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‘Indigenous Youth and Identity Negotiation in an Urban Setting: Life Experiences of ‘Mixed-Blood’ Indigenous People in Adelaide’

Key words

Urban Indigenous youth, identity, life experiences

Abstract

With the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1980s, the Australian government attempted to dissolve the ethnicity of Indigenous people by emphasising the importance of sharing of obligations as citizens rather than claiming of difference between groups. Consequently, a dispute arose in the mainstream society and the Aboriginal community regarding the definition of an Aboriginal, especially over who is entitled to claim social welfare services intended for Indigenous people. Considering this political climate related to Indigenous affairs and the resulting ambiguity of the Aboriginal identity, this paper examines identity negotiation by urban Indigenous youth through an analysis of the life experiences of ‘mixed-blood’ Indigenous people in Adelaide. The data in this paper were mainly obtained from fieldwork conducted by the author in Adelaide from 2007 to 2011.

The paper focuses on the cases of Jack, Tasha and Rose, who are in their twenties and who were born to Aboriginal mothers. Although these three individuals maintain strong kinship relations, they do not overtly express their Aboriginality in their everyday lives. They associate daily with local non-Indigenous youth, who share their experiences of poverty and social exclusion. However, while the Indigenous youth occasionally incorporate the non-Indigenous youth into the Aboriginal cultural domain, such as the practice of reciprocity and the use of Aboriginal English, they also attempt to erect cultural boundaries so that difference between the Aboriginal self and the other is maintained. The Indigenous youth actively utilize their difference as an Aboriginal depending on the purpose and the situation.

Furthermore, the difference in the nature of the Aboriginal cultural elements held by this youth separates them from the mainstream society in terms of socioeconomic success. While Jack has succeeded in establishing a career in Australian society without abandoning his Aboriginality by acquiring ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture, Tasha and Rose remain marginalized in mainstream society, since the cultural difference they acquired at home is excluded from the ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture. Their identity as ‘poor Australians’ has led to their hostile attitude towards immigrants and refugees, which resembles that of some lower class Australians who criticized the government’s welfare policy towards Indigenous people under neoliberalism.

The manipulation of hybrid identities by the Indigenous youth in this study can be characterized as what Hall called ‘the politics of living identity through difference’, which has the potential to transcend the conventional binary opposition between Aboriginal and Western cultural domains, ultimately opening a path

to challenge the static and exclusive identity claimed under multiculturalism. However, the Indigenous individuals did not completely abandon their differences as Aboriginals. Instead, they were able to position themselves between their Indigenous and Australian identities because they had already established a sense of Aboriginal belonging based on kinship. It can be said that such a hybrid identity paradoxically requires a primary cultural difference as Aboriginal. In addition, it is pointed out that there is a widening socioeconomic division among Indigenous youth: those who can acquire the authorized cultural difference to succeed in mainstream society and those who cannot, thereby remaining unprivileged Australians.

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KURITA Ritsuko is a postdoctoral research fellow of National Museum of Ethnology. She received her doctorate in Anthropology from Hiroshima University. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Adelaide, her PhD thesis examined the manner of identity negotiation by the Indigenous people and the nature of their resistance to identity control under multiculturalism. Her recent publications include: “‘Blackfella Way’ and Aboriginal Identity: A Case Study of Adelaide Aborigines,” *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology* (Vol. 13, 2012); “A Study on Criteria of ‘Real’ Aborigines and Ambiguity of Identity: A Case of Urban Indigenous People in Australia,” *Kobe Cultural Anthropology* (March 2012); and “Implications of the Teaching of Aboriginality in Schools: A Case Study of Kaurna Cultural Studies in Adelaide,” *Journal of Australian Studies* (March, 2010). Her research interests include inter-ethnic relations, urban poverty and the underclass and multiculturalism. She is currently working on a research project that examines the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion through racial difference in multiculturalism Australia by focusing on the tensions between Indigenous people and African refugees in multicultural Australia.