

Japan's Regional Diversity Kansai vs. Kanto

By Catherine Maxwell (Editor)

Japan is often cast as a homogenous society, yet one doesn't have to search too far to discover that this is not exactly the case. While the Japanese themselves generally exhibit a consistent national identity, they are also very aware of regional cultural differences. Part of the attraction of domestic travel for the Japanese is the regional cuisines, accents and customs encountered, which may be subtly or radically different from their own area. This regional diversity is evident throughout Japan, even between neighbouring towns.

The most obvious example of regional cultural difference is the divide between the Kanto and Kansai regions, represented by Japan's two largest cities, Tokyo and Osaka. The Kanto region in the east incorporates Tokyo and the surrounding prefectures and could be said to represent standard Japanese culture. The Kansai region in the west includes the area around Osaka, such as the cities of Kyoto and Kobe (see map). In practice, both regions may be considered more limited or extend further than this, depending on context. Historically, the distinction between the Kanto and Kansai regions originates as far back as the 10th century, when barrier stations were established at strategic locations to inspect travellers¹. The word Kanto means 'east of the barrier' and Kansai means 'west of the barrier'.

Throughout much of history, Japanese culture was defined more by region rather than by nation, as communications and transport were poor and thus culture and language developed in different directions. In feudal Japan (1600 - 1868), each feudal domain was like a country with its own customs². There were profound cultural differences between the feudal capital in Tokyo, where almost half the population was made up of the samurai ruling class, and merchant-dominated Osaka, where less than 1% of the population was samurai³. Despite being the lowest class, Osaka merchants were rich and the region prospered, becoming known as the 'nation's storehouse' by the 18th century⁴. Even today, this history influences regional culture.

The characteristics of Kansai people are often attributed to Osaka's mercantile tendencies. Kansai residents are seen as being pragmatic, entrepreneurial, down-to-earth and possessing a strong sense of humour. Kanto people on the other hand are perceived as more sophisticated, reserved and formal, in keeping with Tokyo's history and modern status as the nation's capital and largest metropolis. A degree of rivalry exists between the two, as each usually finds the other's manners not to their liking! In the same way, the residents of other parts of Japan have their own characteristics stereotyped by those in other regions.

Regional characteristics are reinforced by language usage, an important indicator in Japan of an individual's social position. Although the Tokyo dialect has largely become standard Japanese and is now widespread all over Japan thanks to modern education and communication systems, diverse dialects and accents still occur throughout the country⁵. Kansai-ben, the Kansai area dialect is perhaps the most robust of these. Understanding Kansai-ben can be a challenge for non-Kansai people, with its different vocabulary, grammatical patterns, pronunciation and intonation (see table). It is also often perceived as more casual, emotional and louder than standard Japanese. Speaking Kansai-ben is a matter of pride for Kansai people and they have a reputation for making little attempt to modify their language to conform to standard Japanese, even when they move to other parts of Japan.

	Standard Japanese	Kansai-ben ⁶
Thank you	Arigatō	Ōkini
good	ii [i' as in 'bit']	ee [e' as in 'pet']
really	hontō	honma
Negative ending E.g. don't read	~ nai yomanai	~ hen yomahen
Isn't it?	Sō janai ka?	So yanka?

Ironically, the same mass communications that have reinforced standard Japanese nationwide have actually raised the profile of Kansai-ben. Most famous comedians are from Kansai and their use of Kansai-ben in mainstream media has made it far more familiar now to other Japanese than in the past⁶.

Every country's cuisine has regional variations depending on local produce and customs, and in Japan Kansai and Kanto are no exception. One example is *nattō*, the sticky, fermented soybeans renowned for their pungent smell, which is well liked in Kanto but generally shunned in Kansai. In the past, soybeans were used as fodder for horses and in areas such as Kanto where horses were the principal livestock raised, they also produced a lot of soybeans and today *nattō* is universally liked. Conversely, Kansai was a cattle-raising area and so most people there don't like *nattō*⁷. Beef is also the most commonly consumed meat in the Kansai region, whereas in Kanto pork is preferred (although there is evidence these tastes are now changing)⁸. Nowadays, local specialities, such as *okonomiyaki* and *takoyaki* from Osaka, are consumed in other parts of the country, but the original region maintains a reputation for where these are most delicious and eaten most frequently. Even common dishes are slightly different. For example, the broth of noodle dishes such as *udon* is much lighter in Kansai than in Kanto⁹.



There are many other differences between Kansai and Kanto, but what many Japanese seem to notice particularly is that when travelling on escalators, Kanto people stand on the left, while Kansai people stand on the right. One theory to explain this is that in Tokyo, the samurai preferred to stay on the left, where they could draw their swords more easily, while in Osaka the merchants preferred to be on the right, to protect their belongings carried in their right hand¹¹.

Some of these regional variations seem fairly trivial; others are profound. The differences between Kanto and Kansai are only one example of the regional diversity found all over Japan. It should also be remembered that significant differences also exist within the Kanto and Kansai regions. However, as modern communications and technology decrease distances, regional differences become far less pronounced than generational differences. Young people across Japan probably have much more in common with each other than with the older generations in their area who maintain traditional customs. Nevertheless, substantial regional diversity continues to enrich Japanese culture and make it even more fascinating to Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

- ¹ 'Kansai region', 'Kanto region' and 'Sekisho' in *Kodansha's Encyclopaedia of Japan CD-Rom*, Kodansha International: Tokyo, 1999.
- ² Lie, J., *Multicultural Japan*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, USA, p. 117.
- ³ 'The People of Edo, Japan's Biggest City' in *Nipponia* No. 25, 2003, Heibonsha: Tokyo, p. 16; Otani, K., 'Osaka - An Economic Powerhouse for 1,500 Years' in *Nipponia* No. 14, 2000, Heibonsha: Tokyo, p. 13.
- ⁴ Otani, *ibid.*
- ⁵ Lie, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-8.
- ⁶ For example, Otani K., *Osaka-gaku* (Osakalogy), Shinchosha: Tokyo, 1994, p. 99.
- ⁷ Palter, D.C. and Horiuchi, K., *Kinki Japanese: The Dialects and Culture of the Kansai Region*, Tuttle: Tokyo, 1995.
- ⁸ The Quirky Japan Homepage, 'Japan SAQ (Seldom Asked Questions)', viewed at <http://www.quirkyjapan.or.jp> on 9/2/05.
- ⁹ Web Japan, *Trends in Japan* (1996), 'Beef Consumption is Rising', viewed at <http://web-japan.org/trends96/honbun/tj960701.html> on 25/2/05.
- ¹⁰ Watashi to Tokyo, 'The difference between Tokyo and Osaka' viewed at http://smt.blogs.com/trends_style_culture/2005/01/the_difference_.html on 9/2/05; Nihon Chiri Omoshiroi Zemaaru (Interesting Seminars on the Geography of Japan), 'Kansai vs Kanto' viewed at <http://ku0811.hp.infoseek.co.jp/framepagekansai.html> on 25/2/05.
- ¹¹ The Quirky Japan Homepage, *op. cit.*

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