

Book Abstract

Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Return Migration in Transnational Perspective

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This book examines the ethnic consequences of the return migration of the Japanese Brazilians to Japan as unskilled foreign workers and their cultural encounter with the Japanese. Although the Japanese Brazilians are of Japanese descent, most of them were born in Brazil and have become culturally Brazilianized. As a result, they have been ethnically marginalized in Japan because of narrow definitions of what constitutes being Japanese and have become the country's newest ethnic minority. I analyze how return migration affects the minority status, ethnic identity, and psychosocial adaptation of the Japanese Brazilians within the context of migrant nationalism, transnational communities, and globalization. I consider what happens to the experience of ethnicity when identities are no longer confined to one locality but negotiated in multiple contexts and also situate the experiences of the Japanese Brazilians within a broader understanding of Japanese ethnic and national identity.

The introductory chapter contains a self-reflexive analysis of my own experiences in the field as an ethnically ambiguous anthropologist and how the constant and contested negotiation of my identity with both my Japanese Brazilian and Japanese informants influenced rapport, acceptance, and differential access to ethnographic information. Part I of the book then begins the analysis of the Japanese Brazilians by considering the impact of return migration on their ethnic minority status. Although they are a socially prominent and culturally respected positive "Japanese" minority in Brazil, when they migrate to Japan, they suddenly become an ethnically disparaged and socially marginalized negative "Brazilian" minority. I first discuss the construction of a strong transnational "Japanese" ethnic identity among the Japanese Brazilians in Brazil through essentialized perceptions of their Japanese racial and cultural differences and their appropriation of positive global images and information about Japan, which have become the basis for their social prestige and self-esteem as a "positive minority" in Brazil. I then examine how they become "negative minorities" when they

migrate to Japan by analyzing the sociocultural, psychosocial, and situational aspects of Japanese prejudice and discrimination toward them in Japan, which is based on negative perceptions of their migration legacy, national origins, and “Brazilian” cultural behavior.

The second part of the book analyzes the impact of migration to Japan on the ethnic identity of the Japanese Brazilians in the context of an emerging transnational migrant community. Despite their Japanese descent, the Japanese Brazilians are ethnically marginalized and socially excluded as “foreigners” by the Japanese because of their Brazilian cultural differences. Although they had previously defined themselves as a culturally “Japanese” minority in Brazil, their ethnic rejection in Japan forces them to recognize their Brazilian cultural distinctiveness in a Japanese context. In addition, they experience ethnic discrimination, confront derogatory Japanese images of Brazil, and develop negative attitudes about Japanese cultural behavior. In response to such negative experiences, the Japanese Brazilians discard their previous transnational ethnic affiliation with the Japanese and reaffirm the value of their Brazilian cultural differences, thus strengthening their Brazilian national sentiments as a “counter-identity” asserted in opposition to the Japanese. In this manner, the dislocations of migration can produce a form of “deterritorialized” migrant nationalism where national loyalties are articulated outside the territorial boundaries of the nation-state.

However, this resurgence of Brazilian national sentiment among Japanese Brazilian return migrants in Japan occurs within the context of an emerging transnational community. I examine the nature of transnational migrant communities by analyzing the economic, personal, and institutional networks that have developed between Japanese Brazilians in Japan and Brazil in the technologically constituted space of media and communication networks. Such transnational connections enable the constant flow of information, commodities, and people across national borders and allow the Japanese Brazilians to maintain social relationships that transcend the constraints of spatial distance and transgress the boundaries of the nation-state. However, this transnational community does not produce a corresponding transnational consciousness that overrides national loyalties because it lacks the ideological institutions, cultural coherence, and spatial integrity necessary to challenge and subvert the hegemonic influence of the nation-state over individual consciousness. As a result, a

disjuncture between consciousness and community has developed in which migrants strengthen their national identities despite their membership in a transnational community. This indicates that transnational migration, instead of being counter-hegemonic, can in some cases unintentionally contribute to the nation-state's hegemonic agendas because it exposes migrants to experiences abroad that reaffirm and increase their national loyalties.

The last part of the book deals with the behavioral and adaptational consequences of migrant identities. For most Japanese Brazilians, the development of migrant nationalism in Japan leads a form of ethnic resistance that facilitates their psychological adjustment to their negative minority status. Through the behavioral assertion and performative enactment of their nationalist Brazilian "counter-identities," they are able to resist assimilative Japanese cultural pressures and protect their self-image from the psychologically degrading effects of negative minority status. However, such ethnic resistance among the Japanese Brazilians does not change their subordinate position in the Japanese social order nor seriously challenge dominant Japanese ethnic ideologies. In addition to reproducing their socioeconomic marginalization by precluding social mobility, their ethnic resistance also reinforces the hegemony of the Japanese nation-state by causing a re-affirmation of ethno-national identity among the Japanese, who experience a renewed awareness of their Japanese cultural distinctiveness when confronted by the culturally different Japanese Brazilians. This resurgence of national sentiment among both migrants and hosts indicates that the unrelenting forces of global migration do not always weaken the nation-state as a primary source of identity in the modern world.

In contrast to those who resist Japanese ethnic hegemony by asserting their cultural differences, I also discuss the psychological difficulties and problems experienced by a minority of Japanese Brazilians who attempt some form of cultural assimilation (and even try to "pass" as Japanese). Although this type of assimilative ethnic adjustment leads to better Japanese social acceptance and occupational mobility, it has negative psychological consequences and can cause identity diffusion, psychological stress and unease, alienation from ethnic peers, and ultimately, the internalization of a negative ethnic self-image.

The conclusion contextualizes the ethnic experiences of the Japanese Brazilians by examining two types of globalization (contiguous and non-contiguous) and their indeterminate effect on ethnic identity. Instead of simply expanding identity toward transnational possibilities, globalization can cause a paradoxical intensification of local differences, producing a number of disjunctures between globalization, identity, community, and the nation-state. In the second part of the conclusion, I argue that the ethnic encounter between the Japanese Brazilians and the Japanese has produced exclusionary ethnic identities through a decreased emphasis on racial commonalities and an increased emphasis on cultural differences. The book ends with an analysis of the future minority status of the Japanese Brazilians who have decided to settle permanently in Japan and the eventual integration of their descendants into the Japanese national community.