Is Japan embracing diversity?

By Eri Okazaki 25th February 2020

The success of a number of high profile Japanese people of mixed heritage has raised questions about perceptions that Japanese society is homogeneous

Ahead of the Rugby World Cup held in Japan last year, a Japanese sports magazine, asked the national team's captain, "Why are there so many foreigners in Japan's squad?" The 31-year-old captain, Michael Leitch, originally from New Zealand, answered (in Japanese), "Because that's how Japan is today."

Leitch went on to say, "The rugby national team reflects the reality of current Japan, and also anticipates the future of Japan. As a team, we can embody and show society just how important diversity is." The home team – made up of players from South Africa, New Zealand, Tonga, Samoa, Korea and of course Japan – whipped up a frenzy of passion throughout the country and across the world by reaching the quarter-finals for the first time in the history of Japanese rugby.

The fervour surrounding the games on Japanese soil, and the success of the Japanese team, was unprecedented. But beyond sport, there was another conversation bubbling underneath the surface. About what it means to "be Japanese" in modern day Japan. And how does this fit into Japan's ostensibly homogenous narrative?

Who am I?

Some people in Japan still view their society as a mono-ethnic. Japan's sense of national identity and what it means to "be Japanese" is deeply engrained. This comes from layers of historical context; sakoku – an isolationist policy that lasted for over 200 years, which massively limited both migration and imports – as well as assertions from Japanese politicians' over the years that they are a "homogenous society" and that the distinct nature of the country comes from being "one nation, one civilisation, one language, one culture and one race."

And at first glance, it might seem like that on the surface. Take the traditional job-hunting practice of *shūshoku katsudō* for instance. In early April every year, thousands of university students dressed in ubiquitous black suits and carrying a briefcase can be seen traipsing the streets in search of jobs at the most reputable firms in the country. You can see why some still accuse Japan of homogeneity. But that's not actually the case.

Japan has several minority communities in addition to their foreign residents. The indigenous Ainu who have only been officially recognised by the Japanese government since 2019 as well as the Ryūkyūans or Okinawans. There are also the Burakumin or so-called "hamlet people" once considered the lowest caste in Japan's now-abolished feudal.

And then there are groups who are considered to be foreigners despite being long-term residents over several generations such as the zainichi. The word simply means "living in Japan" but is most commonly used to refer to ethnic Koreans and their descendants who remained after being brought to Japan during the occupation of Korea from 1910 until the end of World War II in 1945. While the majority of these Koreans left Japan when the war ended, some 600,000 remained but over time, lost "imperial citizenship" that original settlers were given. The first generation were long-term residents of Japan without Japanese citizenship. As time went on, some of the next generation did apply and receive naturalisation.

In Japan, citizenship is determined by jus sanguinis or the nationality of your parents as opposed to place of birth. For that reason, Japan-born zainichi are counted as foreign residents in government figures.

With a rapidly ageing population, Japan has opened up its immigration policies to fill an acute labour shortage. In 2018 the government signed a bill to allow for hundreds of thousands of workers to come to Japan to work in specific sectors such as construction, nursing and farming. But how will Japan deal with the changing face of its population?

Half or whole?

Japanese people of mixed heritage have long been known in Japan as hafu (meaning, half). Coined in the 1970s, some believe it's a divisive term which on the one hand means multi-ethnicity while on the other means "not whole." In fact, another term – daburu – meaning double began to be used in the 1990s as a way emphasising what is gained by being mixed race rather than what is missing. But in practice hafu is a more widely used term.

There have been several high-profile Japanese people of mixed race in the spotlight in recent years which has highlighted that there are still issues to be addressed. Former Miss Japan, Ariana Miyamoto, knows first-hand the struggles of a perceived sense of "being Japanese". Miyamoto, 25, represented Japan at the 2015 Miss Universe pageant. She was born in Nagasaki, in southern Japan, to a Japanese mother and an African-American father. As a child growing up in Japan, she says she was bullied because of her dark skin. And when she became the first woman of mixed parentage to be chosen as Miss Japan, she was targeted by online abuse from those who claimed she "isn't Japanese", and "isn't fit to represent Japan".

Miss Japan Ariana Miyamoto has spoken out about the racial abuse she has received

But Miyamoto used her new-found fame to become a champion for others like herself, who are of mixed heritage. And when Priyanka Yoshikawa of Japanese and Indian parents was chosen as Miss Japan for the Miss World pageant the following year, she credited her win to Miyamoto, saying she had helped show "mixed girls the way".

And Miyamoto says things changed dramatically for her personally when Naomi Osaka won the US Tennis Open and by association, people's attitude towards her changed completely. Japan's leading tennis player was born in Japan to a Haitian father and Japanese mother and brought up in the US. Osaka is now ranked number three in the world but her success and visibility in the public eye has highlighted a perception that to "be Japanese" you must look and talk a certain way. The Japanese media often pointedly asked Osaka in post-game press conferences to "reply in Japanese" even though she is not fluent in the language.

Japanese food company, Nissin, was also accused of "whitewashing" after it depicted Osaka with white skin and brown hair in an animated advert. Osaka responded by saying, "It's obvious, I'm tan. It's pretty obvious." The company, a sponsor of the Japanese tennis team apologised, saying it had meant no offence and vowed to "pay more attention to diversity issues in the future."
It was reported in October 2019 that Osaka has chosen Japanese nationality and gave up her US citizenship. Under Japanese law, those with dual citizenship must choose one before their 22nd birthday. Osaka, for her part, is bemused by it all saying in an interview: "People start saying I'm American 'cause I live in America or I'm Haitian because my dad is Haitian, I'm Japanese 'cause my mom's Japanese. I don't know, I'd rather they just focus on the tennis."

Living in harmony
Shahran Ishino first travelled from Tehran to Tokyo in 2002 as a student, and now holds Japanese citizenship. He runs a consulting firm that promotes the creation of a working environment conducive to both Japanese and foreign nationals. Ishino believes Japan's rugby team actually achieved a state that Japanese society has aspired to for centuries. And it was because of the team's diversity, not in spite of it. "The game wasn't about the individual players," he says, "it was about the team as a whole. That's very Japanese. It was the very epitome of the Japanese virtue of *wa* (harmony)."

The concept of *wa* could be argued as the very essence of the Japanese character. It denotes a sense that group values are more important than the individual and therefore conformity to social norms is needed to achieve this state.

But Ishino takes a more nuanced view: "I believe the Japanese spirit of 'wa' is a truly wonderful thing. In the rugby team, the Japanese players accept the foreign players, and the foreign players are eager to do well along with their Japanese teammates. They performed well together as a team, everyone pulling together. Of course, they win or lose as the Japanese team, because that's what they are." In Japan, rugby is famous for the phrase "no-side", meaning once the referee blows the whistle to end the match, there are no more foes, only fellow players. While this phrase is no longer widely used, it has lodged itself firmly in the national consciousness of Japan.

Athletes there with foreign roots are still called "players from a foreign country". But in a country where the concept of *wa* is considered a fundamental virtue, there is hope that an increasingly visible "other" Japan in a changing society can lead it to being the natural state of things.

Unit 5 Reading Journal questions: answer each question with at least 4 sentences

1. Why do you think a homogenous society like Japan would still enjoy "imported" sports like rugby or holidays like Christmas? Is this a good thing for Japan?
2. Why do you think Japanese society accepts the virtue of *wa* with Japan's rugby team, but not with a mixed-race representative as Miss Japan?
3. Do you think the idea of what it means to "be Chinese" is also changing to be more diverse? Is this good or bad for Chinese society and culture?