

THE CLASS-ORIENTED INHERITANCE OF ETHNICITY:
ANALYSIS OF THE SYMBOLIC CAPITAL OF JAPANESE-NESS AMONG JAPANESE
BRAZILIANS IN RECIFE AND IVOTI

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Abstract. The early experiences of immigrants may create different trajectories for the ethnicities of their descendants. Second-generation Japanese Brazilians in Recife and Ivoti express their ethnic subjectivity on a different individual basis: some emphasize Brazilian-ness, while others highlight Japanese-ness. The difference lies in whether memories of the early experiences of their families give them an incentive to inherit Japanese-ness in order to make sense of their current class situations and the transitions in their lives. By dealing with three different individual narratives of second-generation Japanese descendants I recorded in Brazil, this article aims to shed light on the occurrence of class-oriented ethnic divisions within the ethnic subjectivities of the descendants of Japanese migrants in Brazil.

Keywords: Brazil, immigration, ethnicity, symbolic capital, class, divided ethnic subjectivity, ancestry.

Introduction

I think that they (the first generations) are warriors, heroes, and they are very brave and persevering. They dedicated their lives to investing in their children`s better futures, especially in their education. They worked until late at night and woke up early for work the next day. There was no Sunday, holiday or vacation for them. My parents strove so hard to enhance the productivity of their work in order to reduce labour. (Kiyoko:² *Nisei*³)

The above quote is from one of my informants, Kiyoko, who lives in the *colônia japonesa* (Japanese settlement) in the town of Ivoti in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Kiyoko is a second-generation descendant of Japanese immigrants to Brazil. While in academia they are called Japanese Brazilians,⁴ in Brazil they are simply called *japonês*

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² All names have been anonymized in this paper.

³ ‘Second generation’ in Japanese. The word *Issei*, used later, means ‘first generation’.

⁴ There are approximately 1.5 million people of Japanese origin in Brazil. Japanese immigration started in 1908

(Japanese). Kiyoko told me how she thinks about her parents, who are from the first generation of migrants. What I elicited from her statement was full of appreciation and respect for her parents, who had overcome economic struggles and social discrimination in this new land on the opposite side of the world from Japan. For Kiyoko, what her parents did was to invest generously in their children for the sake of the latter's better futures by sacrificing their own desires and achievements.

I met Kiyoko during a period of socio-economic crisis in Brazil,⁵ when a mood of depression hung over the entire country. During my fieldwork⁶ the price of petrol rose, after which people working in the transportation sector launched a major strike causing the sector to stop running for a time. The impact of the crisis was also obvious from the many homeless people on the streets, the broken buildings and roads, the many *favelas* (shanty town) along the river, the fall in the Brazilian currency, which benefited foreigners like myself, and people's resentments and anxieties about the next presidential election in October. However, when I asked Kiyoko about the potential impact of the crisis on her life, contrary to my expectations she started to explain how the first generation of migrants had improved her life, which had not been affected by the crisis, thanks to the upward class mobility her parents had already achieved. She thought the crisis was affecting those in economic difficulties, there being much less impact, if any, on those around her. She felt that there were no problems in her life, for which she had her parents to thank.

This article aims to elucidate a peculiar phenomenon I observed during my fieldwork in Brazil. Specifically focusing on the second generation of Japanese Brazilians, my fieldwork asked how Japanese ethnicity is generated and inherited by the initial migrants'

under a government immigration programme.

⁵ Brazil has been suffering a socio-financial crisis since 2014 (see Barua 2016; Costa et al. 2017; Xuecan 2017; Child and Simos 2018; Reuters 2018). In 2015 GDP fell by 3.9% and the following year it recorded a 3.6% drop, breaking a record established in 1931. The unemployment rate also rose to 8.5%, rising further to 12% in 2016.

⁶ The fieldwork was conducted in Recife and Ivoti from June to August in 2018, thanks to generous funding from the US National Science Foundation and the Brazilian Studies Association.

descendants, those who were born in Brazil. In other words, I was particularly interested in how the descendants of Japanese immigrants become Japanese in Brazil. One result of my enquiry was that the more socially successful the first generation is considered to be by their descendants, the more the latter tend to identify with a Japanese ethnicity. In this context, I suggest that Japanese ethnic subjectivity in the second generation may be contingent on their class subjectivities, which have been formed by the experiences of the prior generation of migrants and their own interpretations of and reflections on the impact of those experiences on their current class status.

In doing fieldwork in Recife and Ivoti, I was able to observe the on-going ethnic transition from the first to the second generation, which shows how Japanese-ness is generated, inherited and intensified in respect of Japanese ethnic subjectivity and how the class status of the descendants of the original migrants is deeply intertwined with this process. In addition, I argue that the financial crisis has encouraged many Japanese Brazilians to rethink their current class status, asking themselves why they have not been affected by it, even though many others are suffering seriously from the crisis. In the following sections, after offering basic historical understandings of the early migrant experiences of Japanese immigrants in the literature on Japanese Brazilians, I draw in the individual narratives I recorded to describe the family backgrounds of the first generation of immigrants and the second generation's interpretations of them. From a consideration of these aspects, the discussion moves to the question of the inheritance and maintenance of class-oriented ethnic identity by the original migrants' descendants.

Pioneers in the new land

It is already over a hundred years since the earliest Japanese immigrants arrived in Brazil. After completing a journey of almost two months by ship, around 781 Japanese immigrants

successfully migrated to Brazil in 1908. At the beginning they had to engage in hard work on coffee plantations in and around the state of São Paulo. Experiencing and resisting the quasi-slavery-like treatment of the *fazendeiros* (coffee plantation owners) and racism from Brazilian white nativists against themselves as a ‘yellow’ race (Lesser 1999), early immigrants from Japan, especially the first generation, experienced severe economic conditions as unskilled labour migrants. As Harada (2008) argues, the period from 1908 to 1942 was a time of adjustment and of resistance to these conditions.

The flow of Japanese immigrants temporarily stopped after Japan’s defeat in World War II. However, after diplomatic relations between Japan and Brazil were reinstated in 1951, Japanese immigration resumed. Although some scholarly works vividly describe the harsh experiences of the early pre-war immigrants (Normano 1934; Holloway 1980; Tsuchida 1998; Lesser 1999; Lesser 2003; Carvalho 2003; Nishida 2017), there is little discussion in this literature of the early experiences of post-war Japanese immigrants. Aiming to fill this gap, this article also posits that the experiences and economic conditions of post-war immigrants were just as severe as those of their pre-war forbears given the consistent tendency to engage in unskilled agricultural work in the beginning. The narratives I introduce below focus on the memories of post-war immigrants in Japanese Brazilian communities outside São Paulo.⁷ As some of the local literature about Japanese immigrants in Recife and Ivoti shows, experiences could be challenging given that Japanese immigrants had to settle in localities where they were scarcely accorded any social recognition (Motta 2011; Santos et al 2003; Gaudioso and Soares 2017).

Japanese immigrants started to migrate internally to Recife and Ivoti from the 1960s. Although the reasons underlying this migration are quite diverse in the case of Recife, those who went to Ivoti almost all moved as agricultural migrants, having been allocated land by

⁷ São Paulo attracts a great deal of attention from scholarship in this area because it hosts the largest Japanese Brazilian community, called Liberdade, which accommodates a large proportion of the Japanese population in Brazil.

the state government of Rio Grande do Sul. Even though Japanese immigrants and their descendants live dispersed throughout the city of Recife, where they follow different businesses, in Ivoti many of them live collectively a district called the *colônia japonesa* (Japanese settlement). In Ivoti, where I visited the local Japanese association, there is a memorial, *Memorial da Colônia Japonesa*,⁸ depicting the harshness of agricultural activities and the austere lives of the early immigrants. Teruko, a vice-president of the memorial, explained, ‘We have this memorial so as not to forget the experiences of our grandparents and parents’.

In Recife, on the other hand, the Associação Cultural Japonesa do Recife⁹ (Japanese Cultural Association of Recife or ACRJ), a cultural institution of Japanese Brazilians I frequently visited in order to conduct interviews, was established in order to create solidarity among Japanese Brazilians working in Recife through cultural activities, food events and festivals. In ACRJ I met some first-generation immigrants who repeatedly and consistently recalled the socio-economic struggles they had to go through in the early stages of immigration. One of the families I interviewed, which owns a few restaurants in the city, mentioned that at first they started farming with just a few chickens and only turned to their restaurant business later. They also pointed out that Japanese food did not have a good reputation in the city at the time. In this context, based on the premise that the early experiences of the post-war immigrants were also bitter, in the following section the memories and interpretations of the second-generation migrants about their own early experiences as immigrants are described in relation to how Japanese-ness comes into being as part of the dynamics of changing class status within their ethnic subjectivity.

⁸ The memorial is located within the Japanese area of settlement, and a Japanese Brazilian staff member welcomes visitors.

⁹ This Association is a hub for Japanese Brazilians living in the city. Established for the religious purposes of Tenrikyo, one of Japan’s minor religions, it was transformed into a cultural association later on.

Struggles: memories of the first generation's immigrant experiences

My family was very poor at the beginning. My parents were farming in the countryside, and we lived in a house without light. Of course, there was no money for the children's education, so I went to an almost free state school and could not go to university. I think we (the first generation) share the feeling that we want our children to live better lives. This is why we try to invest as much as possible in their education. (Yoshiko: *Issei*)

'My family had no light', recalled Yoshiko, in contrast to her current situation. I interviewed her with her husband Hiroshi in a fancy condominium located in Boa Viagem, one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in Recife. From the room, I could see the beautiful ocean shining through the window. Yoshiko met Hiroshi when she was in her twenties, married him and raised two sons, Ricardo and Lucas. She migrated to Brazil with her parents when she was twelve years old. Her father first brought his family to a Japanese settlement in Natal¹⁰ to search for land for farming. Since her family's financial situation did not allow her go to university, she decided to go to the city of Recife in order to find a job. Her husband Hiroshi, conversely, migrated to Brazil when he was 21 years old as a so-called 'technical migrant'.¹¹ Not being the eldest son in his family enabled him to take that decision, he told me. However, he stated that being a technical migrant does not guarantee one a high salary, while his being Japanese also made him a target of racism in the new land due to the linguistic barrier and his distinctly Asian appearance.

Their younger son Ricardo, who did his doctoral research at the University of Cambridge and is now a professor of computer science at a prestigious local university in Recife, thinks of himself as having some kind of Japanese heritage in respect of his own ethnic subjectivity. He does not speak any Japanese and does not have a Japanese wife, unlike

¹⁰ Natal is the capital city of Rio Grande do Norte, neighbouring the state of Pernambuco, whose capital is Recife.

¹¹ Hiroshi went to Recife in 1968 after graduating from a technical high school in Japan by applying for a job in a factory owned by a Japanese Brazilian in the city. This is called 'technical migration' among Japanese migrants in Recife. It was particularly promoted in the 1960s and 1970s by immigration agencies.

his father. However, as in the case of Kiyoko from Ivoti, mentioned above, what emerged from his discourse was his appreciation of the investment his parents had made in his education. Ricardo mentioned:

When I was a child I had to negotiate with my parents about going to a party with my friends, but I did not need to negotiate with them about buying a book. When I wanted a book they bought it for me without hesitating, even though I think that my family was not so rich at the time. (Ricardo: *Nisei*)

He noted that, if his parents had not invested in his education, he would not be a professor now. When I asked which class he thought he belonged to, he answered without hesitation '*classe alta*' (upper class), thanks to the generous support of his parents. 'I think I belong to the top 5% in Brazil, which is thanks to my parents', he remarked. As a witness to their struggles and their dedication to their children's futures, and being directly influenced by the first generation who were ethnically Japanese, his experiences indicate that many second-generation Japanese Brazilians have positive views of their ethnic subjectivity as Japanese because this has shaped the class status they enjoy today. Material conditions such as living in a Japanese-style house, speaking Japanese and decorating one's house with Japanese traditional artefacts is not sufficient to express Japanese ethnicity. Rather, in this context Japanese ethnic subjectivity constitutes symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1999; Weininger 2005). Japanese ethnic subjectivity, as cultural capital whose power stems from the socio-economic practices of earlier generations, functions as a distinct form of symbolic capital among the descendants of Japanese migrants. In the words of Bourdieu, this involves 'legitimizing theatricalization which always accompanies the exercise of power', which 'extends to all practices and in particular consumption' (Bourdieu, quoted in Weininger 2005: 101). In sum, their Japanese ethnicity is something they seek to honour in order to validate their current class status as a result of the contribution made by earlier generations. The

ethnic meaning of their Japanese-ness is superficial, but as a symbol of their success its ideological function is immense, being a major factor enabling the Brazilian-born descendants of Japanese migrants to be Japanese, at least in a sense.

Another family I met during fieldwork runs three Japanese restaurants in Recife. Being quite popular, their restaurants are located in a congested and busy area of the city and have regular customers who enjoy lunch there every day. Kimiko, the current owner, gave me a brief history of herself and the restaurant. She moved to Recife with her husband in the 1970s. Her husband was a former restaurant owner, but he died almost seventeen years ago, after which her third son Koichi decided to take up his right to run the restaurants. She gave me details about how their restaurant business was developed in Recife:

At first we were not running a Japanese restaurant business. My husband and I were running a restaurant serving Brazilian cuisine for local customers, but it was not doing well, but Brazilian customers knew that we were Japanese, right? So they suggested that we should run a Japanese restaurant, so we kind of decided to do it and opened a small Japanese restaurant which had only a counter inside, but there was no table, so customers had to stand up to eat [laughing]. Seen from the current situation, I think it became successful. (Kimiko: *Issei*)

Her third son, Koichi, who felt he was Japanese as well as Brazilian, stated that he is full of appreciation and respect for his parents for developing the restaurant business. For him, being born in Recife, where there are few Japanese immigrants, and being surrounded by Brazilian friends, his home was a space in which he could experience Japanese-ness. One of the reasons why he was so determined to take over the restaurant business was the example of his father, who ran the restaurants the Japanese way. Koichi is proud of his current socio-economic situation and tries to maintain the Japanese style of management in the restaurants he inherited from his parents, whatever that means to him. He often goes to Japan to update his knowledge and understanding of how traditional Japanese restaurants are run in

Japan. Also, his older brother Toshi runs a small store dealing in Japanese products, mainly fish. Toshi said to me, ‘This is the *jeito japonês* (Japanese way)’. He also visits Japan often for training in how to process fish professionally in the Japanese manner. His store, albeit small, has many regular customers who rely on his technical skills and knowledge when it comes to dealing with fish. He said that he had acquired a reputation for *credibilidade* (credibility), thanks to the *jeito japonês*.

After conducting fieldwork in Rio Grande do Sul, Takeyuki Tsuda suggested that Japanese Brazilians in Brazil enjoy their status as a Japanese minority and made use of it (Tsuda 2000). Both Koichi and Toshi strive to make use of their Japanese ethnic inheritance, which stems from the migratory background of their families. Their symbolic Japanese ethnic heritage induces them to associate with Japanese-ness in whatever way they decide.

However, it is not always the case that symbolic Japanese ethnicity is inherited by Japanese Brazilians, the class situations of earlier generations being significant in this respect. Here I introduce the case of Masao. Unlike the cases described formerly, he does not interpret the immigrant experience of his own family at all positively. Conversely his comparatively negative interpretation of his memories of severe economic hardship functions as a class-oriented factor that allows him to let go of his Japanese-ness. When he was asked about his family’s background, he replied:

In the beginning, everyone in the first generation experienced difficult times, the children too. We always worried about food for tomorrow. I often encountered the situation of there only being one egg in my lunchbox [laughing]. My family moved from place to place to farm and failed many times. At one time our family grew coffee. We cultivated land and planted coffee trees, but they all went bad because of the frost, so we waited for another three years and repeated this process in different places again and again. (Masao: *Nisei*)

As a second-generation immigrant, he witnessed his parent’s difficult times in Brazil. Masao, now in his seventies, was a military officer, joining up in São Paulo when he was seventeen

years old. The main incentive driving him to find a job in the city was the economic struggles his parents were experiencing. He basically identifies himself as Brazilian and as a military officer who has dedicated his entire life to the military for the sake of Brazil. What was significant among his statements was his remark that he thinks he is 100% Brazilian, unlike other Japanese migrant descendants, who tend to answer, 'Eu sou brasileiro e japônes' (I am Brazilian and Japanese). For him, since his family was very poor, he needed to assume complete responsibility for his life, from finding a job to marrying, because he could not expect any financial support from his parents and family, though in fact he married and ended up having three children. About his children, he told me, 'My children are Brazilian too, despite their *aparência japonesa* (Japanese appearance)'; they were born and raised by myself and my wife, who was born in Brazil'.

One day he and other members of his army unit were conducting intensive training. Suddenly his captain shouted, 'Ei, japonês lá!' (Hey, Japanese there!). The captain shouted because he was not holding his gun in the proper manner, but this incident shocked him greatly because he had been called 'Japanese' by the captain. Since his childhood he has been called Japanese by his friends and his co-workers, but every time he is called Japanese it reminds him to think of himself as Brazilian. He explains:

As long as you are born in Brazil you are Brazilian, and I think that's very simple. For me, dividing up the Brazilian people by ethnic origin is ridiculous. Of course, German immigrants think that they are German and Japanese immigrants do similarly sometimes too. But more than that, we are Brazilian because we were born in Brazil. Brazilian people have to cooperate. (Masao: *Nisei*)

The notion of *jus soli* seems deeply rooted in his discourse, though his migratory background, where he had to be almost totally independent of his Japanese parents and had to establish a life of his own, matters more in respect of his ethnic subjectivity as a Brazilian. His attitude toward Japanese-ness is quite different from the ethnic discourses of Ricardo and Koichi. In contrast to them, what Masao articulated was the multiculturalism of different ethnic groups

in Brazil as a country of immigrants and Brazilian ethnicity, this being the identity of all those who have been born in Brazil. Nor did he try to impose Japanese ethnicity on his children, but instead raised them as Brazilian. Even though he experienced racism from his colleagues and his commander, he still views himself as Brazilian and thinks that the Brazilian military saved him by giving him a job.

Concluding remarks: the hard times have gone, but ethnicity is split

Three different narratives deal with Japanese-ness in different ways because of their different backgrounds. Masao's family history did not support him in maintaining a Japanese ethnic subjectivity. Rather, he relied on his Brazilian-ness as a different way of leading his everyday life in Brazil, despite being the descendant of Japanese immigrants. Conversely, for him his Brazilian-ness – that is, the extent to which he developed his own life by himself for his family, children and career – becomes a form of symbolic capital, as it is the most reasonable way for him to make sense of his current class status as a military veteran who has dedicated his life to Brazil.

For Ricardo, having had educational and financial support from his parents, there is nothing strange in having Japanese ethnic subjectivity as one of the factors validating his class status. Needless to say, his identity also contains a high degree of Brazilian-ness. However, what is important is that he cannot make sense of his current class status without his Japanese ethnic subjectivity because of the extent to which his parents contributed to his life chances. Japanese-ness is deeply embedded in his life because it created the foundation for his career, and this is where his appreciation of his Japanese parents comes from.

Koichi and his older brother Toshi were close witnesses of how their parents developed their restaurant business by making use of their Japanese-ness in Recife, where there was almost no social recognition of Japanese culture at the time. Even though almost all

their friends, co-workers and relatives are Brazilian, they view themselves as Japanese as well as Brazilian because what they are currently doing and why they are currently doing it is a reflection of their parents' Japanese-oriented business.

By observing all these individual narratives of early immigrant experiences and the interpretations of their descendants, this article has shed light on how ethnicity became altered in the sweeping transition from the first to the second generation, that is, from the immigrants to their Brazilian-born descendants in the new land of Brazil. They all experienced hard times, as reflected in racism, social stratification and economic difficulties, but their individual class statuses, whose origin is embedded in their memories of early immigrant experiences, has created completely different trajectories in which the generation of the descendants expresses its ethnicity.

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