

Reconstruction of Minority Identities in the 21st century Japan by Yuko Nishimura

In Japan, government policies generally don't recognize the country's ethnic or minority diversity, preferring to view Japan as homogenous.

Japan does have minorities of course, and a small but growing immigrant community. With government authority figures denying their existence, it is left to non-profit organizations, sometimes with the help of local governments, to promote multi-culturalism and a positive identity for minorities. This paper will explore two such efforts, one successful and one still in doubt.

Derogatorily labeled *eta* (i.e., polluted people), ex-untouchables were re-labeled *shin-he min* ("new commoners") by the Meiji government in 1873 and their official status as a segregated underclass was abolished. Following World War II, the Japanese government established the *Special Measures Law for Assimilation Project* and all official labels were dropped. The law also provided public housing (located, of course, in their formerly isolated and segregated neighborhoods), financial subsidies and "set-asides" for some government positions.

Even after their 'liberation' Japan's ex-untouchables faced segregation, economic deprivation and discrimination and they remain Japan's underclass. Moreover, the *Special Measures Law* fostered a culture of dependency as well as corruption and mismanagement in their community organizations. When local governments terminated assimilation projects in late 1990s, the ex-untouchable neighborhoods had little economic vitality and, as youth assimilated into the 'homogenous whole', populations dwindled. Within this context there are community-based organizations of ex-untouchables attempting to revitalize their neighborhoods, build pride in their history and promote multi-culturalism. Kyoto's *Sujin Machizukuri Council* is one. This new neighborhood-based NPO was formed following public outrage over charges of corruption against leaders of a well-known NPO that claimed to represent the Sujin neighborhood and its ex-untouchable residents. The allegations, well covered by the press, reinforced negative stereotypes of ex-untouchables and further weakened ties to the community by its youth. Their goal is to build a new public image for the community, including a cultural heritage to be proud of, while creating a livable neighborhood attractive to young people. The leader activists also are attempting to build a more multicultural neighborhood--one not bound to a particular community--but inclusive other minorities such as *zainichi*-Koreans and South East Asians. They believe a "cultural synthesis of minorities" will be attractive to the younger generation.

This 'appeal of an alternative culture' can be found with the 40,000 Okinawans, also a repressed and discriminated against minority, who have recreated their territorial

identity in and near Kanagawa Prefecture's Kawasaki City. Kawasaki City is close to Tokyo and a thousand miles from the Okinawan islands.

When Okinawa was occupied by US forces after the World War II, large numbers of Okinawans migrated to Japan's mainland and to South America. Faced by open discrimination from 'true' Japanese, the Okinawans tried to hide their identities, but at the same time tried to maintain their cultural heritage, fearing the American military presence on the island would wipe it out. They organized the "Society to Study Okinawan Music and Dance" in Kawasaki City. Interestingly, this eventually resulted in the local government designating Okinawan music and dance as an intangible cultural asset of Kawasaki City. In "mono-cultural" Japan, it is novel for a local government to designate a cultural asset originating from an entirely different region.

The interest in multiculturalism is also found in the cultural synthesis between Okinawans and *nikkeis*, the South American returnees. The *nikkeis*, some with 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 Kawasaki experience demonstrates that, contrary to the views of some of Japan's most prominent opinion leaders, there is room for more than one culture in Japan. Kyoto's Sujin neighborhood is still a work in progress, but also shows great promise in promoting a more multicultural Japan but a few successful community building experiments among the ex-untouchable communities prove that the change is taking place.

In a rapidly aging Japan which is only hesitantly accepting immigrants from Asia and South America, non-profit organizations can lead the way in making Japan a more open and diverse society.

References

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