

Research Project Title: Interactive Ethnic Interface in Northern Australia: Japanese Migratory Workers and Indigenous Australians

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Aim and the background of the research

This project aims to explore the interaction and mutual influence between Japanese migratory workers, their descendants, and the local Indigenous Australians in northern Australia (the Torres Strait Islands and Broome). Northern Australia had an influx of Japanese migratory workers from the 1870s to the 1960s for the pearl-shell and sugar industries. Despite the immigration restrictions of the White Australia Policy and the internment and deportation of Japanese during and after the World War 2, some of these migratory workers stayed and intermarried with local Indigenous people (e.g. Kyuhara 1986, Nagata 1999, 2004, Sissons 1979). Previous research on these Japanese migratory workers and their interaction with local Australians focused on the pre-war period. Little research has examined their situation since World War Two, despite their and their descendants' continuing presence in that period (cf. Dalton 1964; Ganter 2008; Jones 2002; Kaino 2009; Nagata 1999). My research has focused on these Japanese-Indigenous Australian mixed heritage people's identity through ethnographic field research on Thursday Island and Broome.

Discussion on Indigenous identity has been largely based on the binarism of 'Black and White', both in academic and non-academic circles. This conceptualization of Indigenous identity has been recently criticized by those who point out the high ratio of intermarriage with non-Indigenous people (e.g. Paradis 2006; Ross 1999). On the other hand, hybridization of identity has been one of the significant topic of the studies on Japanese migrants (e.g. Shibara 2003; Tamura 2003). However, the arguments on Japanese migrants have not explored the specificity of the situation that enables and restricts hybridization (cf. Garcia-Canclini 2001). By exploring the identity of Japanese-Indigenous Australian mixed-heritage people, this research contributes to the re-conceptualization of Indigenous identity, as well as expanding the horizon of Japanese migrant studies.

Field Research on Thursday Island and Broome

Field Research for this project was conducted on Thursday Island and Broome for about one month in May and June 2010 respectively. Open-ended interviews were conducted with people of Japanese-Indigenous Australian heritage. The interviews on Thursday Island were organized around referrals from Prof. Martin Nakata (the researcher's supervisor) through his family connections. The interviews in Broome were conducted through the researcher's personal contacts developed through her past visit to Broome (one week each in 2008 and 2009). Thirteen people were interviewed on Thursday Island and twelve people were interviewed in Broome. The content of the interviews were about the participant's life stories (their experiences as Indigenous Australian and Japanese descendants) and their identities. Most of the interviews were taped and transcribed. In some cases notes were taken since the participants declined the taping of interviews.

Yuriko Nagata (1999) names eight families who went back to Thursday Island after World War Two. At the time of the researcher's field research, some family members of these families were living on Thursday Island, most of whom also have Indigenous Australian blood. There are also two Okinawans who were introduced as pearl-shell divers in 1958 (Ganter 2008), who stayed and married local Indigenous or mixed Indigenous descendant women. Some members of these families are related through marriage and know each other. However, none have formed any particular group of, or hold regular meetings as Japanese descendants. They do not live in clusters as pre-war Japanese residents did. The term 'Japanese community' is not used.

The two Okinawans speak Japanese, but many of the Japanese descendants do not. Even though they all identify as Japanese descent, there are differences between generations and families regarding their experience as Japanese descent. Older people have stronger experiences of being Japanese. Two people over their 70s experienced internment during World War Two. Even though it is not so strong, people over their late forties remember Japanese people working on Thursday Island for the pearl-shell industry, which ceased in the 1960s. They have been exposed to Japanese language, food, and customs through them. Another experience of being of Japanese descent was being classified as 'half-caste', which connotes that they do not belong anywhere (cf. Ganter 2004). In contrast, people below their mid-forties have not had such experiences as Japanese descent. They had not seen Japanese people working on shore on the Island. The affect and usage of the term, 'half-caste' seemed to have eased in the last twenty to thirty years. Their 'Japanese-ness' are from some cultural mores and traits such as Japanese food and showing respect to older people. Some even mentioned that their Japanese-ness is only their surnames.

There is also difference between families. While some families have been actively involved in projects such as gathering their family history and visiting their Japanese relatives, others 'just live their everyday life'. This often comes from the local Australian (Indigenous or Indigenous mixed descent) side of the families. The family whose family head (usually male) married a person with outer Islands' background tends to be influenced by their culture and customs, whereas those whose family head married an Asian-Indigenous Australian mixed person tend to keep more of their Japanese customs. However, most of the interviewees claimed that their 'Islander side of culture' has been emphasized when they grew up.

Most of the interviewees identified as Torres Strait Islanders as well as Japanese descent. Clearly this 'Torres Strait Islander' identity they identify with is not exclusive. Some of them questioned the contemporary category of 'Torres Strait Islander'. One person said to me that, though she identified as Torres Strait Islander, she wondered 'what Torres Strait Islander was', since Torres Strait Islanders had a history of people mixing with each other. The 'Torres Strait Islander' that she identifies with is the 'Torres Strait Islander' identity that has been created through the history of Torres Strait.

The Broome Japanese-Indigenous-Australian descent people are similar. Nagata (1996) writes that only nine Japanese or Japanese descendants went back to Broome from internment after World War Two. Some Japanese indentured labourers also came after World War Two from Japan and created families with local people (Kaino 2009). In 2010, there were four Japanese ex-divers living in Broome. Except for one who married a Japanese woman, they have had families with local Indigenous or mixed Indigenous descent women. Including them, there are about twelve Japanese surnames in and around Broome. Some are from those who came after World War Two but passed away before 2010. Some are from those who came before World War Two. Also there are people who are Japanese descent but do not have Japanese surnames (e.g. Dann 2001).

In Broome, people use the term 'Japanese community'. The core members of this Japanese community are from two families of ex-pearl shell divers who came after World War Two. Since the women these ex-divers married are related, they have been close to each other. However, some Japanese descent people have not much to do with the 'Japanese community'. There is no particular organization or regular meetings of this Japanese community either. On the other hand, at the time of crisis such as the suspension of the Sister-city relationship with Taiji in Japan, where many pearl shell divers came from, many Japanese descendants who are usually not involved with the community activities, united (cf. Broome Advertiser 2009).

The first generation Japanese migrants speak Japanese, but none of the Japanese descendants do.

Similar to Thursday Island, Japanese descendant people have various experiences which differ between generations and families although the Japanese presence through pearling industry prolonged about a decade longer than the one of Thursday Island. Two people have experienced internment. People over their mid-thirties remember Japanese workers around. They remember the Japanese quarter which used to offer accommodation to Japanese indentured labourers. They have experienced being labelled 'half-caste'. The difference between the families is also significant. Whereas some family members, which were started by those who came after World War Two, remember being brought up in the Japanese quarter and have visited Japan more than once, other families whose Japanese ancestors came before World War Two tend not to have had those experiences.

The Japanese descendant people in Broome also identify as both Japanese and Indigenous Australian. One Japanese/Chinese/Scottish/Aboriginal Australian descent person said that he identifies as 'mixed', and with all the cultures he has inherited. While he has visited Japan and was brought up with Japanese food and some Japanese customs, he has also been taken around by his Aboriginal aunt to visit her Aboriginal friends around Kimberley. Similar to his counterpart on Thursday Island he identifies with Aboriginality that is not exclusive.

Conclusion

Japanese-Indigenous Australian descendant people on Thursday Island and Broome have various experiences as Japanese descent. Although they all identify as Japanese descent, their experience as 'Japanese descent' differ between generations and families. They do not form formal groups or stage regular meetings to be easily identified as a 'community', but they do recognise each member of the community.

They identify as Japanese and Indigenous-Australian descent at the same time. They do not perceive their Indigeneity to be exclusive. Their Indigenous identity is based on the history of contact and interaction with non-Indigenous-Australian, especially Asian, people. This Indigenous identity resonates with what Clifford (2001: 471) argues as Indigeneity of 'articulated nature'.

This 'articulated' identity might suit the hybrid Japanese identity that has been argued in Japanese migration studies. However, their identity emerges from the particular history of Thursday Island and Broome. Both groups show a strong attachment to these places. When a Japanese-Torres Strait Islander person claims her 'Torres Strait Islander' identity, her identity is based on the particular situation and history of Torres Strait Islands, and thus, is different from Indigeneity developed in Broome. As Garcia-Cancline (2001:7097) maintains, 'hybridization happens under specific historical and social conditions'. The arguments on hybridization of Japanese migrants should be deepened by examining its situations and restrictions.

This research shows that Indigenous identity can have an articulated nature, and that the concept of Indigeneity as exclusive should be rethought. How Indigenous identities have been articulated should be examined in detail to conceptualize the more universal and inclusive concept of Indigeneity. This could also expand the horizon of Japanese migration studies by giving historical and geographical depth to the discussion on Japanese migrants' identities.

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