

# Multiculturalism and Problems of Cultural Essentialism

Hitoshi Mabuchi

## 多文化主義と文化本質主義の問題

馬 潤 仁

### Abstract

This paper examines problems of cultural essentialism in the context of multiculturalism. Cultural essentialism was identified in the debates both by pro-multiculturalists and anti-multiculturalists. Following the arguments presented by Taylor, Bhabha and Young, the notion of cultural essentialism, in which cultures are monolithic with their authenticity and defined boundaries, is problematic and seen to require deconstruction. Thoroughgoing deconstruction of identity itself is not the ultimate goal of multiculturalism. However, the necessity of employing strategic essentialism in each individual context was considered as it may provide a new path to multiculturalism. The above discussion also leads us to explore whether the people in this field recognize Japanese society as diverse or homogeneous. The notion of diasporic hybridity and insights related to gender are suggested as a new valid conceptual framework for multiculturalism, as it has a potential to replace the notions of nationality and ethnicity.

**Key words :** Multiculturalism, Cultural essentialism, Diasporic hybridity,  
Strategic essentialism

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### 抄 録

本稿は、多文化主義というコンテキストにおける文化本質主義の問題点を分析する。多文化主義を推進する、或いは反対するどちらの立場にも文化本質主義に陥る問題性は存在する。小論では、多文化主義の代表的な論者であるテイラーと、それを批判したバーバやヤングの議論を糸口に、静的かつ境界線のはっきりした、自明のように存在すると見なされる「文化」の捉え方を、本質主義とし問題化する。そして、国民性や民族性という概念が構築されたものであるという視点から、ジェンダー等によって脱構築された、或いは根無し草的なアイデンティティの捉え方の意義性について提示を試みる。さらに具体的には、文化理解に関わる様々な場面で、例えば日本、アメリカ、韓国など常に国や民族を単位にして事象を考察しようとする従来のアプローチの問題点が指摘される。

**キーワード：**多文化主義、文化本質主義、ディアスポリック・ハイブリディティ、  
戦略的な本質主義

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## **1 . Introduction**

In my previous papers (2002, 2004), culture was basically identified with ethnic or racial groups, and that way of understanding culture reveals one of the notions of cultural essentialism. Within cultural essentialism, the premise that culture exists has scarcely been questioned. Each culture is seen as having some authentic elements that represent a particular culture. Each culture also has definite boundaries between it and other cultures. In this paper, I will explore some shortcomings or problems of cultural essentialism. First, in the following discussion, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* by Charles Taylor (1992) will be taken up as a means of investigating cultural essentialism and identifying why this concept has recently become the center of debates around multiculturalism. Then, the notions of nationality and ethnicity will be explored in relation to essentialism. Finally, the possibility of diasporic hybridity will be presented and examined. Included here will be an examination of gender and its relationship to these issues.

## **2 . The politics of recognition**

As multiculturalism develops, the relationship between the establishment of self-identification and politics has become important, and these perceived relationships have been the focus of the movement called the politics of identity. Taylor (1992) argues that the process of self-identification is honed through dialogue and conflict with others. In this process, obtaining the recognition of self-identification by the surrounding others comes to have an important meaning. However, some social conditions cause this representation to remain unrecognized. Therefore, a movement referred to as 'the politics of recognition' has emerged as protests against such social conditions and as a vehicle for those demanding equal recognition.

Taylor contends that the politics of recognition contains two antithetical ideas: the one is to demand equal citizenship based on universalistic ideas, the other is to assert the particularity of the individual, giving rise to the politics of difference. He used these antitheses to find a resolution to the conflict between what he describes as the majority and the minority. Majority and minority are often used to describe political power rather than number. For him, the core of the problem lies in establishing whether homogenization has actually occurred as the minority claims. He promotes the concept that all cultures have equal value. According to him, because affirmative action entrenches difference, it cannot provide equality as is the intention. He concludes that affirmative action is ineffective and that a different means of establishing equality needs to be found.

### **3 . Multiculturalism as the discourse of the dominant group and the problem of cultural relativism and essentialism**

Bhabha (1996) criticizes Taylor's idea. He argues that when Taylor asserted the equal value of different cultures, he meant cultures that did not include the cultures of minority groups, and referred only to those that have influenced society for long periods of time. According to Bhabha, Taylor established his own criteria for determining the value of each culture before he began to explore culture. In addition, Taylor focused on the inner world of minority people as exemplified by the notion of self-identification, and he tended to overlook the relation of such matters to power. Although Taylor noted the majority's ethnocentrism, he did not consider how this could actually be a way of sustaining the power of the dominant group.

Taylor's ideas are also premised on the notion of 'cultures as bounded entities'. The problem of seeing culture as a bounded entity is that it prevents us from seeing the diversity within the minority groups, which leads us to hold fixed and even stereotypical views about minorities. This, as a result, helps to sustain the division between the dominant groups and the minority groups. Those who propound principles of respect through statements such as 'we must respect the demand for recognition of the minority groups' may belong to the dominant culture. However, their voices clearly identify with the dominant group (they are the "we"), and these drown out the hybrid elements within them, help to construct the minority cultures in essentialist ways, and, strengthen the position of the dominant groups. The differences within as well as between cultures have to be considered.

Chow (1998) pointed out that, in the politics of recognition, only the White culture recognizes the non-White culture but not vice versa. In other words, the recognition that Taylor proposed has been practiced unidirectionally. Therefore, it is important to ask in whose hands power exists when culture is recognized and represented. Without the examination of this question, the principle of multiculturalism, which exhorts the equal recognition of all cultures, can be misused to maintain the dominant culture to the exclusion of others.

Lowe (1996) looks at cultural essentialism from a different perspective, which leads him to criticize pluralistic multiculturalism. Lowe's point is that the pluralistic approach of treating every culture equally creates an impression of uniformity of differences between minority groups but ignores the differences within each minority group. Accordingly, no sense of problematization of the issues of individual minority groups, which suffer differently in history, emerges. As a result, all cultures are represented naively as equal by the dominant culture. Multiculturalism, for Lowe, should not take this kind of approach,

but must unveil the unequal structures and the contradictions that exist within each of the constituent cultures.

The ideas discussed so far in this section have critiqued the notion of ‘culturalism’ or cultural essentialism in multiculturalism and multicultural education. One of the crucial aspects in the argument relates to ‘difference’ within cultures. Cultural essentialism needs to be problematized and deconstructed so that difference can be considered. In the following sections, the notions of nationality and ethnicity will be examined in order to problematize the concept of cultural essentialism.

#### **4 . Nationalism**

Gellner (1983) has contended that nationalism produced nations, but not vice versa. According to him, the formation of the nations has its root in the emergence of modern nation states and industrial society, and the cultural and political changes accompanying these developments. Hobsbawm (1990) argued that the basic features of modern nations and phenomena related to modern nations contribute to modernity. He stressed the importance of the ideology that was produced to justify the positions of the state in capitalistic economies. Anderson (1983) argued that the decisive factor in the development of nationalism was the printing press. According to him, people imagined the nation through books, newspapers, and mass media. He proclaimed a nation to be an ‘imagined community’.

The common feature among these accounts is that nations have developed as part of modernization and that nations have been built upon notions or myths of homogeneity. Nationalism has played the role of bonding citizens in the process of forming nations. Calhoun (1997: 211–239) explained nationalism as follows:

Nationalism claims essentialistic homogeneity within the group rather than actual hybridity within the group. The function of essentialism is to reduce a certain hybridity among the members of the group to a particular essential norm of the group. Nationalism is an idea that perceives and understands difference in superficial but not fundamental ways, and which neglects to see the differences and particularities among members of the nation.

Bhabha (1994) attempts to tease out certain problems in the abovementioned discourse. He argues that in the discourse concerning nations, mythical origins were invented and traditions were made up in order to create the organic integration of diverse people. On the other hand, nations have crises built-in because the boundary by which they identify themselves always risk being challenged by internal differences. According to Bhabha, the discourse of nations has always contained such tensions. He has focused on

the discourse of the minority groups that can reveal this ambivalent condition of nations because those groups are positioned at the edge of the national culture.

Revealed here is the problem of discourses concerning nationalism. Sakai (1996) has proposed deconstructing nationality as a way of examining this problem. By doing this, it becomes clear that the essentialist understanding of culture, which is represented in phrases such as 'American culture' and 'Japanese culture', is problematic.

## **5 . Ethnicity**

With an increasing number of ethnic conflicts, particularly after World War II, the primordialist approach attracted many adherents. This approach regards the differences between races and ethnic groups as an essential and a primordial aspect of human nature. The theorists arguing this approach include Shills (1957), Geertz (1963), Isajiw (1974), Issacs (1975), and Van den Berghe (1979). One of their claims is that ethnic groups constitute a natural extension of family and kinship relations. Although Smith (1991) does not position himself as a primordialist, he emphasizes the significant role of an ethnic entity, which he called *ethny*, in the process of nation building. He argues that the nation state cannot be built without a core dominant *ethny*.

Barth (1969 and 1994), on the other hand, proposed a boundary approach in response to the primordial approach. In the boundary approach, ethnic groups are divided not by the particular integrated ethnic culture, but by attempts to maintain the boundaries which delineate their existence from that of various outside peoples. According to Barth (1994), each ethnic group and its cultural attributes are not primordial but have been changing in accordance with social conditions. He also argued that ethnicity could be consciously manipulated as the means of politics and that many attributes of ethnic groups, which are believed by primordialists to be objective, are mythical and deliberately constructed either in the ethnic group or the nation. For example, when people talk about a common ancestry, the ancestors are not factual ones but are imagined. People share a history, which includes some constructed narratives. In the same way, many cultural attributes were created because they play a significant role in distinguishing members of a certain ethnic group or nation from others (Smith 1991 22-23).

Sollows (1989) wrote about "the invention of ethnicity" to explain these phenomena. According to him, ethnicity is a cultural construction presumed to have genuine and natural attributes. The invention of ethnicity occurs in a particular context and is shaped by various power relationships. In the process, the evidence pertaining to the process of the invention is removed so that the idea of a naturalized ethnicity can arise. Sollows argues that it is important that ethnic studies focus on these processes which result in or otherwise shape the invention of ethnicity.

To summarize, the discourse of ethnicity needs to be deconstructed. The concept of ethnicity is particularly problematic in the context of Japanese language discourse on intercultural education. For example, Japanese discourse claiming that Malaysia is a compound country consisting of distinct groups of Malays, Chinese, and Indians has to be deconstructed because of its definite boundary notions regarding the authenticity and integrity of each group. The problem with such discourse is the narrow view of the definition of culture based on cultural essentialism, which regards culture as equated with homogeneous ethnicity. What is required might be to revise the concept of a bounded entity in the study of culture and to shift the concept from the idea of celebrating culture to the idea of deconstructed culture.

## **6 . Possibility of diasporic hybridity**

The above discussion of nationalism and ethnicity contributes to the critique of cultural essentialism. The conventional frameworks related to culture, such as the nation state and bounded ethnicity, are being deconstructed. This begs the question: What kind of new framework can be devised to replace such a conventional framework? The concepts of hybridity and diaspora may point the way forward.

The word hybridity, which means the condition of mixing different kinds of things, has been used in a negative sense since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in biology or in the context of racialism (Young 1995: 1–28). Recently, however, positive aspects of hybridity have been discussed (Bhabha 1996). Young (1995), for example, argued that the hybridity presented by Bhabha corresponded to the concept of intentional hybrid proposed by Bakhtin. Bakhtin used hybridization to describe the ability of one voice to ironize and unmark the other within the same utterance and described the phenomenon as intentional hybrid (20). Bhabha transformed Bakhtin's intentional hybrid into an active moment of challenge and resistance against a dominant cultural power (23). Intentional hybridity may change the power relationships between the majority groups and the minority groups. The integration or homogeneity of many nations has often been achieved and constructed by denying the existence of hybrid elements (Tai 1999: 112). Hybridity in this sense replaces the conventional concept of national identity.

On the other hand, the word, diaspora has been used mainly to refer to members of particular ethnic groups such as the Jews who have been dispersed. Recently it has been used to describe the various experiences of people who have lived in different places through the world (Tai: 113). Diaspora can be refer to people who have deserted their original homeland as a result of expulsion and persecution, or have been forced to flee in the wake of political strife, conflict and war (Brah: 1996). Not all diasporas, however, inscribe the homing desire through a wish to return to a place of origin (Brah 1996: 193).

In this sense, “multi-placedness of home in the diasporic imaginary does not mean that diasporian subjectivity is ‘rootless’” (197). New understandings of diaspora can explain the social phenomenon and provide a viewpoint to seek out a new type of identity which does not depend on national identity or colonial, dichotomous identity. The concept of diaspora can be considered in terms of strategies to overcome the exclusiveness of the traditional identity.

Appadurai (1996: 8) points out that the phenomenon, which Anderson (1983) described as ‘imagined community’, now occurs everywhere on earth. The important point of what Appadurai meant here was not the global integration of cultures, but that people imagined communities differently based on their experiences in their own contexts. Thus, the identities, which emerge among those in diasporic communities, should be characterized not by integration but by hybridity. In this sense, Hall (1996) proposes that we have to change the concept represented in the phrase “in spite of the difference”, which has been claimed by the pluralistic multiculturalists, to the phrase “with difference”. He emphasizes the importance of hybridity as the basis for an identity that is gained or achieved through difference. This may be interpreted as suggesting the value of a new identity or diasporic identity, which replaces the conventional national and ethnic identity.

## **7. Gender as an example of the problems of essentialism**

I have taken up a diasporic identity as one which has a possibility to replace an essentialistic identity. Another effective approach to deconstruct the discourses of multiculturalism and intercultural understanding can be found in the view point provided by gender studies.

During the interviews conducted in Malaysia (1995b), I found that some interviewees expressed quite supportive and liberal views toward multicultural or intercultural education. Those who were critical of other Japanese who held disdainful views of local Malays promoted intercultural programs. However, many of these people nevertheless failed to notice diversity within Malay society. For instance, most referred simply to ‘Malay people’ not recognizing differences amongst them that reflected unequal power relations. An example of this is the fact that when talking about Malay, the Japanese businessmen made no distinction between the diverse groups they must have encountered, such as colleagues and the women who work as cheap labor in Japanese factories. In this way, Malay people were treated as a unified entity almost all the time. Regarding Malaysians always as a single category prevents the possibility of exploring their diversity and gives rise to the danger of seeing all members of a social stratum as a single entity.

As discussed previously, one of my main arguments concerning the problem of cultural essentialism is that differences within a culture are not explored. Gender

constitutes a significant difference within cultures, which is overlooked within essentialism. Works by feminists including Brah (1996) and Yuval-Davis (2000), illustrate counter-essentialist arguments. These authors argue that essentialized understandings of culture ignore power inequality including that based on gender. Inequality of this kind creates differences between men and women as well as amongst women and amongst men who share the same cultural identity.

Yuval-Davis (1997: 8) has argued that not all women are oppressed or subjugated in the same way or to the same extent, even within the same society at any specific moment. Mohanty (1995) too has criticized the monolithic view towards women and the assumption that women are an already constituted immutable category. She has claimed the existence of women who do not fall into a single category and therefore an increased diversity amongst women. There are increasing numbers of women who do not marry, who leave their local communities or even abandon their countries, and, on the other hand, there are many women who conform to patriarchal expectations.

These arguments provide a very useful perspective, for instance, when multicultural education is examined in the context of globalization. According to Blackmore (2000: 137), “(globalization created) further casualization of the ‘soft’ periphery dominated by groups such as women at the local level”. This means in the context of education that women are increasingly expected to be trained to fill the peripheral kinds of jobs such as guides, interpreters, and receptionists, all of which are described in Japan using beautiful phrases such as ‘jobs for fluent foreign language speakers’. Many female returnees in Japan enter such jobs. In fact, such jobs have been very popular among girls who have some English competence. Such a phenomenon should be interpreted as meaning that globalization is maintaining the position of women playing a conventional supplementary role in a society. Yet, this notion of women being concentrated in peripheral jobs has scarcely been problematized in the field of intercultural education in Japan.

Therefore, in examining multiculturalism and multicultural education, it is important to acknowledge diversity such as that based on gender. Such difference and the concept of diasporic hybridity described in the section above have provided the basis for the challenge to essentialist multiculturalism and the development of strategic essentialism which will be discussed below.

## **8 . Possibility of strategic essentialism**

Minh-ha (1991: 107), a prominent feminist in the field has argued that “if multiculturalism focuses on the difference between one culture and another culture, it cannot be valid for the subjugated people. Multiculturalism must problematize the difference within a culture”. This statement accords with what Lowe has (1996) argued



(see Mabuchi, 2004). As described in my previous paper, pluralistic multiculturalism has not challenged the traditional power relationship, and has even contributed to the recent anti-multiculturalism. One of the reasons change has not occurred is that pluralistic multiculturalism has not been able to escape from the influence of a notion of cultural essentialism.

Intercultural education in Japan has the same structural problems. The dichotomy between other cultures (essentialized foreign countries' cultures) and an essentialized Japanese culture has always been found in Japan (Mabuchi 1995a). The discourse called '*Nihonjinron*', which is a systematic assertion of the uniqueness of Japanese people, society and culture, has penetrated the Japanese view, particularly that of people regarded as cultural intermediaries (Yoshino 1996).

One question remains, however. Can we reach a solution to the problem of cultural essentialism if we keep deconstructing essentialism to the absolute limit? In other words, an anxiety has emerged as a result of the fruitlessness of the endless deconstruction of identity. Rattansi (1994) has claimed that minority people need to form a positive identity to resist the dominant groups and he proposed *strategic essentialism*. Essentialism in this sense is regarded as not containing the elements of stability and authenticity but embodying the richness of fluidity and hybridity. At the same time, it must be strategically essentialist in each very specialized context. It is possible that shifting identities as a form of strategic essentialism may be an important element of multiculturalism and multicultural education.

Multiculturalism now is able to, and should, find a new path. I would like to characterize this path as a ridge trail, which drops to dangerous gorges on both sides. One side is open for the exhaustive deconstruction of identity. The other side is filled with the endless temptation to re-form essentialist views. The future of multicultural education and intercultural education might be dependent on whether they can successfully find their own ways within their specific contexts between the two.

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