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HNRS 490

2 May 2008

Being Japanese in Brazil: the Japanese-Brazilians and their Identity

I. Introduction

Encountering people who grew up outside of a country of his or her own nationality, or whose parents have different nationalities causes a curiosity to ask them how they identify themselves. For some, the mother language and their nationality determine their personal identity, while others believe that countries and cultures he or she grew up with would make up their identities. These questions regarding self-identification develop into a very interesting discussion when the Japanese-Brazilians are the subject. They are an interesting case for a study of self-identity, because after their very first generation immigrated from Japan to Brazil, there was a quite large amount of their children and grandchildren who decided to ‘immigrate back’ to Japan. Among those returning Japanese-Brazilians, there are a significant number of them who experience difficulty in adjusting to their mother country’s culture. These people often become confused about their self-identity—are they Brazilian, Japanese, or something else—mainly due to the large cultural difference between Japan and Brazil. Scholars have been actively conducting researches on the topic of the Japanese-Brazilians’ identity, especially those who immigrated back to Japan.

While studies of the Japanese-Brazilians in Japan and their identity are well explored, less attention has been given to an analysis of the Japanese-Brazilians living in

Brazil and how they identify themselves. Therefore, this paper expands the existing researches on the Japanese-Brazilians residing in Brazil and the significant factors that determine their identity. Some scholars suggest that the Japanese-Brazilians in Brazil tend to emphasize their Japanese identity more than their Brazilian identity, and the socioeconomic status seems to be a crucial factor for this self-identification. This seems to be true, yet a careful study of the Japanese-Brazilians' history of struggle and their effort to adjust to Brazilian society gives a new perspective in finding self-identification factor. History shows that many hardships, including prosecution from the Brazilian government, became an occasion for the Japanese-Brazilians to hold on strongly to their Japanese identity as a way of resistance. After overcoming many challenges, the Japanese-Brazilians emerged as today's successful minority group in Brazil and maintain high socioeconomic status. The Japanese-Brazilians' experience of hardships in the past and their emerging success afterwards seem to foster a pride within the Japanese-Brazilians and serve as a significance for their self-identification.

II. Historical Origin and Current Demography of the Japanese-Brazilians

The origin of the Japanese-Brazilians goes back all the way to 1908, when the Japanese ship left the country to take the very first Japanese immigrants to Brazil. This year--the year of 2008--marks the one hundred years since the first Japanese immigrated to Brazil. Total of 188,985 Japanese moved to Brazil between 1908 and 1941, with most of them arriving in the decade after 1925 (Reichl 37). Another 52, 839 Japanese left for Brazil between 1952 and 1979. The motivation behind the original immigration to Brazil was Japanese people's desire for better living condition and larger financial gain,

accompanied by an opportunity to work in Brazil because its economy had a labor shortage at that time. Most of Japanese immigrants worked at coffee estates, and their original plan was to accumulate savings and eventually return to Japan. The flow of immigration was reversed largely around the late 1980s. Severe Brazilian economic situation was accompanied by labor shortage in unskilled workers in Japan, which motivated many Japanese-Brazilians to work in the country where their ancestors came from. Many Japanese-Brazilians were planning to work only for short term, accumulate savings, and return to Brazil (Tsuda 122).

Currently, there are about 1,228,000 people of Japanese descendents residing in Brazil, which forms the largest Japanese community outside of Japan (Tsuda 57). Among 91 percent of those Japanese-Brazilians living the Southwestern and Southern regions of Brazil. The state of São Paulo has the highest number of Japanese-Brazilians living in Brazil. Most of the Japanese-Brazilians were born as the second generation (30.9 percent), and the first generation only accounts for 12.5 percent of the entire Japanese-Brazilians, and most of them came to Brazil as post-war period emigrants from Japan. The third generation makes up 41 percent of the Japanese-Brazilians, while the fourth generation remains small, although gradually increasing.

III. Scholarly Arguments: Determining Factor of Self-Identification

A significant number of the Japanese-Brazilians, especially the third and the fourth generations, do not speak fluent Japanese nowadays, hence Japanese language might be a weak determining factor of their identity. The daily usage of Japanese language among the Japanese Brazilians is declining, while a number of the Japanese-

Brazilians who study Japanese as a foreign language are increasing (Nakatou). Some scholars argue that the Japanese as a language in daily conversations will cease even more and more in the future. Many of the Japanese-Brazilians, especially younger generations, have Portuguese as their first language, not Japanese.

Nakatou introduces the Colonia language as more commonly used language compared to the original Japanese, although she does not believe the Colonia language to be a source of identity for the Japanese-Brazilians. The Colonia language is a term for a language (although it refers more or less to a way of talking and not a completely different language) used in the Japanese-Brazilian society, which is a mixture of Japanese and Portuguese. The Colonia language was created under a severe influence of Portuguese, and thus it ended up becoming quite different from the original Japanese language. Colonia language inserts Portuguese nouns and adjective into the Japanese sentence. For instance, a sentence 'she works at a bank' would be in Japanese, except a word 'a bank' would be in Portuguese. Colonial language was naturally developed as the Japanese immigrants attempted to adapt to the new country, environment, culture, and language (Nakatou). However, a significance of the Colonia language as an identity determinant for the Japanese-Brazilians is weak, because many of them grew up having Portuguese as their first language anyway.

Tsuda attempts to find a factor of self-identification by analyzing the contemporary characteristics of the Japanese-Brazilians, which he concludes that they are now well-integrated into Brazilian society. Most of the Japanese-Brazilians are well educated, middle-class, urbanized, and a large population live in the developed regions in Brazil. Many young Japanese-Brazilians have a tendency to move to cities with a

purpose of pursuing higher education and professional careers. Inter-marriage between the Japanese-Brazilians and non-Japanese descendent Brazilians is increasing compared to the past; it currently accounts for approximately 45.9 percent. As a result, 6 percent of the second generation and 42 percent of the third generation of the Japanese-Brazilians have mixed descendents--both Japanese and non-Japanese descendents (Tsuda 58).

Many scholars agree that the Japanese-Brazilians in Brazil continue to assert their 'Japanese-ness' as their most important identity, more than their Brazilian identity (Linger 212). The Japanese-Brazilians have a strong consciousness of the racial, cultural, and social difference that distinguish themselves from non-Japanese-descendent Brazilians. When Tsuda conducted many interviews for his research, a significant number of his respondents said that they felt more Japanese than Brazilian about themselves (Tsuda 58). He also reviews the interview results from other scholars' researches, and they had the similar outcome with his own interview results, with many interviewees stressing their Japanese identity. One survey introduced by Tsuda was conducted in the cities of Bastos (São Paulo) and Assai (Paraná), and the outcome revealed that about 74 to 79 percent of respondents classified themselves as Japanese, with only 7 percent not regarding themselves as Japanese. Tsuda points out that this is an interesting trend, because the Japanese-Brazilians assert their Japanese identity in spite of an increasing realization among themselves of becoming "Brazilianized" (Tsuda 58). The Japanese-Brazilians notice that they had culturally adjusted themselves very well to Brazilian society, yet still maintain their 'Japanese-ness' as an important part of their identity.

Tsuda examines different factors that may be significant for the Japanese-Brazilians to define themselves as Japanese. First, he looks at physical appearance, which he defines as the most fundamental factor in distinguishing the Japanese-Brazilians from other Brazilians (Tsuda 62). Physical appearance is important because it is very recognizable. The oriental appearance, especially slanted eyes, is a distinctive facial characteristic of the Japanese-Brazilians. Because of this unique physical characteristic, the Japanese-Brazilians are always recognized as “japonês”, Japanese. They are always classified as such because of Brazilians’ tendency to pay much attention to racial characteristics of an individual, including slight difference in his or her skin color. Additionally, for some mainstream Brazilians, it is quite difficult to conceptualize the Japanese-Brazilians as a part of mainstream society since they do not belong to the three founding races of Brazil--white, black, and Indians (Tsuda 62).

The physical characteristic is a strong distinction of the Japanese-Brazilians, yet Tsuda suggests that it is not the most important factor to determine their identity. It is true that the Japanese-Brazilians are constantly reminded of their Japanese identity due to a mainstream Brazilians’ tendency to pay attention to physical characteristics when identifying the Japanese-Brazilians. Some of Japanese-descendent Brazilians struggle in order to be fully accepted as a Brazilian, arguing that facial features should not be a reason to exclude the Japanese-Brazilians from counting them as majority Brazilians (Tsuda 64). However, the author’s general observation is that the Japanese-Brazilians are well accepted and integrated into Brazilian society, despite of their distinctive physical features. Some Brazilians, especially when they have a close relationship with culturally assimilated second and third generation-Japanese-Brazilians, tend to include the

Japanese-Brazilians into a majority Brazilians. Because the Japanese-Brazilians are widely accepted as Brazilians by the society, Tsuda concludes that the physical characteristics are not the most crucial factor to determine their identity.

A significant source of the Japanese-Brazilians' self-identity is their social and economic status. Tsuda calls the Japanese-Brazilians "positive minority," (65) meaning that their identity are perceived favorably by Brazilian society. This connotation makes the Japanese-Brazilians a unique ethnic group that distinguishes them from other minority groups. In many cases, minority groups suffer from low economic status, discrimination, and prejudice from majority population. The Japanese-Brazilians are technically a minority group, however, they maintain a high socioeconomic status that is even higher than the status of a majority Brazilian population. Moreover, the Japanese-Brazilians are respected minority group for their achievement of a high socioeconomic status (Ishi 77). The first Japanese immigrants started their lives in Brazil as humble contract workers who came to work in the Brazilian plantations. Yet they eventually created very successful agricultural corporations and introduced a variety of new fruits and vegetables to the Brazilian daily meals. The success of the Japanese-Brazilians to advance their socioeconomic status and their contribution to Brazilian society is recognized in Brazilian society. This is the reason for many Japanese-Brazilians to take pride in their ethnic heritage, which leads them to develop strong sense of 'Japanese-ness' when identifying themselves (Tsuda 66).

Brazil has a strong class-consciousness, and thus socioeconomic status is an effective means for the Japanese-Brazilians to differentiate themselves from other Brazilians in the society. Brazilians' culture to have a sensitive class-consciousness

strengthens the Japanese-Brazilians tendency to identify themselves as Japanese. Some Brazilians without Japanese ancestors perceive the Japanese-Brazilians as a rich population, and believe that a marriage with a Japanese-Brazilian brings an economic security in their lives. This perception also comes from the Japanese-Brazilians' high educational status. Among the all Japanese-Brazilians, 20 percent of them have a university education, which is more than three times higher than that of Brazilian average (Tsuda 65). The Japanese-Brazilians are overrepresented at top universities, such as Universidade de São Paulo. Because Brazilians have a strong class-consciousness and associate being Japanese with an individual's high educational and socioeconomic status, the Japanese-Brazilians can maintain their privilege by stressing their Japanese identity.

An importance of socioeconomic status as a determining factor for the Japanese-Brazilians' identity is evident when one examines the Japanese-Brazilians' reverse immigration to Japan, which increased starting in the 1970s. When the Brazilian economy was sharply declining, many Japanese-Brazilians decided to leave Brazil and work as temporary workers in Japan, so that they could earn much more money than staying in Brazil. Some scholars argue that the Japanese-Brazilians made a choice to work in Japan not because they were financially desperate. Their decision derived from their desire to construct a typical middle class life in Japan, represented as a purchase of a house or an apartment, car ownership, and business ownership. Scholars point out that for some Japanese-Brazilians, the decision to work in Japan was a way to prevent their social status from declining by remaining in economically weakened Brazil (Ishi 77).

Brazilians associate positive image of Japan and its culture with a favorable impression of the Japanese-Brazilians, and this is another factor that strengthens the

Japanese-Brazilians' tendency to push forward their Japanese identity. Generally, Brazilians have more positive cultural impression toward Japanese products than toward American and European brands (Tsuda 68). Brazilians' positive attitude towards Japan comes from both specific knowledge about Japan and general impressions about the country as the First World, which is a term refers to nations that dominates mass media and popular culture in global scale, such as the United States. From his research experience, Tsuda observes that when they were asked, not many Brazilians had a clear idea about a living condition in Japan. However, they applied the same luxurious and privileged living image of American and European lifestyle to the everyday life in Japan. This observation signifies that the Brazilian people have an image of Japan as the First World country, and it brings a positive reason for the Japanese-Brazilians to assert their Japanese identity and distinguish themselves from other Brazilians in the society.

The respect the Japanese-Brazilians receive from other Brazilians depends on the position of Japan in the world. A positive impression of Japan as a technologically advanced country, an important economic power, and the First World country increased the amount of respect the Japanese-Brazilians received from other Brazilians. On the other hand, when Japan was still a backward Asian country and attempting to catch up with the West, the Brazilian elites regarded the Japanese immigrants as a group of people with inferior race (Tsuda 69). At that time, the Japanese immigrants were even thought to bring a negative effect to Brazilian racial composition. The Japanese immigrants were seen as a problematic ethnic group. Another case shows that during the Japan's imperialistic territory expansion in WWII, Japanese in Brazil was seen as a serious threat

to Brazil's national security. As a result, the Japanese-Brazilians during that period became a subject of severe ethnic repression from majority Brazilians.

Despite the negative images attached to them at first, the social status of the Japanese-Brazilians improved overtime. After WWII, when the image of Japan was still negative, many Japanese-Brazilians of the second generation attempted to get away from their minority status by detaching themselves from their Japanese identity. The second generation also tried to integrate more into the mainstream society by negotiating their identity as Brazilians. However, as Japan started to become prosper and emerge as the First World nation after WWII, ethnic status of the Japanese Brazilians changed dramatically. The amount of respect they received had increased (Tsuda 70). Nowadays, the Japanese-Brazilians get a certain prestige in being associated with a part of the First World, instead of Brazil, which belongs to the Third World status. Tsuda observes that Brazilians tend to have negative view of their country (70). The source of such a negative view of Brazil by Brazilians includes a presence of the corrupted government and economic and social problems in Brazil. By asserting their Japanese identity, the Japanese-Brazilians are able to detach themselves from the negative images of Brazil, and maintain the amount of respect they receive from Brazilian society.

IV. History of Struggle and Japanese Identity

The Japanese-Brazilians had been going through struggles so many times in history. During the 1920s, when there was an increasing visibility of Japanese presence in Brazil, political movement emerged in order to prevent a further increase of Japanese immigrants' entries (Lesser 7). An increasing number of the Japanese immigrants

developed an opposition to the receipt of more Japanese immigrants, who argued that the immigrants would remain in the national organism, unassimilated by blood, language, customs, and religion. The situation for the Japanese-Brazilians became more intense in the 1930s. In 1933, the members of the Constitutional Convention, which later produced the Constitution of 1934, had serious debate about the Japanese immigration. The debate discussed the issue of imperialism, assimilation, and nationalism among the Japanese immigrants. This means that social status and position of the Japanese immigrants within the Brazilian society developed as a national topic and significant concern. The Japanese immigrants were accused by the Brazilian nationalists and racists that they were stealing Brazilians' jobs and lands, and polluting the Brazilian race (Lesser 7).

The situation started to become severe in the late 1930s for the Japanese-Brazilians due to Japan's aggressive and imperialistic personality at that time. The Brazilian foreign minister of the time, Osualdo Aranha, and many members of the military became convinced by 1937 that Japan was planning to divide South America into colonies (Lesser 9). Some diplomats feared that Brazil's population was racially weak to fight against the Japan's plot and that it would not be able to protect its people and territory. Furthermore, an installation of totalitarian regime led by Getúlio Vargas in November 1937 was just four days after the Japan-Germany Anti-Comintern Pact outreached Italy for its participation, which displayed Japan's aggressive desire to take over the world in the cooperation with other imperialistic countries. These events changed the ways in which the Japanese immigrants in Brazil were treated. The new regime banned all political parties, and the new nationalist state started to attack against the Japanese immigration. The new decrees were issued in an attempt to diminish

foreign influence in Brazil. As an effort to pursue this goal, the regime started to censor the Japanese newspapers and eventually banned their publications.

The campaign of *Brasilidade* (Brazilization) of identity, introduced by the new regime, further pushed out the Japanese-Brazilians from Brazilian society. The purpose of this policy was to preserve Brazilian identity by eliminating distinctive aspects of immigrant and minority cultures. The legislation controlled entry of immigrants and prevented foreigners from meeting in residential community. All schools were required to be directed by native-born Brazilians, all instructions were to be given by Portuguese, and topics of “Brazilian” were to be included in the course learnings (Lesser 9). The Brazilian ministry of war at that time started drafting children of foreign residents into the army and intentionally assigned them outside of places they were born (Lesser 10). Speaking foreign language in both public and private settings were banned, and Brazilian children with parents of foreign residents were forbidden to travel.

The Japanese-Brazilians reacted against marginalization from Brazilian society by becoming intensively ‘Japanese’. An example of such actions was a replacement of ancestor worship with emperor worship, which was prevalent among people with education from the first quarter of the century (Lesser 10). The Japanese-Brazilians who did not actively express their loyalty to Japan were labeled as enemies. A group of secret societies were born, and they were a mixture of ultra-Japanese nationalism with a desire to strengthen the Japanese identity. These movements escalated sometimes, leading to violent results.

The most powerful secret society as the form of Japanese-Brazilians’ resistance was the *Shindo Renmei*, whose translation was ‘Way of the Subjects of the Emperor’s

League.’ The leaders of this society were retired Japanese army officers who were frustrated against the way the Japanese-Brazilians were treated in Brazil. The society’s goal was to maintain ‘Japanized’ space in Brazil; preserving Japanese language, culture, and religion among the Japanese-Brazilians, and re-establishing Japanese schools (Lesser 11). Despite a repression from the Brazilian regime, the Shindo Renmei did not promote the Japanese-Brazilians to move back home to Japan; their movement was about establishing the Japanese-Brazilian identity and situating it within Brazilian society. The Shindo Renmei’s movement was radical around mid-1946, and the society even recruited youth to assassinate people who criticized the place of the Japanese-Brazilians within Brazil. This caused a fear among the majority Brazilians. Between March and September in 1946, sixteen people were assassinated, and many silk, cotton, and mint farmers suffered because their homes and fields were destroyed during the process of Shindo Renmei members to suppress other Brazilians.

The radical actions by the members of the Shindo Renmei mobilized the Brazilian government to take counterattack. The Brazilian government itself was in the middle of transition from dictatorial regime to democratic government, yet it was very concerned about not being able to handle the potential civil war. The government needed to take action against the Shindo Renmei because domestic situation was already instable enough that the government did not wish to have further problems. In the mid 1946, the police arrested four-hundred members of the Shindo Renmei, and planned to deport its eighty leaders back to Japan (Reichl 43). The Japanese immigrants were suppressed, and some Brazilians made a claim to justify lynching the Japanese-Brazilians.

However, the social status of the Japanese-Brazilians advanced overtime, and the public opinion poll conducted in Brazil in January 2008 by an agency in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan reveals that Brazilians have positive impressions, such as hard-working, about the Japanese-Brazilians. The poll was collected by an agency of the Japanese government, and was taken in three cities in Brazil: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Brasilia. The total number of respondents was 1008, with São Paulo accounting for 500, Rio de Janeiro for 300, and Brasilia for 200. The population studied is broad, with male taking 46 % and female taking 54%. The respondents are the age sixteen and older, with the largest number of participants aging from sixteen to twenty-four years-old. They were asked two-fold questions regarding the Japanese-Brazilians. First, they were asked their opinions about the degree of co-existence of the Japanese-Brazilians in Brazilian society. Second, the question asks about the Japanese-Brazilians' contribution to Brazil (Ministry of Japan).

The outcome from the first question reveals that majority of respondents perceive that the Japanese-Brazilians are adapting very well into Brazilian society. No significant difference is observed regarding respondents' ages and genders. The answer stating that the Japanese-Brazilians co-exist very well with Brazilians society is the most common answer from both genders and all ages, accounting the total 69% of participants. On the other hand, 29% of the participants answered that the Japanese-Brazilians do not socialize much with other Brazilians and only hang out with other Japanese-Brazilians (Ministry of Japan).

The history of struggles the Japanese-Brazilians had been through, and their effort to strengthen the Japanese identity as a way to fight against an oppression from the

Brazilian regimes, is significant for the Japanese-Brazilians' self-identification. In spite of countless struggles and history of prosecution they experienced, the Japanese-Brazilians are well-integrated into Brazilian society today. The Japanese-Brazilians had made efforts to strengthen their Japanese identity as a means to deal with difficulty they encountered (Sasaki). Although they suffered from suppression by the Brazilian regimes, the Japanese-Brazilians had advanced their social and economic status overtime. As a result, they have achieved a high social and economic status. This social and economic advancement of the Japanese-Brazilians associates them with positive connotations, such as devoted and hard-working, and becomes a reason for the Japanese-Brazilians to proud of themselves.

V. Conclusion

A number of Japanese immigrated to Brazil starting in early 1900s, and as a result, Brazil has the largest Japanese community outside of Japan today. Many of the current Japanese-Brazilians are second or third generations. A common agreement is that the Japanese-Brazilians are integrated well into Brazilian society, both culturally and socially. Intermarriages between the Japanese-Brazilians and non-Japanese Brazilians became more common now, and a significant percentage of the fourth Japanese-Brazilian generation is ethnically mixed. Many of the Japanese-Brazilians, especially newer generations, have Portuguese, not Japanese, as their first language. Hence, there is a decline in the number of the Japanese-Brazilians who have Japanese language fluency.

Scholars argue that responsible factors for the Japanese-Brazilians' self-identification are predominantly their socioeconomic status. Brazilians are sensitive to

class-consciousness, and the Japanese-Brazilians emphasize their Japanese identity, which is useful to distinguish themselves from other Brazilians. Japanese identity positively differentiates the Japanese-Brazilians from major Brazilians because of the favorable images attached to ‘being Japanese’—wealthy, trustworthy, educated, and respected. Japan’s national status in the world as economically successful and technologically advanced country gives a positive images of Japan to major Brazilians. Brazilians’ favorable attitude toward Japan motivates the Japanese-Brazilians to stress their Japanese identity because they get respect from Brazilian society.

History of the Japanese Brazilians’ struggles and their reactions against those challenges is another crucial self-identification factor for the Japanese-Brazilians living in Brazil. The Japanese-Brazilians, especially in their early years in Brazil as new immigrants and their time around WWII, faced harsh treatment from the Brazilian regime and marginalization from Brazilian society. However, the Japanese-Brazilians became successful in overcoming these challenges and achieving high socioeconomic status. As a result, the Japanese-Brazilians are a successful minority group and integrate well into Brazilian society. This historical experience of hardships, resistance, and achievements brings a pride in having a Japanese identity. Being Japanese in Brazilian society includes many positive aspects.

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