CHAPTER 17

ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN POSTWAR JAPAN: NIHONJINRON AND ITS RACIAL FACETS

Rotem Kowner and Harumi Befu

In an oft-mentioned speech made during a meeting of the Liberal Democratic Party in 1986, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro praised the achievements of the Japanese education system. His words soon turned into a comparison between ‘we’ (Japanese) and ‘them’ (Americans and the West in general). “Our average [intelligence] score,” Nakasone boasted, “is much higher than that of countries like the United States.” His attribution of the difference is crucial here: “There are many blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in America. As a result of this, the average score over there is exceedingly low…” The ensuing scandal on the other side of the Pacific Ocean led an abashed Nakasone to expose another quintessential cultural dictum. “Things are easier for the Japanese,” he attempted to explain away his earlier statement, “because we are a monoracial society.”

This brief, albeit revealing, utterance by Nakasone was not accidental. It expressed a worldview that he believed in and advocated publicly, as would many other major figures in Japan in subsequent years. At the same time, they all seem to represent a widespread phenomenon: namely, that the Japanese public in general has shown a passionate interest in its cultural and national identity and persistently resorted to international comparisons. This is not to say, however, that this interest is a postwar invention. Despite having a somewhat different focus and nomenclature, it can easily be traced back to the time in which Japan turned into a nation state in the late nineteenth century.

1 Bowen, 1986: 40. For an analysis of the speech, see Ivy, 1989.
2 See, for example, similar remarks made by Watanabe Michio in 1988.
3 In a large-scale survey conducted in the late 1980s, no less than 82 percent of the respondents expressed interest in this topic. Moreover, many of the respondents were familiar with leading writers of this genre, such as Kindaichi Haruhioko (70 percent), Aida Yūji (50 percent), Doi Takeo (20 percent), and a surprising number of them had read their works, such as Yamamoto Shichichihe’s Nihonjin to Yudayajin [The Japanese and the Jews] (BenDasan, 1970) (30 percent) and Doi’s Amae no kozô [The structure of Amae] (20 percent). They were also familiar with the main tenets of the genre, such as the homogeneity of the people (72 percent) and the uniqueness of the culture (57 percent). See Befu & Manabe, 1987; Manabe & Befu, 1989, 1992.
century and to even earlier texts. Nonetheless, this interest does not necessarily make the Japanese unique. A nation, Stuart Hall observed, “is not only a political entity, but something which produces meaning—a system of cultural representation.” Modern Japan fits this description aptly. Since the early 1970s, however, this quest for meaning had witnessed a quantum leap, as indicated by the number of publications on this topic. A decade later, the local discourse of identity began to attract considerable scholarly attention and criticism both at home and abroad, and had become identified by a more or less single designation.

This discourse is currently known as *Nihonjinron* (although it is also infrequently referred to as *Nihonron, Nihon bunkaron*, or *Nihon shakairon*), which means, literally, “theories/discourses of the Japanese [people].” It seeks to account for the particular characteristics of Japanese society, culture, and national character and provides the building blocks for a domestic identity. Crucially, it has become a societal force shaping the way in which the Japanese regard themselves and with time has also emerged as a hegemonic ideology and as an ‘industry’ whose main producers are intellectuals (mostly Japanese, but also some foreigners), and whose consumers are the masses. Although *Nihonjinron* literature may have leveled off a bit in recent years, it still seems to be extremely popular and its tenets can be traced easily in a broad range of other public discourses, notably those related to Japan’s place in the world, to its modern history, and to the problems caused by its relations with foreign countries and people. While *Nihonjinron* is primarily concerned with questions

---

4 For an overview of the history of *Nihonjinron* and the parallel rise of ethnic nationalism and the concept of an ethnic nation in modern Japan, see Aoki, 1990; Doak, 1996; Minami 1976, 1980, 1994; Weiner, 1995; Doak, 2001. Early *Nihonjinron* writings were not necessarily only concerned with the West. For the early twentieth-century debate on the indigenous roots of Japanese culture and the role China had played in its emergence, see Tanaka, 1993: 153–187. For the *Nihonjinron* discourse in the 1950s, see Igarashi, 2000: 73–103.

5 Hall, 1992: 292.

6 There are no up-to-date surveys on the spread of *Nihonjinron* literature. A dated compilation of monographs in this genre published between 1945–1978 contains no less than 698 titles, 25 percent of which were published in the three years that preceded the compilation. See Nomura Sogo Kenkyūjo, 1978.

7 There is an extensive literature that has examined *Nihonjinron* writings and tenets critically, notable among which are Befu, 1987; Dale, 1986; Kawamura, 1980, 1982; Miller, 1982; Mouer & Sugimoto 1986; Sugimoto & Mouer, 1982; Yoshino, 1992. The literature that has criticized or challenged specific tenets of *Nihonjinron* is ever vaster. See, for example, Amino, 1992; Amino et al., 1994; Nishikawa, 1992.

8 For *Nihonjinron*’s producers and consumers, see Befu, 2001: 52–65; Kowner, 2002a.