

Summer 2021

## The 2020 Tokyo Olympics and The Myth of Japanese Homogeneity

Hana Y. Morita  
*University of Puget Sound*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer\\_research](https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research)

---

### Recommended Citation

Morita, Hana Y., "The 2020 Tokyo Olympics and The Myth of Japanese Homogeneity" (2021). *Summer Research*. 403.

[https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer\\_research/403](https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research/403)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in Summer Research by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact [soundideas@pugetsound.edu](mailto:soundideas@pugetsound.edu).

## 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 multiracial athletes and performers throughout the opening ceremony events, and the subtle nod 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).*



## What is the myth of Japanese homogeneity?

The idea of Japan as a homogenous nation is embodied by the creation of the "kazoku kokka" or, "family state" which is described as homogenous, pure, and sharing in a certain historical and cultural background. This concept was largely shaped by the rising nationalism and growing imperial power of Japan in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and the increasing international exposure and influence—particularly to Western ideologies

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

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 Ryukyuan (also known as Okinawan) people of the archipelago south of Japan.

## Olympics Connection

For the Tokyo Olympics, Japanese organizers successfully lobbied for the addition of karate as a medaled sport. This was particularly meaningful to many Okinawans in Japan and across the world as karate has its roots in Okinawa. Moreover, Ryo Kiyuna, an Okinawan, became the first person to win gold in karate and the first Okinawan to win an Olympic gold medal.



Ryo Kiyuna competing at the karate world championships in Madrid in 2018. Credit: Javier Soriano/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

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



TOKYO, JAPAN - JULY 23: Naomi Osaka of Team Japan lights the Olympic cauldron with the Olympic torch during the Opening Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at Olympic Stadium on July 23, 2021 in Tokyo, Japan. (Photo by Jamie Squire/Getty Images) 2021 Getty Images

### 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 decrees of exclusion and inclusion by Japanese society.

While the mainstream Japanese images of models, athletes, and celebrities have changed the post war association of hafus to one that is cool, trendy, and glamorous, many hafus still face discriminated 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

Beech, Hannah, and Hikari Hida. "Japan's Diverse OLYMPIC Stars Reflect a Country That's Changing (Slowly)." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, July 24, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/24/world/asia/japan-olympics-diversity.html>.  
 Belson, Ken, and Enya Toyama. "Japan's Big Hope in Karate Is from the Home of the Sport." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, August 4, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/04/sports/olympics/karate-okinawa-olympics.html>.  
 "Breaking — RYUNA Wins the Gold Medal in the Men's Karate Kata, Bringing HOME Okinawa's First Olympic Gold Medal." *Ryukyu Shimpo - Okinawa*, Japanese newspaper, local news. Accessed August 19, 2021. <http://english.ryukyushimpou.jp/2021/08/10/33933/>.  
 Lee, Jongsoo, and Hyunsun Yoon. "Narratives of the Nation in the Olympic Opening Ceremonies: Comparative Analysis of Beijing 2008 and London 2012." *Wiley Online Library*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, March 27, 2017. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/nana.12318>.  
 "Meiji Restoration." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Accessed August 19, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Meiji-Restoration>.  
 Oeser, Fallon. "Closing Ceremony Marks End of Olympics." *NBC10 Philadelphia*. NBC 10 Philadelphia, August 8, 2021. <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/sports/tokyo-summer-olympics/tokyo-updates-closing-ceremony-marks-end-of-olympics/2919696/>.  
 Weiner, Michael, and John G. Russell. "The Other Other: The Black Presence in the Japanese Experience." *Essay*. In *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*, 84–110. London: Routledge, 2009.  
 Weiner, Michael, and Michael Weiner. "'Self' and 'Other' in Imperial Japan." *Essay*. In *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*, 1–20. London: Routledge, 2009.  
 Weiner, Michael, and Richard M. Siddle. "The Ainu: Indigenous People of Japan." *Essay*. In *Japan's Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity*, 21–37. London: Routledge, 2009.  
 Yamashiro, Jane H. *Redefining Japaneseness: Japanese Americans in the Ancestral Homeland*. Rutgers University Press, 2017.