhabitants since the early 1960s.

Suggested Reading

Hudson, Mark J. *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.