

Introduction

The staff of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf (JFD) was unwinding at the end of a long workday. The headquarters of the largest association of the deaf in Japan had about fifteen employees crammed into the eighth floor of a small office building in central Tokyo. The majority of the senior staff was deaf, while about half of the junior and part-time staff members and interns (including myself) were hearing. The chief of the Tokyo office, Ohtsuki Yoshiko, had been a long-time activist in the JFD's women's division. In her sixties, she was known, loved, and feared for her forthrightness and spunk. Although she herself was deaf, Ohtsuki-san often vocalized while she signed to make it easier for her hearing employees to understand what she was saying.

One of the JFD members from the outer metropolitan area had dropped by with some snacks, and we were enjoying them while he told us stories about what was going on in his local association. He had recently gone to a lecture organized by a new deaf organization called D-Pro, which had a core group of young activists. In a series of talks and publications, D-Pro was insisting on a separatist deaf identity with a unique sign language and cultural orientation different from mainstream (hearing) Japanese. They were promulgating a notion of a pure Japanese Sign Language (JSL)—an exclusionary position counter to the one espoused by the JFD, which was arguing at the time that Japanese Sign was any sign form used by any deaf person in Japan.

Under the D-Pro model (and the American cultural Deaf model, which D-Pro drew from), deafness was a quasi-ethnic status. The purest deaf were those who were born to deaf parents and for whom signing was their first language. The next purest were those who were born deaf and attended schools for the deaf at

an early age. Those who were late-deafened or had not gone to schools for the deaf were not truly deaf in this model, but only "hard of hearing." At the lecture, the D-Pro speaker apparently disparaged the JFD as a "hard-of-hearing organization (*nanchōsha dantai*)" and the signing used by JFD members as an impure form of sign mixed with spoken Japanese.

Ohtsuki-san listened to this narrative with visibly growing irritation. Finally, in anger at D-Pro's attempt to disqualify both her identity and her signing, she blurted out in sign, "THAT'S SIGN FASCISM!"

As usual, Ohtsuki-san spoke out loud at the same time she signed this, so according to D-Pro, even in her moment of ultimate exasperation she was not signing pure JSL; further proving she was not really deaf, but one of those "hard-of-hearing" masqueraders.

THIS book is the story of three generations of deaf people in Japan and how the shifting political, social, and educational environment of the last century shaped their lives. The development of schools for the deaf and the birth of politically active organizations of the deaf during this period profoundly affected the types of friendships, social networking, jobs, political outlooks, and marriages possible for each cohort.

My central thesis is that the social and institutional history of postwar deaf communities in Japan enabled an unusual form of personal and mass organizational identity politics to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. Articulating signing as a different mode of communication and not a fundamentally different language from spoken Japanese, the center-left Japanese Federation of the Deaf co-opted discourse surrounding social welfare policies in Japan for the benefit of its members. However, just as certain historical forces created a generational cohort that accepted this assimilationist message, subsequent changes in deaf education and etiology have caused a new, more radical separatist generation to emerge in the late 1990s.

We cannot assume that identities based on biological categories such as disability are any more stable than those based on ethnic categories. All such categories are socially constructed and historically specific. For example, unlike many of the ethnic minorities in Japan (Ainu, resident Koreans, and Chinese, for example), the JFD argues for a fundamental Japaneseness. In this regard, they are similar to *kikokushijo* (returnee Japanese, the group to which I belong); some *nikkeijin* (Brazilian-Japanese); and the more assimilationist front of the Burakumin former outcaste movement. But all of this must be set against the context of generational

changes within the deaf community. The younger generation represented by D-Pro argues that they are profoundly non-Japanese in language and culture and instead are members of a global Deaf culture and community. In this way, they are similar to factions of the Ainu native movement who argue that they are part of a global First People's struggle and are not ethnically Japanese.

This book takes us through the various shifts in the deaf community over the past hundred years. While there has been great interest in the history of minority social movements, much of it has unwittingly become hagiography (literally, the lives of saints), as authors tend to focus on the elite leadership of the groups and not the general membership. I have tried to avoid this by balancing the history of deaf schools, political organizations, and movement leaders with the life stories of five rural deaf women whose experiences span almost the entire twentieth century.

The first woman is "Nakano Shizuyo," who was born in 1913 in the northern edge of Kyoto Prefecture. We explore her story in chapter 4. Because her family was poor, Nakano-san was able to attend only a year of informal education at a local "temple school." Her parents forbade her from marrying, she never had any children, and she was largely secluded from the outside world until her forties, when Japan was in the process of recovering economically from the Pacific War. At about the same time, the nascent JFD was gaining prominence as the representative organization of the deaf in Japan. It was at this point that Nakano-san began to see more of the world outside of her small village through her local deaf association, an affiliate of the JFD.

Regional associations of the deaf such as the one she belonged to in northern Kyoto Prefecture sprang up in the 1950s and provided many essential community functions. By hosting drinking parties, hikes, picnics, barbecues, hot spring tours, and other social events, the local associations created a separate, parallel version of mainstream Japanese society for their members. Participating in this parallel society helped sustain the feeling within the deaf community that while they might be socially isolated from the mainstream, they were still Japanese at heart.

It is in this complex postwar environment that the second cohort of postwar deaf women emerged. Three life stories from this generation are presented in chapter 6. The first, Sano Hiroe, was born in 1926. As compulsory education for the deaf was only instituted in 1948, Sano-san had

a bare few years of schooling, but even then her life course was much different from that of Nakano-san. Sano-san was able to work freely outside the home, marry a deaf man, and have children. These are experiences she shares with the other women in this group, such as Horikawa Hiro (born in 1946), who went on to lead the Women's Section of her local prefectural association of the deaf. The youngest woman in this cohort, Funata Hatsuko (born in 1951), attended school for twelve full years, but her hopes for college were dashed when her high school counselor told her that no college would accept a deaf applicant and that she should become a hairdresser instead. Struggling against social discrimination such as this, she managed to get a factory job, marry, and raise a son.

The director of the Tokyo office of the JFD who blurted out, "that's sign fascism," comes from this middle generation, as do most of the senior staff and leadership at the JFD. The movement she grew up in profoundly shaped the worldview of the director, Ohtsuki-san. Her deaf politics are inclusive—to her anyone who is hearing-impaired is deaf—and her sign language politics are equally encompassing. She has no tolerance for those who would criticize other deaf persons because their signing is too much like spoken Japanese. That is because in her mind being deaf and being Japanese are not contradictions.

This brings us to the youngest and most recent cohort of deaf people. Starting in the 1970s, deaf children in Japan were encouraged to mainstream, attending their regular local schools rather than residential schools for the deaf. They were taught to speechread and speak orally rather than to sign. This resulted in a generation of children who grew up not identifying as deaf and not using sign as their primary communication method. Ironically, in college many of these students became attracted to the notion of a cultural deaf identity and vibrant deaf culture espoused by American Deaf activists. The more radical ones formed groups such as D-Pro and sought to wrest control of Japanese Sign Language away from the JFD.

The subject of my final biographical chapter grew up in this mixed environment. Born in 1980, Yamashita Mayumi went to a kindergarten for the deaf, but was mainstreamed from first grade until she graduated from high school. Although like many in her generation, she did not have a strong sense of herself as deaf and could not sign, she ended up choosing to go to the only college for the deaf in Japan. There she learned how to sign and gradually became more aware of her identity as a deaf person. After graduation, she returned to the deaf community, this time as a teacher at a school for the deaf in Tokyo.

Postwar Deaf Political Activism

Up through the end of the 1970s, deaf people in Japan had few legal rights and little social recognition. They were classified as legal minors or mentally deficient. They were unable to obtain driver's licenses, sign contracts, or write wills. Many deaf men and women worked in factories or as beauticians, printers, shoe-shines, or dental technicians, or were simply unemployed. Schools for the deaf in Japan taught a difficult regimen of speechreading and oral speech methods and vocational skills. Very few graduates were able to attend college. Even by the mid-eighties, deaf persons were rarely seen signing in public. The dominant social/legal attitude toward the deaf dictated that—like other minorities in Japan—deaf people should try as hard as possible to assimilate even if societal discrimination in employment and marriage made such homogenization difficult.

The 1980s was a decade of much political mobilization behind the scenes. The United Nations declared 1981 as the first International Year of Disabled Persons. Many nations, including Japan, enacted legislation in response to this. After that, the UN realized that a single year for disabled persons would not yield the results they wanted, so they declared 1983–1993 as the International Decade for Disabled Persons. This prompted further political mobilization from the disability lobby in Japan, responses by politicians, and legislative activity. For the most part, however, the largely political and legal changes that occurred in the 1980s were not visible to those who were not part of the politically active disability community.

Through this period, the Japanese Federation of the Deaf was the leading national political and social organization for the deaf in Japan. It mobilized the protests, lobbied the politicians, organized the petition drives, oversaw the interpreter-training programs, published sign dictionaries, and even built a nursing home for elderly deaf residents. Infused with a new leadership who had come of age in the postwar period, the JFD adopted a collaborative approach to working with the Japanese government.

Called "participatory welfare" (*sanka fukushi*) by one JFD leader, their strategy involved working *with* the government in providing resources to the deaf community through grants and contracts. Their politics deemphasized the linguistic differences between Japanese Sign and spoken Japanese and highlighted the social responsibility of well-bodied Japanese to help their own (that is, disabled Japanese) through increased social welfare services and local volunteerism. These inclusive and as-

simulationist politics derived from the experiences of the middle generation of deaf described above.

The past decade and a half alone has seen much change. In 1989, after the death of Emperor Hirohito and the end of the Showa era (1926–1989), the Japanese scholar Kanda Kazuyuki presciently wrote, “this year, the first year of the Heisei era, has the potential to be the first year of rapid [deaf] social change (1989:30).” That prediction turned out to be true. During the 1990s, the public television network NHK regularly broadcast a Japanese sign–interpreted news hour and hosted a weekly educational program named *Signing for Everyone*. There have been at least three hit mini-series on television with deaf characters. Instructional sign courses and seminars became very popular with housewives eager to become volunteer sign interpreters.

Comic books that taught signing became trendy among (hearing) Japanese students. Companies began slowly hiring deaf people in nonmanual labor positions and holding workshops for their hearing co-workers to ease the transition. The World Federation of the Deaf held a massive international congress of the deaf in Tokyo in 1991. These visible changes were accompanied by other social and legal shifts. In 1993, a major revision of disability law in Japan was passed. Several schools for the deaf began openly experimenting with signing in the classrooms. By the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, the deaf community was in the public spotlight.

The JFD was a major force behind this transformation, and we need to understand how they pushed for it. Political arguments for social change can take several different forms: human rights (rights that accrue to us on the basis of being human); civil rights (rights that accrue to us on the basis of being a citizen of a particular nation); ethnic diversity rights (recognition of the linguistic or cultural needs of minorities); and so forth.

The model that the postwar JFD leaders promulgated was a mixture of civil and disability rights. First, they stressed that deaf people in Japan were quintessentially Japanese with all of the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural markers of mainstream Japanese. They argued that because of a physical impairment as well as ensuing social discrimination, Japanese deaf persons were not able to achieve full parity with the mainstream in education, employment, or social integration. Thus, it was the responsibility of other Japanese, via the government, to ameliorate the difference through social welfare benefits, hiring quotas, and awareness education.

In many ways, we can view the JFD-led deaf movement as one of the few successful minority social and political movements in Japan. In the mid-1990s, however, a new generation of deaf activists emerged who re-

lied on a very different model of social change, based on American minority identity politics and linguistic separatism.

Minority politics in the United States is unique because of the availability of the powerful and articulate frame of ethnic multiculturalism. In America, new groups such as “Somali-Americans” or “Hmong-Americans” are immediately recognized as being part of the same domain as Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, and Japanese-Americans. Members of new immigrant groups are understood as being entitled to bilingual language support in the classroom, minority civil rights, or protection under anti-discrimination laws without having to argue for this status. In Japan by contrast, it has been very difficult to argue for a “Korean-Japanese” identity since there is no general recognition of the existence of ethnic minorities.¹ In sociological terms, there is no *frame* for ethnic minorities in Japan. Within recent years, various social scientists in anthropology, political science, and sociology have begun to look at the intersection of language, identity, and politics in contemporary social and political movements and the role that these framing narratives play.²

Once frames such as ethnic multiculturalism are established, it is easy to extend them to include other nonethnic categories. For example, the American gay/lesbian movement has articulated itself as part of the multiculturalism frame. The rainbow flag of the gay and lesbian movement mirrors the rainbow colors of ethnic diversity. Gay bashing is a federal offense under the Hate Crimes Statistic Act of 1990, along with other violent crimes motivated by race, religion, national origin, and ethnicity. In other cultural contexts, it is not obvious that being attracted to people of the same sex or gender has anything in common with being a member of a minority ethnic group. Nor should it be. These types of frames are created and extended by social activists, not discovered.

The deaf political movement in America has leveraged the multiculturalism frame to great effect. Founded in 1864, Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, is the world’s first and only four-year college for the deaf, but up until 1988 it had never been led by a deaf president. Students during the 1988 *Deaf President Now* protests at Gallaudet argued that they

1. Legacies of Japan’s colonial expansion in East Asia during the Pacific War, ethnic Koreans in Japan are referred to as *zainichi* Koreans, or resident Koreans. Volumes have been written on this; see Ryang (1997) or Fukuoka (2000).

2. Erving Goffman’s original formulation of a frame as an “interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment” (Snow and Benford 1992:137) has been extended into the field of mass social movements by a number of scholars (Gitlin 1980; Melucci 1980; McAdam 1994; Morris and Mueller 1992; Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994).

were entitled to a deaf president just as historically black colleges or colleges for women were led by their own. Many television viewers at the time were struck by the sight of deaf protesters carrying banners stating, "We still have a dream," or declarations that "This is the Selma of the Deaf." The deaf students succeeded in forcing the hearing president of Gallaudet to resign, and a deaf man was chosen to replace her. Signed into law two years after the Gallaudet protests, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) was presented as a new civil rights law, extending anti-discrimination protections to people with disabilities. These examples show the power of the ethnic minority frame in the United States.

In Japan, for many reasons, it has been difficult to establish a similar type of powerful ethnic minority frame.³ As a result, groups such as the JFD have had to use other frames in order to leverage political power: human rights, an appeal to the commonality (and thus mutual responsibility) of all Japanese, neighborhood volunteerism, and perhaps most powerfully with the government, a sense of falling behind the West. And as a result, disability social welfare in and of itself has now become a powerful frame in its own right.

The disability frame impacts the community differently from an ethnic minority frame. For example, men and women in the deaf middle generation in Japan unhesitatingly and unequivocally argue that they are Japanese first and deaf second. This inclusivity allowed the movement to expand rapidly during this period and accomplish real political change. Arguing that signing (*shuwa*) was a different mode of spoken Japanese and not a separate and unique language permitted its use in public schools for the deaf without raising the ire of the Ministry of Education. But when the youngest generation of deaf activists emerged in the 1990s, they introduced a totally new frame, one that advocated a cultural deaf identity and recognition of a Japanese sign language.

In 1995, several forceful articles by the leaders of D-Pro, a radical new Deaf political and cultural activist group, appeared in the mainstream intellectual journal *Gendai Shisō*. This represented a break from the politics of the previous JFD-led generation. One of the articles begins:

A Declaration of Deaf Culture: We Deaf people take this as a (basic) definition: "Deaf people are a linguistic minority who converse using Japanese

Sign Language, a language that is distinct from the Japanese language." The previous perspective was that "Deaf people" equaled "People who can't hear"—a biomedical disease model that focuses on impairment. This is changing to a new perspective of "Deaf people" equal "People who use Japanese Sign Language as their daily/normal language"—namely, a social-cultural one. (Kimura and Ichida 1995:354)

This manifesto highlights the differences between Deaf culture and hearing culture in Japan. It stresses the importance of language within the Japanese deaf community and the development of a separate "Deaf culture" (*rō bunka*), drawing on ethnic minority positions espoused by American Deaf activists (cf. Padden 1980; Padden and Humphries 1988).

D-Pro's Declaration borrows American deaf studies scholar Harlan Lane's concept of the Deaf as a colonized people without a country. The capital D in Deaf here symbolizes a strong cultural minority identity and primary relationship with signing.⁴ But while the plight of deaf students in Japanese schools is comparable to those of other linguistic minorities in Japan, no mention was made in the D-Pro Declaration of resident Koreans, Chinese, Okinawans, or Ainu. Instead, an early article in their newsletter *D* compared deaf discrimination to the oppression of left-handed individuals (May 1, 1992).

Here, the leaders of D-Pro had a problem. As mentioned before, a broadly successful, identity-based "new social movement" (Melucci 1980: 1994) using an ethnic minority frame is nonexistent in Japan or at least invisible. There are certainly many minority groups: the Burakumin, a former outcaste group; the Koreans who were brought over as forced laborers during the colonial period (1910–1945); the Ryukyuan/Okinawans who were forcibly annexed by Japan; and the Ainu, who are the aboriginal residents of northern Japan whose lands were occupied and colonized by the Japanese beginning in the eighteenth century. But there is no extant notion of an active "Burakumin culture"; there is no emergent Korean-Japanese culture discussed positively in the mainstream press;⁵ Okinawan nationalism is largely ignored by mainland media; and the Ainu native culture

4. Following standard notation in American Deaf studies (Woodward 1972; Padden 1980), "Deaf" (with a capital D) indicates people who identify with "Deaf culture" and "Deaf politics" and who use sign language as their primary language; lower-case "deaf" indicates individuals who are audiologically deaf. Neither implies the other, and so one can be "deaf" without being "Deaf"; for example, elderly people who become late-deafened are not usually considered Deaf.

5. This has changed slightly in the past few years with the emergence of a new generation of resident Koreans. The "Korea boom" (*hanryū*) in Japan with the popularity of dramas such as *The Winter Sonata* starring Bae Yong Jun—who is known in Japan as *Yon-sama* or "Lord Yong"—may yet prove to be more than just another short-lived fad.

3. Lacking the multiculturalism frame, gay and lesbian politics in Japan have struggled to come up with a suitable strategy. Somewhat ironically, the disability frame in Japan has become so powerful in its own right that groups such as transsexual activists have been calling themselves "gender identity disabled" (*seidōitsusei shōgai*) rather than embedding themselves in the gay and lesbian movement. That itself is a subject for another book.

(while still alive) has been encased behind museum glass in the popular consciousness. This underscores the powerlessness of the ethnic minority frame in Japan, not the lack of minority groups in general.

Former Japanese prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone infamously declared in September 1986 that the United States was a "less intelligent society" with its "blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans" compared to mono-ethnic Japan (Wetherall 1993:3). Although Nakasone was not the brightest politician Japan ever produced, most Japanese on the street would blink uncomprehendingly if asked about Japan's ethnic minorities (*shōsū minzoku*). The absence of a prevalent ethnic model has existed in large part because the Japanese government has actively subdued ethnic identities since the turn of the nineteenth century in the name of national unity. For example, early in Japan's colonial phase, the Ainu had been forced, under such laws as the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act (1899), to adopt Japanese names and to abandon the Ainu language and customs. This same pattern emerges for Okinawans and resident Koreans as well. This suppression of minorities was not unique to Japan; in many ways Japan borrowed both the concept and implementation details from the United States and European colonial powers.

This unrelenting pressure to assimilate resulted in many second- and third-generation Koreans, Okinawans, and Ainu no longer identifying as such or not even aware of their ancestry. In a 1995 nationwide poll, 99 percent of respondents (regardless of nationality) considered themselves to be of Japanese ethnicity.⁶

If D-Pro framed itself as an ethnic and linguistic minority and used that as the basis for political rights, they would have difficulty leveraging the relatively weak local concepts of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism. The leaders seem to recognize this. In the Declaration they

write: "perhaps some people will find some resistance to the term 'ethnic group'; instead we could say that the Deaf are a 'linguistic minority.'" The authors lead their readers away from the problematic discourse on native ethnic minorities in Japan and instead tried to draw authority from the American multicultural frame.

The Physicality of Deafness and Deaf Identity

Although deaf politics in Japan are embedded within larger disability politics, this book mainly focuses on the deaf community and only intermittently talks about broader disabilities. For although JFD leaders in Japan often use the mantra of disability rights in making claims to the State, actual interaction between the deaf leadership and other disability groups (with the exception of those who are deaf-blind, deaf-wheelchair-users or otherwise multiply disabled) has been limited until recently. The same communication barriers that separate the deaf community from the non-signing mainstream also separate them from the non-signing disability community.⁷

Deafness has been called a hidden disability because you cannot tell from looking at someone that she is deaf unless she is wearing a hearing aid. The main social handicap caused by deafness is communication with hearing people since so much of mainstream cultural, social, and business life is conveyed through speech. The blind-deaf writer Helen Keller is said to have once remarked that while blindness cuts you off from the world, deafness cuts you off from other human beings, by which she meant the majority who do not know how to sign. Being deaf is a hybrid and intersectional identity. You are who you are—Japanese, a Christian, a painter, photographer, architect—but the language barrier places you out of the mainstream of all those categories.

With deafness, as with physical gender,⁸ many people believe that there is a clear physicality that underlies deaf identity—a biology of deafness. Many people think there is an essential quality to deafness, for example that all deaf everywhere in the world must surely understand each other using a universal sign. They see a deaf person as physically

6. Source: NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Department, January 6, 1995. "The data utilized in this publication/presentation was originally collected by NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Department. The data was obtained from the Japan Public Opinion Location Library, JPOLL, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Neither the original collectors of the data, nor the Roper Center, bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here."

There were approximately 1.4 million legal foreigners in Japan in 2001, which is 1.1 percent of the total population (MHLW 2003:184). Thus, the 1 percent of respondents who answered with a non-Japanese ethnicity could easily be just the resident foreign population. Resident Koreans are legally considered foreigners unless they naturalize. The Statistics and Information Department (SID) of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare does not keep any official statistics on the number of ethnic minorities with Japanese citizenship in Japan (personal communication, SID staff member, November 10, 2004).

7. This has changed with the creation of the Japan Disability Forum in October 2004, which integrates activists across multiple disabilities including deafness.

8. See Anne Fausto-Sterling's (1993) article "The five sexes: why male and female are not enough" for a critique of the prevalent view that there are two and only two sexes bound into our biologies.

deficient, or at least tangibly different from a hearing person. In this book, I argue instead that while the causes of deafness may be similar across cultures and times (illness, genes, and so on), the sociohistorical construction of what it means to be deaf varies considerably.

Although all deaf communities have discovered manual signs as a primary means of communication (perhaps pointing to the neurological, inherent adaptability of the brain), the forms of signing and relationship with spoken language within these communities are highly variant, and the politics of deafness are also multitudinous. British Sign Language is distinct from and mutually unintelligible with American Sign Language, which is distinct from Japanese Sign Language. Meetings at the World Federation of the Deaf are just as much a Tower of Babel as those at the United Nations.⁹

At the Gallaudet Deaf Prez Now demonstrations in the United States, deaf student protesters carried placards stating, "Deaf can do everything but hear." Perhaps that is the most (and least) one could say about deafness and identity. The diverse identities created by the product of a physical impairment, social institutions, family, history, and individuality all contradict an essentialized, unitary, and mandatory nature to deaf existence.

In many ways, because deaf communities across the globe have each created their own sense of (deaf) identity, (sign) language, and (visual) culture, it is easy to imagine them as types of ethnic minorities. However, deafness is very different from other ethnic identities (such as being Black or Hispanic) in that very few deaf children are born to deaf parents, only 10 percent in most estimates. That means that rather than through their families, the majority of deaf people arrive at their identity as deaf through social institutions such as schools for the deaf in childhood or deaf associations as adults. Because the deaf community represents a unique type of non-family-based, nonethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority, we need to approach the study of deaf identity through different channels from those for traditional ethnic minorities. In the next chapters, we will first look at the demographics of deafness and linguistics of signing before exploring the early history of deafness in Japan.

9. In 1973, the World Federation of the Deaf constructed Gestuno as an international communication tool. But like Esperanto, Gestuno is criticized for being both artificial and Eurocentric in both derivation and use.