

The Japan Times COMMUNITY

ISSUES | THE FOREIGN ELEMENT

There is more to my son than the fact he's a 'half'

New father Ryan Surdick is tired of being told his son is cute — because it's always linked to the issue of race

BY RYAN SURDICK

[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | JUL 29, 2013

For foreign residents, having a child in Japan can be a daunting prospect. Going to the hospital and trying to figure out what the doctor is saying in complex Japanese medical terms is just one of myriad trials.

However, as Kenji is my firstborn, I had nothing to compare this with — which, on reflection, is probably just as well. Now that the dust has settled, raising a child in Japan is pretty much as one might expect: busy, fun — and challenging at times. I've become an expert at changing diapers (30 seconds start to finish!), saying “No!” five times in a row, and have spent what seems like hours pointing at my face and saying “Dadadadadada.” All in all, I assume it's not so different from having a child in one's native country.

One difference I have noticed, however, is the way people react towards my son, based on the fact that he is half-Japanese. Many people have heard stories of elementary-age non-Japanese students being bullied or ostracized. This is surely unacceptable, but as my son is only a year old, this isn't a problem yet.

On the contrary, people meeting Kenji for the first time often marvel at how cute he is (a correct statement, but I may be biased ...). “So what's the big deal? Why complain about people saying your son is cute?” you might well be thinking. The problem lies not with the comment itself, but with the implication that he is cute *because he is half-Japanese*.

The word “half” often comes up when people meet my son for the first time. Statements such as “*Yappari, hāfu ga kawaii*” (“Just like they say, ‘halfs’ are cute”) or “*Hāfu no me ga okii*” (“Half [kids'] eyes are big”) are fairly common in first encounters. As with most transgressions in Japan, I would usually respond with a polite smile and say “thank you,” bury any misgivings and chalk the experience up to “cultural differences.”

In the West, most people would never think to call someone “half” — or, at least, they wouldn't say it to your face. While it may be acceptable to call someone “half-Japanese” in certain contexts, rarely, if ever, have I heard of someone of mixed ethnicity being called simply “half.” In English,

the word “half” by itself has a connotation of “not being complete” or possibly even “impure,” whereas “half-Italian” or “half-Chinese” has a more literal meaning.

In Japan, however, the word “half” has no such intended meaning, and it is apparently perfectly acceptable to use it in a casual encounter. According to [Hafu Japanese \(http://hafujapanese.org\)](http://hafujapanese.org), a project that promotes discussion about and understanding of half-Japanese individuals in Japanese society, “In modern Japan, the Hafu image projects an ideal type: English ability, international cultural experience, Western physical features — tall with long legs, small head/face, yet often looking Japanese enough for the majority to feel comfortable with.”

This positive perception of half-Japanese people, coupled with the fact that Japan is relatively culturally and genetically homogenous, makes it understandably difficult for the average Japanese to understand why the word “half” could be offensive. There is simply no way for the average person to relate.

In this context, it's taken me quite a while to work out what exactly it is about the usage of the word “half” in Japan that bothers me. Though I know people don't mean any offense by it, there is still a twinge of repulsion when I hear the word. For a long time, I assumed it was just the English connotation influencing my perception of people's meaning.

However, I've come to realize there's more to it than this. The real problem I have is not with the word itself, but rather what it signifies about the user's thinking. It's often one of the first things people say when they meet my son. “Half” immediately becomes the defining characteristic of him to anyone he meets in Japan. And along with this comes a whole host of assumptions.

People are much more than the sum of their physical characteristics. I realize, of course, that Kenji is only 1 year old and there aren't a lot of other ways to define him yet. But I fear this classification based on the fact that his father is not Japanese will only lead to issues in the future that needn't be created in the first place.

Obviously, it's human nature to latch onto something that makes a person unique when we try to fix them in our memory. We often use terms like “the bald guy” or “the girl with glasses and a ponytail” when referring to people we don't know by name. In large part, these types of statement don't bother me, partly because of the brevity of their existence. People quickly come to know other individuals by more than these simple descriptions, providing they get to know the individual at all. “The bald guy” soon becomes known as “George”; if we never meet again, he is forgotten.

In Japan, though, the “half” classification seems to stick. It is forever associated with a person. It becomes a label. People have referred to my son's “halfness” and then have not been able to remember his name. Often, people look at him, look at me, then say with a smile, “*Hāfu?*” as if to confirm his genetic identity before asking his name or how old he is.

This is clearly evidence of a person's ethnicity eclipsing their identity. Remembering someone by

the fact that they're of mixed parentage is as useful as recognizing someone as the "woman with pink glasses." It says nothing about their character and reduces a multi-faceted personality to two dimensions. This type of thinking is a slippery slope that furthers compartmentalized, stereotypical thinking — something I think most people would agree should be avoided.

Is Japan the only society that makes these assumptions? Most certainly not. It's in our nature to stereotype. Even in the U.S., the self-proclaimed melting pot, people routinely class others based on their race or appearance — and it's no more right there than it is here. But the Japanese cultural concept of *uchi/soto* — inside/outside — makes it all the more troubling that multiracial individuals are categorized according to their "halfness." Such pigeonholing can surely only hinder the integration of bicultural individuals into mainstream Japanese society.

For people of mixed ethnicity who grow up, work and live here, this "racial profiling" can be a lifelong irritant. As a young half-Japanese man named Chikara Dean, quoted in an article on the Japan Today website, says, "I had some Japanese people who would stare at my face seemingly in wonder that I could speak fluent Japanese." Much as the terms *gaijin* or *gaikokujin* push the fact that an individual is not Japanese to the forefront of the speaker and listener's consciousness, "half" segregates people who are culturally, linguistically and genetically part-Japanese from the rest of the society in which they have been raised.

Having been referred to as "gaijin" more times than I can even hope to remember, I have at least some insight into how much of a pain these labels can be. But in my case, cultural integration is not something I'm seeking. I can live, work and get along just fine in Japan as the perpetual "guest." But I wonder how it would be to grow up like this. How would a lifetime of these "psychological micro-aggressions" affect an individual? Could that person ever truly feel Japanese? Would they even want to? Or does it rob them of part of their cultural heritage? These are questions that only bicultural individuals can answer.

So does this mean I'll go about my daily life correcting everyone that calls Kenji "half," explaining to them in lengthy diatribes about the implications of their statement? Probably not. No one person in particular is to blame. Much like being told "Wow! you use chopsticks so well!" — or "You speak Japanese very fluently!" after having only said "konnichi wa" — it's the multitude of trespasses that grates more than any one particular offense.

It's difficult to turn the tide of an entire culture individual by individual. But is there any other way? I explain my concerns to a few Japanese friends and I encourage them to pass them on to their acquaintances. I tell them to always keep in mind that a half-Japanese person may have lived their whole life in Japan, only speak Japanese and be effectively monocultural.

Hopefully, through these small conversations, a greater recognition of these issues can eventually be reached. Japanese culture, for all it's beauty and nuances, is slow to shift, but it is not immobile; and for change to happen, shared understanding is all it takes.

Send comments on these issues and story ideas to community@japantimes.co.jp
(<mailto:community@japantimes.co.jp>).

[MAIL THE EDITOR \(HTTP://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/CONTACT-US/READER-MAIL/\)](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/contact-us/reader-mail/)

[ERROR REPORT \(HTTP://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/ERROR-REPORT/\)](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/error-report/)

[REUBLISHING \(HTTP://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/ABOUT-US/REUBLISHING/\)](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/about-us/republishing/)

[COMMENTING POLICY \(HTTP://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/ABOUT-US/COMMENTING-POLICY/\)](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/about-us/commenting-policy/)

[Refresh](#)

[Settings](#)

[Sign in with your Twitter account](#)
