

CHAPTER 5

Keynote Lecture: Identity of *Nikkeijin* and the Definition of *Nikkei*

Shigeru Kojima



Kinosaki Onsen, Hyogo

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The word, *Nikkeijin* 日系人 consists of three kanji, or Chinese characters, which respectively mean 日=日(本[人]) Japan or Japanese, 系=系(統) family line or lineage, and 人=人(間) person. In other words, *Nikkeijin* means Japanese immigrants and their descendants. Looking back to the photos, all of the people are *Nikkeijin*.

According to the Discover Nikkei website (What is Nikkei?, 2005-2016), approximately three million *Nikkeijin* reside in the world, mainly in the Americas (e.g., 1.6 million in Brazil, 1.3 million in the U.S.A., and 109 thousand in Canada). However, how *Nikkeijin* is defined is somewhat problematic, because the term was coined from the viewpoint of the Japanese people in Japan. Three million *Nikkeijin* do not necessarily have the true identity of *Nikkeijin*. Naturally, most of them have the cultural identity of the country that they emigrated to. So when we ask them, “What are you?” we find a wide variety of answers such as American, Japanese American, Japanese Canadian, Japanese descendant, Brazilian, Nikkei, Hapa, etc. These are some examples. Do you know the terms “Nikkei” and “Hapa”? The latter means “of mixed racial heritage with partial roots in Asian and or Pacific Islander ancestry.” It is relatively well known in the U.S. and Canada. Prof. Kip Fulbeck of University of California Santa Barbara published the book, titled *Part Asian, 100% Hapa*. This is an album of the portraits of Hapas and their responses to the question, “What are you?” (Fulbeck, 2006).

Looking at the many portraits of Hapas photographed by Fulbeck enables us to embrace diverse identities of *Nikkeijin*. Some Nikkeijins in the book identified themselves as “half Japanese Canadian and half Chinese Canadian” or “half Japanese, quarter Danish and quarter English.” Although the way ethnic origins are combined is almost infinite, each person has a right to choose his or her own identity.

At the Japanese Overseas Migration Museum (JOMM) in Yokohama, we always ask *Nikkeijin* visitors the same question, “What are you (*Anata wa nani-jin desu ka?*)?” Table 1 shows their answers.

	Brazil	USA	Peru
1	Japanese Brazilian 30.3	Japanese American 76.3	Peruvian 46.0
2	Brazilian 29.7	Japanese 5.0	Japanese Peruvian 36.0
3	Nikkeijin 27.3	American 3.4	Nikkeijin 12.0
4	Japanese 1.8	Nikkei 2.0	
5	Others 10.9	Others 13.3	Others 6.0

Table 1: Answers to the question “What are you?”
(Japanese Overseas Migration Museum, Yokohama)

Among those who were from Brazil, 30% answered “Japanese Brazilian” and almost the same percentage answered “Brazilian.” This is only 2 % more than those who answered *Nikkeijin*. In the case of U.S.A., almost 80% answered Japanese American. Among those who were from Peru, almost one half answered “Peruvian;” and 10% less answered “Japanese Peruvian.” Also about 10% answered *Nikkeijin*. In other words, we can see clear differences among those countries. Answers on cultural identity appear widely different from each other in relation to social and cultural surroundings.

Another important point is the term “Nikkei.” *Nikkeijin* themselves have been trying to define this term. The terminology cited below was given as a part of the report of the *Nikkei* conference held in San Francisco in 2000, where Japanese Americans discussed the meaning of the term “Nikkei.” Based on their discussion, the term “Nikkei” was defined more inclusively than “Japanese American”:

The term “Nikkei” is used throughout this report and is not necessarily interchangeable with the term “Japanese Americans.” Although the term literally means “of Japanese ancestry,” the Japanese currently use it to describe people of Japanese ancestry who’ve left Japan. We’ve found that with the changing definitions of what our community has become, “Japanese American” is too exclusive of a term. Participants in the conference found that although far from perfect, “Nikkei” was a better label. “Nikkei” is a state of mind, not a label defining ancestry. It applies to those who are simpatico with the Nikkei community and its people. (California Japanese American Community Leadership Council, *Nikkei 2000 Conference Committee*, and Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California, 2000, 8)

Furthermore, Nikkei was viewed as a state of mind rather than a label defining ancestry. In other words, anyone can be Nikkei as long as he or she is “simpatico” with the Nikkei community and its people.

During the 2001 Pan-American Nikkei Convention (COPANI) in New York, there was a workshop about nikkei identity, and they came to define Nikkei as follows:

Working definition of *Nikkei*

After about an hour’s discussion on Friday morning, July 27, we arrived at the following working definition of the term *Nikkei*.

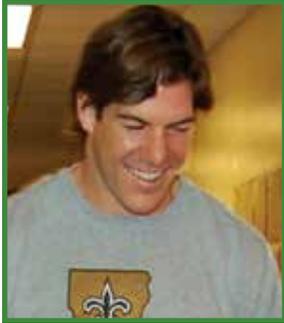
A Nikkei is anyone who has one or more ancestors from Japan, and/or anyone who self-identifies as a Nikkei.

Although not everyone agreed with the second half of the definition, we have included it in the spirit of being (1) open to self-definitions; and (2) inclusive.

For example, there are people of whole and part Japanese ancestry who do not self-identify as Nikkei, and we all agreed that we cannot and should not force them to do so. On the other hand, there are people who may not be of whole or part Japanese ancestry who need to identify with the larger community and we should try to include them. An outstanding example would be of a child who is not of Japanese descent who is adopted into a family with one or more persons of Japanese descent. If this child is raised in the context of a Nikkei family and community, and identifies with that, it would be cruel to deny affiliation simply because of ancestry. (Panamerican Nikkei Association USA East, 2001)

These above-cited two definitions of Nikkei are clearly different from the meaning of *Nikkeijin*. However, it seems to be understandable and convincing if the following examples are considered:

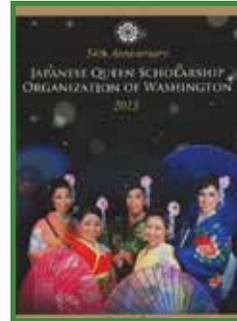
Scott Fujita is a professional American football player and was adopted into a Nikkei family. Technically he is not a *Nikkeijin*, but his father is a Japanese American Nisei. Fujita identifies himself as a half Japanese, despite the fact that he is not biologically Japanese at all, as he was quoted to say, “I recognize the fact that I don't have one single drop of Japanese blood in my body. But I've always felt half Japanese at heart” (Youngmisuk, 2010)



Photographs: (Left) Scott Fujita, Wikipedia (public domain); (Right) His Nisei father and family, Youngmisuk (www.nydailynews.com, 2010.)

Another example can be seen in the Nikkei Queen Contest in Seattle. One of the conditions of participation in the Nikkei Queen Contest is the blood quantum rule. In Honolulu, Los Angeles and San Francisco, applicants need to have more than 50% of Japanese blood. In Seattle, however, the percentage is 25%. Why is the percentage lower in Seattle? According to one of the Seattle committee members, the committee considers that the most important factor is not the blood, but the “heart” and the participation in Nikkei community activities (Kojima, 2013a).

Kiana Kobayashi won the 2009 Japanese Queen Contest in Seattle. Interestingly, she is not *Nikkeijin*. She is Chinese. Her case did not meet the condition of 25%, but she had wanted to participate and acquired the right to enter the contest. How? In Seattle, the Japanese Queen Contest is not only a contest to showcase beauty, but also to evaluate the qualifications to be a member and successor of the Nikkei community. She was actively participating in every event in the Nikkei community. Queens receive a scholarship to promote cultural exchange programs and play a vital role to revitalize the Nikkei community. In case of Kiana, her daily activities in Seattle’s Nikkei community were highly regarded by the committee.



Images: (Left) Kiana Ye Mayumi Kobayashi, as cited in the Seattle Japanese Community Queen Scholarship Program (2009); (Right) The program brochure (2013)

Today *Nikkeijin* are of diversified racial backgrounds, and we cannot say who is *Nikkeijin* only by looking at their physical appearances. Many of them have multi-racial ethnic backgrounds and very often some of them do not look Japanese. According to Census Canada in 2011, there were 109,740 *Nikkeijin* in Canada. From these, only 54,900 were of single ethnic origin. In other words, the other 54,840 were of multiple ethnic origins and represent 49.9%.

If we look at the existing statistics in the U.S.A. and Brazil, the tendencies are the same. Table 2 shows the percentages of mixed roots in *Nikkeijin* populations.

Country	USA	Canada	Brasil
Nikkeijin population	1,304,286	109,740	1,228,000
Single ethnic origin	763,325	54,900	905,036
Multiple ethnic origin	540,961	54,840	322,964
Mixed roots %	41.5	49.9	26.3
Census year	2010	2011	1988*

Table 2: Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Asian Population by Number of Detailed Groups, 2010; Statistics Canada, National Household Survey, Ethnic Origin, 2011; Sanpauro Jinmon Kagaku Kenkyūjo, *Burajiru-ni okeru Nikkei jinkō chōsa hōkokusho, 1987-1988 (1988)*.

According to Prof. Duncan Williams of University of Southern California, the mixed roots percentage in the United States will probably exceed 50% (Kojima, 2013b). In Canada, it has already passed 50%. In Brazil, the situation will be almost the same as in the other two countries.

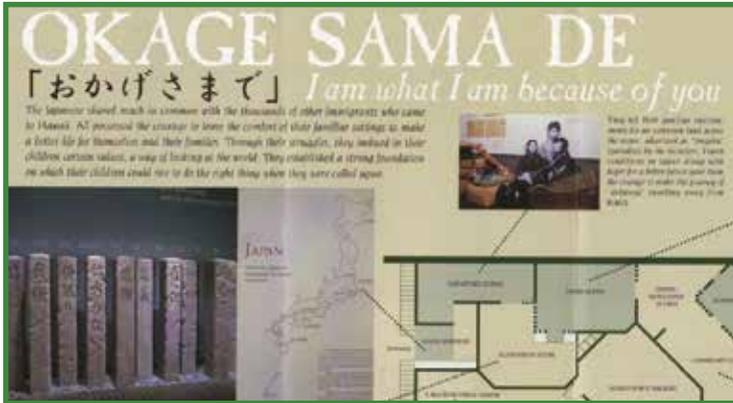
At the end of the permanent exhibit at JOMM in Yokohama, visitors appreciate a wonderful picture titled “Nikkei Big Family.” In this picture, Nikkei family members totaling 58 persons, from Sansei (3rd generation) to Rokusei (6th generation) appear to be cheerful and harmonious. They are part of the Nikkei family, but their ethnic backgrounds are diversified. It is difficult to tell who is *Nikkeijin* and who is not. This is a reality. This is today’s Nikkei family and community.



Nikkei Big Family in Hawaii, 2002. (Permanent exhibition, JOMM, Yokohama).

Coming back to the definition of Nikkei, some *Nikkeijin* define themselves as Nikkei and others define themselves in many other ways such as American, Canadian, Japanese American, etc. In the case for those *Nikkeijin* identified as Nikkei, for what reason do they consider themselves as Nikkei? What is the basis for having the identity of Nikkei?

One of the reasons for having the identity of Nikkei can probably be found in the exhibit of the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii. In their brochure, a Japanese phrase “*Okage sama de*” is emphasized and translated into English, “I am what I am because of you.”



Brochure, Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii

This translation cannot be found in Japanese-English dictionaries, but expresses the true meaning of the phrase very well. This is surely one of the most important parts of cultural heritage that Nikkei has received from their Issei parents. Nobody can live by him or herself. We live together by always helping each other. This sense of community and sentiment of appreciation for others is always highly evaluated and taught by the Issei generation. Some of the 2nd and 3rd generations continue to pass down these values to the next generations. Until today, I remember very well the interview I conducted when I was preparing my Masters thesis in Brazil more than 20 years ago. I asked a Nisei woman what was the most important part of cultural heritage that she received from her Issei parents. Her answer was simple: in Japanese "*kansha no kimochi* (a sense of appreciation)." She said that for her this is the most important part of cultural heritage that she learned from her parents. I was deeply touched by her answer. I never thought about that, but it gave me a new perspective of the cultural heritage as a Japanese person.

Every time I receive a Nikkei group at JOMM in Yokohama that wants a short lecture about the exhibit, I always talk about "*Okage sama de.*" During one of these occasions, a Japanese American Yonsei (4th generation) came to me and showed me her arm. She had the words "*Okage sama de*" tattooed on her arm. I was surprised and of course loved her tattoo! You may know of many books titled "*Okage Sama De*" in Canada too.



“Okage Sama De” tattooed on the arm of a Japanese American Yonsei (4th generations)
(Photo by author)

In Brazil, we can find another way to appreciate Issei’s cultural heritage, that is, “Japonês garantido.” In Portuguese, the phrase means that the Japanese are trustworthy and diligent. Here is a Brazilian Volkswagen advertisement that appeared in the weekly magazine *Veja* in 2000.



Advertisement of Kombi in Brazilian weekly magazine, *Veja* (2000)

It says “Garantido (guaranteed),” which means that Volkswagen is guaranteed to be a good car manufacturer. However, if you carefully look at the photo on the page, you may notice that the man is a Nikkei. In Brazil, Nikkei people are known for their contribution to agriculture. They produced, commercialized,

and distributed agricultural products or produce and established agricultural cooperatives. This is a remarkable and unusual phenomenon. Not a small number of great statesmen nor thousands of wonderful volunteers, but millions of unknown Japanese common people have earned the reputation of being honest and diligent. Because of that, in Brazil, Brazilian people came to use a saying “Japonês garantido.” This identity label, I believe, is the very foundation for the ethnic pride found among Brazilian people of Japanese descent.

To preserve on these values and cultural heritage and also convey them to the next generations in many ways, Nikkei communities celebrate and promote events such as Powell Street Festival in Vancouver, Nisei Week Festival in Los Angeles, and the Cherry Festival in San Francisco, Folklore and Ethnic Festival of Parana in Curitiba and so on. Through these community activities, self-conscious Nikkei will try to pass on their cultural heritage and will play a vital role for *Kakehashi* (bridge-across) building in multiple ways: *Kakehashi* between the past and the future, *Kakehashi* among the countries in the America, and *Kakehashi* between Japan and the Americas.

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