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**JAPAN'S INTERCULTURALITY IN A GLOBAL  
CONTEXT: IS THIS REALLY SO NEW?**

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# **Japan's Interculturality in a Global Context: Is This Really so New?**

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## **Resumen**

Japón ha incorporado prácticas e ideas extranjeras, adaptándolas a su contexto, al mismo tiempo que contribuye a la globalización con innovaciones culturales y tecnológicas. Los museos etnográficos y parques temáticos sobre países extranjeros de Japón, reflejan su interés por otras culturas mezclando educación y entretenimiento. Además, comunidades como los ainus y los okinawenses revitalizan y reivindican sus identidades culturales con sus propias representaciones. La interculturalidad se desarrolla a varios niveles en Japón y cuenta con una larga historia de contactos, influencias, conocimiento y adaptaciones.

## **Palabras clave**

Japón, Interculturalidad, Globalización, Museos Etnográficos, Parques Temáticos de Países Extranjeros, Ainu, Okinawa

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## **Abstract**

Japan has incorporated foreign practices and ideas, adapting them to its context, while contributing to globalisation with cultural and technological innovations. Japan's ethnographic museums and foreign countries theme parks reflect its interest in other cultures by blending education and entertainment. In addition, communities such as the Ainu and Okinawans revitalise and reclaim their cultural identities with their self-representations that they display. Interculturality develops at various levels in Japan and has a long history of contacts, influences, knowledge and adaptations.

## **Keywords**

Japan, Interculturality, Globalization, Ethnographic Museums, Foreign Country Theme Parks, Ainu, Okinawa

# **JAPAN'S INTERCULTURALITY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: IS THIS REALLY SO NEW?**

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Japan has played some interesting roles within the wider world, as we have all entered the era now described as global. On the one hand, it enjoyed economic success unparalleled within Asia to become accepted into the elite capitalist think-tank known variously as the G7, the G8, and now G with ever-increasing numbers. On the other, it retains cultural differences that continue to intrigue and baffle journalists and other short-term commentators who never seem to tire of finding new and extraordinary things to recount. It has made enormous contributions to all kinds of global enterprises, often sidelining the nations that first developed them, and striding ahead of its competitors with alarming speed and dexterity. At the same time, it has won over the hearts and minds of young people throughout the planet by developing games and other pastimes that take advantage of the latest technology almost as soon as it appears.

Japan is certainly a global player, then, and its presence can hardly be ignored in any part of the world, but how, and how far, does it enter into the practice of interculturality? Japan has adopted many foreign practices, especially at a superficial level, and it offers many of the activities developed within its own shores for the world to share. “Cosplay” is a fashionable example, when people gather to dress as characters in their favourite animated films or video games; the tea-ceremony is a more staid but still popular possibility. Both incorporate elements adopted from abroad into Japan. In “cosplay” some of

the characters look remarkably like the heroines of European fairy tales, and the tea ceremony was based on a Chinese practice, but in what sense do these cases of cultural exchange influence each other? How far is Japan becoming just like anywhere else in the globalised world? And, for that matter, how far is the world becoming like Japan?

In this paper I am going to argue for another apparent contradiction, namely that Japan both adopts huge amounts of foreign culture, which it then adapts and absorbs into its own fund of existing cultural heritage, but at the same time, certain Japanese practices help to draw boundaries around those very aspects of society which might seem to be becoming merged. Moreover, in the study of Japan, it is possible to identify some quite persistent characteristic cultural traits, precisely while Japan may appear to be adopting the most foreign elements of culture. In this sense some parallels may be drawn with phenomena found in other parts of Asia, and I will offer some examples of this as well. Eventually, however, I will argue that this process is neither new, nor particularly global, but it is, in my view, something very Japanese!

The subject is, of course, highly complex and multi-faceted, and this paper will set out to make its case by focussing on one specific aspect of interculturality that is found abundantly within Japan itself, namely in examples of cultural display. From the early-1970s through to the mid-90s, the combination of technological skill, international awareness, and an unprecedented economic boom enabled the construction of ethnographic museums and foreign country (theme) parks that went beyond anything that had ever been seen before, in Japan or elsewhere. In this paper I will describe a selection of examples in some detail, partly to examine the intercultural relations on which they might have been built, and partly to illustrate the way that the Japanese (and foreign) public reacted

to them. We will also look at a couple of examples of self-display by sections of Japanese society that have a more specific identity, and a permeability with the outside world that is also somewhat out of the mainstream of Japanese society.

### **Museums – post-EXP70**

On the theme of cultural display, Japan began to enter the world-at-large in the middle of the 19th century, only a couple of decades after the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 set alight a movement of World Fairs and Exhibitions that enabled a measure of interculturality that had never been shared with so many in so many places before. With displays gradually more and more expensive and impressive, the people of Japan left a strong impression of skill, industry and exquisite beauty in major countries and cities around the world, at the same time as gathering information about the cultures of all the countries to which they sent delegations (Allwood, 1977:50; Conant, 1991:83; Findling and Kimberly, 1990; Harris, 1975; Hendry 2000). With several aborted plans, it was a century before Japan would host a “universal” exposition, as they had become known, but in Osaka in 1970, the gathering of national pavilions, with all the accompanying commerce and entertainment, was a display to equal any that had been held before. It was also at last an opportunity for the Japanese public, who came in huge numbers, to enjoy representations of the rest of the world within their own shores, and it seemed to inspire a whole new era of display.

The National Museum of Ethnology, founded in 1974 and opened to the public in 1977, was built on the EXPO site at Suita Park, in Osaka, using many of the objects that had been collected by its first director, anthropologist Tadao Umesao for the EXPO itself. It is also a research Museum, and the anthropologists it employs work with local people from their

own field sites to produce objects for display, some of them suitably reduced in size, so its role is less one of conservation than that of many of its European and American predecessors. According to an early interview I had with Umesao, now laid out clearly on its website:

“one of the main focuses of the Museum has been to provide the general (Japanese) public with accurate and updated information about various societies around the world, in order to facilitate understanding of peoples with different cultural backgrounds living together in the modern world” (my emphasis).

To achieve this end, the museum is not averse to making copies of objects that their collectors have found interesting in other ethnographic displays, which include an Aztec calendar, reproduced from the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, and a huge photograph of the ruins of the Tenochitlan pyramid there. The “Minpaku”, as it known locally, also employs a wide range of electronic and audio-visual aids to assist with the aim of bringing understanding to its visitors, the first a huge videoteque that offers 15-minute clips of the original people using many of the objects on display, then later a materiotèque that allows children and others to handle objects and ask Dr. Minpaku, a speaking computer, to explain them. The buildings are spacious and well-adapted to museum space, offering a range of flexible possibilities for temporary exhibitions, which have over the years covered many subjects, even in 1998 including a display of old-fashioned types of museum display, entitled “Images of Other Cultures: From the British Museum Collection”.

An even more innovative ethnographic museum which was also opened in Japan under the advice of an anthropologist involved collecting for EXPO70, Ohnuki Toshio, is the Little World:

Museum of Man, not far from the city of Nagoya, also in Japan's central island. This is an open-air museum, which has engaged anthropologists to invite people from different parts of the world to come there and build houses in their own style, and to help construct displays of their own cultural artefacts. Here it is possible to try on the clothes characteristic of particular peoples and places, and to play games devised by different ethnic groups, and the visitors may of course have their photographs taken in these pursuits. A range of exotic food is available for consumption on the premises, or for purchase, as is a selection of souvenirs imported directly from the locations represented on site.

Visitors to Little World are given passports as they pay their entry fee, which they can stamp as they visit the different regions represented, and for children there is an informative quiz to carry around with them. At particular times of year, festivals may be performed here at the same time as they are being held in their countries of origin, and I witnessed a German Oktoberfest in full swing on one visit I made, properly accompanied by a band that had travelled to Japan from Bavaria for the occasion. A few other people from the source communities are employed to work in the park, and in some of the displays, an effort is made to mark historical links with Japan, such as a Toba Batak house from Indonesia that had been painted with depictions of air battles they suffered there when the Japanese seized their islands from the former Dutch occupants. It is not always necessary to be entirely authentic, however, in the interest of having fun again, and in the restaurant next to an African village that serves crocodile and ostrich meat, I was soon informed, when asked, that these delicacies were actually imported from California!

In general, these museums, like others that have more closely followed the European or American model that may have



inspired them, are concerned with the business of education, but there is certainly no bar on having fun while learning, and one of the most popular exhibits in the main hall of the Minpaku is a Dutch barrel organ that is turned over at mid-morning every day to the delight of the visiting school parties. In another section, a selection of African wooden stools may be tried out physically, and in a third, it is explained that the appearance of a beautiful wooden boat from the Pacific will actually be enhanced if visitors touch it as they pass. Thus some of the rules of the old ethnographic museums have been cast aside, and another interesting and unusual feature for European visitors, is that they may well find many objects from their own countries on display! Finally, despite the representation of foreign cultures in these places, it was many years before the Minpaku installed labels in any language other than Japanese, and the so-called Little World is also somewhat forbidding for visitors who do not know the Japanese language.

### **Gaikoku-mura – Foreign Country Villages**

It was perhaps a measure of the enjoyment and fascination experienced as Japanese visitors encountered the European and other “developed” cultures on display that led to the next big boom in the genre, namely the construction of a huge number of foreign country theme parks. The first two of these opened in 1983, a year sometimes described as “the first year of leisure” (*reja gannen*, Notoji, 1990:226), and they more or less set a pattern for the phenomenon that transpired. One was the Japanese franchise of the big American commercial success, known as Tokyo Disneyland (Awata and Takanarita, 1987; Raz, 1999; Van Maanen, 1992), certainly a park for rides and fun, but in this case also regarded locally as a reconstruction of “the best of America” on Japanese soil (Brannen, 1992:216). Although it was apparently suggested to the local company that

they might want to create some Japanese stories there, they preferred to reproduce the fun and games of America (*ibid.*).

In the same year, a park opened in the south of Japan that had chosen Holland as its theme, this time focussing on architectural style and the historical connections that Japan had enjoyed with the Dutch, who has been allowed to occupy an island off the coast there for 200 years between the 17th and 19th centuries when Japan was otherwise effectively closed to the outside world. The only ride here was in a big Dutch galleon, and some 19 years later, when a much larger and more famous Dutch park named Huis ten Bosch was opened, the galleon continued to ply between the two. The name of the second park is that of the Queen's palace in Den Haag, which was reconstructed on-site, complete with its formal gardens, and though the purpose of much of this enormous site was recreational, the palace for some time housed a local branch of the University of Leiden, where students of Japanese could study during their year abroad, at the same time as earning pocket money by assisting in the activities of the theme park.

Another early park was built at the other end of the Japanese archipelago, in Hokkaido, where a town that had recently closed down a coal mine chose to instigate new work for the local people by converting quite an expansive piece of local land into a place that they named Canadian World. The country was apparently chosen because of the supposed similarity with the "big nature" of Canada, but they also picked a literary theme for the layout of the place and reconstructed the small town and several of the scenes that featured in a Canadian novel that was tremendously popular in Japanese translation, namely *Anne of Green Gables*. The author, Lucy Maud Montgomery, came from Prince Edward Island, and a reconstruction of the eponymous house, Green Gables, also served as a museum about her life, so learning was not totally

divorced from the fantasy of the place. The park also featured some of the actual landmarks of the Island, like St. John's Clock Tower. Other areas paid tribute to the French part of Canada, in the Terrasse Dufferin, apparently built on a model from Quebec province, and a display of totem poles to remind of the First Nations.

In the height of its popularity, actors from Canada would play the part of Anne and her friends throughout the summer, so that visitors could meet in the flesh a girl like the one they had admired in the story, take tea with her, and try out their English language (if they could pluck up the courage!). There were a couple of craftspeople working there in the year I visited as well, demonstrating how to make stained glass pictures and patchwork quilts, but in general the number of Canadians to be found in the park was never very large. It may have had an effect on tourism to Prince Edward Island, however, as the drop in visitors in the year of the SARS scare was said to have brought a heavy blow to the local economy. When the original Green Gables house in Prince Edward Island was ruined by fire, it was also said to have been donations from Japanese fans that covered much of the reconstruction.

Another park in the northern island of Hokkaido did take a lot of trouble to involve people from the country it set out to represent, for Glücks Königreich not only chose the Brothers Grimm for their literary inspiration, they also brought German craftsmen to Japan to construct much of the infrastructure, and chose the castle of a member of the German aristocracy to copy there. In the passport one receives on purchasing a ticket to enter this place, there is a message from the Count in question, who welcomes visitors to his home in Japan, and describes his pleasure at making the connection. When I visited this park, there were musicians from Germany playing in the reconstructed great hall of the castle, and others demonstrating

ballroom dancing, though the latter in fact turned out to be from the Czech Republic, apparently because they were less expensive!

Still, the park had many buildings that had been built and furnished in a German style, some others copy of those that had been occupied, or used, by the Grimm Brothers, and visitors could buy (and order for future consumption) a variety of German beers and wines. On the premises, one could watch German sausages being made and try these and other kinds of food said to originate in Germany, in the restaurant. There was a section with rides in this park, many of them drawing on the themes of the Grimms' fairy tales, which also inspired many of the games and cuddly toys that were available for purchase in the shops. A large statue of the Grimms was to be found in the park, and a library of their stories in several languages and many editions. To be honest, however, there didn't seem to be much communication between the visitors and the Germans employed there, despite all the efforts that had gone into its construction.

### **Centres of Self-Representation**

A third set of examples of Japanese forms of cultural display bring some new qualities to the endeavour, and turns around the idea, at least for the organisers, that outsiders are being represented. There is also here a new kind of interculturality, for the principles of self-representation that we shall illustrate have been influenced by peoples outside Japan working within a very different framework from those of the museums and theme parks discussed above. In this case, the people representing themselves are groups that seek to display a distinct cultural identity to that main Japanese one that was sometimes described as homogeneous, though that particular political line has more recently given way to an acceptance of

the diversity of people who live within the nation. This diversity includes large groups of settlers from China and the Korean Peninsula, as well as second and third generation Japanese from families who had emigrated to South America, but the focus here will be on the longer-standing residents of Hokkaido and Okinawa who have drawn inspiration from the global movement of Indigenous or First peoples reclaiming their prior association with lands subsequently occupied by colonial powers (Hendry, 2005).

The first example is to be found in Hokkaido again, where an open air museum in Shiraoi displays aspects of the lives of the Ainu people, under the curatorship of Ainu scholars and artists who have also travelled to museums in other countries to see Ainu materials collected by foreign visitors. I had met my personal contact here, Nomoto Masahiro, when he was visiting the UK as part of a group that presented Ainu dancing at the British Museum, as well as in Oxford, when I was recruited to show them Ainu objects in the Pitt Rivers museum. In return, when I arrived in Shiraoi, he showed me the houses that they had reconstructed to form Poroto-kotan, the Ainu name for the community, and introduced me to the dancers and craftspeople who worked in the park to represent traditional forms of Ainu life. They dressed in Ainu appliqué-decorated kimono, recounted Ainu stories, demonstrated the playing of Ainu instruments, and again performed traditional dances. Also displayed in the park was a plantation of native herbs and other vegetation, with explanations of how they had been used; and a row of dried salmon, which provided much of the protein for Ainu people when they lived within the natural environment there.

The park is open to tourists, again usually Japanese, and local Ainu visitors who may come for various special activities, and it hosts school visits, but it also takes part in exchanges with

museums and other kinds of cultural centres in several different countries. For example, a group of Ainu artists travelled to Edinburgh to see objects made by their forbears in the Royal Scottish Museum, where they also used the objects publicly to display and refine their own skills by reproducing new examples of them. The First Nations in Canada apparently offered a powerful influence and encouragement to Ainu people as they each regained confidence in their own existence and identity after several decades of subjection to government assimilation policies, and reciprocal visits with these peoples also offered opportunities to exchange ideas and mutual support. It would seem then that there may be a greater degree of genuine interculturality in this kind of venture of self-representation than in the apparently more international parks described above.

A second example from Hokkaido, further north in Akanko, near the famous Lake Akan, is a larger community of Ainu with a variety of outlets that again offer the chance of self-representation. There is a fairly standard museum, containing a collection of conserved objects, as well as some reconstructions of traditional life; another reconstructed Ainu residence, inside containing a display of Ainu garments, new and old, and a fireplace where an Ainu host explains details of Ainu life. She talked to me about the communication that Ainu people used to have with other Indigenous peoples living further north in an area which became part of the Soviet Union, and the long distances they would travel in the past for hunting and trade. This community also contains a theatre, with regular presentations during the day and evening, a row of shops selling Ainu goods, and a cafe that serves refreshments, but also boasts a collection of information about other people recovering from efforts to eliminate their identity. When I visited this place in 1971, it had been an “Ainu village”, with old Ainu houses and various displays of Ainu cultural fare, but

it was administered by a tour operator who was neither Ainu, nor seemed to care that the people he employed to work there were not Ainu either. According to my 2004 informant, many Ainu disapproved of the place, and kept themselves out of sight, though living only a single street away!

The third example in this category is from the other end of the Japanese nation, in the prefecture of Okinawa, and this time the display itself focuses on influences from the outside world. It is a museum of lacquer ware in Urasoe, a district of the main island in the Okinawan archipelago that also houses the castle of the Shuri dynasty that used to rule the Ryukyuan people, separately from Japan. The display specifically illustrates styles of decoration that were influenced from China, and indirectly from Europe, as well as showing examples of the tributes offered to Japan and China in the 16th century, when the Shuri Kingdom maintained a diplomatic position between the two.

The kingdom was also in touch over the centuries with other countries of Southeast Asia through sea trade along a route described as the “black tide” (*kuroshio*), and to represent this communication, objects produced in Burma, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam could be seen on display, as well as designs in lacquer ware that were explained to have been influenced by them. A beautiful six-part folding screen at the entrance to the galleries depicts the ancient port of Naha, bustling with colourful vessels flying the flags of several foreign nations, and the introductory brochure makes clear the extent to which the Ryukyuan people defined themselves through contact with these ports in the outside world. “We, at this museum, stress the importance that Okinawa has given, and gives, to ‘looking outward’ beyond the borders by which it is surrounded”. This clear, explicit example of interculturality is something of a contrast to the rather bounded representations of foreign cultures found in the “theme parks”.

In fact the permeability and diversity found at the peripheries of Japan may perhaps serve something of a purpose of protecting the mainstream of Japanese culture in a way that parallels an old Chinese view of itself at the centre of a world populated on the fringes by colourful minority nationalities, again with a degree of permeability with their relatives across the borders of the Chinese empire (Morris-Suzuki, 1998). To emulate this model had been another example of Japan's propensity to pick up on the practises of a successful outside nation it admired, and the efficient way in which it later imposed an assimilation policy on its minority peoples reflected the influence of the British empire during the period when it was thought beneficial for "inferior races" to be given the opportunity to become incorporated into the "civilised world" it thought itself to lead. For the Ainu and Okinawans to pick up on the movement of cultural revitalisation of those same so-called inferior peoples illustrates a tendency both to be Japanese and to reject the Japanese dominance!

In fact, to adopt a broader Asian perspective can be shown to demonstrate that all of the peoples we have considered under the rubric of being Japanese share some features with other Asian countries, for parks that represent aspects of Malaysian, Thai, Indonesian and Chinese culture, to name but a few, share many of the qualities of the Japanese parks. They build houses containing specimens of material culture that need not be old or collected, but simply illustrative, and they may be copies, even reduced in size. They all also seek to depict aspects of their own histories, and several Japanese "theme" parks have been constructed to portray particular periods of the past in a variety of ingenious ways that are also fun to visit. In fact, it could be argued that the European, American and Canadian parks offer the Japanese the chance to examine in more detail the countries from which they have picked up the latest influx of cultural,



social and political influence, hence adding them to the list of places of self-representation!

## **Conclusion**

We have examined a variety of forms of display that ostensibly offer the chance of some interculturality. Whether EXPOs, museums, theme parks or cultural centres, they all draw on communication between the organisers and the outside world, some to create an authentic representation of the outside, some to gain encouragement in the depiction of the organisers' own heritage. Some are presented as an experience for learning, some for fun, but each share elements of the other; and the third category also made a point of expressing a new-found self-esteem in their identity. They are all therefore influenced from the outside in different ways, whether in form, in content, or in ideology. Japan became a good contributor to world fairs, built impressive museums and theme parks, and stunned the outside world by making literal copies of some of its most magnificent buildings.

Generally, the parks demonstrate a curiosity on the part of the Japanese visitors, a high level of accuracy in observing and representing new forms of material culture, a willingness to interact and absorb new things, to innovate on the basis of those new ideas, and to enjoy the whole process. In this paper, we have drawn on the display of cultural difference that can also be linked with Japanese history, and we have demonstrated an internal diversity that reflects Japan's place in its own historical context. We have shown in this specific case how Japan has engaged with the global village the world has become.

What then makes these examples of interculturality specifically Japanese? Is Japan not just demonstrating a great skill for adopting outside methods of display and even exceeding them in scope and style? Certainly, that is what Japan did, but that is

also what Japan has been doing for a couple of millennia. In an interesting collection of papers entitled *The Culture of Copying in Japan*, the authors illustrate this propensity on the part of Japan to pick up outside elements of culture, ranging from the Chinese script, city plans and systems of government in the 6th century AD, through guns and gunpowder in the 16th., to the production of motor bikes and cars in the 20th (Cox, 2008). Various styles of art and architecture have been adopted over the centuries too, and some now shown off as quintessentially Japanese (such as at Nikko, where buildings of Korean origin abound).

In fact, the pattern seems generally to be to adopt outside forms precisely by copying them to perfection, but then to adapt them to suit the Japanese situation, so that the museums and theme parks we have seen are largely aimed at a Japanese clientele. This kind of interculturality may not be so new after all, then, indeed it is rather a Japanese way of proceeding in its interaction with the outside world. The elements that are new, and can be seen to coincide with the period we have come to describe as global, can probably be found in the degree to which Japan is engaged in exporting the ideas it has developed again, rather than in closing down its ports to outside trade and influence as it did in the 16th century when Christianity seemed to be taking a dangerous hold. At present Japanese visitors may be found in many countries of the world, as visitors, doing business, studying and teaching; but if past history is anything to go by, it would not be outside the bounds of possibility that Japan retreat within its own boundaries in some way again.

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