

Tetsuro Miyazaki knowingly waits for that strange look he'll get when checking into his Tokyo hotel. The professional photographer watches as befuddled Japanese staff try to match his very Japanese name with his bearded and, well, half-Japanese face.

Miyazaki, 39, who has done around 50 interviews in Japan to dig deeper into the identities of half-Japanese, is actually a Belgium native. He grew up, like a lot of people with a mixed-roots heritage, not quite knowing to which part he belonged more: His father's Japanese roots or his mother's Belgian ones. But if you ask the Japanese-Dutch-English-and-French polyglot today where he "belongs," he'll tell you "at home, with my family, at the dinner table" where he currently lives in the Netherlands.



Perhaps it's a revelation unturned during his more-than-a-year-long project titled "Hafu2Hafu," which is what brought him to Tokyo this month for a workshop, as well as an intense 24 interviews in just 11 days.

"I want people to get some understanding of the complexity of identity when both parents are not from the same country," he said.

While it's Miyazaki's second time in Japan for Hafu2Hafu, the aim started small: Interview people of mixed-roots with one Japanese parent to share and learn about identity. But with funding from various non-profit organizations in the U.S. and the Netherlands, it gained momentum — and a website — hafu2hafu.org. The site is part art exhibit and part social experiment cultivated through online profiles of the people Miyazaki meets and interviews. With an exhibition in Amsterdam, a presentation in Los Angeles and a feature in a New York Times article, the project's aim grew to a lofty new objective.

Now, Miyazaki wants to photograph and interview at least one person from each country in the world (36 on the website and counting...) who has one Japanese parent. During his interviews in Tokyo this month, he added 24 countries to that. Through an emotionally and mentally draining process, his job is to explore his own identity and let others do the same.

Who are the people behind the term 'hafu'

So what exactly do they talk about?

“We try to be free and talk about anything we want,” Miyazaki said about the hour-long interviews.

The participants are volunteers who sign a waiver to be part of the project, with the October interviewees mainly finding out about it via Japan-based media. One interviewee, Hisanori Tamura, who is of Thai and Japanese origins, said the conversation with Miyazaki made him want to know “even more hafu” to exchange experiences. In an email, the Tokyo resident said he loved the project because it inspired him to further explore “grey” areas in a society often thought to be strictly defined.

“Unfortunately, in Japanese society, it's always a question of classification, a question of belonging to something precise,” he said. “There are grey zones, whether it is about ethnicity, gender, sexuality — nothing is completely black or white. And, it is important to make [the] Japanese population, especially the new ones, to understand what ‘grey’ means.”

The photos on each hafu’s online profile might be black and white, but the topics spoken about certainly align with Tamura’s definition of grey zone. Some conversations flow better than others, but interviews often elicit mixes of joy, pain and the mutual laughter of two people relating. Yet, an online viewer gets just a glimpse of these sessions. The main feature of the Hafu2Hafu profiles is just one question the interviewee wants to ask another “hafu.” Hafu is a term coming from the English word “half.” It’s used in Japanese to refer to people with one Japanese parent. The word itself often gets backlash -- especially from parents.

“Some people are offended by it, but many are not,” Miyazaki said, who brings an international perspective to the term. “It’s nice to find a name to relate to other people.”

In its essence, his work is meant for himself and other half-Japanese, but the father of a one-year-old hopes that along the way it can bring a deeper understanding of race and identity.

“I’m doing this for me,” he quipped. “But with me come all the other half-Japanese people, then come all their family, friends, and co-workers, and teachers and classmates. All the people who don’t know anything about the struggle — and I don’t want to say struggle, because that makes it negative — but all of the topics that are on the minds of people with mixed race.”

Miyazaki’s time in Tokyo so far

Hisanori Tamura checks out a book of some Hafu2Hafu photos and questions.

Last Wednesday, Japan Today observed one of Miyazaki’s interviews in Tokyo. In a quaint Shinjuku cafe in late afternoon, Miyazaki starts off it with a ballpoint pen, unlined notebook and the question, “What is your name?” A half-Japanese person’s name, Miyazaki points out, is paramount to how they experience “Japaneseness” in and out of Japan.

For hafu in Japan, he has observed that most who were born in the country -- and especially those with one single Japanese parent -- consider themselves to be Japanese (not half.) Yet for someone with mixed-roots living in Japan, they might be considered not-quite Japanese, yet not quite a foreigner. This “in-between” can feel different from person to person based on characteristics that, in this country, often-than-not boil down to what Miyazaki experiences at a hotel-check-in -- if someone is a “visible” or “invisible” half-Japanese.

That's part of what Miyazaki wants to get people talking about in an open and judgement-free way online but also in person. He did just that on Sunday, Oct 15, at Tokyo's Sophia University where he presented about the Hafu2Hafu project and did a workshop about the half-Japanese experience.

The session had about 40 people, with attendees speaking both English and Japanese, he said. The event, which was for ages 12 and up, was in connection with SIETAR Japan, The Society For Intercultural Education Training and Research. It was a chance for Miyazaki to not only identify with other hafu but to also help connect them with each other. The results were “fantastic,” he said.

After the workshop, one attendee wrote in a personal Facebook post (provided by Miyazaki) about it: “For the first time in my life, I felt that I was in a room with people who sincerely understood and shared similar experiences as me,” the post said. “There were so many nods, chuckles, grunts -- I was getting butterflies and chills.”

Documenting personal narratives online — like Humans of New York and subsequent spin-offs — has its place, Miyazaki said, but he actively avoids that with Hafu2Hafu.

“You can feel sorry for the person, or you think he's a hero,” he explains. “I want [my participants] to be free of this judgement.”

This isn't the first time stories of being half-Japanese have been explored. Back in 2013, the documentary “Hafu: The Mixed-Race Experience in Japan” and the accompanying “Hafu Project” presented the lives of Japanese people and families. Conversely, Miyazaki downplays the obvious opportunity for documentation of specific stories to keep the focus concise and the dialogue poignant.

So, if you're looking for a tell-all about his experiences in Tokyo -- other than faint echoes still floating around in the coffee shops where interviews took place -- you won't find it. That's calculated and exactly how Miyazaki wants it. He opts not to share each visceral conversation with the world. Both finality and continuation, each interviewee's question at the end of the session frequently sums up the whole conversation anyways.

You can view those questions and the profiles of the people he's interviewed and check out the online discussion that goes with it on hafu2hafu.org. Miyazaki said he will continue his journey of speaking with half-Japanese people around the world and plans to “definitely” return to Japan in 2018.

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