The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Views of Japanese Ethnic Identity Amongst Undergraduates in Hokkaido

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Many studies of postwar Japan have emphasized that an ideology of ethnic homogeneity has been an important element in Japanese society since 1945. Oguma and others have argued that this ideology contrasts with the view of a multi-ethnic empire that was prevalent prior to 1945. [1] It has been widely proposed, we believe correctly, that this ideology of ethnic homogeneity —the idea of the *tan'itsu minzoku* —has been used by political and business elites to weaken class unity and to exacerbate other divisions among working people. The term "cultural nationalism" probably best encapsulates this ideology. [2] A vast pseudo-scientific literature known as *Nihonjinron* (literally "theories of Japanese(ness)") has grown up in support of this cultural nationalism and has in turn been widely critiqued, both in Japanese and in English. [3]

In concrete terms, postwar Japanese views of ethnic identity are said to be characterized by three main features: (1) belief in a distinct "racial group" due to the possession of "Japanese blood"; (2) "a constant emphasis on the homogenous composition of Japanese people in disregard of the historical process whereby many peoples fused with one another to form the 'Japanese race'"; and (3) "a lack of adequate attention given to the presence in Japan of minorities such as Koreans, Chinese, Okinawan and Ainu". [4] That these ideas remain powerful and controversial in Japanese society was amply demonstrated by the recent comments of Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Aso Taro. During the opening ceremony for the new Kyushu National Museum on October 15, 2005, Aso described Japan as having "one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture and one race." [5] While students in some Japanese universities may be exposed to critiques of these ideas, McVeigh has argued that the general culture of Japanese education encourages essentialized views of identity. Japanese people typically "contrast national self with national other," categorizing "material culture, food, eating habits, clothes, and especially language into two mutually incompatible categories: Japanese or non-Japanese". [6] This practice extends into the classroom in various ways, including the emphasis on English and on *kokusaika* ("internationalization"), which, according to McVeigh, have the major effect of increasing students' awareness of their essential "oriental", i.e. *non*-English-speaking/*non*-Euro-American, identity. McVeigh links this classroom culture with Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism' —simple, everyday practices that are used to reproduce the national community. In other words, Japanese undergraduates may be expected to possess, almost unconsciously, certain "nationalistic" beliefs that center on ideas of ethnic uniqueness and homogeneity. [7]

Materials and Methods

This article reports the results of a survey in which undergraduates at a small private university in Sapporo were asked to identify their ethnic affiliation. The survey took the form of a final exam question in an anthropology course on the origins of the Japanese that was taught by the first author. The exam was held on January 25, 2005. The question related to ethnic identification was one of seven questions in the exam. All of the students who took the exam had Japanese names and, to the best of our knowledge, all were of Japanese nationality. Although a student from China had attended the classes, he did not take the final exam. As discussed below, a range of answers were given, but none of those answers suggested that any of the students were actually of non-Japanese nationality.

Sapporo, Hokkaido

The question was "Which ethnic group (*minzoku*) do you think you belong to? Give the reasons [for your choice]" (*Anata wa dono minzoku ni zoku suru to omotte iru? Sono riyu o kaku*). The course had taught the difference between "race" (*jinshu*) and "ethnicity" (*minzoku*), emphasizing that the latter involves culture rather than biology. The textbook for the course was Ikeda Jiro's 1998 *Nihonjin no Kita Michi* [The Route Traveled by the Japanese]. It is a wide-ranging and quite detailed account of the population history of the Japanese archipelago written by one of Japan's most senior biological anthropologists. This volume does not contain an extensive discussion of the concept of ethnicity (*minzoku*), but it does explicitly criticize the biological concept of "race" (*jinshu*). [8] Students who had read this book and who had attended the lectures would at least have been conscious that there are important differences between "race" and "ethnicity". The students were allowed to refer to the textbook during the exam. Although 122 students were registered for the class, only 84 took the exam, presumably those who were interested in the topic and/or keen to obtain credit.

As discussed below, the results of this survey were surprising and a follow-up questionnaire using the same question was given to a small (n=21) class of undergraduates at a different university in Sapporo on October 26, 2005. These were students of occupational therapy and, unlike the main sample, had not taken classes in anthropology or been specifically taught about ethnicity. All of the answers to both surveys were written in Japanese and are here translated into English by the present authors.

Results

Table 1 lists the answers given by the students in the main survey. Many of the students apparently found the question extremely difficult and 13.09% (n=11) left it blank or wrote that they were unsure. As discussed below, several students frankly admitted that the concept of ethnicity seemed to have little relevance to them. Only just over a third saw themselves as "Japanese". Ten students (11.4%) used the term "Yamato *minzoku*", an old, explicitly historical yet somewhat anachronistic term for the Japanese people. A quarter of respondents regarded themselves as Ainu. Almost all of these would-be Ainu students emphasized biology over culture. Typical replies included: "Because I was born in Hokkaido, I might have Ainu blood", "My ancestors have always been in Hokkaido", "My family and I all have rugged faces [*hori ga fukai*] and I heard that my grandfather used to live in a mountain village in north Hokkaido", "Because my body and face are very similar to the Ainu", and "As I was born in Hokkaido I think I am Ainu. Judging from TV and books, the Ainu are hairy and my features are similar to those of the Ainu". Although most of the replies here were thus very personal, one student also wrote that, "Ainu culture was the prototype of Japanese culture".

TABLE 1. Ethnic identifications given by the students in the main survey

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage	Sex (M:F)
Japanese or 'Yamato'	29	34.52	20 : 9
Ainu	21	25	15 : 6
No reply/'don't know'	11	13.09	8 : 3
Mongoloid	7	8.33	5: 1 (+1)*
Yayoi	4	4.76	4 : 0
'non-Ainu Emishi'	2	2.38	2 : 0
Germanic	2	2.38	2 : 0
Chinese	2	2.38	2 : 0
'Student'	1	1.19	1 : 0
'mixed Jomon and Yayoi'	1	1.19	1 : 0
Emishi	1	1.19	0 : 1
Caucasoid	1	1.19	1 : 0
Epi-Jomon	1	1.19	1 : 0
Mongolian	1	1.19	1 : 0
Total	84	99.98	63 : 20 (+1)

*Includes one student whose sex was unclear from the given name.

One particularly surprising result of this survey was the two students who saw themselves as "Germanic". The reasons given were (1) "There was a great migration of Germanic peoples and at that time they came to Japan" and (2) "I thought this because it seems that [my/our] ancestors came from the continent. I have always lived in Hokkaido, but I don't think I am Ainu." Initially we were at a complete loss how to explain this identification with a distant European people. In May 2005, however, the first author happened to read Oguma Eiji's *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-images,* which describes the influential folklorist Yanagita Kunio's analysis of Tacitus' account of the Germans. Just as the Germans were seen by Tacitus as a "sturdy natural people" in opposition to the Roman empire, the mountain dwellers of Japan were regarded by Yanagita as the original *Volk* of Japan. [9] Whether or not these students had actually read Yanagita, it seems likely that they were influenced by his ideas in some form.

As mentioned already, a number of students found the concept of ethnicity difficult to relate to. One male wrote, "Nothing comes to mind when I try to think about myself using the word *minzoku* [ethnicity]. If pressed, I would say Japanese, [a] *minzoku* living in Hokkaido. At present, I think that people live and are recognized as 'individuals' rather than as *minzoku* or other groups. For this reason, I cannot apply the category of *minzoku* to myself."

The results of the follow-up survey on occupational therapy students are shown in Table 2. Although the sample size was small, these results are largely consistent with those in the first survey. In fact an even smaller percentage of this group described their ethnicity as "Japanese". The most common response here was "Asian". It should be stressed that this did not necessarily exclude a Japanese identity since three students wrote, "Because I am Japanese" or "Because I live in Japan" as the reason for their choice of "Asian" ethnicity. Another three students admitted that they had never really thought about the term *minzoku*. Unusual answers from this group were "Inuit" ("Because I prefer it cold to hot") and "British" (*Igirisu-jin*). The female student who chose the latter wrote, "It [the U.K.] is a place where pride and tradition are important. Because it is a country where soccer develops into riots and where punk rock originated, it is a place where nobility mixes with violence." While this description of British society as a mixture of tradition and yobbishness is probably more accurate than the romanticized "My Fair Lady" view held by many Japanese people, this student gave us no idea how these observations relate to her own personal identity.

TABLE 2. Ethnic identifications given by students in the follow-up survey

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage	Sex (M:F)
Japanese	6	28.57	1 : 5
Asian	7	33.33	1 : 6
Mongoloid	4	19.05	2 : 2
'Don't know'	2	9.52	0 : 2
Inuit	1	4.76	1 : 0
British	1	4.76	0 : 1
Total	21	99.99	5 : 16

The major difference between the two surveys was that no-one in the second group saw themselves as Ainu or identified with any of the prehistoric populations of Japan such as Jomon or Emishi. One female student in the second group, listed in Table 2 as a "Don't know", wrote, "I feel that *minzoku* is an extremely detailed classification and I have no sense that I belong to such a *minzoku*. In Hokkaido one thinks of the Ainu, but I have the feeling that this is an old [*mukashi no*] *minzoku*." This difference between the two groups suggests that many of the students in the first survey were influenced by the lectures and associated the concept of ethnicity with the debates on Japanese origins, which they had been exposed to in class.

Discussion

Approximately one third of the students questioned here understood ethnicity as it would be defined by most sociologists or anthropologists, *i.e.*, as a primarily cultural phenomenon. However, the remaining two thirds of students appeared confused by the term, some seeing it as a very broad grouping akin to "race", others as a much more narrow phenomenon

essentially defined through individual choice. The same survey applied to students or other persons outside Japan could well produce results as complex as those reported here. Certainly in English terms like "ethnic group" or "ethnos" come across as very technical: the Japanese word *minzoku* is used much more often in ordinary conversation. At the same time, however, minzoku has broader meanings in Japanese. *Minzoku* is perhaps best glossed as "nation", i.e, "a community of people of mainly common descent, history, language, etc., forming a state or inhabiting a territory" (OED). In English today, this earlier usage of "nation" has tended to be replaced by "ethnic group", except for certain special cases, notably Native Americans who in legal terms remain as political entities. Thus in both English and Japanese, "ethnicity" tends to be applied to minority groups and cultures: the ethnic is the "Other" and the mainstream culture typically finds no need to define itself in such terms. Finally, as mentioned in the previous section, many of the responses in the first survey reported here may have been influenced by the context in which the concept of ethnicity was explained to the students in the anthropology course. Although only one lecture specifically focused on the Ainu, the idea that in prehistory the Japanese had diverse roots was a major theme running through the course.

Despite, and perhaps in part because, of these ambiguities and problems, we believe our results are of interest for a number of reasons. As noted in the Introduction, it has been widely argued that postwar Japanese society has been characterized by a strong ideology of ethnic homogeneity. Since in Japanese the term *minzoku* is usually used in this context, the results presented here would appear to be at odds with this ideology. Although if we had asked our students "Are you Japanese?" almost all would probably have replied "Yes", the results of the surveys we conducted suggest that this Japanese nationality goes hand-in-hand with quite diverse views of individual ethnicity.

Prejudice against and misunderstandings of the Ainu continue to exist in contemporary Japan. [10] The comment of one student here that the Ainu seem to be an "old", i.e., non-contemporary ethnic group may be seen in such a context. However, the fact that a quarter of respondents in the first survey saw their own ethnicity as "Ainu" suggests that other, more complex views of the Ainu also exist among young Japanese. While we accept that this identification with the Ainu is unlikely to exist outside Hokkaido, and in this case was probably influenced by the context of the course in anthropology, nevertheless we submit that our results imply that straightforward anti-Ainu prejudice no longer exists amongst a significant group of young Japanese adults. Even in Hokkaido, it is probable that Japanese students normally rarely think about the Ainu in terms of their own identities. In this case we accept that they were almost certainly encouraged to think in such terms by the context of the lectures. However, the important point is that, when give the opportunity to think about the Ainu, so many students were willing to accept a degree of Ainu ancestry for themselves. Such a view is, of course, quite consistent with what anthropologists now understand about the population history of the Japanese Islands, including the mixture of Ainu with other elements to form the Japanese people.

Young Ainu woman

One way of interpreting the present results might be to look at the concept of *kokusaika* or "internationalism". This has been an influential policy in Japan since the 1980s, but many observers have noted that it tends to reinforce quite opposite nationalistic tendencies through the essentialization of identities. [11] McVeigh writes that, "The more 'internationalism' is pursued and practiced, the more elusive, superficial, and detached from genuine internationalism it becomes, resulting in a sort of self-orientalized/occidentalized fantasy and theme-park view of the world…." [12] Although the results here could on one level be said to reflect a "theme-park" view of ethnic identity similar to Baudrillard's idea of "simulation", our results contradict McVeigh's suggestion that internationalism reinforces the "essentialization" of identities. According to McVeigh, "Essentializing breeds categories that are clearly marked, persistent, and immutable." By contrast, the results here are equally clearly vague and changing. [13] While we do not deny that McVeigh's analysis contains important insights into the relationship between nationalism and *kokusaika*, we suggest that the results of our present research are better interpreted as resulting from the inherently fluid nature of ethnicity.

Scholars of ethnicity usually see that phenomenon as being either "primordial" or "situational". [14] Many of the responses received in our surveys have a strongly primordial character, emphasizing family roots or physical characteristics. Other replies, however, are much more situational. In a situational approach, "Belonging to an ethnic group is a matter of attitudes, perceptions and sentiments that are necessarily fleeting and mutable, varying with the particular situation of the subject. As the individual's situation changes, so will the group identification; or at least, the many identities and discourses to which the individual adheres will vary in importance for that individual in successive periods and different situations". [15] The nation-building project in postwar Japan may indeed have emphasized ethnic homogeneity but, by definition as a *cultural* phenomenon, ethnicity is always in flux. The following comments by Immanuel Wallerstein have particular resonance in the light of the results of this paper: "Nothing seems more obvious than who or what is a people. Peoples have names, familiar names. They seem to have long histories. Yet any pollster knows that if one poses the open-ended question 'what are you?' to individuals presumably belonging to the same 'people', the responses will be incredibly varied, especially if the matter is not at that moment in the political spotlight." [16] In any "objective" sense, none of the students interviewed here can be seen as Ainu, Germanic or Inuit, yet we cannot dismiss these identities as "fake". To the contrary, fluidity and inconsistency must be seen as the norm rather the exception as regards ethnicity.

Conclusions

A class of 84 undergraduates at a university in Sapporo was asked to identify their ethnicity (*minzoku*). Only 34.52% saw themselves as "Japanese". A quarter of respondents identified themselves as "Ainu" based either on self-perceived phenotypic features such as body hair or on long family residence in Hokkaido. Although further surveys are needed to confirm the present results, this research suggests the possibility that significant numbers of young adults in contemporary Japan possess a rather situational view of ethnicity which contradicts common assumptions about Japanese ideas of ethnic diversity, nationalism, and prejudice against the Ainu.

The results of this short paper need to be assessed in light of other surveys from different regions of Japan and of different age groups. We are unaware of other published studies similar to what has been attempted here. Provisionally, however, our results can be said to contradict the emphasis on cultural nationalism that many sociologists have used to discuss ethnicity in postwar Japan. While we do not doubt that cultural nationalism and the idea of the *tan'itsu minzoku* or "homogeneous nation" have been important organizing *principles* in postwar Japan, the concept of ethnic identity is so fluid that it subconsciously transcends such artificial constraints. Finally, while we accept that many of the students' identifications with the Ainu may have been influenced by the context of lectures on the prehistory of Japan, the fact that so many students were willing to incorporate the Ainu into meta-narratives of Japanese identity suggests that, at least in Hokkaido, long-held prejudices against Ainu people are undergoing subtle changes.

[1] Oguma Eiji, *A Genealogy of 'Japanese' Self-images* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2002).

[2] Yoshino Kosaku, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[3] See Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001); Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Ross Mouer and Yoshio Sugimoto, *Images of Japanese Society* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1986) and Yoshio Sugimoto and Ross Mouer, *Nihonjinron ni Kansuru 12 Sho* [12 Chapters on Nihonjinron] (Tokyo: Gakuyo Shobo, 1982).

[4] Yoshino, 24-25.

[5] "Aso says Japan is nation of 'one race'", *Japan Times*, October 18, 2005.

[6] Brian J. McVeigh, *Japanese Higher Education as Myth* (Armonk, NY.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 149.

[7] McVeigh, 150. See M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

[8] Ikeda Jiro, *Nihonjin no kita michi* [The Route Traveled by the Japanese] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 1998), 14-17.

[9] Oguma, 179.

[10] See, for example, R. Siddle, "From assimilation to indigenous rights: Ainu resistance since 1869", in W.W. Fitzhugh and C.O. Dubreuil (eds), *Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People* (Washington D.C.: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, 1999), 108-115.

[11] Ivan P. Hall, *Cartels of the Mind: Japan's Intellectual Closed Shop* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

[12] McVeigh, 150.

[13] McVeigh, 150.

[14] P.R. Brass, "Elite groups, symbol manipulation and ethnic identity among the Muslims of South Asia", in D. Taylor and M. Yapp (eds.), *Political Identity in South Asia* (London: Curzon, 1979), 35-43.

[15] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 20.

[16] Immanuel Wallerstein, "The construction of peoplehood: racism, nationalism, ethnicity", in E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 71.

[17] A similar point is made for the Chumash of California by B.D. Haley and L.R. Wilcoxon, "How Spaniards became Chumash and other tales of ethnogenesis", *American Anthropologist* 107 (2005): 432-445.

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