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Ethnicity of Second-generation Japanese Indonesians in North Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

The author has examined the ethnicity¹ formation process of Japanese Indonesians in North Sumatra from various perspectives to determine their type of individuals. The diverse points of view are as follows: their common historical perspective as Japanese Indonesians, friendships between Japanese Indonesians from the time of the Issei² to the present, the influence of Japanese culture in each family, their involvement with the Medan branch of the Yayasan Warga Persahabatan³, and the impact of working and living in Japan, among others. In the study of ethnicity among Japanese Indonesians, three factors are especially significant: blood ties, a sense of being the descendants of residual Japanese soldiers, and the Japanese influence from the Issei within the family. This paper is a compilation of the author's research findings to date, with the addition of Nisei narratives to illustrate aspects of the Japanese Indonesians' ethnicity.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Nisei; Second-generation Japanese Indonesians

ABSTRAK

Penulis telah meneliti proses pembentukan etnisitas orang keturunan Jepang di Sumatera Utara dari berbagai perspektif untuk menentukan tipe individu mereka. Sudut pandang yang beragam adalah sebagai berikut: kesamaan sudut pandang sejarah mereka sebagai orang Indonesia keturunan Jepang, persahabatan antara orang Indonesia keturunan Jepang sejak zaman Issei hingga saat ini, pengaruh budaya Jepang di dalam keluarga masing-masing, keterlibatan mereka dalam Yayasan Warga Persahabatan cabang Medan, dan dampak bekerja dan tinggal di Jepang, dan masih banyak lagi. Dalam studi etnisitas di antara orang Indonesia keturunan Jepang, ada tiga faktor yang sangat penting: hubungan darah, perasaan sebagai keturunan sisa tentara Jepang, dan pengaruh Jepang dari Issei dalam keluarga. Tulisan ini merupakan kompilasi dari temuan penelitian penulis hingga saat ini, dengan tambahan narasi Nisei untuk mengilustrasikan aspek-aspek dari tipe kepribadian orang Indonesia keturunan Jepang.

Keywords: Etnisitas, Nisei, Orang Indonesia keturunan Jepang generasi kedua



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1. Introduction

The author has been researching the ethnic formation process of Japanese Indonesians in North Sumatra descended from Japanese soldiers. The various perspectives encompass their shared historical knowledge as Japanese Indonesians, intergenerational friendships among Japanese Indonesians, the impact of Japanese culture on individual families, and the ramifications of working and living in Japan, among others.

In the study of ethnicity among Japanese Indonesians, three factors are especially significant: blood ties, a sense of being the descendants of residual Japanese soldiers, and the Japanese influence from the Issei within the family. This paper is a compilation of the author's research findings to date, with the addition of Nisei narratives to illustrate aspects of the Japanese Indonesians' ethnicity.

2. Method

The Author's Ethnographic Fieldwork

Since the late 2000s, the author has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia and Japan. In particular, the author has conducted fieldwork in Medan, North Sumatra, and surrounding areas like Binjai, Tebing Tinggi, and Pematang Siantar. In addition, the author has conducted intermittent fieldwork in Japan since visiting Ueda City, Nagano Prefecture, in May 2006. Since December 1990, descendants have migrated to Japan in search of employment. Their first destination in Japan is Ueda City.

The author's ethnographic field research consisted of interviews, observations, participant observation, material collection, and questionnaire surveys. The author gained knowledge through participant observation that could not have been obtained through interviews and literature research. This also resulted in the establishment of a good relationship with Japanese descendants. The author participated in Friendship Citizens Foundation activities in Medan, attended the weddings of Japanese descendants, and spent leisure time with them. In Medan, the author spent as much time as possible day and night in their gathering places.

3. Historical Background of Japanese Indonesians

The Issei are former Japanese soldiers stationed in Indonesia during the Pacific War and World War II who remained in the country for various reasons. They remain in Indonesia because of the following reasons: attachment to Indonesia and the Indonesian nation, having children by Indonesian women or being married, fear of becoming war criminals and being taken prisoner by Allied forces, not wanting to trouble close family and relatives with the stigma of being a fugitive soldier, the death of close family members in Japan, the growing issues in society such as the destruction of the homeland and raids on demobilized ships, and the desire to fulfill the duties of the Greater East Asia War (Fukushi-tomonokai 2005, Hayashi 2007). The results of the author's ethnographic fieldwork reveal that many Issei remained in North Sumatra and Aceh because they were married to Indonesian women, already had children or were in love, but not yet married.

After World War II, the Issei, descendants of former Japanese soldiers, participated in the Indonesian War of Independence (August 1945 to December 1949) by joining the Indonesian Army or unofficial militias, repairing or manufacturing weapons, and providing military training to local residents, among other activities. Then they remained in Indonesia after independence (Issei) and because of their descendants (Nisei and subsequent generations).

Since the Issei period, Japanese Indonesians have been concentrated in Java and Sumatra. There are still some Issei living in Bali and Kalimantan. The author estimates that 150 Issei live in Java and Sumatra, despite the fact that it is impossible to know the exact number due to the lack of official data or an official census.

It is estimated that there are more than 3,000 Japanese Indonesians in Sumatra today, from the Nisei to the fifth generation (Gosei). Less than 27,000, or less than 0.01% of Indonesia's total population of 270 million, are in this group. Moreover, because they are not recognized as a distinct ethnic group, their numbers are not included in census data. They have little cultural, social, or historical recognition in Indonesia.

Photo 1 is a Japanese organization that was founded in Medan in the early 1950s. The organization used to host year-end parties and New Year's celebrations. Participants hail not only from Medan but also from Pematang Siantar and Binjai. Some also came from South Tapanuli and Aceh. Photo 2 depicts a year-end party held in Medan in the 1950s. Meanwhile, Photo 3 shows the Japanese organization in South Tapanuli. This image was captured during the early 1950s. The majority relocated to Medan.

Photo 1

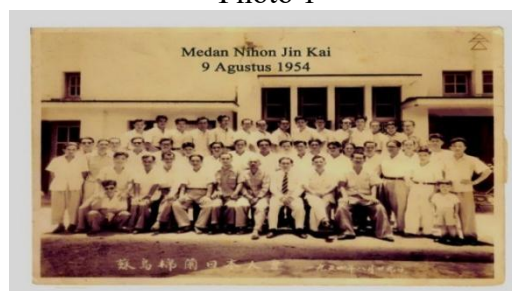


Photo 2



Photo 3



4. Result and Discussion

Elements of Nisei Ethnicity

Here are some of the ways in which the Nisei's ethnicity and Japanese consciousness were formed.

4.1 Children of former Japanese soldiers

The Nisei would not exist without the outbreak of the Second World War. Obviously, they claim that they are of Japanese descent because they have Japanese ancestry. Blood ties conclusively identify a person as a Japanese Indonesian. However, in some cases, the historical fact that the father was a former Japanese soldier takes precedence over the fact that the father is Japanese by blood.

4.2 From the same part of the country

Their ethnicity was also influenced by their sense of brotherhood. The majority of Japanese Indonesians residing in Sumatra are from Medan. If they reside in the same neighborhood within the city of Medan, it is expected that their sense of brotherhood will grow.

4.3 Teasing or discriminatory experiences

Many male and female Nisei were teased as Japanese strays, Japanese in the middle, Japanese children, or colonizer's children by other students when they were students, and they felt bad and uncomfortable.

In August of 2022, a Nisei man told the author, "My granddaughter came home from elementary school. She said her classmates made fun of me because I am Japanese." Other students still ridicule Japanese Indonesians after learning about Japan in history class.

4.4 Japanese name or Japanese style name

The first generation of descendants who married Indonesian women were compelled by their circumstances to assimilate into the local culture and society; consequently, their children and descendants have almost no culture or customs that can be objectively characterized as Japanese or of Japanese descent.

In actuality, very little has been passed down to the second generation.

So, what type of Japanese culture did the first generation of Japanese Indonesians pass on to the next generation? One of the cultures they passed down to their children and grandchildren is the use of Japanese names or names in the Japanese style.

4.5 Friendship between Japanese Indonesians from the time of the Issei

The author believes that by tracing the Issei's friendships, the formation of a Japanese Indonesian community in North Sumatra will become clear. This is because, prior to the 1979 establishment of Yayasan Warga Persahabatan, nothing other than the Issei's friendships and the small associations they formed played a role in their bonding.

The Issei friendship was passed on to the next generation. Therefore, the Nisei continue to gather at weddings and funerals even today. Moreover, the Nisei still cherishes the friendships formed by their forefathers.

4.6 Yayasan Warga Persahabatan

The Medan branch of Yayasan Warga Persahabatan has conducted numerous activities. For example, two memorial services are held annually in Medan. This event is co-sponsored by the Japan Club Medan and the Consulate General of Japan in Medan.

4.7 The influence of the Issei within the household

The following are the narratives of Sansei and Nisei living in Medan

My grandfather was a very fast eater. My grandfather was silent throughout the meal. When we Sansei talked, he would scold us, telling us to shut up and concentrate on eating. I remember learning at a very young age that that is how the Japanese are. (*Male Sansei, June 2, 2010*)

The Japanese culture that my father introduced me to was food. Being of Japanese descent, I can eat raw meat like sashimi and also love sushi. Then, every New Year the family always receives Ozoni from the Japanese embassy in Medan. Ozoni is a soup dish with miso or soy sauce made using mochi and added vegetables such as carrots, daikon, and green onions. (*Male Nisei, February 27, 2023*)

Clean and tidy culture. Once my father taught me how to sweep. The yard is swept clean and there is no moss. When washing dishes, wash them according to the shape of the dish. If dishes are round, wash them in a circular motion. My father taught me how to iron. He also taught me how to take off my slippers when entering the house. I have to keep my slippers together so that they are easy to wear when I leave the house. (*Female Nisei, February 28, 2023*)

5. Summary

The author would like to conclude by providing a summary. The results of ethnographic research were enumerated from a variety of perspectives, and the kind of people Japanese Indonesian Nisei are described in the preceding section. Then, why do Japanese Indonesians Nisei in Sumatra consider this to be their identity? What makes them Japanese (their Japanese Indonesian identity or ethnicity)? This can be attributed to the shared historical memory of their father remaining in Indonesia and contributing to Indonesia's independence, as well as the resulting sense of pride. In addition, sibling feelings, the influence of the first generation in the household, and exposure to Japanese culture through employment in Japan since 1990 have created a second generation who assert themselves and behave as Japanese Indonesians in a complex manner. The author will continue to examine how the ethnicity of Japanese Indonesians has been formed and maintained in the historical, cultural, and social context of Sumatra, as opposed to Java or Bali.

Notes

1. Japanese Cultural Anthropologist Tsuneo Ayabe (1930-2007) describes ethnicity as "a group of people and their consciousness who share a common origin and cultural identity within the framework of a nation-state, under reciprocal circumstances" (Ayabe 1993:258). The author's research follows this definition of ethnicity to examine the Japanese consciousness and identity of Japanese Indonesians who live / lived in a multi-ethnic society from multiple perspectives, and takes the perspective that their ethnicity is the aggregate of all these factors. On the other hand, this paper does not discuss the concept of ethnicity itself.
2. The first generation who were born in Japan and are residual Japanese soldiers are called Issei in Japanese. Indonesian-born second generation are Nisei, third generation are Sansei in Japanese. In other words, the Nisei are the children of the Issei and the Sansei are the grandchildren of the Issei. In this paper, the author uses the Japanese terms Issei, Nisei, and Sansei.
3. Yayasan Warga Persahabatan in Indonesian and Fukushi Tomo no Kai in Japanese is an association of Japanese-Indonesians established in 1979 to support each other and establish relationships between Issei. The foundation is headquartered in Jakarta, with branches in Surabaya and Medan. Japanese-Indonesians call it Yayasan or YWP in Indonesian.

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