

# Belonging

From childhood, people who I met for the first time often ask me, "*Nani jin?*"\* ("*Nani jin?*" means "Where are you from?" or "What are you?"). Through such experiences, I have come to ask myself "Where am I from?" or "What am I?"

I was born in the *Kansai* region of Japan in 1978 between a German mother and a Japanese father. When I was a child, I thought I was just like any other Japanese child because I spoke Japanese and had Japanese friends. I watched the same TV programs and played with them. So naturally I became a Japanese, at least, in the cultural sense.

But when I reached the age to enter school, little by little I came to realize that my family was different from other families. At first I did not know what the differences were, but in school, some of my classmates taught me that I was different by asking me such questions as, "Your mother is a *GAIJIN?*" and "Are you a *GAIJIN?*" I did not understand the meaning of "*Gaijin*" at first, but I could feel that it meant that I was somehow different or strange.

Some time later, I was asked another type of question: "If Japan and Germany fought against each other, on which side would you stand?" Through such questions, I was forced to think about myself and where I belonged.

"What am I?" Am I German or am I Japanese? When I was asked this question, my usual answer was, "I'm Japanese." Sometimes, I would strongly answer so, because I had to show and prove to others that I was a member of their "group". I had to prove that I stood on the same side as the others and not in another position such as that of a German, or a *Gaijin*. For a long time, namely for most of my teenage years, I had to protect my position with such answers or make an effort to learn Japanese history and customs. As a result of such efforts, someone once said to me, "You are more Japanese than other Japanese."

But I noticed that such efforts had no meaning. When I meet a new person, they first ask me, "Where are you from?" or "What are you?" Even though I speak Japanese fluently, have a Japanese family, live in Japan, and have attended Japanese school all my life, these facts held no meaning for others. The important

thing for them was my face or my hair color. Because they don't have the physical features of other "Japanese", I got labeled *GAIJIN* or *Haafu* or "The Other" - not Japanese.

What is Japanese? Doesn't it refer to individuals who have Japanese nationality/citizenship, who go to Japanese schools, have a Japanese family, and speak Japanese? I have all of these characteristics. The only difference is that my face doesn't look like other "Japanese" and my mother is German.

In high school, during a class in history about Greece\*\*, I learned about the idea of Cosmo-politanism. At first, the idea sounded nice because if I were to become a cosmopolitan, I wouldn't have to choose between Japan or Germany. Later, I then noticed that the idea was not useful to use because in this world there is no place named "Cosmopolis". This world is divided into units, or nations, and the rule stands that each person belongs to one nation (Now, I do not think so, but isn't this the common understanding of the world?). Cosmopolitanism is a nice idea, but it is not enough to answer such questions as, "Where are you from?" and, "What are you?"

Imagine this conversation: Someone asks me, "What are you?" and I answer, "I'm a cosmopolitan." Is this the right or expected answer to this question? No, it isn't. Individuals who ask such questions want another answer, such as Japanese or German.

I think cosmopolitanism is a good idea, but it cannot be used in daily life. I then had to think about the theme again, and at last, I came to a conclusion: I'm both. I'm not only Japanese but also German. Having come to this conclusion, I can live with ease.

This conclusion was brought about the FIFA World Cup football games held in 2002 in Japan and Korea. Normally, I do not have a strong interest in football games, but then, the games were held in Japan, making them easier to watch, so I watched them. However, this was not the only reason why I watched the games. I also wanted to know the answer to my question by seeing which side I would choose.

But now I have another opinion. To find an answer to this kind of a question is like walking through a labyrinth or trying to catch the clouds. There is no correct answer. Of course, thinking about it is meaningful, but to get upset about not finding the answer is a waste of time.

For a long time, I thought I was an eccentric person because I thought about such questions - or I

thought it was because I live in Japan. But I know, in the age of globalization and the spread the Internet, there are individuals who live in similar situations in other countries. Their situations may not be the same as mine but they are similar.

The answer to the question, "Where are you from?" is tiresome. But if one thinks about this theme, it brings much insight about the world into the forefront. Now, if someone were to ask me, "Where are you from?" or "What are you?" I would answer, "I come from Japan" or, "I'm a citizen of Japan," and I would also add that "I have a German heritage too."

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by Hyoue

\* "*Nani*" means "what", and "*jin*" means "person". The two are combined to form the sentence, "Where are you from?" or "What are you?"

\*\*At the high school level, Japanese students can choose to either take a class on the history of Japan, named "*Nihonshi*", or a class on the history of other areas of the world, named "*Sekaiishi*". In my school we could only choose one class, and I chose *Sekaiishi* because by that time, I already had a thorough grasp on Japanese history. By the way, "*Nihon*" means Japan, "*Sekai*" means world and "*shi*" means history.