The 2020 Tokyo Olympics and The Myth of Japanese Homogeneity

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Introduction

The Olympics opening and closing ceremonies are full of culturally symbolic messages about the host country’s identity including their national myths, values, and character. Promoted under the title of “Unity in Diversity”, Japan’s Tokyo 2020 Olympics challenged the popular myth of Japanese homogeneity through its intentional representation of multicultural athletes and performers throughout the opening ceremony events, and the subtle nods to the Ainu and Ryukyuan indigenous communities within Japan.

As stated on Tokyo’s 2020 Olympic webpage, Tokyo 2020 aimed to “embrace Diversity” by celebrating the differences of individuals, while ‘Inclusion’ will see people accepted and respected regardless of age, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs or intellectual or physical impairment” (Tokyo 2020).

Impact of imperialism and nationalism on the concept of Japanese homogeneity: The Ainu and Ryukyuans

The Meiji Restoration period of 1850 to 1889 is characterized by its dramatic political, economic, and social change through a rapid Westernization of the country. The importation of Western ideology and particularly of Social Darwinist, Eugenics, and Anti-Black racism would also greatly impact Japan’s construction of who was to be included as “Japanese” and who were to be “Othered”.

Following the steps of other Western imperialist powers, the theories of Social Darwinism and evolutionary hierarchy provided justification for Japan’s brutal imperialistic expansion and subsequent dispossession of the ancestral land and resources of indigenous people. Including the Ainu people of the island north of Japan now known as Hokkaido, and Ryukyuans (also known as Okinawans) of the archipelago south of Japan.

The impact of international exposure and immigration on multiracial Japanese and Blackness in the Japanese imagination

Pre WWII

The history and reception of multiracial Japanese—specifically of children of Black and Japanese parents— is as complicated as the Japanese relation to Blackness. Blackness holds both positive and negative associations in premodern Japanese. For example, while colorism and a preference for lighter skin has a long history within Japan, Japanese representations of Buddha as a Black and African Buddha also exist.

More formative to the stigmatization of Blackness in Japanese society is the exposure to Social Darwinism and racist Western ideology. The more reliant Japan was to Western nations and the more important it was to maintain friendly and profitable relationships, the more anti-Black Japan became. This was apparent during America’s Occupation of Japan post WWII.

Post WWII

America’s Occupation of Japan post WWII challenged Japan’s myth of homogeneity with the births of biracial children born largely of US military men and Japanese women. These children became colloquially referred to as “hafu” meaning “half” in Japanese and referring to someone with biological parentage of two different ethnicities or races. Hafu children were often associated with the military, single mothers, prostitution, and poverty, receiving varying degrees of exclusion and inclusion by Japanese society.

While the mainstream Japanese images of models, athletes, and celebrities have changed the post war association of hafu to one that is cool, trendy, and glamorous, many hafu still face discrimination as an “other” in their own country. Thus, the representation of Naomi Osaka (who is both mixed-race and mixed-nationality) as the Olympic torch lighter and in this way, the face of Japan is hugely symbolic of Japan’s slow transition to a more accepting society.

Minority Groups in Japan not represented in the Olympics

Burakumin

For many centuries, Japanese society was structured in a caste system with the lowest category an “untouchable” class, the Burakumin. Burakumin refers to the small segregated communities which laborers working in stigmatized occupations lived in. Burakumin were known to work as leather workers, executioners, butchers, and undertakers and seen as being “tainted by death”.

Other names used to refer to Burakumin, which are no longer commonly used include eta (filth abundant) or hinin (non-people), which largely describes the treatment of Burakumin people by the larger Japanese society. While the caste system was abolished in 1872, Burakumin continued to live as a marginalized and discriminated group.

Ethnic Koreans

During Japan’s brutal colonial rule of Korea, many Koreans were used as cheap labor in Japan.

Today many of these descendants live in Japan spanning multiple generations. However, many Koreans are still treated as foreigners and suffer many forms of discrimination, lack political representation, and are often targets of hate speech by right-wing groups.

Bibliography

