

Dekasseguis: Japanese Brazilians Abroad

by MAXINE L. MARGOLIS | University of Florida and Columbia University | maxinem@ufl.edu

Several times a week a Tam Airlines flight leaves from São Paulo for Tokyo's Narita Airport. Beginning in the early 1990s each 28-hour flight brought a new contingent of *dekasseguis*, Brazilians of Japanese descent, to Japan to seek economic opportunities in the land of their ancestors. The term *dekassegui* refers to Brazilian immigrants of Japanese descent living in Japan. It is a combination of the Japanese verbs "to leave" and "to earn" and has the general meaning of leaving one's hometown to seek work elsewhere.

When and how did Japanese Brazilians leave the country for their ancestral homeland? By the late 1980s a deep and prolonged economic crisis in Brazil, combined with an economic boom in Japan—the so-called Japanese miracle— together with an innovative government policy drew many Japanese Brazilians to Japan, the vast majority of whom belonged to the second and third generation. This migration was part of a larger phenomenon in which, because of the economic crisis in Brazil, several hundred thousand middle-class and lower middle-class Brazilians left their homeland for the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and several countries in Europe in search of improved economic opportunities (Margolis 1994, 2004, 2013).

In 1990 the Japanese government passed a law that attempted to ameliorate the labor shortage in those industrial jobs that the Japanese themselves shunned. These were the so-called three K jobs, the *kitsui* (arduous), *kitanai* (dirty), and *kiken* (dangerous) jobs. This legal reform permitted Brazilians (and Peruvians) of Japanese descent, that is, *nikkeijin*— Japanese people who emigrated from Japan and their descendants—to work legally in Japan (Sasaki 2010; Yamanaka 1993, 1996b).

The value of the *nikkeijin* was twofold: as a large pool of relatively cheap, docile labor they would help solve Japan's labor shortage and at the same time they would not disturb what was perceived as the nation's racial and social homogeneity. Because most Japanese pride themselves on belonging to a single, cohesive ethnic group, *nikkeijin* were preferred over other foreign workers because it was thought that their "race," regardless of nationality, would allow them to absorb Japanese customs with ease (Yamanaka 1993).

The year 1991 marked the high point of Brazilian emigration to Japan when some 96,000 *nikkeijin* entered the country. By the mid-1990s rising unemployment in Japan led to the gradual decline of this immigrant flow. Nevertheless by that date the *nikkeijin* population was significant, with some 160,000 living in Japan, representing over 10 percent of Brazil's population of Japanese ancestry. In less than a decade this immigration stream was not much smaller than the nearly 190,000 Japanese who had emigrated to Brazil in the 42-year period that ended right before World War II. Even more remarkable is that by the mid-2000s close to 20 percent of the population of Japanese Brazilians in Brazil were now living in Japan (Yamanaka 1996a; Koyama 1998; Tsuda 2004).

Most *nikkeijin* had traveled to Japan envisioning immigration as a temporary journey to take advantage of an opportunity that would improve their lives in Brazil. For most, at least initially, there was no doubt that Brazil was their homeland, where their real lives were lived. Japan was no more than a way station, a temporary workplace to acquire the means to better their lives upon the return home. Most *nikkeijin* went to Japan planning to stay from about one to three years and return to Brazil to build a house, start a

business, pay for their education, buy a car, or have a comfortable retirement. While many did return to Brazil within the time frame planned, others extended their stay (Yamanaka 1996b, 1997).

Over time, somewhat enhanced job opportunities also tied some *nikkeijin* more closely to Japan. In the last few years several Japanese Brazilians found themselves no longer limited to unskilled jobs in factories. They moved into a variety of jobs catering to the ethnic market, a result of the local growth of the Brazilian community. Such new opportunities also changed the outlook of some. Rather than saving money for the return home, many began investing in Japan. Nevertheless, there was and still is a definite limit to their social mobility as immigrants. "Becoming upwardly mobile in Japanese society seems almost impossible," noted Angelo Ishi, a *nikkeijin* journalist who has lived in Japan for over a decade. "They lack the language fluency, and Japanese companies seem reluctant to accept foreigners into skilled jobs: lawyers, doctors, or engineers in Brazil have little chance of working in their own profession in Japan," he concluded. This is one of the reasons they are anxious to earn as much money as possible for the return to Brazil. "Our life in Japan, is not our real life" (Ishi 2004; 2003, 81).

Just who are these *nikkeijin* traveling to an unknown land, albeit the land of their forebears? At the start of the emigration surge in 1990, most emigrants were young, second- and third-generation Japanese descendants. Moreover, most had middle- or lower middle-class backgrounds with fairly high levels of education by Brazilian standards; over half had at least a high school education. They contrasted with earlier Japanese immigrants from Brazil who were mainly *issei*, first-generation *nikkeijin* who retained their native

language and culture. The newer arrivals were born and raised as cultural Brazilians and they spoke little or no Japanese (Sasaki 1995; Koyama 1998).

This linguistic and cultural ignorance did not sit well with the Japanese. As a result, the arrival of nikkeijin set the stage for many well-documented examples of cultural misunderstanding and cultural conflict. Estimates suggest that some 20 to 30 percent of nikkeijin can communicate in Japanese at least to some extent, but only about 5 percent actually study the language. But it is not their lack of language proficiency alone that leads to friction between nikkeijin and their Japanese hosts. Cultural clashes with Japanese—the fact that Brazilians often play loud music, barbecue on their balconies, do not keep appointments on time or recycle properly—have abated in some locations as Japanese disturbed by such behavior have moved away from large housing complexes like those in Toyota City where Japanese Brazilians make up half of all residents. In short, the Japanese take on all of this can be best summarized as follows: “They look like us, but *they certainly don’t act like us!*” Or, as Angelo Ishi, the Japanese Brazilian journalist cited above, put it: “Our hardware is Japanese, but our software is Brazilian” (Tsuda 2001; Onishi 2008; quoted in Wehrfritz and Takayama 2000, 29).

The Japanese media pay a great deal of attention to Japanese Brazilians, who are exoticized as “amusing anomalies.” At first nikkeijin were portrayed mostly in a favorable light; because of their physical appearance, they were expected to absorb Japanese culture easily. But when they failed to do so they were derided as “inadequate” Japanese. In contrast, North Americans and Europeans are generally treated with more respect as *gaijin*

(foreigners) than are Japanese Brazilians. The former are praised even when they speak broken Japanese, because Europeans and Americans are expected to be incompetent in Japanese ways. Nevertheless, they are still admired because they come from “modern” first-world nations. But when expectations of Japanese Brazilian’s “Japaneseness” are contradicted by their behavior, they may be verbally abused and called “uncivilized people from a backward country.” Says one researcher about the Japanese view of the nikkeijin, “their Brazilianness is at best a mystery, at worst a sad third-world affliction” (Linger 2001b, 6; see also Tsuda 2001; Yamanaka 1997).

The generally negative reception that nikkeijin receive in Japan leads to shifts in their ethnic identity. In Brazil they are perceived—and in many instances see themselves—as Japanese rather than as Brazilians, but in Japan they are viewed as Brazilians. Having grown up as *japonês* in Brazil, the unexpectedly cool reception they receive in their ancestral homeland undermines their sense of cultural identity. When they emigrate to Japan their ethnic pride plummets as they realize they are regarded and are treated as inferior to “real” Japanese. To escape this stigmatized image, they eventually come to define themselves as foreigners—as Brazilians rather than as nikkeijin (Ishi 2003; Tsuda 2003; Yamanaka 1997).

Many nikkeijin have strong feelings of empathy for Brazil as a multicultural and multiracial society where the majority have prospered at least to some degree. At the same time they hold a sentimental regard for Japan, since most nikkeijin were raised in families that highlighted their distinctive Japanese ancestry and valued things Japanese. Although most had never visited Japan before emigrating there, they still

maintained a Japanese sense of themselves through the food they ate, the traditional festivals they celebrated, and, for some, the Japanese language classes they attended (Linger 2001a).

In spite of these cultural and ancestral roots, after the move to Japan the Japanese identity that most nikkeijin enjoyed while living in Brazil gradually begins to fade. Instead of becoming more Japanese, they become more Brazilian, that is, they begin to have a far stronger sense of their own Brazilian pedigree in Japan than they had in Brazil. The longer nikkeijin reside in Japan, the more they come to think of themselves as a distinct Brazilian minority living there. Because they have few social relationships with Japanese and remain isolated from many spheres of Japanese life, they begin to emphasize and celebrate markers of Brazilian identity such as the samba, to which most were indifferent in Brazil. They wear colorful Brazilian clothes, dance in carnival parades, and speak Portuguese loudly in public. They spend most of their leisure time in Brazilian spaces including bars, dance halls, shops, and restaurants. Given life’s difficulties for nikkeijin in Japan, Brazilian restaurants and similar ethnic locales are appreciated for their casual, relaxed style, which Japanese Brazilians contrast with the strained formality of Japanese venues. In such places nikkeijin can feel comfortable acting like Brazilians (Roth 2002; Tsuda 2003).

In short, many nikkeijin are deeply distressed by the irony of being regarded as Japanese in Brazil, and then once in Japan discovering the profound differences between themselves and native-born Japanese. But their anguish also stems from other shifts in status: after being regarded positively in Brazil because of their Japanese heritage, they become unwelcome in Japan because of their Brazilian roots;

from being middle-class and white-collar in Brazil, they turn into a derided underclass holding low-level blue-collar jobs in Japan (Rocha 2009).

But what of the future? Are Japanese Brazilians still arriving in Japan, and are some remaining there? Are others returning home to Brazil? The picture is mixed. A number are “yo-yo migrants,” that is, immigrants who have re-migrated to Japan although they had purportedly returned home to Brazil “for good.” Some have traveled back and forth between Japan and Brazil, unsure as to where they should settle. Others have returned to Brazil permanently, while still others have begun settling in Japan even as they maintain their identification with all things Brazilian. The few figures we have are as follows: Brazil’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates that since the economic recession began in 2008, resulting in growing unemployment, 25 percent of Brazilians in Japan have returned home. The flights from Japan to Brazil are said to be full with a large increase in the sale of one-way tickets. However, only a few years earlier an additional 10,000 Brazilians annually were establishing permanent residence in Japan. By about 2010 an estimated 110,000 Brazilians in Japan were legal permanent residents, and by 2013 there were over 181,000 Brazilians living in Japan, making them the second largest foreign population in the country (Yamanaka 1997; Roth 2002; Globo On-Line 2012; Sasaki 2010)

Still, are nikkeijin actually limited to only two options in terms of their futures: To stay in Japan for the long term, trying to assimilate to Japanese culture and make the best of being confined to low-prestige jobs, as most still are? Or to leave for home and resume their lives as Brazilians? It is perhaps too soon to tell which path most Japanese Brazilians will take.

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Nicaraguan Immigration to Costa Rica: Tendencies, Policies, and Politics

by CARLOS SANDOVAL-GARCÍA | University of Costa Rica | carlos.sandoval@ucr.ac.cr

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Like migration from Haiti, Bolivia, and Guatemala to the Dominican Republic, Argentina, and Mexico, respectively, Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica is a major case of South-to-South migration in Latin America. It takes place in Central America, a region where migration—both intraregional and extraregional—is a structural dimension of everyday life. Demographers estimate that between 12 and 14 percent of Central Americans live in a country different from their country of birth. Military conflicts, economic inequalities, and, more recently, violence are among the main factors that expel Central Americans from their countries of birth (Sandoval 2015).

Although the 2011 census confirms that Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica shows a slow decrease (about 6 percent of the total Costa Rican population), discrimination continues to be an everyday experience for Nicaraguans in Costa Rica (Bonilla and Sandoval 2014). Imagineries of immigration, most of them derogatory, are evident in conversations, emails, and digital social networks, and expressions such as “No sea nica” (Don’t be *nica*) or “Parecés de La Carpio” (You seem to come from La Carpio—an impoverished and criminalized community where about half of the population is from Nicaragua) inscribe hostility in everyday life.

Paradoxically, although Nicaraguans are seen as threatening “others,” they are indispensable to neoliberal economic development. The agriculture-based economy that produces new commodities like watermelons, oranges, melons, and mangoes, as well as the traditional coffee and bananas, depends on Nicaraguan men and women. Production and processing of the traditional and new tropical fruits that Costa Rica exports to the world are in the hands of migrants. The case of the

construction sector is similar, since Nicaraguans have become indispensable for building the infrastructure that has made the tourist boom possible, especially in the Pacific coastal region.

The popular representation of Nicaraguans as violent and lawless conflicts with the roles some of them play in tempering the insecurity that is often considered Costa Rica’s main social problem. Private security companies often recruit Nicaraguan guards to protect property, and Nicaraguan women perform a great deal of (badly) paid domestic work, in particular caring for Costa Rica’s middle-class children and elderly people. Nicaraguan domestic workers, construction workers, and private security guards generally live in highly criminalized neighborhoods or shantytowns. Ironically, those who live in such settings are responsible for the production and reproduction of life in the respected neighborhoods, which include gated communities.

Unfortunately, neither academic research nor NGOs have been able to estimate the economic contribution of Nicaraguans in terms, for example, of the Gross Internal Product. The erasure of migrants’ economic contributions might be due to their absence from the media and everyday conversations. Lack of recognition of the Nicaraguan community renders migrants invisible and erases their economic contributions from the public imagination. Instead, the media frame most discussions in terms of the economic costs of migrants. Prevailing discourses denote Nicaraguan immigration as a “cost” and a drain upon resources, paying scant attention to its contribution in a number of key economic activities. In short, as Sousa Santos (2009) notes, absences, such as Nicaraguans’ contribution to the Costa Rica economy, make it even more difficult to acknowledge