What are the cultural ramifications of international migration?

"I used to hate *criollo* (Peruvian) music in Lima, but being in Japan, I've come to appreciate it more"[1]. The term "nikkeijin" literally means "non-Japanese nationals of Japanese descent" and has commonly been used to refer to ethnically Japanese Latin Americans who have returned to Japan after two or three generations, to work in Japan as economic migrants. This essay looks at a small sample of the writing which theorises transnational migration ranging from theories which explain the cultural assimilation of migrant groups to those which explain their collective cultural self-differentiation. The question is then answered with reference to the nikkeijin as a case study. The sense of disappointment and social distance felt by the migrants is described, as are some the nikkei community's cultural practices and a trend towards further essentializing of ethnicity within the community is noted.

In their co-authored essay on transnationalism Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton identify transmigrants as those whose "lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field". They go on to argue that rather than seeing transmigrants as units of labour – as world systems theorists are

[1] Ayumi Takenaka, *Ethnic Community in Motion: Japanese-Peruvians in Peru, Japan, and the United States*, (Columbia University: UMI Dissertation Services, 2000), p.114

wont to do – it is important to understand that, "The transnational context of migrants' lives develops from the interplay of multiplex phenomena – historical experience, structural conditions, and the ideologies of their home and host countries"[2]. They argue for transmigrants to be viewed as "culturally creative but as actors in an arena that they do not control"[3] and they emphasise the hegemonic contexts whereby migrants can find themselves having categories for self-identification imposed upon them by the host society. In the United States for example, these constructions are said to be race rather than class-based and newcomers will tend to adopt this self-identification as the basis for any broader collective action[4].

In opposition to this transnational turn, Nancy Foner asks 'What's new about Transnationalism?' and notes that return migration rates for immigrants to New York were higher at the start of the twentieth century between 1901-1920 than during the period 1971-1995[5]. The new elements which Foner does suggest may have cultural ramifications include the increase in provision made by homeland governments for dual nationality, greater technological connectedness, a migrant workforce which includes

[2] Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, 'Transnationalism: A new analytic Framework for Understanding Migration', ed. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Toward a Transnational Perspective on Migration* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992), p.8
[3] Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton (1992), p.19
[4] ibidem, p.14
[5] Nancy Foner, 'What's New About Transnationalism?: New York Immigrants Today and at the Turn of the Century', *Diaspora*, 6:3 (1997), p.358

more skilled members, and in the US, a greater tolerance for pluralism[6]. This overview of a century of migration usefully reminds us of the manner by which the boundaries and connotations of ethic categories are in flux such that Italians immigrants to New York were considered as non-white and "swarthy"[7] at the start of the last century rather than, as presently, "white".

Significant ramifications for transmigrant social behaviours arise from the psychological contexts described by Hanna Malewska-Peyre in her paper 'Conflictual Cultural Identity of Second Generation Immigrants'. Malewska-Peyre suggests that having internalised family norms during childhood which are culturally foreign and considering them to be absolute and universal, the young second generation migrant is prone to being negatively perceived in the host society and will experience this as unjust[8]. Discerning anomia among young North African and Iberian immigrants in France – defined as "a state of complete uncertainty and indifference as regards every model or value"[9] – she quotes approvingly Erik H. Erikson's proposition that "Self-identity gains its true force from constant recognition of achievements which are meaningful in the culture concerned, or otherwise we find self-depreciation, shame, a feeling of guilt, and

[6] Foner (1997), p.362
[7] ib., p.360
[8] Hanna Malewska-Peyre, 'Conflictual Cultural Identity of Second Generation Immigrants', *Cultural Identity and Structural Marginalization of Migrant Workers*, ed. Hermann Korte, European Science Foundation: Human Migration (1982), p.99
[9] Malewska-Peyre (1982), p.100

difficulty in forming an identity"[10]. Suggesting tentatively that rapid cultural assimilation may not be the soundest course for second generation migrants, contrary to general opinion, Malewska-Peyre's analysis offers insight into the forces which could be said to favour migrant ghettoisation.

Czarina Wilpert illuminates the topic of cultural ramifications further by building upon Hans-Joachim Hoffmann-Nowotny's hypothesis that saw "acculturation as a result of opportunities for structural integration and not as a prerequisite for structural integration"[11]. Wilpert argues that it is the perceived lack of opportunity which will conversely result in the greater emphasis of cultural distinctiveness and the co-option of ascribed traits as positive by the marginalised group. This link between perceived access to opportunity and expression of cultural identity is surely significant to analysis of the cultural impact of transmigrants since it posits not merely that external cultural differences become apparent through migration, but that the recourse to emphasising these difference can assessed as a proportional reaction, a strategy and an "antidote"[12] to structural inequalities, perceived or otherwise.

In the 1980s, when large numbers of Japanese-Brazilians and Japanese-Peruvians entered Japan on work visas which facilitated their return, many

[10] Malewska-Peyre (1982), pp.100-1
[11] Czarina Wilpert, 'Structural marginality and the role of cultural identity for migrant youth', *Cultural Identity and Structural Marginalization of Migrant Workers*, ed. Hermann Korte, European Science Foundation: Human Migration (1982), p.118
[12] Cited from E.B. Brody, *Minority Group Adolescents in the United States* (Baltimore, 1968), p.231; Wilpert (1982), p.126

reported surprise at the mismatch of modern Japan with their expectations of it and some were upset by the manner in which they were denied acceptance into the mainstream conception of "the Japanese". As one informant explained to Takenaka, "It's shocking … because in Peru, we looked down on Peruvians (non-Japanese Peruvians) and discriminated against them. But here in Japan, the Japanese discriminate against us"[13]. The change in visa legislation prompted by a shortage of unskilled labour was motivated by the assumption that it would be easier for the ethnically Japanese Latin Americans to integrate into Japanese society compared to migrants of non-Japanese ethnicities – a belief echoed at the grassroots level by respondents in Daniela de Carvalho's study. Carvalho represents "Japaneseness" as being socially constructed along axes of "'Blood', Japanese culture and language"[14] and quotes a respondent as saying, "We feel closer to the Nikkeijin because they look like Japanese. The Iranians and other foreigners do not look like us"[15]. Yet whilst according to this rationale those nikkeijin who are ethnically pure should be entitled to stake a fuller claim to membership, paradoxically non-Japanese Peruvians have been found by Takenaka to be generally more integrated than their ethnically Japanese compatriots. On measures such as level of spoken Japanese,

[13] Ayumi Takenaka, 'Paradoxes of ethnicity-based immigration: Peruvian and Japanese Peruvian migrants in Japan', ed. Roger Goodman, Ceri Peach, Ayumi Takenaka and Paul White, *Global Japan: The experience of Japan's new immigrant and overseas communities* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p.227
[14] Daniela de Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil: The Nikkeijin* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p.120
[15] ib., p.142

involvement in community activities and frequency of (or aspiration to) trips back to Peru, the non-Japanese Peruvians were less socially distant from the majority Japanese[16].

Öizumi in Gunma Prefecture is described by Carvalho[17]. Dubbed variously "the most Brazilian town in all Japan" or "サンバの町" (the City of Samba), Öizumi is one of several towns which has come to promote itself as a tourist attraction for its carnival-style *matsuri* (festival) which annually attracts 15,000 people. By 1997 half of the babies born in Öizumi were Brazilian. Brazilian-Japanese in Öizumi are described by Carvalho as eating Brazilian dishes (thereby creating a market for imported canned beans), buying Brazilian-made goods, including imported Brazilian clothes (saying that Japanese clothes do not fit nikkei bodies), claiming that Japanese hairdressers are unable to cut their hair; and in many cases distinguishing themselves through long hair, colourful clothes – cultivating the *jeitinho Brasileiro* (Brazilian flair) supposedly characteristic of Brazilians – casual dress, relaxed posture, swaying gait and loud Portuguese conversation[18]. As well as allegedly breaking rules, they are reported to bargain in shops[19], have different consumption patterns in snack shops[20], disturb their neighbours with noise and are known for taking issue with the conventions for refuse

[16] Takenaka (2003), p.232
[17] Carvalho (2003), pp.134-5
[18] ibid., p.137
[19] ibid.
[20] ib., p.140

separation and disposal[21]. In general amongst studies of nikkeijin, social distance rather than overt discrimination are reported and two Okayama residents describe the change in attitudes since the mid-nineties:

> Everybody was staring at us – maybe because of the way we dressed. I think they were afraid or they did not like us. It happened sometimes that we were not served in shops. Now it is different because the number of Brazilians has been increasing and they value our consumer power.[22]

An interesting development has been the fetishisation of nikkeijin identity within the migrant community. Since technically under Japanese law all Japanese descendants up to the third generation were granted a privileged legal status in visa legislation, the term nikkeijin which had previously been an ethnic one in Latin America came for migrants as for Japanese to take on its legal connotations in Japanese usage and applied broadly to anyone with at least one Japanese grandparent[23]. Takenaka relates how the term nikkei-nikkei has entered circulation to refer to those Brazilian-Japanese of whom both parents are Japanese. She comments that "With the legal privilege conferred on Japanese 'blood', *Nikkei* became a status symbol in Japan. It meant the right, or at least more right than non-Japanese Peruvians, to stay and work in Japan"[24]. The category nikkei-nikkei not only distinguishes ethnically Japanese nikkei from ethnically mixed nikkei, but also emphasises legitimacy – these are not false nikkei who have entered

[21] ib.
[22] ibid., p.133; p.184, ft.34
[23] Takenaka (2003), p.229
[24] ib., p.228

Japan on forged documents. Takenaka associates this accentuation of ethnic categories with a need on the part of the Peruvian-Japanese to distance themselves from the 90% of fraudulent Peruvian renewal applications, from negative associations with crime and stereotypes of alcohol-related violence[25]. This semantic tension between constructed ethnic categories is also observed to have manifested itself in a pattern of fighting between Japanese-Peruvians and other Peruvians at Peruvian parties. One respondent told Takenaka that these fights would usually be triggered when "a Peruvian stares at a *Nikkei* fiercely" or "a *Nikkei* curses a Peruvian for his false documents"[26].

A pluralist view of the situation would surmise that the nikkeijin have difficulty integrating because they instantiate cultural otherness in a culture otherwise accustomed to foreseeability – what Merry White calls the "*yappari* problem"[27] in a study of shorter-term returnees. "The conservative society to which the Japanese returnee returns has no comfortable Yappari understanding of his life and ways; thus, the only role he fills is that of the unpredictable other"[28]. White later concludes of this kind of returnee that there are intrinsic features of the society such as the primacy of group membership through participation which make the reintegration culturally problematic:

> He is regarded as potentially disruptive of the efficient, standardized and loyal

[25] ib.
[26] ibid.
[27] *Yappari* means "after all" or "it's as we'd have expected isn't it?"; Merry White, *The Japanese Overseas* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1988), p.26
[28] White (1988), p.26

> work force to which Japan attributes its world success; his absence suspends his relationship-based membership; given unifocal loyalty, he is assumed to be disloyal;[29]

However, from a structuralist perspective these ethnic categories are seen to operate differently. Carvalho claims that "the nikkeijin" as cultural minority are the result of a retroactive construction predicated upon their social position as an immigrant underclass. He writes, "A minority is formed when two groups are brought together in social interaction and establish 'differences'"[30] and later adds that the nikkeijin present an example of how "a sense of 'us' and 'them' is socially constructed with some reference to culture"[31]. Carvalho emphasises however, that the references to culture are incidental – "The bases of discrimination are not grounded in 'differences', but on the conditions that allow the attribution of meaning to 'differences'[32]. What is mystified by this lens of ethnicity, according to Irving Howe, are the relations of production which we are complicit in obscuring[33]; and Carvalho concurs that "it seems that the low status of the *Nikkeijin* accounts as much as (or more than) cultural differences for the social distance between them and the Japanese people"[34].

Thus, the argument runs, the nikkeijin are collectively conscious of their "difference" only because a "culture" has been constructed to legitimate their low

[29] ibid., p.122
[30] Carvalho (2003), p.136
[31] ibid., p.149
[32] ib., p.151
[33] cited here from W. Sollors, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.xiii; ib., p.185, ft.6
[34] ib., p.150

economic status. Takenaka declares "Migrants do not simply 'have' ethnicity or culture"[35], but rather reconstruct and negotiate them in interaction with their hosts and through their experiences. The Brazilian-Japanese nikkeijin in Carvalho's study arguably display what Wilpert referred to as that quality of cultural identity as problem-solving asset for a marginalised group[36]. Linger goes further to assert the need for distinguishing varying distributions of consciousness within the collectivity, rather than analytically working with group collective consciousness as the unit of culture – and in his microcosmic ethnography of Brazilian-Japanese gives voice to individuals who rather than rigidly adhering to narratives are shown to be using, rejecting and embellishing narratives as skeletal propositions[37]. Of Naomi Mizutake, a bilingual teacher in Toyota City, he observes: "Her perspective *enables* her to be, much of the time, a Nikkei Brazilian, but that perspective itself, *which is also (and perhaps more fundamentally) "Naomi,"* is neither Nikkei nor Brazilian"[38].

To conclude, where Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton tell us that transmigrants can be "culturally creative but as actors in an arena that they do not control"[39], we may interpret that the hegemonic context in which the nikkeijin define themselves has

[35] Takenaka (2003), p.233
[36] Wilpert (1982), p.117
[37] Daniel Touro Linger, *No One Home: Brazilian Selves Remade in Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.310-11
[38] Linger (2001), p.312, his italics.
[39] Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton (1992), p.19

encouraged them to appropriate the constructed cultural "differences" which arise in negotiation with the majority Japanese. The allegedly Latin American behavioural traits and cultural practices which arise at this interface demonstrate how a marginalised group can turn cultural identity into a problem-solving asset to overcome low status and low opportunities for structural integration. Whether one sees the "culture" discourse of these migrants as merely clothing an economically exploited class or as a narrative widely adopted for its efficacy, at least in the case of the nikkei-nikkei, two phenomena are noted. It seems that whilst culture has become separated from ethnicity it offers a no less internally persuasive group-consciousness; and that furthermore the category nikkei-nikkei has seemingly bled out of an existing rhetorical trope of purity in majority Japanese discourse into the marginal group itself.

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