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"*Maybe I used to be like that*":

History and memory in the process of identification among Indisch-Japanese descendants

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Nagel, N.M.R

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Supervisor: Dr. A.E. Ezawa

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Introduction

"[my Japanese part] is now an undeniable part of my history. In the past I had to be secretive about it. Yeah, there was also some shame that I was Japanese, but that's over now."

R.

In this thesis I examine the complications in constructing an identity among Indisch-Japanese descendants. An identity that is based in a past of conflict, one that has been hidden and negatively approached. With Indisch-Japanese descendants I refer to people who were born of an Indisch mother and a Japanese father during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies (1942-45) and live in the Netherlands. Growing up in a social environment that is taunted with the memories of the Japanese occupation, many Indisch-Japanese grew up with the image of 'the Japanese' as 'the enemy'. The wartime discourses in the community led to an approach of taboo, secrecy and shame towards their Japanese background. Many children grew up not knowing that their biological father was a Japanese man and were raised to believe that their adoptive father was their real father. How do these Indisch-Japanese descendants construct an identity out of a past that has been hidden and negatively approached?

The above quote was spoken by one of these Indisch-Japanese descendants. He found out about his Japanese background when he was 61 years old. This quote contains his experience with taboo and the shame he encountered for his Japanese background but it also shows a shift in his perception on his Japanese identity. In this thesis, I will elaborate on how these aspects of history, taboo and identity relate and how different experiences led to a change in perception.

Former research has been done on the life-stories of Indisch-Japanese descendants (Buchheim 2008) and the negotiation of their identities (Ezawa Forthcoming). These researches show the importance of a history based in WWII and the effects of the leading discourse about 'the Japanese' on the silencing and hiding of information about the origin of the children born of the so-called 'enemy'. I aim to extend this, by examining the ways in which they aim to find new ways to deal with their history by pursuing more information about their background. The central focus in this thesis is the moment in which they try to discover their Japanese background by taking a trip to the country of their biological father.

This trip to Japan is part of a co-operation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan (MOFA) and the two organizations in the Netherlands that are directed at Indisch-Japanese descendants, 'Stichting Sakura' and 'Vereniging JIN'. Each year, a number of members of these two organizations have the opportunity to visit Japan. This program is

sponsored by the MOFA and is part of a peace and reconciliation program. The official name for the these trips is the “Japan-Netherland Peace Exchange Project-trip”.

With a history of growing up surrounded by a negative discourse about Japan and a negative approach towards their Japanese background, I wonder what their image of Japan and Japanese people is and whether or not this changes when they experience Japan for themselves. Besides this image of Japan, there is also the question of identification; Do they identify themselves to this image of Japan and its people? What does it mean for them to be Japanese? Do the personal experiences in the actual country influence this identification?

As the important work of Hall on identity shows us, identification is a process (Hall 1996). Accordingly, this research is based on life-stories to show what the processes are in the forming of an image of Japan and the identification to ‘the Japanese’. This thesis shows the interplay of history, memory, discourse, taboo and agency in the negotiation of what it means to have a Japanese identity for these Indisch-Japanese descendants.

Life-story as a method

In order to answer the main question, I have applied several methods of research. The most central is the conduction of five qualitative semi-structured life-story interviews. In these interviews, the interviewer holds minimal control over the direction of the story, but is aware of a red line that needs to be followed (Bernard 2006, 211). In this way, the interviewees could express themselves on their own terms, which allowed me to see the central aspects of their lives as Indisch-Japanese descendants.

These interviews were held in the form of life-story interviews. I use ‘life-story’ instead of the often used word ‘life-history’ because the story a person tells about his life is always a selection and its content is not provable as a fact. Instead, it shows how a person gives shape to his experiences and memories, constructs a certain order in these experiences and tries to make sense of them in the form of narrative (Ochs & Capps 1996, 19). This is especially important for my research, because it is not about the facts of their past, it is about how they remember and interpret certain experiences and how this shapes the way they think about themselves.

Besides the interviews, I have analyzed the written reports about the trip to Japan from other Indisch-Japanese descendants. This has been of importance in my preparation for the interviews because it gave me an overview of the most important themes that come forward in the experiences of the trip. The reports are send to the MOFA and can contribute to the continuation of future trips. Because of the possible bias to these reports, I have not used them in the content of my research. The analysis of these reports has been used to gain background information and insight in the preparation of the interviews.

The trip to Japan is a central focus in this thesis, consequently I have followed three of the interviewees more intensively. I have conducted interviews with them before and after the trip to Japan and have been present at formal and informal meetings regarding the trip. This method of observation gave me insight in the way people act and think towards being Japanese and how they think and act in anticipation of going to Japan. It gave me more indirect information on the most important aspects of their identity and the trip, because the subjects of conversation occurred in a social, informal gathering. This in contrast to a semi-structured interview.

The intensive and qualitative research methods have resulted in a case-study research. Based on these three cases, I will show the processes and mechanisms that take place when constructing an identity out of secrecy. But before we go there, I will first explain what I mean when I write about the much discussed term ‘identity’.

Identification, discourse and memory

Identity is a term that has kept many scholars in sociology and anthropology occupied. As Hall shows us, there has been a paradigm shift in Western thinking on identity. Especially leading into the age of modernism in the 19th century, along with the help of Saussure, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, the idea of identity as something fixed and static has been refuted (Hall 1996, 340-1). Instead, identity is formed and constructed through social interaction and in comparison to 'the Other' throughout a period of time. To contradict the perception of identity as something static, scholars have suggested to use the term 'process of identification' (Hall 1996, Jenkins 2008).

Internal- and external process of identification

This process of identification is a matter of both classification and self-identification, while attributing meaning to this differentiation. The process of *classification* is a manner of differentiating the social world as a way to find out 'who is who' and what the established differences and similarities mean. But merely a differentiation between others is not sufficient for an individual to form an idea of who he is. In order to do so, one must also *self-identify* to other individuals and collectives to find out 'who am I' within the social world and what does it mean that I am different from him or similar to her.

To make it somewhat more difficult, identification is not only an *internal* process. As Jenkins' theory of 'internal/external dialectic of identification' shows, it is not only up to you to classify and identify, for a large part this is also done *externally* (Jenkins 2008, 12). Hall explains this very well: "Most of the identities that I have been, I've only known about *not* because of something deep inside me – the real self – but because of how other people have recognized me." (Hall 1996, 344).

So for now, when I write about terms like 'identity', 'construction of identity' and 'identity forming', I refer to this as a process and not as something static. I understand the process of identification as the interplay of internal- and external identification. This process of identification is both a matter of classification and self-identification, in which meanings are attributed to the defined differences and similarities between individuals and collectives.

'Imagined communities' and discourse

A pivotal way in which people classify and identify is in terms of groups and collectivities. A central element of knowing who you are in contemporary constructions of identity, is in knowing where you come from, to which 'kind of people' you belong. The identification to a group based on historical ties of belonging, is often done in terms like nationality, ethnicity and family. For a moment, let's look at national identities. A way to form a group out of an amount of individuals that do not know each other and share nothing but

the national boundaries they live in, is to find or create similarities. According to Renan, the formation of a national collectivity to which people can identify themselves with, is subject to two key elements. One is the construction of a story that shows a shared past of greatness, in which some elements that contradict this greatness are deliberately 'forgotten'. The other key element is having a common present-day consent, the shared will of a people to carry on this greatness of the past in the their future as a unit (Renan 1996, 52).

These elements form a group, a national community, to which people can identify based on these constructed similarities. The members of these kind of groups do not know each other face-to-face, but they share the belief of belonging to the same group, they 'imagine' a community to which they can identify. Anderson's term 'imagined communities' is originally aimed at political units (Anderson 1991), in this case I will use it to refer to the 'imagined community' of Japan, or 'the Japanese'.

The establishment of an 'imagined community' such as 'the Japanese', is based on similarities and differences that are not in the essence of such a group, but rather 'imagined' by the people who identify this group. For instance, a characteristic that is 'imagined' to belong to 'the Japanese people' is discipline. This is not something that is actually apparent in every member that is considered 'a Japanese person', but it is 'imagined' to be one of the shared characteristics of the members of this group. When you look at, for instance, racial identity, the meaning of differences between these established groups are not as essential as a difference in the color of the skin, they are meanings that are politically, culturally and historically formed in a society (Hall 1996, 345). These kind of 'imagined' meanings and labels are of importance because they can have 'real' consequences in social relations, such as exclusion and discrimination.

An important aspect of the attribution of meanings and labels to certain groups, is the influence of discourse. The foundation of this term lies with Michel Foucault and it refers to the way in which communication forms the 'truths' and 'realities' of people (Foucault 1972). Discourses are the "...systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak." (Lessa 2006, 285). They are a power-full influence on the way people give meaning to the identification of individuals and groups.

Discourses are not 'things' that just exists, rather they are an ongoing form of communication that is constructed and reconstructed over time. When we look at the discourses about 'the Japanese', an important influence on the 'system of thoughts' among the people who have experienced the Second World War in the Dutch East Indies, is history and memory. The historical base for the discourses about 'the Japanese' that the Indisch-Japanese descendants grew up with lies in the experiences and memories of a period in which Japan was considered 'the enemy'. In the next chapter I will further elaborate on these

memories of the war. For now, it is important to note the role of history and memory on the discourse about 'the Japanese' and how this influenced the 'truths' and 'realities' that shaped the understanding of the world among the Indisch-Japanese descendants.

Memory and the story of the self

Now let's return to the process of identification. An important aspect in forming an identity is memory. According to Jensen and Wijnberg, Locke's identity theory stresses the importance of a 'continuous consciousness' in the process of identity construction (Jensen and Wijnberg 2010, 139). Without a 'continuous consciousness', a person has no recollection of the past and for that reason has no memory of his identification processes. So identification is not a measurement of the moment but it is a complex collection of experiences and memories over a large period of time.

When a man finds out about his Japanese background when he is 60 years old, he does not have a history of identification to 'the Japanese'. This identification to 'the Japanese' needs to be constructed for it to mean something to him. As Hall states: "Part of his identity is there, but he has to discover that identity. It's not an essence like that, he has to learn to tell himself the story of his past." (Hall 1996, 348). This story of his past is about finding out where you come from, recovering the relation to the past by memory in order to be able to tell a story of the self. But it is also about claiming the identification, finding ways to identify with 'the Japanese'. These activities are also referred to as 'identity practices': "The routine actions and ways of thinking, as well as the representations of these acts and thoughts, that enable people to claim collective identities" (Gerson 2001, 179). His identification to 'the Japanese' is not only a matter of having an ancestral similar background and recovering the relation this has to his past. It is about finding ways to identify to this collective based on the 'imagined' similarities. These ways of identification need to be learned, incorporated and then attributed to the story he tells about himself (Hall 1996, 348).

The framework in which I research the cases is the process of identification that is based on an interplay between internal- and external identification based on differences and similarities. A center point in this process is the role of history and memory. This occurred in the way discourses are of influence on the process of identification. But also in the way individuals aim to constitute themselves by constructing a story of the self. I will continue with a discussion of the history and memories of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies.

Memories of the war

To understand how the negative discourses about 'the Japanese' developed in the home situations that the Indisch-Japanese descendants grew up in, it is important to understand how the people have experienced the war in the Dutch East Indies. In many cases, the father who adopted the descendants was either an Indisch or Dutch member of the KNIL[1]. Their memories of the war play a central role in the social relation they had with their half-Japanese adopted child. The memories of the Indisch, and especially the Indisch mothers, have also been of importance to the identification processes of the descendants. Here I will focus on the experiences of the KNIL-members and the Indisch people.

The Indisch people refers to people of mixed European and Indonesian blood, or Indo-Europeans with Dutch citizenship. But it also refers to full-blood Europeans with Dutch citizenship that were born or grew up in Indonesia. Many of the Indisch children, if their father would officially recognize them, were considered Europeans with a Dutch citizenship. As such, by 1940 there were about 200,000-300,000 people registered as Europeans in the Dutch-East Indies .

With the invasion of the Japanese Army in 1942, the population was divided mostly by color of the skin instead of legal status. On their mission to form a 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere', the Japanese military imprisoned anybody that could form a threat. Among these imprisoned people were full-blood Europeans and members of the KNIL. The Indisch were divided based on their degree of Asian descent which decided whether or not they were imprisoned (Buchheim 2008, 261). Those Indisch people that were not imprisoned, the so-called 'buitenkampers'[2], were kept outside of the camps on condition that they would be pro-Japanese and work hard to create a sphere of prosperity. The 'buitenkampers' consisted mostly of women and children because most of the men were summoned to join the KNIL just before the war started (Janssen 1995, 129). With no income from the men, and often no experience in working for themselves, these women had to deal with the asperities of the war on their own. Especially as the war progressed, scarcity and hunger became big issues which left them in a situation that was insecure and threatening.

This was the situation in which most of the mothers of the Indisch-Japanese encountered a Japanese man, either at their workplace or in daily life (Ezawa Forthcoming). The resulting relationship often brought support to the women and their families in terms of more access to scarce products, but also in exemption from military rule. In some cases the relationship resulted in the birth of Indisch-Japanese babies. Among the Indisch, these kinds of relationships were often judged. The romantic relationships with 'the Japanese enemy'

[1] Koninklijke Nederlands-Indisch Leger, or Royal Netherlands East Indies Army
[2] 'Outside campers'

made them a disgrace for their family and in their community. Reason enough for many of the Indisch mothers to keep their relationship with a Japanese man a secret.

In 1945, the Japanese were defeated after which most Japanese men were shipped back to Japan, among whom most of the Japanese fathers. What followed was a chaotic and violent four year period of the Indonesian National Revolution[3]. In these years, the mothers got involved with another man, in many cases this man was a KNIL-soldier.

These KNIL-soldiers had endured their own hardships in the war. During the occupation, about 42,000 men became prisoners of war and had to work for the Japanese in most merciless circumstances. The POW's[4] were often used as laborers to build airports and railways or were set to work in the mines. Many were shipped off to other Japanese occupied parts of East and South-East Asia. The Burma Railway is best known, because of its horrible conditions and death rates. About 20% of the POW's did not survive the war (Bosma et al. 2006, 45). The Dutch POW's who worked in these Japanese labor camps often had to endure maltreatment by their camp guards.

Despite their experiences during the Occupation, many of the KNIL-soldiers adopted the half-Japanese child and later raised it as a part of their family. But the traumatic memories these men have of their imprisonment have lingered on even long after the war. With memories of maltreatment and the horrific conditions during the POW's internment, you can imagine that their image of 'the Japanese' was not much of a positive one. This was especially so in the few years after the end of the war, in which 'the Japanese' were blamed for everything that had gone wrong.

After Indonesian independence in 1949, the mothers and adoptive fathers emigrated to the Netherlands with their children. In the Netherlands, they were confrontedwith a lot of ignorance about what had happened in the Dutch East Indies. The people in the Netherlands had to deal with their own traumas of WWII (Raben 1999, 9). The war victims from the Indies had a hard time finding acknowledgement in the Netherlands (Locher-Scholten 1999, 58). The Indisch were drawn towards each other in their new country and they formed the 'Indisch Community'.

The people in the 'Indisch Community' had experienced 'the Japanese' as the 'enemy' and in the memoirs they are often referred to as 'split eyes', ants, rats and other vermin. This was the discourse that occurred mostly in the memoirs from shortly after the war, but later memoirs were much milder (Captain 1995, 111). According to Bosma et al., the stance towards 'the Japanese' within the 'Indisch Community' was one of hate. On one side this was because of what they had to go through during the war and on the other hand because

[3] A period in which the Indonesian nationalists fought for the independence of Indonesia and the KNIL army fought to regain their power over the Dutch East Indies.
[4] Prisoner Of War

Japan stood symbol for the disruption with their pre-war existence (Bosma et al. 1999, 79). It was the demolition of the colonial imperium that led to the loss of status among the Indisch.

These memories of the wartime past, led the Indisch mothers to keep the Japanese background of their child silent, while the adoption fathers were constantly reminded of their wartime experiences by the presence of a half Japanese child. Growing up as a half Japanese child surrounded by people who have such memories of the war and of 'the Japanese' have often led to a difficult home situation. To illustrate this, I will now introduce you to three Indisch-Japanese descendants.

The Indisch-Japanese descendants

The three men whose life-stories I will focus on are Karl, Mark and Ron[5]. In this introduction I will shortly highlight the most central aspects of their lives, which I will expand on in the chapters that follow afterwards.

Karl

Karl was born in Indonesia, near the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945. During the Indonesian National Revolution, he and his mother were put in camps. In 1947, Karl's mom met his foster father with whom she got two more babies before they all moved to the Netherlands in 1950. Over the years, Karl's family got extended with two more children. Karl grew up with his mother, stepfather and four little (half)sisters.

When Karl was around his teens he started to feel that his father treated him differently from his sisters. He also noticed that he looked different from his sisters but could not explain why. The relationship with his father became very difficult and by the time he was 15 years old, he could no longer live with the situation at home. He got a job working on trade boats that took him all around the world. During this time he had visited Japan twice but at the time he did not know that he was partly Japanese himself.

After the trade boats and his service done in the military, Karl worked several jobs all around the Netherlands. His relationship with his father did not change for a long time. Karl mentions feelings of being a stranger, in his family and in his home country. When he was in his 30's he married and had a child. His mother died when he was about 41 years old and his father passed away not long after that.

Karl has always had an interest in history. During his retirement he had a lot of spare time which he spent researching his family's past in Indonesia. He did extensive research and found family trees of the family that lived in Indonesia. He already knew that his father had been imprisoned by the Japanese and was send to Siam to work on the Burma-railway. He remembers that his father had good experiences with Thailand and the Thai people, apart from the forced labor he had to do for the Japanese. But what he found out is that the numbers did not add up. His father had been in Thailand from 1943 and did not meet his mother until 1947, which meant that he could not have been around when Karl was born in 1945. He realized that his father could not have been his biological father, after which he contacted an aunt, who was a teen during the war. She told him that his biological father was a Japanese military man.

[5] In order to keep these three men anonymous, I have chosen to give them aliases. These are not their real names.

Mark

Mark has known about his Japanese background all his life. He and his brother were born in 1945, in Indonesia. When they were two years old, their mother left them in a home for boys' care where they grew up as orphans.

His earliest memories of the boys' home were of him and his brother being bullied. He remembers the years in the home as a very hard and difficult period in his life. At the time, the boys did not know either of their parents, which left them with a lot of questions about where they came from. There was nobody around who could answer these questions which left them confused and instable.

At the age of 11, they were taken in by a man and a woman. These few months were hell for them. The man was abusive and the boys tried to run away as often as they could. They often had suicidal tendencies and one time the nurses from the boys' home had to take them off the train tracks to save them. After this happened, the nurses had sent a letter to child protection service in the Netherlands, stating that the boys could not stay with this man.

After a few months they all came to the Netherlands after which Mark and his brother were put in a boarding school. Years later they learned that the married couple they stayed with in Indonesia were actually their biological mother and her new husband. They started to restore contact with their family, but Mark still felt bitterness and misunderstanding as to why things happened as they did. His questions about this were never answered, his family did not want to talk about it.

When Mark was 18 years old, he heard a story from his mother's neighbor. According to this story, his mother had been involved with a Japanese man in Indonesia and this resulted in the birth of Mark and his brother. Their mother had lost contact with the Japanese man and by the time they were 2 years old, their mother had met her current husband. This man insisted that she would abandon these babies because they were Japanese and not his own babies and so she deserted them. The neighbor claims that she had even seen a picture of the Japanese father. When Mark confronted his mother with this story, she denied everything. The confrontation resulted in a big fight after which he broke with the family.

After this fight he did not want to have anything to do with the past anymore. He got married and started to focus on his own family and his work. He started his job and went to night school, while raising his children as well. This was a very busy time for him. Over the years he got back in contact with his mother, her husband and his half siblings but the past was still a troublesome subject. They did not understand why he had all of these questions and why he couldn't just let it rest.

When they got older, Mark's brother started to look into the past more actively by joining 'Stichting Sakura', conducting a search for their biological father and taking a trip to

Japan. This slowly attracted Mark to join as well, but it was not until last year that he decided to take the trip to Japan.

Ron

Ron was born in 1945, in Indonesia. He and his family were so-called 'buitenkampers' when Ron was born. After the Japanese were defeated, Ron's mother met a KNIL-soldier, who had come back to Indonesia from working at the Burma-railway and they got married. During the Indonesian National Revolution, they were put in camps for a few years. After the birth of a daughter, they came to the Netherlands in 1949 where three more children were born.

When he was a child, Ron remembers, his father used to bully him. His father was a strict man, also towards his sisters, but Ron felt that he was only mean to him systematically. He felt like he was treated differently and he also felt that he looked different from his siblings, which made him feel like an outsider in his family. When he was about 12 years old, he discovered his adoption papers. The papers stated that his father acknowledged him and that Ron would from now on carry his last name. He knew now that his father was not his real father. He was surprised and confused but somehow he felt that he could not bring it up to his parents, so he never spoke to anyone about it.

By the age of 15, Ron spend less and less time in the family circle. Soon after this, he left home to go live on his own. Ron describes his life from his 20th to his 40th as a rebellious time. He was active in the anarchistic scene and he was drawn to the periphery of society. During this time he had met his girlfriend with whom he got engaged.

When Ron was 39 years old, he and his girlfriend had their first child. After two years he decided to throw his life around. He broke with many of his friends and got a job, which was against all his principles before that. He lived this life until he was in the end of his 50's when he got a psychological burn-out. He was advised by his therapist to find out more about the past and confront his mother about the adoption papers. By the time, his father had already passed away. Ron was 61 years old when he broke the silence and first confronted his mother to ask her questions about his descent. This was when he found out that his biological father was a Japanese man that she had met during the war.

Image of Japan and social relations

As all three men have lived very different lives, including three very different ways in which they have been confronted with their Japanese background, I will now go deeper into their stories, focusing here on their childhoods. I will discuss the general images of Japan they were confronted with in their youth. Then I will focus on the external classification of them as 'Japanese' and the resulting behavior of their surroundings towards them. Lastly, I will focus on the impact that this classification, its attributed meaning and resulted behavior has had on

the self-perception of these men. I will show how the taboo, secrecy and respect towards their mother overruled their ability to ask questions about their origin.

The wartime discourses on Japan have led for many Indisch-Japanese descendants to grow up with prejudices and a negative image towards Japan. The memories of Japan as 'the enemy' have lingered on even long after the war and affected the image that these Indisch-Japanese constructed of Japan. Ron remembers that his father had always had a firm stance towards everything that was Japanese. "The things that were talked about during those [family meetings] were not so positive, I can remember…there was quite a rigid attitude towards everything Japanese, that couldn't be any good. My father has for a long time refused to buy a Japanese car. He didn't want that, nothing from Japan. There were many…maybe because of the way my father talked, but there were many negative things said about Japan." At a young age, these stories influenced Ron's image of Japan, "I got the image of cruelty, system aimed, authoritarian…they seemed like some sort of ant colony to me. An unstoppable mass, that's the image I had of the Japanese people when I was young."

This negative image, combined with other people's classification of them as partly Japanese, has influenced the way people behaved towards them. Mark, for instance, remembers that he was being bullied by the other kids in the boys' home because they recognized him as Japanese. "Some of those kids [in the home], especially the older Chinese, were real bastards. Sometimes they would snort their nose and rub it all over your face, or they would spit in our faces. And they only did it with me and my brother." When I ask them why he thought they only did it to them, he says "yeah well, because we were Japanese children. Those other children were never picked on, only my brother and me." Another story he tells is of him joining the military service when he was 18 years old: "I was among KNIL-people and I heard negative stories about Japan. And when they discovered that I was of Japanese background, they were very distant…'well, then, you don't belong to us'. Not that they blamed you, there were also KNIL-soldiers that said 'Oh, you can be proud of that, they were good fighters' and stuff. But those are not the words I wanted to hear. It's just that…in fact, I didn't belong. If I would've said that I was a Sumatran, an Indonesian, then I would have been welcome." The classification by others of Mark as a 'Japanese person' resulted in the behavior of discrimination and exclusion.

Ron and Karl were also confronted with behavior that made them feel excluded. At the time they only encountered this behavior, but were not able to explain it. In their stories it is especially the father that showed this behavior. Ron, for instance, remembers that his fathers' behavior was explicitly directed at him: "He had the habit of hurting me, in front of everybody ehm, he had the nasty habit of eh…on Sundays we had dinner at noon and we would all sit at the table. He would bully me for such a long time that I would run from the table crying. He didn't do this type of bullying to my sisters. My oldest sister did complain that

he would punish her, but she was pretty naughty and disobedient. But systematically, eh…what he did to me, I don't remember him doing that to her. Systematically…that is actually mistreatment." Karl was also confronted with his fathers' behavior towards him, which started when he was in his teens: "He was a strict man, also towards my sisters, and I could handle that…but when I became a teen, around twelve or thirteen years old, I suppose that he saw some traits in me that reminded him of the past…I could feel that he started to have an aversion towards me and that is…that's pretty tough, yeah. My father did try to hide it, he wouldn't admit it like that, but as a child…you feel more and you see more than you would think". In their stories, the behavior of their fathers made them feel marginalized and mistreated in their families.

The resulting behavior and expressions of this external classification, has had an influence on the way these children defined themselves. Mark identified himself as Japanese and was confronted with it as something negative at a young age. His youth was a period in which he was sensitive to the opinions of his surrounding: "As a child you're not able to put things in perspective, you only know that when they tell you 'you're father was a villain' for instance, all villains are bad, you know that. So when you are the child of a villain, that is bad enough in itself." At a young age, Marks identification to this negative image of 'the Japanese' and the behavior of the other children, made him feel like his Japanese part was a bad thing and that it made him a bad person.

The difference with Mark's story and that of Ron and Karl is that the latter did not have an explanation for the behavior they were confronted with. They did not know that they were partly Japanese and had no reason to identify themselves as Japanese. The image of 'the Japanese' was not something they internalized in their self-definition. What they did internalize was the behavior of their surroundings and the resulting sense of being different.

The noticed difference in their appearances compared to their siblings, combined with how people acted towards them, made them feel like they did not belong in their families. Their childhoods were marked by feelings of inferiority, a distorted relationship with their father and a strong sense of being different. They knew who they were not and that they were different, but they did not know who to identify with and were struggling with questions of belonging.

These questions of belonging were made even more difficult by the taboo and secrecy that surrounded their origin. They felt like an outsider, but the taboo made them feel that they could not talk about it. As children, this sense of taboo was already prominent in their lives and made it tough for them to ask questions. Even for Ron, who had discovered his adoption papers which raised many questions about his belonging, the confrontation with his parents seemed impossible: "I understood, instinctively, that oh, I should not go and say

‘hey, look what I found, please explain to me what this is’. So I just put the papers back…I was a coward.”

For Mark, this sense of taboo was less automatically felt, but he was confronted with it when he started to ask his family questions about the past. His curiosity was not understood by his family and they had told him to stop asking questions. He felt like he only had a partial understanding of where he came from, but had no sources to find out more about the truth: “…but you are also a part of history. Do we always have to keep silent? When you want to tell about history, you have to get near the truth and don’t just tell a story. It’s good to know what happened in the past and maybe we can learn something from it. That’s what it’s about, but it does have to be about the truth. And why can’t that be the case with our history? If people keep silent, then we can’t know the truth of our history.”

The taboo and secrecy made it impossible for these children to find out more about their origin. Their primary source of information, their family members, could not be reached due to this taboo. The result this had was that they grew up in a “reality” that was based on the information given by their family about their origin, a “reality” that they somehow felt was wrong but were incapable to ask questions about.

Leaving the home, independence and agency

While growing up in a difficult home situation, the period of adolescence brought many changes in their process of identification. From adolescence to adulthood, the men became less dependent on their families to form their understanding of the world and started to rely more on their own perspectives. Their identification became less focused on difference, and more on an internal search for who they were and who they wanted to be.

Karl’s story shows a radical form of breaking away from the family when he started to work on trade boats when he was 15 years old. The following quote shows how the situation at home and the relation to his dad had left him insecure and he could no longer live that way: “Let me tell you, when I was fifteen, I had a real inferiority complex, but those years on the boat really helped me, I got tougher. I don’t care about anything or anyone anymore… I’m no longer afraid, you know, back in the day I used to be. I used to be kind of…as a young boy, I was withdrawn and shy. Afraid of my father…now I am afraid of nothing and no-one, I really mean that.” When he broke away from the family, he wanted to change how he felt about himself. This was a moment in which he told himself: “Karl, there will never be anyone who will be the boss over you anymore, no matter who it is. From now on, you take care of yourself.” When he looks back on the years on the trade boats, he says that the experiences during this period were the most important for him to form his own character, to become stronger and more self-assured, a contradiction to who he was in his family home.

Ron was also 15 years old he slowly started to leave his family home. He would spend as little time in his house as possible. As the years passed, he became more independent and started to become rebellious: “I could not identify with anyone and stood up against everyone”. He created an image of himself as a strong person who has everything under control, but at the same time he knew this wasn’t really him: “I was much more attracted to the periphery of society than general role models… I was quite anarchistic, radical and I was active in that scene as well. You create a certain image of yourself, but that image didn’t really fit with what I could handle. The image of a rational person that oversees everything, I could handle anything, you couldn’t madden me. I was a macho in that time…yeah, strange…because at the same time I felt like I was playing a role. It was a role that I will play for a short period of time, but it’s not really me. I didn’t believe in it, I’m pretending and I was quite good at that. I did that for about forty years.” He had created an image of himself that was the opposite of who he had been as a boy, but this image he created was an ideal to which Ron felt alienated because it did not resemble with who he really was. Still, he had lived this image for almost forty years.

Mark did not literally leave the family home, but his story does show a particular moment in which he pulled himself away from his family. This was after the big fight about the past when he was 18 years old. This fight was about learning a new form of truth about the reason they were abandoned as babies, which was denied by the mother. After the fight, Mark decided to break off all contact with the family and focus on building his own life. This period in his life shows how he started to form his own image of Japan, based on the sources that were now available to him: “I watch documentaries, war-documentaries…when I was younger, I didn’t want to because it was still fresh, the war wasn’t so long ago. So you didn’t want to know about that, it only gave negative things, you want to avoid that. But when I was somewhat older, I thought about that very differently. I read books about Japan and about camps in America. That’s when I realized…eh, those people were also victims. It wasn’t only us.”

With the ability to put things more in perspective, Mark was also able to re-adjust his image of himself as being Japanese. Instead of deducing himself to the negative associations of his Japanese background, he started to look more at his own personality: “[my children] should not have to think that things are no good because they are Japanese, because there’s no proof for that. Up until now, and I know myself very well, I don’t see any reason why I shouldn’t be proud of myself. I don’t say that because I think that about myself, I say that because others have told me that. ‘You’re a very good man, always honest’.” The people at his former work place spoke very positive about him, “I’m very glad to hear that and I’m proud of that. It’s a bit of recognition, and all that is negatively said, I can shake that off.”

In his process of identification, he formed a more self-assured image of himself but

still there was a gap in his understanding of himself. He ascribes this to the lack of information he has about his origins: “We have certain characteristics but from who did we get those, you can’t get them only from your mother. So, you get very curious why my brother and me have the same characteristics. Where do they come from? Because I don’t see them in them, not in my mother or other family members…I think that must be something from my father. See, those kinds of things interest me. What does your father love? Do we have things in common? Because we never knew him, we miss a part of ourselves, your background, or whatever you would call it. You’re trying to retrieve your identity…see, sometimes it was claimed that the Japanese were bastards, ruthless…nah, I never felt it like that. It may be true, I don’t know…I….it could be possible, but *I* don’t feel that way, *I, myself* and I’m talking about me and my brother. It’s just not in me and that goes the same for my brother.”

The period of adolescence and their radical moves away from their parents were periods in which they showed a strong need to define their own identity. The stories show different ways in which they try to form an image of themselves on their own terms, but it also shows that their understanding of themselves is still under construction.

Searching for information: rethinking, understanding and being Japanese

So far, the stories show of the most central aspects in their process of identification during their youths, adolescence and leading into adulthood. We have now arrived at a period of the last ten years before the trip. Around the age of 60 years old, all three men were confronted with the questions of their past. One of the reasons is having spare time on their hands due to retirement. Karl had always had an interest in history and with the extra time on his hands, he started to research his family's history. In other cases, it was the emergence of psychological help that led them back to their youth experiences. The psychological problems were interpreted as deriving from what they had experienced in their youth, and in order to deal with them, they had to address these problems. For Ron, this led to a confrontation with his mother about his adoption to find out more about his origin. Mark started to actively engage in activities that were based on his past when his brother had gone on the Japan-trip with 'Stichting Sakura'. Based on the recurring questions, they started to find new ways to search for information about their past.

Due to different stages in their process of identification to 'the Japanese', there are different types of information that are sought after. I will start here with Mark, who's identification has a long history to it. His search for information derives from a need to identify to a more positive image of 'the Japanese'. I will follow this by focusing on Ron and Karl, who's search for more information resulted in the discovery of their Japanese background. Their process of identification to 'the Japanese' started at a much older age. Their search shows how they try to find ways in which they can identify to 'the Japanese'. In the next section I will show that their identification to ''the Japanese' is not only to be discovered, but that it has a close link to their past and youth experiences. Here you will see that the search and gathering of new information leads to a reinterpretation of their memories and a new understanding of their history and the way people acted towards them.

Identification to 'the Japanese'

Mark's understanding of himself as Japanese is already rooted in his identification since he was young. As I have shown, the meaning he gave to being Japanese has changed over time, from associating to a very negative image of Japan to trying to leave this behind and basing his self-concept on his own personality. His need at this stage is to replace the old image he had of ''the Japanese'. He knows the imposed negative image is unjust, but he does not have personal encounters with Japanese people that can replace this image: "I am not judged for what my father was, I am judged because I am Japanese. So now I would like to know, who are the Japanese?" He wants to contradict the negative discourse about Japan,

but is not able to do so based on his own experience: “Imagine they tell me that I am Chinese, eh. Well…and I have always thought otherwise. Well ok then, I am Chinese. What would I think about that, that’s a much too short amount of time to say anything about…I have always been proud, out of self-respect for myself, but not because I know so much about the past. So I don’t know my Japanese background. I can’t say anything about it.”

His search for information is in the need to form a positive image of ‘the Japanese’ and to be able to relate to it, to identify himself with it. Based on these questions, Mark decided to participate in the opportunity to take a trip to Japan in order to form an image of ‘the Japanese’ that is based on his own encounters. In the next chapter, I will focus more on the results of this search, but for now I will continue with the identification processes of Ron and Karl.

An important result that derived from their search for information about the past, is the discovery of their Japanese background. With no history of identifying themselves as Japanese, they started to reflect on their personalities to find out what about them might be ‘Japanese’. When I asked Karl what he thought about being partly Japanese, he says “actually it doesn’t interest me that much, I’m 68 years old and I just see myself as a citizen of the world, not as a Dutchman, or specifically this or specifically that….” Having formed an identity for 68 years, the new information that he was partly Japanese did not directly change much in how he thought about himself. However, he did start to look for similarities between himself and what he knew of ‘the Japanese’. His identification was in the form of finding similar characteristics. He refers to certain traits, like his talent for Japanese martial arts, his perfectionism and determinism, that he ascribes to his ‘Japanese genes’.

Ron has also thought about his identification to ‘the Japanese’ and started to find similarities: “It gives me the luxury feeling of ‘there’s nothing I can do about it, so that is comfortable’ (laughs). So that exactly, that idea of ‘it’s in your genes’, I have always been against that. I don’t want it, it goes against my view of humanity. Maybe I don’t even disagree, but I just don’t want to hear it. But now, I slowly start to give in on it, so I can be lazy. For instance, I’m very perfectionistic…you hear that a lot when people talk about the Japanese. Ehm, that in particular. Yeah, well…I am also very systematic. I have a rigid need for structure and order. I don’t mind that, that way I can practice like crazy on a certain [guitar] riff. But on the other hand, I am also very impatient. I don’t know, that’s the mystery…that Zen-stuff, it can combine explosive moments with contemplation.” Here you see that, for Ron, his ‘Japanese genes’ are explained as a ‘lazy’ way of identifying to a group without having the constant struggle and insecurity about whether or not this fits with who he is. Instead of the exclusion and feelings of difference he had always experienced throughout his life, he now has something that he can identify to.

Their identification to 'the Japanese' at this stage is based on finding similar characteristics to how they view 'the Japanese' as a community. These new findings are attributed to the way they think about themselves, to the story of the self. But what I will show here, is that their discovery of being Japanese is not only about this internal identification, it is also closely entwined with the way they think about the social relations of the past. Being Japanese has as much to do with current identity practices as it has with their memories of the past. This shows that their story of the self is still being reconstructed. Here I will focus on the different ways they pursue new information and the effects this new information has had on the story they construct of the self.

Reconstructing history and what it means to be Japanese

The new information about their background made them rethink their place in the world and the situation they derived from; What kind of man was their biological father? What was the relationship between their biological father and their mother? Were they themselves wanted as a baby? The lack of information and the general knowledge about the occupation and public discourse about 'the Japanese', confronted them with questions about the power relations and the motivation for their biological father to get involved with their mother; was this relationship voluntarily? They were subject to making assumptions and guesses about the situation that led to their birth. Ron, for instance, had created an image of his biological father as an "horny old man looking for a pretty young thing". The possibility that their relationship was not voluntarily made it difficult for him to form a positive point of view to what had happened. These assumptions and guesses influenced his sense of self: "the lively details were lacking. For a while I thought 'the bastard, making a baby and then taking off'. I felt deserted by my biological father, I felt neglected by my mother, I felt rejected by my adoptive father…for a big part that has been my emotional make-up, those kinds of feelings…yeah, that was eh…not so nice actually."

The access to the answers of these questions was very limited for both Ron and Karl. Due to the taboo, there were not many people left who knew about this past, and others would not talk about it. Karl's parents had both already passed away when he discovered his Japanese background. The only person who knew more about the past was his aunt, but she was very young during the war and could not remember everything. Ron's only source of information was his mother, who had been quiet about the past for such a long time that she did not always have access to her memories. Her reaction to the confrontation made him notice that it was a very sensitive subject and it was not easy for her to talk about it. This held him back to ask too many questions to her and he was not in the position to approach other sources because his mother had asked him to keep his background quiet. This resulted in only a gradual access to information.

When Ron's mother passed away, a few months before I interviewed him the first time, the sense of taboo and the need for silent keeping became less strong. He was now able to pursue information more actively and searched for new ways to find out more about his biological father. One of the ways he did this, was by contacting his aunt. Ron's mother had given him the advice to visit his aunt, her younger sister, if she would pass away. This aunt was around 12 years old when Ron's mother got involved with his biological father. The stories she told of the past were more lively and detailed: "she told me that, that man, my father, had sent a letter to my mother asking her to come to Japan with me. That touched me already, I thought that was special. She told me that after the capitulation, the Japanese were locked in camps for their own safety. Those camps were guarded and defended against the Indonesians. He was there for his own safety, and somehow he must've heard that I was born. Shortly after my birth, he eh…disguised as an Indonesian, he came to my grandfather's house, my mother and I lived there. In the dark…it's like a scene from a movie! But they heard knocking on the door and there was my father in Indonesian clothes. He had heard that I was born and he wanted to see me and he also held me close. The next day he did it again, but it was quite dangerous, because if he was caught…but it was also dangerous for my family. So my grandmother asked him not to do it anymore." With this story, he could now contrast the image he had of his father that was based on the stories he knew from the public discourse about the power relations during the war. Instead of thinking that he was born of a quick relationship based solely on lust, he could now tell a story of being wanted and loved by his biological father.

So, one of the effects that their newfound Japanese identity had, was that it raised more questions and a need to pursue more information. Another effect was that they started to reinterpret their memories of the past. For both Ron and Karl, the discovery of their Japanese background made them reflect on their life stories and youth experiences.

Karl: "It was pretty emotional in the beginning, when I discovered it. I started thinking about the past, you know, how he acted towards me, how my mother acted towards me, how she always picked my side. Emotional, yeah. But I'm very grateful to both, because they…well, maybe I didn't amount to much, but I have always been able to survive." His Japanese background became an explanation for his fathers' behavior: "I understand it now…let's say it was the other way around, that I had worked on that Burma-railway. I don't know if I would've done better than him, I still think that he, even though he was so strict, he still treated me very well. What I couldn't stand was, he tried to hide it, but his aversion. I didn't understand it back then, but I do now." He continues: "the man had suffered a lot [in the war], those people had severe traumas and when they see a Japanese child like that, well…my father was strong, when it comes to that, because when I was little, he had never done anything to me. I have heard stories that were worse."

The relation towards their parents was reconstructed when they realized what it must have meant for their parents to have a half-Japanese child. For Ron, this realization changed his attitude towards his parents: “I have now become more mild towards my ‘stern father’ and my ‘cool mother’. You are the result of so many things that you can’t control, how can I blame them for it? I used to blame them, but now I have accepted it more and it doesn’t have this angry load anymore.” In relation to his parents, he had seen himself as a victim of their behavior towards him. Now that he understands this behavior and sees that they were victims as well, he has the agency to forgive and stand on a more equal foot in this relation.

As they gather more information about the past, their understanding of their parents behavior has changed. The memories of their past are being re-interpreted and the stories of their lives are being adjusted. What comes forward in these processes is the importance of power relations on the access to information about the past, and how the lack of this can influence the way you look at your history, social relations and yourself. I will now zoom in on a particular moment in time, where all three men have the agency to conduct an active search for their ‘roots’ by partaking in the yearly organized Japan-trip.

The trip to the ‘fatherland’

The MOFA sponsored trip to Japan is part of the Japan-Netherlands Peace Exchange Program. This program aims to “help Dutch victims of war overcome and cope with their wartime experiences and to promote a spirit of reconciliation with Japan and the Japanese people” (Embassy of Japan in the Netherlands, 2014). The MOFA provides a guide, who also functions as translator, and a 10-day program in which they visit 5 cities in Japan. The program consists, among other things, of visits to memorial centers, the atomic bomb museum in Nagasaki, the Dutch embassy in Japan and an elementary school in Mizumaki. During the trip there are several occasions in which the visitors are required to give a speech. In many of these speeches, the three visitors told about their life-stories and how having an Indisch mother and a Japanese father has affected their lives. There have also been occasions in which the visitors were interviewed by Japanese journalists and a few moments have been recorded by a camera crew. The resulting articles and television items were made accessible through public media.

Half a year before the trip to Japan, the three men started to meet in informal settings in order to get acquainted and comfortable with each other. ‘Stichting Sakura’ has been closely involved in the preparations for the trip, providing them with information on the program, advice for the speeches, previous experiences of people who have taken the trip, and advice on correct behavior.

The trip gives the men an opportunity to experience Japan for themselves and to discover first-hand what this part of their background means. Here again, the difference in the history of their identification to ‘the Japanese’, resulted in different forms of information that is pursued during the trip to Japan. In the first part, I will show how the personal encounters with Japanese people contradict the wartime images of ‘the Japanese’, which was very important for Mark. I will show how the personal encounters with Japan and its people result in a stronger identification to ‘the Japanese’ for Ron and Karl. In the second part, I will focus on how their experiences in Japan are entangled with the memories of their youth and the problems they faced in their processes of identification.

Changing the image and identity practices

As shown in the previous chapters, Mark has a rooted sense of being Japanese, the external classification imposed a negative image of ‘the Japanese’ on him. For him, the most important change was that he got to contradict this image, based on his own experiences: “now that I have seen Japan, the meetings and the people, the hospitality and everything…well, no, it’s not…there’s nothing negative about it, you see. Everybody has their sores, but in general, I thought the people were very friendly. The hardness and insensibility,

I haven't seen that there, not a moment." Especially the encounter with Japanese children at the school in Mizumaki has impressed him: "thanks to those kids, those kids have given me a totally different view, because…because I know they have norms and values. Because I can see that in those kids, they are spontaneous, honest, they smile at each other, friendly…that they are emotionless, no, not at all, not that I could see. And that they would only bow and stuff, no, because they hugged me as well and they also enjoyed our presence." These encounters have changed the negativity of the image he had, but he was not able to recognize himself in these people and he missed the feeling of relating to someone, that he was searching for. "The trip gave me new dimensions, I am thankful for the opportunity…my goal for the trip was, what I had missed my whole life, is to see how the Japanese are…that's what I got, a little, not all, I got to experience for myself.", but the encounters were too short and volatile for him to get to know them personally and be able to relate to them.

Some of his prejudices were readjusted, but his identification to a negative image of Japan has too much history for it to be easily replaced with a new story. The personal encounters made him realize that the 'reality' about Japan and 'the Japanese' that he grew up with, was not how he experienced it himself. He is regretful that he never had such an opportunity when he was younger, "I have missed out on a lot in my life, all those lost years. Then I wouldn't have had to blame anybody. But now, I still walk around with those stories. Why this? And why that? You've found peace with the people, now you know the story has another side to it. But why, when I was younger, why was there nobody with the decency to show us that? That we are also just normal people." His confrontations to negative images of Japan have influenced the course of his life too much for the trip to really change things.

The difference with Ron and Karl, is that their process of identification to a negative image of 'the Japanese' is something they have no history with. Their identification started at a later age, in which they already had formed an image of Japan for their own. Karl was never confronted with a negative discourse about 'the Japanese'. He had also already experienced Japan when he was 17 years old, on one of the trips on the trade boats. This way, he had already formed an image of Japan based on his own experiences. Ron, in contrast, was confronted with the negative discourse, but as he grew older, he image of Japan had already changed. They are much less taunted by the identification to a negative image of Japan..

Their experiences in Japan made them come back with a very positive image of Japan. The country and the people they have encountered were admirable, according to Karl: "As someone in [Stichting] Sakura said very well, you have now become an ambassador for Japan, that's really true. What I mean by that is, after everything that I've seen, I am proud that I have a Japanese background. I have seen so many positive things, that's no lie, the hospitality of those people… and when you walk around the city here, you

see dirt everywhere, but over there…nothing! In a city like Osaka, Tokyo, so neat, you can't imagine! I am very proud of that." As Karl shows in this quote, his pride for what he has seen in Japan is linked to how he feels about being Japanese and this resulted in a sense of pride.

Both Ron and Karl speak of pride as a cause for a stronger identification to their Japanese background. Ron explains it as such; "When you look at Tokyo, modern buildings, what is happening technique-wise. Their road building, architecture…colossal. I do have some respect for…what an achievement. And a little bit it's…I borrow it from them." He goes on to state that this experience, this sense of pride, resulted in a new way for him to look at himself as being Japanese: "Well, when I'm in Japan…I do now believe that I'm Japanese for a part. That's the amazing thing, I used to be more of culture and not nature. But if I feel a little bit proud because of those things, then that's based on the idea of 'it's something in the genes'. It has changed my way of thinking a little bit. And a positive effect is that I feel a stronger need to define my own identity." His sense of pride and his association to this image of Japan, gives him a positive way of looking at himself because he identifies himself to it.

So for both Ron and Karl, the sense of pride resulted in a stronger internal identification as 'Japanese'. Next to this pride, they engage in identity practices by finding and talking about the similarities they experienced between themselves and their surroundings in Japan. These similarities are in contrast to their sense of difference that they always experienced in the Netherlands. This resulted in a sense of recognition and belonging when they were in Japan.

Ron, for instance, points to his height as something that always differentiated him from his surroundings. In Japan he walked around people that were even smaller than he was, "and those were really adults, not toddlers (laughs)…but that is nice, being able to look people straight in the eyes." Karl also spoke of the pleasure of recognition and not looking different from other people when he talks about the first time he visited Japan when he was 17 years old: "Maybe it's because of the people. I had always felt like a stranger in the Netherlands, I look different, you understand? And I came there and I saw that the people were the same, I don't know… it's a feeling, I can't explain. I had that feeling…I'm not lying, it may sound like I'm trying to tell you a pretty story, but that's not true, I had that feeling."

Now that he visited Japan again, almost 50 years later, besides the similarities in appearance, he experienced an enforced sense of similarity in characteristics, which resulted in a sense of belonging and a stronger identification to Japan: "I noticed that I have a lot of Japanese things in me. I am also neat, I also hate being late. I have a certain love for gardening, generally the Japanese have that as well. Love for nature…what else, a certain temper, I have that as well, yeah. Finding peace within yourself….also discipline, I just have it. I know that I have much of those traits in me, from Japan, I realize that now more than ever. In Japan I saw things in the people of which I thought: 'that is something that belongs to

me' and I saw many things of which I thought: 'these are my roots'. Maybe even more than you think, I just saw it, it's a feeling, it's hard to explain." Ron also experienced this sense of recognition, as he shows in the following quote: "I have also been in Poland, in ehm…in miners villages, where there was lots of unemployment and illiteracy, people that are very distant from me. But the weird thing was, in Japan things were very distant from me but at the same time it was very familiar to me. I think I must've walked around grinning all the time because I enjoyed myself."

Besides the current adjustments to the image of 'the Japanese' and the identification experiences they can add to the story of themselves, the stories of the trip show that the different visits and the impressions they gained in Japan were also a constant reminder of their history and childhood experiences.

Confronting the memories

One of the activities that led to a direct confrontation with the past was in the preparation and the giving of the speeches. Some of the speeches contained the life-stories of the men and were mostly focused on the childhoods. While preparing the speeches, they had to consciously think about their lives and construct a story about themselves. The giving of the speeches was for some a very emotional moment, because it was entwined with memories of the past. For someone like Ron, who had always kept his background a secret, the speeches were a very important moment for him to get more comfortable to talk about his past and background. The speeches have helped to release the taboo surrounding his background: "The comfort I did it with and the openness that I felt was so much in contrast to what I had experienced for years with the hidden knowledge, and things I had to hide for myself or my mother, you know. You know about 'coming out' right? It went so easy, that was really astonishing. Totally different from a year ago. And that happened during the preparations, but there it manifested it in ultimo." This experience gave him the confidence to speak more openly about his background, to decide for himself if he could talk about it and leave the influence of taboo behind. So for Ron, the giving of the speeches was not only a reminder of his history, but it also helped him to deal with his history of secrecy and speak more open about his Japanese background.

The second activity that I would like to bring forward is the visit to the Mizumaki elementary school. In almost all travel reports, this moment is pointed out as one of the most impressive moments. The three men were driven to the school in a bus. Ten minutes before arrival, there were rows of children yelling and waving Dutch flags at the bus and when they arrived at the schoolyard, it was filled with children who now also waved Japanese flags around. In the school they were treated with a demonstration of the children playing the Dutch national anthem on flute and some demonstrations of for instance, Taiko drumming.

What makes this visit so special to the Indisch-Japanese descendants is the encounter with the children.

Seeing the Japanese children brought forth a sense of resemblance, it made them think about themselves as a child. Mark: “Those kids, you know...so spontaneous, so honest. That’s how I see myself as a child, all those memories come back. Now and then, you feel sadness, you know what a terrible time that was…but on the other hand, I’m at peace with it.” This made it a moment of mixed feelings. On the one hand, he found resemblance with these children and was able to connect with them. They showed him a positive image and the way he talks about them is in an excited tone of happiness. But on the other hand, it reminded him of his own youth and the difficulties he faced in that time.

The following quote shows how Ron reflects on his own life when he sees a little boy that resembled him: “There was this group of young boys who were going to play the drums…and one of those boys, I thought, oh, I must’ve looked like that as well when I was young. Big glasses, very dedicated and very lively and so cheerful. He was so free, and I saw that, how he was absorbed in what happened. Ehm, what had always bothered me was my alienation…I don’t belong in this situation, I always had that feeling. And that little boy, in contradiction to that image, was so absorbed into what had to happen. That was really…very nice to see and at a given moment I felt a tear…I had to cry, because of the emotions…maybe I used to be like that.” People who knew Ron as a child, always told stories of what a spontaneous, open and curious boy he was. Ron was always surprised by these stories, because he could not imagine he used to be like that. He was not able to identify to this image of himself. When he encountered this little Japanese boy, he found resemblance and was reminded of the stories about him. Looking at the boy, he realizes: “maybe I used to be like that”. His image of himself as a child appears as something that is partly being remembered and reconstructed when he identifies himself with this little boy.

Here you can see that what it means for the Indisch-Japanese descendants to be Japanese is entailed with childhood memories of exclusion, of differentiation and a denied identity and existence. At the very moment of witnessing the little children, the whole interplay of history, memory and identity come together. It shows that the trip not only changes their image and identification, but the encounter with Japan also means a direct confrontation with their childhood memories and a reconstruction of how they think about themselves.

Conclusion

What can we say about the construction of an identity that is based in a past of conflict and that has been negatively approached? First of all, we see the interplay of internal- and external identification in the processes of their identification. In their youth, the external identification and their social relation with their families formed a dominant aspect in their lives. Influenced by wartime discourses and memories of the war, these social relations determined their knowledge about their origin, it raised the taboo to ask questions and resulted in the exclusion of these children. This negative approach to their Japanese identity, resulted in a distorted self-image, in which they either identified to an enemy image of the Japanese or had trouble identifying to anything at all. As they reach adulthood, they try to find ways to detach themselves from their social relations with their families and aim to avoid any negative feedback about who they are. The focus comes to lie on their internal identification, they create an image of the self and try to find a way to deal with their past to find self-acceptance.

Second, in the development of the stories we see that identification indeed is a process and that this is still under construction, even during late adulthood. The ways in which they try to construct their image of the self during adulthood is by searching for new information and new experiences. We have seen how the individuals engage in identity practices to construe their Japanese identity and how they search for new information about their past. Their attempts to find out who they were still obstructed due to the taboo and respect for their family members. Their Japanese identity needed to be discovered with care because it was still involved in the social relations to their families. In this stage they constructed their story of the self, piece by piece, while navigating through the taboos and discourses that surrounded their Japanese background.

The opportunity created by the MOFA for them to visit the country of their biological father, has been a central moment in this construction of their story. The personal encounter with the country and its people resulted in an adjustment in the image of ‘the Japanese’ and a stronger identification to ‘the Japanese’. Besides this construction of their Japanese identity, the new information and experiences regarding their background also had the effect of reconstructing their memories.

This brings me to the third point; the importance of memory on the construction of a story of the self. The stories show that being Japanese is not only about forming an image of ‘the Japanese’ and of the self as ‘Japanese’, it is also about the social relations that shaped their sense of self and controlled the ‘realities’ they grew up with. Being Japanese is already rooted in their history and the deriving of new information gives them the opportunity to reconstruct this history. The new information they find in the forms of new ‘truths’ about their

origin and the contradicting and more humane image of ‘the Japanese’, brings them to rethink and reinterpret the ‘realities’ of their past. The effect this had for Ron and Karl was reinterpretation of their relation with their parents. For Mark, the new information changed the image he had of ‘the Japanese’, but it also reminded him of how his life could have been different if he grew up with his current ‘truth’ about ‘the Japanese’.

Their identification to ‘the Japanese’ does not occur as a core and separated ‘part’ of an identity, it is something that needs to be discovered, but is also rooted in their history. The construction of their story is a complex matter of internal- and external identification processes, searching new information and experiences and reconstructing memories to add to the construction of their identity.

Recommendations

My findings and conclusion regarding the trip to Japan, are the result of interviews conducted within a half-year after the return of the men. As suggested by other Indisch-Japanese descendants that I have spoken with, this short period of time between the trip and the interviews do not cover the long-term effects of the trip. In order to gain a better understanding of how this trip influences the identification process of these people, I would recommend a research based on the long-term effects of the trip.

Furthermore, I have occasionally referred to ‘Stichting Sakura’ and ‘Vereniging JIN’ but in the framework of this study, I have not been able to elaborate on the influences the encounters with these so-called ‘lotgenoten’, or ‘companions‘, have had on the identification processes. The encounter with the members of these organization often have a deep impact on individual Indisch-Japanese descendants. Further research might focus more on the influence of becoming a member of these collectives in their identification processes.

Finally, the Indisch-Japanese descendants that are the focus of this research are people who have immigrated to the Netherlands, however, there are also Indisch-Japanese descendants that are still living in Indonesia. Further examination can be done on these Indisch-Japanese descendants to research the differences in the discourse about ‘the Japanese’ between Indonesia-oriented families and Dutch-oriented families and how this may or may not have influenced the lives of the individuals.

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