

# “People with Foreign Roots” and “Japanese” Living Together in Multicultural Japan : Who is Tolerating Whom ?

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## Introduction

In this paper, I want to recount the life story of Patric, an individual with “Foreign Roots.” The intent is to bring focus on how “people with foreign roots” in their everyday life, confront their own perceived differences and to tread carefully when asserting attributes of “Japanese-ness” and “foreign-ness,” taking care to avoid flaunting on “foreign” attributes in order to build a better relationship with Japanese people.

In the age of globalization, people move across borders on a massive scale, thus ethnicity and culture have become fluid, and the diversity of people has come to be recognized and tolerated. And Japan is also a land of strangers such as: “*Hafu*” an individual born to Japanese and non-Japanese parents, Returnees who have received Japanese curricular or foreign curricular education overseas, and children with foreign parents who immigrated to Japan. Overall, these strangers are recognized by the rhetoric of “*Gaikoku ni Ru-tsu wo motsu Kodomo* (Children with foreign roots) . On the grounds that their lives are transnational and transcultural, and sometimes inter-ethnic, the diversity that the concept of “Japanese (which had long been understood to be mono-ethnic)” includes has also been questioned. And in recent years, Naomi Osaka, and Rui Hachimura, and other countless “foreign rooted” Japanese athletes competing in the Olympics and other international stages, has played the role to disseminate the diversity of “Japanese-ness” to the international community. Though the presence of “people with foreign roots” in Japanese society is not limited to the stages of entertainment such as sports and performing arts, it also expands to the field of education and welfare projects in many districts and cities. These show a glimpse of recognition and tolerance for people with diverse backgrounds.

However, there is a precarity over acceptance and tolerance between “Japanese” and “people with foreign roots.” The rhetoric of “people with foreign roots,” for example, suggest the presence of contrasting “pure Japanese without foreign roots.” The contrast between the two are overemphasized on the differences of physical characteristics, parents’ nationality, experience of living overseas, and the fluency of Japanese language. These attributes often determine the degree of their “Japanese-ness,” and the flaunting of these attributes associates people to “non-Japanese” and often becomes an obstacle to their tolerance. In other words, an anxiety is fueled between “Japanese” and “non-Japanese” over their definition of “Japanese-ness.” The question here is who has anxiety over whose difference, who is tolerating who, and how are they overcoming these anxieties?

## 1. “People with Foreign Root”

The word “People/children with foreign roots (*gaikokuni ru-tsu wo motsu kodomo*)” has a strong overtone to Japan’s *Jus Sanguinis*. And it often refers to people whose parents’ country of origin

is of outside Japan. The word derived from “people/children from foreign country (*gaikokujin no kodomo*),” but it was criticized for obscuring the existence of children with either one of the parents being Japanese, hence the name change. The truth is there are no clear definitions, and it is rather an oratory way to distinguish between “pure” and “non-pure” Japanese. I’d say it is just a mouthful way to say “*gaijin kid*.” In this section, I like to skim through studies revolving around “people with foreign roots.”

The debate on “People with foreign Roots” began with *Kikokushijo*’s (Children of Expat returnees) identity. The early discussions were mainly dominated by acculturation with an essentialist approach; whether the experience of living in foreign country diminishes the sense of belonging to Japan, and whether re-education to Japanese culture is required for re-adaptation to Japanese societies. This dichotomy between “Japan vs Foreign” presumed the existence of “Japanese culture,” “pure Japanese” and the opposing “Foreign Culture,” “adulterated Japanese.” For these reasons, *Kikokushijo* were perceived to be adulterated by foreign influences, and stigmatized for diminishing Japanese-ness (Minoura 1984, White 1988, Goodman 1992) .

The revision of immigration law in the early 90’s triggered the shift of focus, from *Kikokushijo*’s re-education to children from foreign country’s school education. By the constitution, Children of foreign nationals do not have a secure rights to attend school in Japan. And researchers focusing on education, indicate the need to incorporate multiculturalism into their education system and call for the need to secure the rights to education for children of foreign nationals.

By the early 2000s, ethnicity became the main analytical concept which aided in understanding the multinational, multi-ethnic, multicultural, and even inter-ethnic situations in Japan in response to globalization. This shift in paradigm allows us to question the concept of “Japanese” which has long been understood to be mono-ethnic. The collection of journals titled “Multi Ethnic Japanese” edited by Sasaki (2016) , attempted to use the term Japanese with an adjective to be more inclusive. One example is the renaming of *Zainichi Kankokujin* (who were marginalized Korean descendants in Japanese society) to Korean Japanese (Lee 2016) . Another example is when they renamed the Vietnamese living in Japan as Vietnamese Japanese (Kawakami 2016) . However, such attempts were criticized for a couple of reasons. The attempt of the Japanese, who are the majority, to grasp the minorities within the framework of the nation-state could be political oppression. And instead of approving diversity, it could otherwise limit it (Kawakami 2016 :168) .

In case of *ha-fu*, it invites racism into the discourse. With the concept of Japanese Supremacy came to describe children with either one of parents being Japanese national, in such derogatory terms as *konketsuji* (mixed blood children) , and *ainoko* (crossbreed) . Nowadays, the negative connotation that followed *konketsuji* is comparatively less significant in the discourse of *ha-fu*. That is because, thanks to makeup and fashion industries picking up trends on whiteness, blond hair, taller nose, and bigger eyes which were aspirational physical characteristics among Japanese (Watarai 2014) . But, on the other end there were unfavorable characteristics such as blackness, slanted eyes, and flat nose. And *ha-fu* with such physical traits are prone to discrimination.

It has become clear that researchers has become an accomplice marginalizing “people with foreign roots.” And depicting them as transnational entity crossing over the boundaries of multiple

nations, ethnicities, and cultures, and eventually as “other.” Especially so when researchers focuses on the lives of “people with foreign roots” highlighting the roots in foreignness, rather than in Japaneseness.

## **2. Tolerating means putting up with others**

The keyword that helps us understand how “people with foreign roots” interact with Japanese people is tolerance. Living with people of different races, ethnicities, and classes is not because of tolerance, but rather because of endurance (King 1976:21), in other words, compromising with “others.” (Lee Perez 2020). When it comes to being tolerant of people with differences, there is a power relation between the one tolerating and the one being tolerated.

Looking back on the argument of “people with foreign roots,” it is “pure Japanese” tolerating them. “People with foreign roots” were portrayed as passive actors. Scholars have argued, “people with foreign roots” who possess unfavorable “difference,” often hide or eliminate their difference to be accepted as a member of the Japanese society. For example, *Zainichi* change their “Korean name” to “Japanese name.” Sikh immigrants cut and shave their hair and beard (Azuma 2009). Nikkei Brazilian women manipulate their appearance and name to be more “Japan-friendly” and “advertisable” (Watarai 2014).

This presentation, then, aims to focus on the relationship between Patric and other individual from a vantage point of “tolerance.”

## **3. Patric**

Let me introduce you to Patric Aoba (pseudonym). Patric was born in California to an American Caucasian mother and first generation Japanese American father. At the age of eighteen, he moved to Oregon to attend college. While he was in college, he also studied abroad to Japan between 2010 and 2011. After he graduated, he worked for computer company in Texas, then came to Japan in 2014 to work in an IT company, but later change to foreign affiliated company in Tokyo. Meanwhile, he has been married, divorced. He speaks English and Japanese, and some Spanish.

I’d rather let him introduce to you.

I get asked a lot, whether my mom is Japanese. My mom is caucasian, and my dad was born in the US. He was the first generation in his family to be born in the US. His parents came from Japan. Or so I’ve been told. My parents’ are divorced when I was very young. I was pretty much raised by my mom. I guess, on a DNA level, I’m *ha-fu*, but since both of my parents were born in the US, then kind of makes me a “fake *ha-fu*.”

I think its funny, because I stand out wherever I lived. When I’m in the US with my friends, I become the Asian person, but when I’m here (in Japan), I’m suddenly the white person.

As he explains his parental background, he humorously deprecate him self that he doesn’t fit anywhere. Later he continues to talk about his relationship with his parents.

My dad married late. He was born towards the end of the war. During that time, it wasn't popular to speak Japanese in the US. And he grew up without any knowledge of Japanese culture, or anything like at all. He was assimilated to American society as much as possible. But as he got older, he took a bit of interest in Japan, but never got to learn the language.

But as I said, I was raised by my mom. She has some sort of issue with my dad. I can't ask them what exactly was the situation. But I know she disliked him and everything he stood for. So, a part of her doesn't like that I embraced, and decided to learn to speak Japanese, and live in Japan. Because she sees it as more of "win" for "him." Even though it really has nothing to do with that.

Some people care about where they "came from" or "who they are." I just took whatever it was presented to me.

As he talks about the dynamic relation with his mother and father, he convinces that his interest in learning Japanese and living in Japan, has nothing to do with his "roots," nor appeasing either one the parents.

Next let's hear his story during his first time in Japan as an exchange student.

I came here to study as an exchange student. I saw caught inside the social dynamics in Japanese school. International students were divided into two groups, "permanent people," and "temporary people." This is how it was perceived to me; exchange students and even "ryugakusei (international students with the goal to graduate)" should not be considered as permanent friends. We were considered just a temporary visitors. Not just my self, but a lot of students, even who stayed up to 4 years were seen as "temporary friends." I felt as if they had this idea of; "lets not invest too much time in these students because they gonna leave anyway." It takes several years before people look at foreigners as permanent "real people" that you can actually become friends.

They'd be happy to hang out with us. We exchange numbers and say "lets hang out again." They'd say "yeah for sure." But when we meet up, a lot of them would make excuses that they had some apprehension to meeting up multiple times. At first, I thought my social skills were terrible and it was my problem. But I convey that with other people, and they say they experienced similar things.

After returning to the US, and worked in Texas, he returned to Japan, and this year marks his 8th year living in Japan. He feels he is well integrated into Japanese society, but he still finds it difficult to make Japanese friends.

I'm still trying to figure that out. I have more foreigners as a friend than Japanese. But all you can do is to be eloquent in Japanese. I don't want to fit in to appease people that I don't really need to appease.

But, the longer you've been here, the more integrated you are into Japanese society. The more, rapport, the more trust worthiness. If you've been here for 10 years, worked in Nikkei

company, you are married, you have Japanese passport, you bought a house, you have driver's license, you have a car, then maybe you'll have more credibility. But you know, you might still experience issues, even after all that.

#### 4. conclusion

I was only able to show you a glimpse of Patric's life story, but what did you see when you heard his story? I like to skip on the diversity of foreignness and Japaneseness, because that is already a statement, so let's see who was tolerating whom in Patric's relation while living in Japan.

In the case of Patric's story, we could observe that he was unable to develop much more intimate relation with Japanese, because he is perceived to be a visitor eventually leaving Japan one day. We could say he was marginalized from Japanese circle of friendship for perceived for being a sojourner, a person who is passing by. However, we cannot conclude that the length of stay overrides his foreign attributes, such as his name, appearance, place of birth, Patric's place of birth, educational background, his fluency in Japanese. All of these attributes gives Japanese the impression that Patric is a foreigner, therefore, he may leave Japan one day, hence, not worth investing time to develop an intimate relationship.

Patric introspects on his situation in Japan, and is aware of his attributes, and of how Japanese perceive of him. He is also aware of what he could do to be perceived as "credible" and "worthy" of friendship among Japanese. However, he refuses to change his differences to more Japanese-friendly in order to appease them (Azuma 2009, Watarai 2014), but he rather tolerate or "put up with" them.

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