

Explorations of difference in a homogeneous field: Inter-marriage and mixedness amongst Brazilian migrants in Japan

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Abstract

Studies of Brazilian migrants living in Japan tend to focus on the importance of individual and collective identity dynamics at the boundary between migrant self and host Japanese other. An emphasis on boundedness, sameness and groupness in this field has led to important gaps in research, in terms of inter-marriage and mixedness. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Japan this article examines how people make sense of such concerns, in memory, narrative and practice, in their everyday lives and in relation to and negotiation with other family members. A focus on kin and generational change, I suggest, provides a fresh basis to explore broader connections between self, ethnicity and nation state amongst Brazilian migrants living in Japan. In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of transcending a focus on relations and boundaries between migrant self and host other in migration studies in order to examine a range of social experiences, relations and differences evident within given migrant groups.

KEYWORDS: inter-marriage, mixedness, kinship, migration, generational change.

Introduction

In 1990 a revised immigration law provided a legal basis for Brazilians of Japanese descent to live, work and study in Japan (Tsuda 2003: 93). By 2007 there were over 310,000 Brazilian nationals in Japan (Ishi 2008: 115). Such people have fascinated scholars in recent years (Carvalho 2003; Green 2008; 2010; 2011; Ishi 2003; 2008; Lesser 1999; 2002; 2003; Linger 2001; Roth 2002; Sellek 1997; Tsuda 2000;2003; Yamanaka 1996; 2000). Questions of ethnic and national identity have dominated this literature, facilitating specific understandings of life in both Brazil and Japan. As Linger argues (2001: 25), Japanese Brazilians, or Nikkeis (Japanese emigrants), maintained a strong sense of ethnic identity in Brazil, through family and community ties and the celebration of traditional festivals. In the journey from Brazil to Japan this sense of identity is transformed, we are told, in the face of a cold and discriminatory society in Japan. Through interaction between self and other, Brazilian migrants embrace a national counter identity that finds individual expression in

“Brazilian” clothing such as tight, figure hugging jeans and a collective sense of belonging through the haphazard public performance of samba (Tsuda 2000).

This focus on identity concerns offers welcome and important insights into Brazilian migrant life in Japan. I follow Handler (1988; 1994), however, in questioning the consistent applicability of a conceptual framework that *tends* to emphasise and overstate the bounded, homogeneous qualities of people, ethnic and national communities and nations over potentially salient issues of transgression and difference. Built on a language of boundedness, sameness and groupness (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) the limitations of this conceptual approach are exacerbated by a tendency, evident in migration studies more generally, to examine life at the boundary between migrant self and host other. By focusing on differences *between* migrants and the mainstream society such studies deny the extent to which differences *within* a migrant group, based on class and generational concerns as examples, may be an everyday fact of life (Green 2010; Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002: 324). By focusing on boundaries between *communities* this research also downplays the importance of family and kinship ties, which despite their central relevance for understanding life in Brazil more generally (DaMatta 1991), are best viewed as the most important social group within community (Tsuda 2003).

One of the most striking features of this focus on relational communities is the almost complete lack of attention paid to issues of intermarriage and mixedness. While recent, reliable statistics do not exist, it was estimated in 1988 that 45.9% of Japanese Brazilians had married outside of their ethnic group (Lesser 2002: 50). The study also alluded to the importance of generational difference, with evidence of intermarriage rising from 6% to 61% amongst 2nd and 4th generation Japanese Brazilians, respectively. The impression given by “Nikkei” researchers is that such ethnically mixed families must have remained in Brazil. Issues of intermarriage and mixedness receive scant attention in Tsuda’s extensive study (2003) and represent roughly three pages of Roth’s monograph (2002: 72–4). Linger makes a crucial point when he suggests that *most* Brazilian families on the housing estate he lived on, ‘as elsewhere in Japan, are ethnically mixed’ (2001: 22n). This statement represents a mere footnote of an account of a distinct ethnic group’s search for another categorical identity in their ancestral homeland of Japan.

This article examines this under-researched aspect of social experience. As I illustrate here a focus on understandings and narratives of intermarriage and mixedness necessarily draws attention to the importance of family, kinship ties and generational difference, or in other words, other neglected aspects of research in the Brazilian Nikkei field. Following Burkitt’s understanding (1999: 127) of the connection between subjectivity and social relationships I illustrate the extent to which understandings of mixedness and intermarriage exist in the remembered and contested realm of everyday family ties and relations between parents and their children. Examining narratives and understandings of intermarriage and mixedness on these relational terms, I suggest, provides insights into people’s broader understanding of social and cultural change and the relationship between change, ethnicity and the nation-state. By analysing mixedness on these broader terms this article similar provides insights into the relationship between self, ethnicity and nation state that necessarily transgress an analytical concern for the construction of identities at boundaries between migrant self and host other.

Inter-marriage and social change

This article draws on almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Japan. Based in Nagoya city, I conducted research in several surrounding towns and prefectures. Like Linger, I found the majority of my research participants to be of mixed descent or in relationships with non-Japanese Brazilians, or quite often other *mestiços* (people of mixed descent). Many Brazilian migrants in Japan claim cultural ties, through their parents and grandparents, to Japan but also Portugal, Spain and Italy, for example. It was particularly common to meet people of Japanese and Italian descent. The Italians were by far the largest European immigrant group to settle in Brazil. Many came to live and work in São Paulo State, and were supplemented at the turn of the 20th century by a supposedly more docile and eager workforce from Japan (Lesser 1999: 82).

Several participants felt that rates of inter-marriage amongst Japanese Brazilians have been rapidly increased from the 1990s in particular. Some participants, such as Luciane, who was a “pure” descendent of 28-years-old, often drew on their experiences of childhood as a way of locating the roots of this important aspect of change amongst Japanese Brazilians in Brazil:

There has already been so much miscegenation in Brazil. When I was a child, nisseis (2nd generation Japanese Brazilians) married with nisseis, many Nikkei families were against marriages with other Brazilians. In such cases families would fall apart. There were lots of cases of children losing their inheritance because they had married a Brazilian. The Japanese community was really strong, with the culture brought by parents and grandparents preserved and maintained in Brazil. People just spoke Japanese at home and so on. Today this situation doesn't exist. The new generations don't speak Japanese, nothing. Nothing remains of Japanese culture, and it's difficult to come across Nikkei marriages. Generally one of them is a Brazilian without Japanese descent.

The supposed loss of Japanese culture is brought home in a more personal sense by my friend Sylvia, who was also a pure descendent, in her early 20s. As a 3rd generation Japanese Brazilian Sylvia expected to play her own, particular role in the supposed disappearance of her culture:

Our culture is disappearing. All that my parents learned is being lost. When I was a little girl my dream was to get married to a Japanese guy, have Japanese kids and continue our tradition, because my parents wanted it for me. But the reality is very different. I've never had a Japanese boyfriend and I don't know if I want to marry one anymore. I'll marry the man I love, Japanese, Brazilian, African, whatever.

In Sylvia's view her culture was disappearing along with her childhood dream to marry a Japanese guy and maintain the ethnic tradition of her parents. Her new dream to marry Mr. Whatever, however, was not cast in stone. The “choice” she would make about an eminently marriageable partner was rather a point of contestation and negotiation between Sylvia and her mother. Here she reflects in this sense on her life as a teenager in Brazil:

Sometimes I feel real pressure in my heart and I don't know what I really want to do. I never took my boyfriends home to know my parents. It's a little bit confusing. My mother knew that my first boyfriend was a *mulato* (person of African and European descent) and that I loved him. And I could see she was scared about this, that I would perhaps marry him, which really hurt me. Then one day a blue-eyed friend of mine came to pick me up and she told me that I should date him. Can you see? My family is so pre-conceited. I can have a non-Japanese boyfriend, but he should be white at least, she says. This is horrible.

Sylvia's story hints at an often unspoken relationship between intermarriage and racialised boundaries of exclusion. During my time in Japan I never met a Brazilian that was in or the product of a relationship with a Brazilian of African descent.

As Sylvia's tale, and Luciane's recollection of her childhood suggests, however, this "tug-of-war" between the values of different generations is shifting in favour of younger generations. Families are no longer falling apart over such issues, as they did during Luciane's childhood. This sense of change and acceptance can sometimes be found in the confines of one household. My friend Edson had 7 brothers, 4 of whom, like him, had married at some point in their lives. All of them had married non-Japanese Brazilians. Edson's second-oldest brother Hiroe went against his father's wishes and married a non-Japanese Brazilian in the early 1990s. By 1999 Edson was 28 and able to marry who he pleased. As Edson explained, Hiroe had paved the way for the rest of the brothers to marry in peace.

In some cases, or perhaps because this shift of values seems irreversible, there is little or no conflict over such issues in some families. Many young Brazilians told me that their parents did not mind whether their future husband or wife was of Japanese descent or not. There was a greater acceptance of changing times and the fact that young Japanese Brazilians are now following their heart and not the tradition of an ethnic group imbued in kin ties.

The cases of Sylvia and Edson illustrate the extent to which understandings of social change, intermarriage and potential marriage partners are embedded in the contested and remembered domain of kin and household ties. In the section below I highlight how and on what terms Diana, a *mestiça* of Japanese and Italian descent, makes sense of her cultural origins and identity in light of the relevance and influence of kinship ties at the heart and periphery of her life.

Mixedness in practice – the case of Diana

For many of the *mestiços* that I met concerns over the supposed loss of Japanese culture did not really exist. Japanese culture was just one potential experiential element of their lives and life history. For them racial mixedness presented a range of identification possibilities and ethnic heritages from which they could draw upon in the making of themselves as Brazilians of mixed descent. Being a Brazilian of mixed descent was often explained through the ethnic or national origins of other familial selves. As Aline, 25, described herself: 'I'm Japanese on my father's side and my mother is of Portuguese descent.' Aline's understanding of the two cultures "within her" derived its meaning through the two sources

of that culture, namely the bodies of her mother and father. Most people spoke of their racial mixedness on such terms. If the parents themselves were *mestiços*, then people would step back a generation in order to account for and locate the “pure” origins of their mixedness. As Lidia, who was 27-years-old, described herself: ‘My maternal grandfather was Japanese. He was married to an Italian woman. My paternal grandfather was German and he was married to a Portuguese woman.’

This rather formulaic and equitable approach to cultural origins, however, did not necessarily reflect the ways in which people connected to kin and their associate sense of self identity *in practice*. Take the case of Diana. When I met Diana she was 40. She lived alone in the city of Ogaki. All of her family lived in Brazil.

For Diana the historical absence of her father’s side of the family in her life meant she had little interest in his “Japanese” culture. It was her mother’s side of the family that mattered in this sense. The walls of her living room in Japan provided a microcosm of this life history. Photographs of Brazilians of Italian descent were sprayed over the walls, reflecting the web of social relationships imbued in them – collective ones of her older brother, her sister-in-law and their two nieces. There were larger images of the two nieces that she truly adored. Photographs of her younger, aspiring actor and musician brother, her parents and snapshots of “the whole family” together were also on prominent display for visitors. The significance of her Italian side also seemed to overwhelm the contours and features of her face and body. She resembled her mother, she suggested, in both looks and general body shape. Diana viewed her body as distinctly Italian, as something that had been passed onto her via her mother and her hearty Italian cooking.

Diana had a few photos of her two Japanese Brazilian aunts and their husbands. They were stored inside a cupboard. This side of her family was kept out of sight. They were people she did not know in any intimate sense. The formal style of these photographs differed greatly from those of her mother’s family on her walls. In the latter images people were captured in sunlight, in shorts and t-shirts, all smiles, hugs and embraces. The “Japanese” images were of people dressed in more formal attire. The photographs were all taken inside the darker light of family homes. They seemed to transmit more than simply a different sense of what constituted good presentation and posture for a photographic image. They echoed volumes about Diana’s understanding of her cultural origins today. When Diana arrived in Japan she did not require face-to-face encounters with cold, reserved Japanese nationals to reinforce or even awaken the warmth and friendliness inside her Italian-inspired body. This perception of herself was created, in part, within the contrasting sense of intimacy found in each side of her parent’s families.

Diana’s case illustrates on a more nuanced level how and in what ways people experienced “culture” in the realm of kinship ties. Diana, I suggest, embodies the Italian side of her mixed origins because she feels closest to this aspect of her cultural heritage. The closeness derives in part from the sense of love that is shared between her and the likes of her older brother’s family. Put differently, Diana’s understanding of family is grounded in social relationships, not blood. Blood matters but the meaning of kinship is not cast in conjugal stone. As Carsten suggests, ‘blood is always mutable and fluid – as is kinship itself’ (2004: 310). Diana feels closer to the Italian side of her family because these rela-

tives represented an everyday or near everyday part of her life in Brazil. They regularly indulged in *churrascos* or family barbecues together. Feeding represents a central element of how and in what ways such people were and became close kin to Diana (Carsten 2004). In contrast, she felt little sense of connection or relatedness with her Japanese relatives, who on social terms represented distant kin.

As I suggest below, for younger *mestiços* living in Japan their understanding of self may be inspired by generation difference and the extent to which they may identify with a historically constructed national narrative, inspired by the work of Gilberto Freyre, in which, ‘conquest and slavery yield a beneficial miscegenation, an adaptive Luso-tropical synthesis’ (Linger 2001: 298).

Mixedness and national identity

During the 1970s the nationalist Gilberto Freyre suggested that Brazil had produced the world’s first “meta-race” or “beyond-race”. In such circumstances, ‘each Brazilian overcomes his or her consciousness of racial origin or status, of color as an indicator of origin or status. Instead, the Brazilian simply feels – Brazilian’ (cited in Andrews 1991: 10). The meta-Brazilian, therefore, was no longer an identifiable fusion of conflicting but perfectly blended cultures. The vastly different cultural heritages of Indians, African Slaves, European and non-European immigrants were now simply indistinguishable aspects of the contemporary Brazilian’s soul.

As Linger argues, part reality, largely fantasy, ‘Brazil’s so-called “racial democracy” has long been a ballyhooed centerpiece of national pride’ (2001: 298). Given the evidence, both statistical and empirical, of high intermarriage rates and mixedness amongst Brazilians of Japanese descent, it is surprising that questions have not been raised by researchers, of a potentially evolving relationship between ethnicity, mixedness and national identity in Brazil. It is certainly the case that many of the young Brazilian *mestiços* that I met were able to draw on their mixed heritage, as opposed to relations with a host Japanese Other, in order to justify their sense of attachment to the Brazilian nation state. Indeed, many of the Brazilian teenagers and twenty somethings with whom I spoke to suggested that they were typical Brazilians because they were *mestiços*. According to the 24-year-old Wagner he was a typical Brazilian salad, made of the fused leaves of his Spanish, Italian and Japanese origins. For the 18-year-old *mestiça* Ana she was typically Brazilian because, well, *Brazilians* are a complete jumble or mixture (of races). Lu followed her ‘I’m a typical Brazilian’ line with the view that ‘... in Brazil there doesn’t exist a “pure” race because everyone’s a mixture of others.’

The appetite for such discourses was so pervasive that in some cases young Brazilians would turn to the city they lived in to defend their attachment to their racially-mixed nation. For Adriana, what made her a typical Brazilian was the fact that she hailed from the multi-cultural city of Curitiba (in Paraná State). As a *mestiça* with a pluralist heart she was able to suggest that her hometown was typically Brazilian (and therefore so was she). It contained people, she argued, from various non-European and European backgrounds, which, as such, indulged in each other’s festivals and other cultural events.

The “pure” descendent Sheyla’s love of the category *mestiço* was such that she

wanted 'its' children. As she told me: 'In Brazil you see all kinds of crazy (racial) mixtures! It's really cool. I like it ... I told my Mum that my children will be mestiços. She laughed so much!' Her admiration for cool and crazy mixtures may one day add another meta-Brazilian or two to the national production line. What Sheyla's case also illustrates is the extent to which, in some households and in contrast to the earlier case of Sylvia, families are able to joke instead of argue about a potential future involving mestiço grandchildren.

For many young Brazilians, the category mestiço abounds with connotations of beauty and style. As Wagner put it, because of racial mixedness, 'Brazil turns out lots of beautiful women.' The association of the category mestiço with all things beautiful is much in evidence on the World Wide Web. On the friendship and romance pages of the website *Braznet* I often came across females looking for mestiçosto date. One twenty something female migrant specifically asked for a Japanese-Italian Brazilian to brighten up her life. I wrote to her, inquiring about her particular taste in Japanese-Italian salad leaves. She replied with the answer that she had dated "one" before and considered them to be the "most" beautiful of mestiços. Another young Brazilian placed her advert as follows – in the heading she wrote in typical net shorthand: 'Mestiços kdvc!' (Mestiços where are you!). Her message is then 'Oi (Hi). My name is Talyta. I'm 16 years old. I'm really outgoing and looking for a handsome mestiçinho (a typical Brazilian diminutive of mestiço). Write me ...'

An endnote

The very thought perhaps of a Brazilian of Japanese descent living in his or her ancestral homeland has led to a range of publications which focus the individual and collective identity concerns of this particular group of people. As I have illustrated here, such concerns have consequently neglected important aspects of social experience. For Luciane and Sylvia in particular the supposed disappearance of Japanese culture is felt, first and foremost, in the ties and relations of family. "Family", in this sense, represents the site and source of ethnic tradition and social change. For people of mixed racial origins, like Diana, their understanding of who they are as mestiços may be located in these kin ties but in ways that reflect the actual quality and intimacy of these relationships in her evolving life.

The ways in which younger mestiços draw on categorical sources of identification to reflect an individuated sense of belonging to their salad nation reflects, in part, the sense of change occurring amongst Brazilians of some form of Japanese descent as young people marry and indulge in relationships on the basis of love and beauty, not obligation to one's parents and ethnic group. Crucially, a focus on mixedness in practice and narrative has highlighted the limitations of focusing on identity concerns between a migrant self and host other. For Sheyla, who wants to have lots of mestiço children, the shifting and varied relationship between self, ethnicity and nation-state is carved out of relationships with and in reference to a joking relationship with her mother. Young Brazilian migrants may often draw on a discourse of identity to speak of who they are and who they have or will become on these terms. Their narratives nevertheless highlight the extent to which researchers of migrant experience should be focusing on a range of social relations and experiences evident *within* a migrant community, which in this case has revealed important linkages to boundaries and transgressions of boundaries relating to other ethnic groups in Brazil.

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POVZETEK

Študije brazilskih migrantov, ki živijo na Japonskem se navadno osredotočajo na pomembnost dinamike individualne in kolektivne identitete na meji med jazom migranta in japonskim gostiteljem kot drugim. Poudarjanje povezanosti, enakosti in skupinskosti, je na tem polju privedlo do pomembnih sivih področij v raziskovanju, kot so proučevanja mešanih zakonov in mešanja. Pričujoči članek, ki temelji na obširnem etnografskem delu na Japonskem, proučuje, kako ljudje osmišljajo tovrstne skrbi v spominu, pripovedovanju in praksi v svojem vsakdanjem življenju in v odnosu ter pogajanju z ostalimi družinskimi člani. Menim, da osredotočanje na sorodstvo in generacijske spremembe predstavlja svežo podlago za raziskovanje širših povezav med jazom, etničnostjo in nacionalno državo med brazilskimi migranti na Japonskem. Nenazadnje pa raziskava osvetljuje pomembnost preseganja osredotočanja na odnose in meje med migrantskim jazom in gostiteljevim drugim v migracijskih študijah, saj na ta način lahko proučimo širši spekter družbenih izkustev, odnosov in razlik, ki jih lahko opazimo med raznoterimi migrantskimi skupinami.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: mešani zakoni, mešanost, sorodstvo, migracije, generacijska sprememba

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