



CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: JAPANESE SOCIETY

Ethnic Minorities

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Japanese often think of themselves as a homogeneous society, with a strong sense of group and national identity and little or no ethnic or racial diversity. But such differences exist in Japan, as in all societies, as Harvard University professors Theodore Bestor and Helen Hardacre explain in this video series. Rather, what is perhaps most unique about Japanese society is its highly structured approach to managing and resolving these differences.

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Theodore Bestor :: The question of this ethnic homogeneity of Japan is an important one, because though from a distant perspective Japan does look very homogeneous, in fact there are a number of very significant minority groups — ethnically different minority groups — in Japan today.

The Ainu, an indigenous group that now consists of probably fewer than 30,000 people living primarily on the northern island of Hokkaido — in some ways the history of Japanese relations with the Ainu parallels the history of North American settlers vis-à-vis American Indian groups. In other words, the Ainu were sort of pushed back and back and back as the frontier of Japanese society expanded. That is to say, Japanese society expanded to fill up the entire Japanese archipelago, from say the 12th century onward, the northward expansion of Japanese society was constantly pushing up against indigenous peoples like the Ainu, pushing them farther and farther back, farther and farther north, to today, where most Ainu today live in Hokkaido, the northernmost of the major islands in Japan. And that process really continued until almost the beginning of the 20th century, because Hokkaido was a frontier region well into the 19th century, even into the early 20th century.

Another major ethnic group in Japan is the Korean Japanese population — in Japanese sometimes called *zai-nichi kankokujin*, “Koreans-resident-in-Japan” — who are a large population estimated in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps in the low millions, of descendants of Koreans who were brought to Japan as forced laborers from the Japanese,

from the beginning of the Japanese colonial period in Korea, which started in 1910 when Korea was annexed by Japan.

The population of Koreans who live in Japan now occupy a very difficult social and political situation, because they're not recognized by the Japanese state as being citizens of Japan, but their claims to citizenship either in South Korea or North Korea are equally problematic, so they're sort of caught in a socio-economic political vacuum. And because of the intense amount of discrimination that Japanese have felt towards Koreans in the past, many Korean Japanese find it very difficult to enter mainstream companies, get into good schools, pursue sort of ordinary middle-class aspirations and lifestyles.

Helen Hardacre :: The idea of Japan's homogeneity is often presented as something that gives the country its renowned ability to achieve consensus, to act together as a group. However, if we look at this consensus model, or the homogeneity of society, from the point of view of minorities living in Japan, we can see it from a very different angle.

Koreans living in Japan rather regularly say that they feel shut out of ordinary society and that they may be born there and grow to adulthood without really having a Japanese friend [or] ever having been inside the home of an ordinary Japanese family. And for them, homogeneity is not a warm, cozy harmonious thing, but something from which they feel excluded.

Koreans have been coming to Japan for millennia. In fact, some of the earliest settlers of the Japanese islands no doubt came from the area which today is called Korea. Koreans were among the most important people transmitting the culture of the Asian continent, including Buddhism, to Japan. This kind of contact was uncontroversial for many centuries. It's really only in the modern period, when Japan made a colony of Korea in 1910, that contact between the two countries became politicized in an antagonistic way.

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