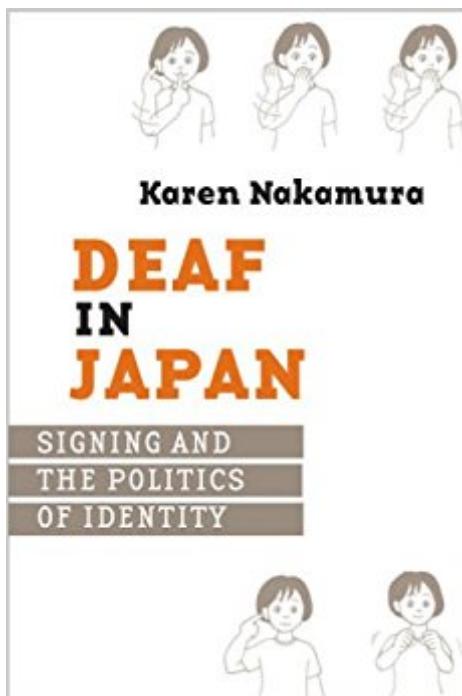


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# Deaf In Japan: Signing And The Politics Of Identity



## Synopsis

Until the mid-1970s, deaf people in Japan had few legal rights and little social recognition. Legally, they were classified as minors or mentally deficient, unable to obtain driver's licenses or sign contracts and wills. Many worked at menial tasks or were constantly unemployed, and schools for the deaf taught a difficult regimen of speechreading and oral speech methods rather than signing. After several decades of activism, deaf men and women are now largely accepted within mainstream Japanese society. *Deaf in Japan*, a groundbreaking study of deaf identity, minority politics, and sign language, traces the history of the deaf community in Japan, from the establishment of the first schools for the deaf in the 1870s to the birth of deaf activist movements in the postwar period and current "culture wars" over signing and assimilation. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with deaf men and women from three generations, Karen Nakamura examines shifting attitudes toward and within the deaf community. Nakamura suggests that the notion of "deaf identity" is intimately linked with the Japanese view of modernization and Westernization. The left-affiliated Japanese Federation of the Deaf embraces an assimilationist position, promoting lip-reading and other forms of accommodation with mainstream society. In recent years, however, young disability advocates, exponents of an American-style radical separatism, have promoted the use of Japanese Sign Language. Nakamura, who signs in both ASL and JSL, finds that deafness has social characteristics typical of both ethnic minority and disability status, comparing the changing deaf community with other Japanese minority groups such as the former Burakumin, the Okinawans, and zainichi Koreans. Her account of the language wars that have erupted around Japanese signing gives evidence of broader changes in attitudes regarding disability, identity, and culture in Japan.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[A] fascinating account of deafness and deaf people in twentieth-century Japan... " - Douglas Baynton, University of Iowa (Journal of Asian Studies)[T]his text can be read ... as a long- overdue monograph on the Japanese deaf community... and ... as a text that provides insight into the ways in which identity politics established during modernization were tweaked and twisted during postwar Japan. - Cindi L. Sturzreetharan (American Anthropologist)"[This book] is extremely important because it explores disability in a wider context -- as deafness cuts across all class, ethnic, and gender lines--and explores disability as a social construct for identity formation." Carolyn Stevens, Univ. of Melbourne (Journal of Japanese Studies)"Nakamura's methodology combines the field techniques of anthropology, archival research, and the political analysis of social movements to gather information on deaf movements in Japan in the postwar era, with the goal of understanding what it means to subscribe to 'deaf identity' in Japan. She frequently includes cross-cultural perspectives from international deaf movements and language systems to contextualize the Japanese case, as well as poses thoughtful and provocative questions about personal and communal identities by comparing the Japanese deaf community to other minority groups in Japan. Nakamura's monograph is extremely important because it explores disability in a wider contextâ •as deafness cuts across all class, ethnic, and gender linesâ •and explores disability as a social construct for identity formation."â •Carolyn S. Stevens, Journal of Japanese Studies"Deaf in Japan introduces readers to the largely unknown world of the marginalized minority of the hearing impaired in Japan. Offering a succinct historical overview and an exploration of the internal friction among the deaf and the inner workings of disability activism, Deaf in Japan draws attention to the great socio-historical changes that have taken place in this area in Japan since the early twentieth century. Of vital importance as a substantial contribution to the neglected field of disability studies and to the study of social movements in Japan, it is a work of indisputable originality, distinguished by the application of a successful fieldwork method and highly readable, accessible writing. Competent in both JSL (Japanese sign language) and ASL (American sign language), Nakamura embeds actual life stories within her study and in this way succeeds very well in conveying the realities of deaf identity in Japan beyond ideological theorizing. Relatively concise as it is, this thoughtful study also stimulates a greater awareness of issues of identity formation, ethnicity, and culture in general, and of the intercultural dynamics of discourses that go beyond national borders in

the process of globalization. For this reason, Deaf in Japan is equally relevant to an understanding of the problematics of disability elsewhere, thus contributing to the integration of Asian Studies in general academic discourse."•John Whitney Hall Prize Citation from the Association for Asian Studies"Deaf in Japan begins to fill an enormous lacuna in the literature on contemporary Japanese society, namely how the society treats those with any form of physical or mental disability. Those interested in contemporary Japanese society and comparative welfare will learn much in this book about how Japanese social attitudes have changed over the past fifty years."•Roger Goodman, University of Oxford"In addition to expertly introducing to an English-speaking readership the world of the deaf and deaf movements in Japan, Karen Nakamura provides a very interesting and useful perspective on Japanese social movements and the 'new' forms they are taking in the 'post-postwar' milieu."•J. Victor Koschmann, Cornell University"Karen Nakamura combines history, life histories, ethnographic observation, and politico-linguistic analysis of sign language in Japan to open up sensible and much-needed debate on the multiplicity of the Japanese and their culture."•Sonia Ryang, The Johns Hopkins University

"Deaf in Japan begins to fill an enormous lacuna in the literature on contemporary Japanese society, namely how the society treats those with any form of physical or mental disability. Those interested in contemporary Japanese society and comparative welfare will learn much in this book about how Japanese social attitudes have changed over the past fifty years."•Roger Goodman, University of Oxford "In addition to expertly introducing to an English-speaking readership the world of the deaf and deaf movements in Japan, Karen Nakamura provides a very interesting and useful perspective on Japanese social movements and the 'new' forms they are taking in the 'post-postwar' milieu."•J. Victor Koschmann, Cornell University "Karen Nakamura combines history, life histories, ethnographic observation, and politico-linguistic analysis of sign language in Japan to open up sensible and much-needed debate on the multiplicity of the Japanese and their culture."•Sonia Ryang, The Johns Hopkins University

I needed this book for a paper I was doing on Japanese Sign Language. This book touches on it but it is mostly focused, as titled, on the politics and Deaf identity. Very informative and easy to read. It is interesting to see the similarities and differences between the ASL culture with the JSL culture. The author, Karen Nakamura, has two published academic journals to which this book corresponds. Some of the information is repeated but it is a good idea to read this first. Her journals are published by Gallaudet University Press, if you are inclined to read them.

As a Americal Sign Language/Deaf Studies minor, this book was quite insightful. I'm also East Asian and it was interesting to see how Japan has developed the culture around the Deaf in comparison to America!

This was a very good, easy to read book. It was very interesting and I am intersted in learning more about the topic.

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