Ethnoperipheralism: Conceptualizing the Social and Psychological Positionality of Cross-Culturally Raised Children "at Home"

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Ethnoperipheralism:
Conceptualizing the Social and Psychological Positionality of Cross-Culturally Raised Children “at Home”

Ichiro Numazaki

Introduction

This paper proposes a concept for understanding a peculiar state of cultural awareness that some cross-culturally raised children develop in relation to their “home” society—that elusive entity to which they are nevertheless intimately connected through family, friends, food, clothing, speech, seasonal events, and other “trivial habits in daily living” (Benedict 2005[1946]:10).

What I have in mind here is a situation where a child due to his/her acquisition of alien cultural habits feels that she/he is “different” from the people who he/she thinks are the “same” as her/himself. The child in such a situation experiences the dissonance between “I” and “They” although she/he retains the feeling that both “I” and “They” are part of “We.” In other words, the child identifies her/himself with the people around him/her yet at the same time realizes a sharp divide between her/himself and those people; he/she develops a sense of both sharp separation from and strong connection to those people simultaneously.

The child notices that he/she is “strange” in the eyes of the people around him/her, and realizes that as a result she/he is sometimes looked down—mildly or strongly—on by them. The child is initially shocked by the fact that what he/she takes for granted is strange to the people who she/he thinks are the “same,” but then discovers many subtle and not so subtle differences between her/him and those “same” people. The child then accepts that he/she is not completely the “same” and that she/he is often alone in being not the “same.” Nevertheless, the child can and does relate easily to the people around her/him
in many ways because he/she does share many local habits with the people around her/him. Occasionally, however, she/he is reminded of her/his differences and some of the differences matter both psychologically and socially.

The child does not lose sense of belongingness. The people around him/her also think that she/he belongs; they do not regard or treat him/her as a complete alien. So, “I” and “They” are part of the single “We.” But “I” know that “They” think “I” am strange. “I” too think “They” are different but “I” cannot think “They” are strange because “I” am alone and “They” are many. “Their way” is the rule and “My way” is the exception. “I” also know, however, that things are done “my way” in a different place where I have been. “They” just do not know that “my way” is not so strange after all.

Same but different, separated yet connected—I would like to name this state of cultural awareness “ethnoperipheralism.” The naming of course is derived from the concept of ethnocentrism—the “natural” tendency of a group to regard its customs and practices not only as the only way but also as superior to those of other groups. Ethnoperipheralism, by contrast, is the “natural” tendency of a child who has acquired alien cultural habits to regard the customs and practices of the group that he/she identifies as his/her own neither as the only way nor as superior to those of which she/he has a concrete knowledge and experience.

In the following, I shall describe my early childhood experience from kindergarten through 6th grade in Buffalo, New York, and in Sendai, Japan, to illustrate how a cross-culturally raised child developed what I call ethnoperipheralism. This essay is my first venture into an “auto-anthropology” (Strathern 1987; Rapport and Overing 2000:18).

“America,” 1963-65

I was just five years old when I was taken to “America” in June 1963. My father, a pediatrician, obtained a research assistantship at Children’s Hospital in Buffalo, New York, and he took his family with him to the United States.
I was born in Sendai, Japan, in 1958 to Japanese parents of prewar generation and was raised within a “genuine” Japanese family—my parents, an unmarried aunt, and my grandparents on the mother’s side. None of them had ever lived abroad. I entered a kindergarten nearby in April 1963. It was already decided that we would be leaving for “America” in June. I remember my mother and grandmother repeatedly telling me in very grave tone not to tell anyone that I was “going to America” at kindergarten. I did not know where “America” was and did not understand the reason for secrecy. But I kept silence. My mother and grandmother both looked unusually serious.

So we left “Japan” for “America” in June 1963. I vaguely remember peeping out of the airplane window in search of grandparents and others who were seeing us off from the airport building.

My first vivid memory of “America” is a male Caucasian in uniform looking at my father’s chest x-ray. My father was short. His face was stiff and his voice was tense. The man holding the film was big. He was holding a square black sheet very high up to the light. It was at the airport immigration counter in Hawaii, our first stop and the entry point to the United States. I remember this perhaps because I sensed unusual nervousness in my father.

My second but even more vivid memory of “America” is a refrigerator in our apartment in Buffalo. I saw an electric refrigerator for the first time in my life and it was huge in the eyes of a five year old. I had to climb up the shelves to reach the freezer at the top where a big box of ice cream was kept. And ice cream was there every day, and tasted better than the one I had eaten in “Japan.” Same with fresh milk and orange juice. I also had to climb up the shelves to get long sausages on the top shelf of the refrigerator. I had to get them for my younger brother and myself in early Saturday mornings. We watched cartoons on a TV eating sausages while our parents were still asleep.

TV was not new for me, but cartoons and sausages were. Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Huckleberry Hound, Tom and Jerry, Bugs Bunny, The Mighty Hercules and others, along with sausages, became the icons of “America” for me.

Opposite to the refrigerator was a pantry, another new encounter, where
cases of chewing gum, boxes of Kellogg cereal, cans of Campbell Soup, loafs of bread and bottles of jam, jelly and peanut butter were “always there.”

My father bought a used car, the first ever family car for us, and it was big I thought. “American” cars were all big. Some had triangular tail fins on the back. We went to supermarket, which was huge with rows and rows of various goods, once a week and bought bags of food, which were put in the trunk of our family car. I had never been to such a huge store. The touch and smell of big boxy brown bags amazed me.

Everything was big in “America.”

I do not remember when or from whom we learned how to eat Kellogg cereal, but my brother and I quickly acquired a habit of eating cornflakes with sliced banana and milk for breakfast. “American” milk was in tall paper cartons unlike short glass bottles we had in “Japan.” My brother and I of course preferred Frosted Flakes, and the tiger with a red scarf around his neck became one of our favorite characters.

My parents put me in a kindergarten of Public School No.30 in September 1963. My parents later told me that I did not speak a word at school for three months, spent a lot of time in bathroom, and my teacher was worried that I had some kind of disease. My father had to go to school and explain to the class teacher that I was killing time in bathroom because I did not understand English. Three months later, however, I was talking English.

Two months in a “Japanese” kindergarten were too short to equip me with a yardstick for comparison. So I freshly started my school life in Buffalo without much preconception. My first memory of kindergarten is a nap time, the only practice that seemed strange to me. I did not have a habit of taking nap. At this “American” kindergarten, I had to lay on a piece of lug although I was not sleepy. Another sharp memory is seeing the principal in her office. One day, I drew a picture of “Japanese” police car. My teacher liked it and wanted to show it to the principal and took me to her office. When we entered, the principal just came out of the bathroom sounding flush. I was amazed that “American” principal had a private bathroom next to her office.
I also remember my first Halloween. A classmate had a Japanese mother and she became our family’s cultural advisor of a sort, and my mother learned from her that every kid was going to school in costume on October 31. My English was not good enough yet, so I did not know what was happening. My mother of course did not know what Halloween was and what kind of costume was appropriate. Unprepared, she dressed me up in yukata (a “Japanese” summer kimono)! I put yukata over my clothes and went to school only to find out that my classmates were supermen and batmen and fairies and nymphs. I had watched superman and batman on TV by then and fairies and nymphs in Disney cartoons. So I could see that I looked, well, odd. No one in yukata was on TV programs. I do not remember my classmate laughing or calling names. Perhaps I did not notice anything since my English was not good yet. I was less embarrassed than perplexed. I followed my classmates that evening around our neighborhood shouting trick or treats (sounded “trick-a-tree” to me) as best as I could and getting candies. I saw a window with graffiti and learned what tricks meant. My mother got me a proper costume a year later. But I do not remember much about my second Halloween. I do not even remember what costume I put on. It may be that by then it was so natural an event for me that it did not impress me. And yet, Halloween remains an important element of my “America.” Later back “at home,” I would really miss it every October.

My kindergarten teacher gave me the nickname “Ichy”—pronounced “ee-chee.” She could not pronounce “Ichiro” and wanted a shorthand, I guess. She started to call me Ichy, and my classmates followed. So, I became Ichy. At home, my father called me “Ichiro,” my mother “Ichiro-kun” or “It-chan” or “Onii-chan” meaning elder brother. At school, I was Ichy. English-speaking me was Ichy. That was an “American” me. Soon I started to introduce myself as Ichy to “American” visitors to our house. Once my father’s colleague heard me say so and then turned to my younger brother and said “Is he ‘Scratchy’?” My father repeatedly talked about this incident to his “Japanese” friends as a typical case of “American” jokes.

I liked the “American” flag and the “American” national anthem. I liked
them because the two were associated with joyful events like parades, fairs, and sports. The flag was colorful and pretty, and it was flown everywhere. The song was cheerful and upbeat, and it was sung always flamboyantly. Both sharply contrasted with the “Japanese” flag and national anthem that I knew. I preferred the “American” flag and national anthem to the “Japanese” ones.

Perhaps my attitude was affected by the very low reputation of “made in Japan” in “America” in the early 1960s. My brother and I started to collect pennants of historic places and tourist attractions, some of which were “made in Japan.” Once I bought a souvenir toy cannon at Niagara Falls. I turned it upside down and found a label “made in Japan.” I sighed and said “Oh no, not made in Japan again!” in English to my mother.

The most important ingredient of my “America” however were food.

First, hotdog with Heinz tomato ketchup. I acquired a new habit of putting a lot of Heinz tomato ketchup on a hotdog and sticking it into my mouth. Especially delicious was the hotdog I ate at family picnics. Several Japanese families used to get together on picnics at various parks in and around Buffalo. We would find a barbecue stand in the park and grill sausages and beef steaks. Our mothers usually brought “onigiri (rice balls)” and other “Japanese” food as well, but I preferred hotdogs and steaks. Not that I did not like “onigiri” anymore. It just did not seem right to eat it while barbecuing. One day, it started to rain when we got to a park and had to stay inside our cars and only eat “onigiri” we brought with us. That was the saddest picnic I had in “America.”

Second, Hershey’s milk chocolate bar. A flat bar of chocolate in a brown cover with light grey logo of Hershey’s became the chocolate for me. I also came to like Hershey’s Kisses. When we went to a supermarket, my brother and I would always put a lot of Hershey’s in our cart. We put bags of M&Ms in our cart, too. These bright colored bits of chocolate were always on the table in our living room. Then, jelly beans and Twizzlers. I even developed a taste for licorice black.

But most important of all was peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. This
would later decidedly determine my ethnoperipheral consciousness. I shall discuss this in due course. Peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich was kids’ favorite. I do not remember where I first tasted it but soon I was making it at home with Skippy peanut butter and strawberry or blueberry jam. I did not call them jelly because my mother always said “jamu (jam).” I do not remember what brand of jam my mother bought. But, Skippy made a very strong impression on me. I had never tasted such a paste on bread before. Skippy was sticky and salty. I had to have a glass of milk to swallow a piece of bread with Skippy on. I liked it though. And I liked it better with some kind of sweet “jam” on Skippy. Peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, or “jam on Skippy” sandwich, thus became my favorite sandwich.

Certain drinks also became a basic element of my “America,” notably orange juice, Coke, and Dr. Pepper. Unlike “Japanese” orange juice that I knew, “American” orange juice was thicker and richer and sweeter in taste. I came to prefer the “American” to the “Japanese” orange juice. I did not know Coke or Dr. Pepper before I went to Buffalo, but I quickly learned to like them. They had an exciting taste that I had never experienced in “Japan.”

Then, there was clothing. “American” clothing I liked in particular was long pants for boys. “Japanese” boys in elementary school and kindergarten wore short pants except in cold winter days. But, “American” boys wore long pants to school and so did I. I liked long pants because wearing them made me feel more grown up. And of course we bundled up in snowy Buffalo. “American” winter gears were all new to me.

“American” home environment affected my motor habits, too. One is crossing legs while sitting on a chair or in a sofa. I even learned to put my crossed legs on a coffee table in front of the sofa. These habits would later put me into trouble in “Japan.” Another is using shower. The shower head in our apartment bathroom was fixed above, so I developed a habit of turning myself round and round under the shower head to wash off soap—in fact, I still have this habit after fifty years. Still another is the toilet habit. I learned to sit on a toilet bowl in “America,” which was easy and comfortable. Two years of
sitting style toileting would make it very difficult for me to readjust to the squatting style of “Japanese” toilet.

Learning English affected my Japanese speech habit as well. I started to answer “no” to my mother’s negative questions in Japanese meaning “no” in English sense. My mother would say “Iranaino (Don’t you want this)?” and I would answer “Nn·nn (No)” when I did not want it. In Japanese, however, you have to say “yes” if you did not want it. My mother would ask me again “Iruno·ne (You want this, do you)?” and I would keep saying “Nn·nn (No).” My mother would explode, “Iruno, iranaino, docchi (You want this or not, which)?” She soon accepted my way of answering to negative questions. She smiled and said “Your ‘No’ is an American ‘No’.” My “American” way of saying “No” would irritate a lot of “Japanese” later.

“Oops” and “Ouch” entered my vocabulary. A cup slips off my hand and I say “Oops!” My toe bumps into something and I say “Ouch!” Interestingly, I kept using Japanese “otto (oops)” and “ita (ouch)” as well. Different things, different situations seem to have made me say “oops” or “otto” and “ouch” or “ita.” I was mixing codes in my own way of which I was not exactly aware. I did not stop doing this after I came back to “Japan” and it surely amazed the “Japanese” around me although I was not conscious of my strangeness.

My “America” was almost all “white.” It was before bussing and my school did not have large number of African American children. I did not have any African American friend. I remember seeing an African American once at school dining room. I had to buy lunch at school that day instead of going home for lunch as usual. I do not think I talked with him. I just watched as we used to do when we went on picnic at parks. Some African American families were barbecuing, too. My mother once remarked that they charred sausages on a grill. I did not know if that was true but I took her words for granted. “America” I saw on TV was also almost all “white.”

My “America” was an industrial city in the Mideast. My “America” was a middle-class neighborhood. But, of course, I did not realize such facts then. I did not experience a particular neighborhood in the city of Buffalo. I
experienced “America” and my “America” consisted of a big electric refrigerator, a big family car, shelves of Campbell soup cans and Kellogg cereal boxes, jelly beans and Twizzlers, Coke and Dr. Pepper, Tom and Jerry and Huckleberry Hound, shower and sit-on toilet bowl, and so on and so forth. My “America” was all things I did not have in “Japan.”

We returned to “Japan” in the summer of 1965. We visited Disneyland in California and spent a few days in Hawaii on our way home. My brother and I were wearing aloha shirts when we landed on Haneda. My grandmother told my mother, “You took them to America and bring them back in such shabby shirts!”

“Japan,” 1965-71

I had no doubt I returned “home.” I was welcomed by my grandparents and relatives. I had no difficulty understanding their speech. I came back to the same house I left. I was eating the food I was accustomed to.

And yet, I started to see things differently than before. I realized how small “Japanese” cars were. And I was surprised how small a “Japanese” refrigerator was. It was shorter than seven-year-old me! No sausages there. No ice cream boxes there. Tiny bottles of milk were there but it tasted waterish and thin. No “real” orange juice anymore. “Orenji jusu” tasted like “mikan (mandarin orange)” not “American” orange. A tiny refrigerator had nothing “American” in it.

I gradually came to think that many things “Japanese” were fake. The case in point was chocolate. Meiji chocolate bar looked like exactly Hershey’s. It was in a brown cover with silver logo. But it did not taste like Hershey’s. Meiji also sold colorful round grain chocolate called Marble Chocolate. The grains looked like M&M pieces but the color was lighter and paler and again did not taste like M&Ms. “Japanese” Coca-Cola was different from Coke, too. The bottle was the same and the logo was the same but it tasted sweeter and less piquant. People called it “kōra” not Coke, so I thought kōra was a fake Coke.
The truth was that Coca-Cola company changed the formula from country to country catering to the most preferred taste in each market. But I did not know this. Tomato ketchup was different, too. Kagome ketchup did not taste like Heinz. Again, I thought it was a fake ketchup. The cheap image of “made in Japan” I formed in “America” probably affected my perception of things “Japanese.” They look like “real” something but are not.

My family soon moved into a new apartment. It had three rooms, kitchen, toilet, and a bathroom. My brother and I shared a room and a double bunk bed. My parents and American-born baby sister had another room. The remaining room functioned as both living and dining room. All the rooms were very very small. Kitchen was small, too. No pantry, no Campbell cans or Kellogg boxes. Bathroom had a wooden “Japanese” bath tub with a gas heater but no shower. I knew the “Japanese” way of taking bath, so the bathroom was not a problem, although I missed bubble bath. Toilet however was a big problem for me. It was a newly invented “Japanese” style flush toilet.

Traditional “Japanese” houses like my grandparents’ used to have two separate toilets: one for men’s urination, the other for men’s defecation and for women’s use. The former had a urinal (same in “Japan” or “America”) for standing use. The latter had a “Japanese” toilet bowl for squatting use. The new “Japanese” style flush toilet combined these two! It had the same old “Japanese” toilet bowl but was placed on a slightly elevated part of the floor in front of a lower standing space. It was placed lower than usual urinals but men could stand in the lower space and urinate into the higher-placed toilet bowl without making a big splash or wetting the floor. The tip of the toilet bowl protruded out of the elevated floor.

I had to jump up and squat on this new toilet to poo. I could not do so without taking off my pants and underwear, so I underessed in front of the toilet room when I wanted to poo. I used to do so when I lived in my grandparents’ house. I was merely keeping my old “Japanese” habit. One day, my mother told me stop doing this. “You are an elementary school boy now. You cannot show yourself like that,” she said.
I did not know what to do. Finally, I decided to use it the “American” way. I was small enough and the toilet bowl was high enough that I was able to sit on the protruded tip of the toilet bowl. That way, I only had to pull down my clothes, turn back and sit down. It was not comfortable nor stable as the edge of the toilet bowl was narrow. But I did not find any other way of using the toilet bowl without taking off my pants and underwear. My mother found this out when I asked her to give me a roll of toilet paper. She was shocked and shouted, “What are you doing! Here is not America!” She then taught me how to lower my pants and underwear, hold them in front of myself and squat on the toilet bowl. So, I finally learned the proper “Japanese” way of using a toilet, but that was an ordeal for me. I stopped sitting on the tip of the toilet bowl, but never got used to the hold-your-pants-and-squat style, so I secretly took off my pants and underwear now inside the toilet room. When I had to ask for a roll of toilet paper, I made sure my mother could not peep inside.

So, I was not at ease at my home in “Japan.” Things that made my life easy and cozy in “America” were now missing. Things I liked in “America” were hard to come by. My mother had to go to a special imported goods store to buy Campbell soups and Kellogg cereals. I had to put up with many “fake” goods. An important point is that “Japan” came to my mind when I was not at ease.

I was perfectly at ease speaking local dialects with my grandparents, relatives, or classmates and teachers. I was perfectly at ease eating rice with “misoshiru (fermented soybean-flavored soup)” and grilled “shiojake (salted salmon)” for breakfast. Green tea went well with “osenbei (soy-sauce-flavored rice crackers).” Iced barley tea that my aunt made in summer or boiled black beans that my grandmother cooked for the new year tasted all the same as before I went to “America.” All these things that I took for granted however did not make me feel “Japanese.” These things were too natural for me to be conscious of. What stood out as “Japan” consisted of those things that I was not comfortable with because I knew there were “better” alternatives in “America.”

My parents put me into Saint Ursula elementary school in the fall. It was a missionary school run by Quebec-based convent, the Ursulines Canadian
Union, which was the only school in Sendai back then where English was taught. My parents did not want their seven year old to lose his English ability so they put me there. I remember attending the fourth grade English class even though I was a first grader as well as visiting the nearby convent after school to have private conversation sessions with a Canadian nun.

St. Ursula elementary school had uniforms, and I had to wear short pants again. I did not like the tight short pants, which were well above knee and covered only upper thighs. I was so used to wearing long pants all the time. Needless to say, I had to put up with the uniform. I consoled myself that it would be only for six years as uniforms for junior high school boys, private or public, were long pants.

In this school, I ceased to be “Ichy.” I was introduced as “Amerika-gaeri no Numazaki-kun (Numazaki-kun, back from America).” The “-kun” attached to my surname was a suffix for boys. Later in the upper grades, I would be called just “Numazaki” by teachers and by boy classmates. I too had to address my classmates by their surnames adding the appropriate suffix for boy or girl. First names and nicknames were used as well, but not exactly in the same way as in the “American” school I went. “Amerika-gaeri” was a rarity then. I was the only child who spent years abroad in the entire school if not in the whole city of Sendai. I spoke Japanese all right, but was at loss in a “Japanese” school. My mother would laughingly tell me later, “You could not even tell Taro was a boy’s or a girl’s name.”

The school was “western” in that teachers were Christians, bibles were taught, and Catholic masses were conducted. And yet, school life was nothing like the one I was accustomed to in “America.”

For starters, I was shocked by the practice of “kiritsu, rei, chakuseki (rise, bow and sit down)!” performed in every class when a teacher came in: we had to jump up from our chairs when a “tōban (duty officer)” pupil shouts “kiritsu (rise),” bent our torso from the waist up almost 90 degrees when he/she says “rei (bow),” and raise our bent-body back straight and vertically sink into our chairs when he/she says “chakuseki (sit down).” I was startled when I first
experienced this ritual in the first grade and it remained bit scary ever since. Moreover, I thought it was pointless, illogical, and just a waste of time.

Then I had to sit tight in my chair with my torso straightened and two legs neatly in line. I had a hard time resisting my urge to cross legs. I would unconsciously pull back my chair a little to make a space for crossing legs. I would be scolded had a teacher found that out.

Next came “mae-e narae (line up to the one in front of you).” You raise your two arms to the height of your shoulders with your fingers all straightened up; your arms must be strictly parallel to each other and your hands perpendicular to the ground so that the palms face each other, positioning your fingertips just about to touch the shoulders of the pupil in front of you. The idea is that arms of the pupils form two parallel lines so that the pupils line up perfectly straight. The order is from the shortest to the tallest, so the heads of pupils form a nice slope and you are forced to stare at the occipital of the pupil in front of you. I always asked, silently of course, “Why we have to do this? Why we have to line up so straight? My friend’ head is blocking my sight!” If I could stand just a little off to the right or left, I could have a better view—so I thought, and I think I once said so to a teacher, whose reaction I do not remember.

Well, we always had to line up and coordinate our move, especially so in physical education classes. When we marched, everyone had to keep all the moves in line with all others. All the right feet stepped forward at the same time and all the left feet did the same. When all the right feet stepped forward, all the left arms were swung up exactly to the same height. Same with the left feet and right arms. We marched like a military parades not just in physical education classes but whenever we moved in lines.

And then there was “sōji tōban (cleanup duty).” Pupils were organized into several groups, which took turns cleaning up their classroom, hallways, and toilets. When cleaning your classroom, you move all desks and chairs to the back, sweep the floor, then return all desks and chairs back to the original positions, wipe the desktops and chairs, and so on. Cleaning toilets was an
ordeal. “Why do pupils have to do all this? I did not have to do this in America.” I do not remember saying that to any teacher. I guess I learned the futility of questioning customs early on.

What angered me most, however, was the practice of “batu tōban (punitive cleanup duty)” which is premised upon the emphasis on “rentai sekinin (collective responsibility).” If a member of your group misbehaves, the rest of the group is also held responsible for his/her misdeed, and a cleanup duty is assigned to the group as a whole for punishment (which relieves another group on regular duty from cleanup work). For my classmates, it was only a mishap. For me, however, it was something unreasonable and incomprehensible. When this punitive cleanup fell upon me, I always thought: “It was he (or she but usually he) who did something wrong. I did not do anything wrong. Why on earth I have to be punished for what he did?” And, I used to murmur “fei ja nai (it’s not fair).”

Now, I do not think that the small boy understood the meaning of the word “fair.” But he knew the phrase “it’s not fair” in English. “American” children do use this phrase—without understanding its real meaning but imitating adults around them—in complaint of whenever they are asked to do whatever they thought they did not have to do. I am sure I was saying “fei ja nai” in this childish sense but I did think it illogical and strange to have to share the burden of cleanup work for someone else’s stupid conduct with which I had nothing to do.

I also had a hard time accepting the distinction of “meue (superior—literally above your eyes)” and “meshita (subordinate—literally bellow your eyes).” Teachers always said “meue no hito wo uyamainasai (show respect to superiors)” and “meue” included not only parents and teachers but anyone older than I! How could anyone just one or two years older be superior to me? Why did I have to show respect to anyone just because I am younger? One way of showing respect was to use proper “keigo (respect language).” I learned to use it but I never understood why I had to use different words for same conduct depending on who I was talking to. No teacher in “America”
Two years in an “American” school gave me a yardstick for comparison. I was not able to articulate how “American” classes were run but I could easily tell those things I was forced to do in “Japan” that I did not have to do in “America” and those things I was not allowed to do in “Japan” that I was free to do in “America.” That means I only noticed salient differences as either “Japanese” or “American.”

I therefore had been developing an awareness of differences between “Japan” and “America.” But I also connected well to my family, relatives and friends through food, speech and other commonalities. I was not an alien as I was in “America.” I was living in my home world even if I occasionally felt uneasiness about things “Japanese.”

Then the decisive moment fell upon me. I can never forget that moment in my life. The reality I took for granted suddenly collapsed around me. It happened in my fifth grade home economics class. The teacher announced that we would be making sandwiches the following week. Then she asked, “What kind of sandwich do you want to make?” I raised my hand and said, “Let’s put jam on peanut butter. It tastes good.” The entire class exclaimed, “Oeh (Yuck)!”. Even the teacher gave me a pitiful glance and said, “Only you would like such a thing, Numazaki.”

What I meant was peanut-butter-and-jelly-sandwich, one of the favorites of “American” children. My fault was naively assuming its universality: I thought every child in the whole world would love it. I never imagined that it was peculiarly American.

I should have known better. I had already encountered strangely sweet Sonton’s “peanut cream” served at school lunch. It was so different from Skippy’s peanut butter, to which I was accustomed in the US, that I never thought it was what Japanese meant by “pīnatsu batā (peanut butter).” For one thing, Sonton’s label read “peanut cream” not peanut butter. When my friends talked about peanut butter I automatically assumed that they were talking about Skippy not Sonton. To me, peanut butter meant Skippy.
was “the” peanut butter; nothing else was.

I begged my mother to get Skippy for me. I told her I wanted “real peanut butter.” She had to go to Meijiya, the only imported food store in downtown Sendai, to get me a jar of Skippy. And, I kept making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at home and apparently I was still doing so in the fifth grade. I was carrying and reliving the food culture of American children at my Japanese home.

Later I realized that my classmates and the teacher thought that I mixed sweet “peanut cream” with sweet strawberry jam, which was the only kind of jam available in Sendai then. I remember asking my mother to get blueberry preserves for me, too, when she went to Meijiya for my Skippy. Sonton’s strawberry jam on Sonton’s peanut cream? Well, that would be terrible. I would not eat it either. No wonder they all said yuck. But I meant something different. “American” jam on Skippy!

Needless to say, even if I tried to explain or to show the “real” thing, its taste would have been too strange for my Japanese classmates and teacher. Sweet jelly on salty peanut butter was not within the ordinary Japanese food culture then and still it is not now. Only I liked such a thing.

It had been four years since I came back from “America” when this moment of truth visited me. I had many small experiences that were surprising and irritating early on, and I am sure I surprised and irritated my classmates and teachers on so many occasions, but I thought I had adjusted myself to a way of life in a Japanese school.

So, the peanut butter and jelly shock was all the more surprising to me. “Am I still that different?” “They hate what I love?” Not only my ignorant classmates but also the teacher who should have known better totally rejected my favorite food. Worse, they were saying that I was eating something uneatable. Was it not a categorical denial of my humanity? Of course, an eleven year old boy did not think it that way, but even he clearly understood that there was an unbridgeable gap between “They” and “He.”

I knew I was different from “them” in many subtle and not so subtle ways.
even before this incident, and I kept questioning many strange practices in my “Japanese” school which I had not experienced in “America” as I explained before. So I had doubts about the way of life in a “Japanese” school, and I knew I was thinking and feeling differently from my classmates sometimes. Nevertheless, I did not realize the degree of difference between me and my classmates. But “peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich” finally revealed the deep divide. “Their” tastes and mine were incommensurable!

If “they” rejected me, “I” wanted to reject “them” back. But “they” were the majority and the mainstream, while “I” was the lone minority and an offshoot. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, I had to accept the fact that “I” was on the strange side and “they” were on the normal side here in “Japan.” But, I also knew that “I” would be on the right side and “they” would be on the wrong side in “America.” I also knew however that “I” was not an “American.” My parents and grandparents were “Japanese.” I spoke “Japanese.” I stayed in “America” for only two years. Yes, I spoke English and I was quite comfortable living in “America,” but I did not look like the “Americans” physically.

My baby sister was born in “America” and she had to get an “American” passport to come to Japan. But, I did not have an “American” passport. My brother and I were photographed together with our mother and our names were listed on her “Japanese” passport.

So, “I” was “Japanese” after all but probably of a slightly different kind. “I” was not “futsu no nihonjin (ordinary Japanese).” “They”—those who hated peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, those who did not question all the strange customs at school—were.

From this incident on, I acquired a habit of counterposing “I” to “they, the ordinary Japanese.” Whenever I encountered something I felt uncomfortable, I watched “them” to see if “they” shared my sense of uncomfortableness. If “they” did not, that had to be something “Japanese.” The source of my uncomfortableness was the difficulty or impossibility of maintaining certain “trivial habits of daily living,” like crossing legs when sitting on a chair, using toilet the “American” way, or having Kellogg cereals for breakfast with “real”
orange juice.

All these “fake” stuff that “they” thought were “American” but I knew otherwise had to be something “Japanese,” too. It seems that “I” had developed a peculiar sense of authenticity about things “American.” “American” Coke was the authentic Coca-Cola, while “Japanese” kōra was not. “American” Skippy was the authentic peanut butter, while “Japanese” Sonton was not. Heinz was authentic, Kagome wasn’t. Hershey’s was authentic, Meiji wasn’t.

Interestingly, authenticity was not the issue in my mind for things “Japanese,” for I did not encounter fake “Japanese” things neither in “America” nor in “Japan.”¹ “Onigiri (rice ball)” my mother made was the same in “America” or in “Japan.” I did not drink orange juice when I had rice and “misoshiru (fermented-soybean-flavored soup)” and “shiojake (salted salmon)” for breakfast, so it did not matter in that situation if I could get “real” orange juice in “Japan” or not. In fact, I was not conscious of the Japaneseness of “onigiri” or “misoshiru” at all, because these things did not separate “I” from “They.”

When “I” and “They” shared comfortableness, I did not consciously feel comfortable let alone think about the comfortableness. “I” and “They” blended into undifferentiated “We.” I did not notice the sameness. I noticed only differences. I did not think about the sameness. I only thought about the differences.²

What differentiated “I” from “They” were those things “they” took for granted but “I” could not, such as the daily ritual of “kiritsu (stand up), rei (bow), chakuseki (sit down),” or those things “I” took for granted but “they” did not, such as peanut-butter-and-jelly-sandwich. Only these salient differences constituted my “Japan.”

When I was in the fifth and six grades, Star Trek (the first season episodes

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¹ At least, not yet. The situation would dynamically change when I “returned” to “America” later as an exchange student, but that is another story.
² Again, not yet. I would discover the significance of “sameness” or “closeness” later when I spent a year in Honolulu, Hawaii, after three years of stay in East Lansing, Michigan. This will be yet another story to tell.
of the original series), dubbed in Japanese, was broadcasted on TV. I liked it very much and I identified myself with the character of Mr. Spock who was half-Valcun and half-human. He was differentiated from them culturally due to his Vulcan upbringing. But, "green blooded" as he was, Mr. Spock was biologically connected to the human crew through his human mother. Being always unemotional and logical, he was different from other fully human crew of the starship, Enterprise, and often clashed with humanly passionate Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy. Mr. Spock was calmly observant of "illogical" humans. I too was observant of the ordinary Japanese around me. I was like him, alone among "them"—so I thought. I often said to myself, "I am Mr. Spock, I am Mr. Spock."

Reflections

By the time I was finishing elementary school, I had developed a "gazing self" inside me that was constantly watching "futsu no nihonjin (ordinary Japanese)" to find out what "futsu no nihon (ordinary Japan)" was. Ethnoperipheralism provides a peculiar "subject position," similar to the one occupied by ethnographers in the field, "with particular angle of vision" that "enable[s] and inhibit[s] particular kind of insights" (Rosaldo 1989:19).

That ordinary Japan, for me, consisted mainly of unaccustomed and uncomfortable school habits and fake "American" things. The ordinary Japanese were accustomed to and comfortable with those school habits and they took fake for real without knowing the really real.

The "essences" of "Japan" that I constructed was therefore not necessarily the same as those emphasized in usual "Nihonjinron (Theory of the Japanese)" literature (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986; Befu 2001). Groupiness, for example, was not an essence of my "Japan."

Firstly, such practices as "mae-e-narae (line up to the one in front of you)" and "batu tōban (punitive cleanup duty)" could of course be interpreted as instances of groupiness, but I as an elementary school boy did not entertain such
interpretation. More important for me then was the physical
uncomfortableness of sticking my arms horizontally or the vague sense of
unfairness. The “meue-meshita (superior-subordinate)” distinction is of course
an example of what Ruth Benedict (2005[1946]) called “habits of hierarchy and
order,” but my problem then was that I could not simply understand why
someone just a year older than me could be superior to me in any sense. The
essences of my “Japan” was not some abstract values or aesthetics but physical
and psychological uncomfortableness and perplexity.

Secondly, the fake “America” was probably more important an essence of
my “Japan” than uncomfortable or perplex things or deeds. Certain food stood
out among those fakes: Coca-Cola, chocolates, orange juice and peanut butter.
And I definitely looked down upon the fake “American” food and the ordinary
Japanese who loved them. I was ethnocentrically “American” in this regard.

But my “American” ethnocentrism stopped short of looking down upon the
“Japanese” culture as a whole. In fact, I was not able to do so even if I wanted
to since I was not conscious at all of the vast array of things and deeds that were
treated as archetypically “Japanese” in “Nihonjinron” literature. Many habits
and things with which I was comfortable were neither “American” nor
“Japanese”—they were just “natural.”

Finally, I had no doubt I was connected to the people around me through
kinship, dialect, food and so on. I had no doubt as to who I was. I was a
“Japanese,” though I was not quite an ordinary one. I had no doubt as to where
my home was. My home was “Japan,” though I did not necessarily feel at home
in “Japan.”

Feeling not at home in your home is the hallmark of ethnoperipheralism. It brings you a sense of sadness and sorrow. Knowing that you could feel at
home somewhere else is another hallmark of ethnoperipheralism. It gives you
a sense of relief and consolation. It also makes you long for “returning” to that
would-be home. I had only fond memories of my “America.” Actual returning
may not rescue you, however, from the sadness and sorrow of
ethnoperipheralism. I would find that out in my later life.
In retrospect, my “Japan” was of an urban middle-class segment of Sendai, the largest city in the Northeast region. My “Japan” did not even included large portions of the residents of Sendai, let alone other cities in other regions. I would start to notice some diversities in my high school years in Sendai and in Kumamoto. That, however, did not change my basic image of the ordinary Japanese or the ordinary Japan. Why so will be a theme for another essay.

References


