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Migração de Retorno, Identidade e Transnacionalismo

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Title: Migração de Retorno, Identidade e Transnacionalismo: Famílias nipo-brasileiras e as experiências de vida entre o Brasil e o Japão

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Summary

This dissertation studies the identity construction and the transnational practices of Japanese-Brazilian migrants returning to the land of their ancestors, a phenomenon that is known as “return” migration. This concept of “return” is at the centre of the discussion in this dissertation as it challenges the dichotomy between emigration and immigration. Return migration is studied in this dissertation based on the case of the descendants of the Japanese diaspora who were born in Brazil and who, since the late 1980s, started “returning” to the land of their ethnic origin, with which most of them had had no previous contact. Within the description and analysis of this phenomenon the focus is on the concepts of identity and transnationalism.

In this study, the concept of identity is explored primarily on the grounds that we are dealing with generations of descendants of former migrants who belonged to a diaspora that was established in the past. Even after several generations these descendants’ identity still is characterised by the preservation of elements that relate to their original heritage. These very elements reflect the fact that their identity was not shaped by a uniform historical and cultural context, but rather consists of elements of both Japanese and Brazilian culture. Ironically, existing scholarly research has pointed out that when Japanese Brazilians return to Japan elements of Brazilian culture take prominence in spite of their Japanese background. According to such research, the cultural differences related to the Brazilian culture of Japanese Brazilians have led to social exclusion and to ethnic marginalisation of these migrants in Japan, who in response emphasise their Brazilian identity even more. If this analysis is correct and may be generalised, this means that it is the Brazilian culture that determines these migrants’ identity and uniformly marks this ethnic group. Ironically or not, these results are predominant in research projects on Japanese-Brazilian migrants carried out in Japan. It also may not be without significance that scholarly projects have focused on geographical areas in Japan that are characterised by a strong presence of Brazilian culture due to a high concentration of Japanese Brazilians. In such areas it is easier for migrants to preserve their transnational cultural habits that are related to their Brazilian identity. This perspective also affects research dealing with the concept of transnationalism.

Accurate understanding of these concepts is one of the main challenges of this dissertation. It is examined whether the assumptions and generalisations concerning Japanese-Brazilian migrants also apply outside the areas with a high concentration of Japanese

Brazilians. In spite of the existence of an extensive body of literature on this topic, there is a lacuna when it comes to research on Japanese Brazilians outside these areas. This is the starting point of the discussion in the dissertation.

Another important aspect in the existing scholarly discussions of this migration is the claim that Japanese Brazilians after their “return” to Japan develop a positive perception of Brazil and the Brazilian identity along with a rather negative one of Japan and the Japanese identity. This is in contrast to the perceptions they had during their life in Brazil. This claim is related to the fact that the actual experiences of these “return” migrants in Japan do not match their expectations. It is assumed that the migrants were not aware of the type of work and life that would await them in Japan. This claim is examined in the dissertation.

Another question that has received attention in the academic debate has to do with the different results obtained by two scholars, Takeyuki Tsuda and Hitomi Maeda, with regard to the level of education of the Japanese Brazilians, the change of status of those who migrate, and their positive or negative perceptions of Japan. The results of these scholars’ research contribute to an important question posed in this dissertation concerning the diversity of the migrants and of the motivations that determine and affect the experiences of the Brazilian families returning to Japan.

Finally, this dissertation describes and documents the experiences of the second generation migrants. These experiences are in an important way related to the choices of education. The overall picture is complicated by the fact that the motivations and assumptions of the first generation of migrants concerning the future of their children – within a context of options that in this type of “return” migration are not limited to simple ethnic and cultural considerations – will also play a role. Recent scholarly research has pointed out that we still do not have sufficient insight into the motivations and experiences of second generation migrants and into the challenges that they encounter, both within and outside the family context. In the present research, therefore, the voices are included of two generations of migrants, in order to illustrate and to explain how they are interrelated and how each of the generations deals with everyday problems within the family structure. Insight into these motivations and the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of the “return” emerges from the stories of families on how they develop culturally and how they live in Japan in search of the dream of a better life.

In the fieldwork the ethnographic method has been chosen. This made possible to study in great detail the culture of a specific group or an ethnic minority, and to analyse how it develops in the geographical area in which it lives. For this reason it has been decided to undertake multiple case studies. The individual pieces of information made possible to clarify how and why certain choices are made in the daily life of the informants. It also made possible to understand habits, values, and attitudes that reflect cultural aspects as well as the ways in which this group of informants interpret their own condition. The choice of multiple cases strengthened the validity of this type of research, since a case study is a typical example of qualitative and ethnographical research. The research underlying this dissertation describes aspects of the life of these migrants over a period of seven years (2003-2010).

Within this approach the present dissertation describes and analyses the various cultural and historical elements that contribute to the identity construction and the transnationalism of the “return” migrants. The dissertation aims to do justice to the lives of the first and second generation of migrants who do not live in areas with a high concentration of Japanese Brazilians. The focus of this research, therefore, is on the critical evaluation of the theories of “return”, identity, and transnationalism, empirically based on the real life conditions of these migrant families. This dissertation accordingly consists of the following chapters.

Chapter 1 lays out the theoretical framework, in the first place by presenting the scholarly debate on the content of the concept of “return” migration. In order to understand this phenomenon, the motivations of the migrants have also been taken into account, in particular of those who never before had set foot on the land to which they “return”. The concept of “return”, therefore, is the central axis which forms the basis for the study and understanding, within this scholarly debate, of how the concepts of transnationalism and identity are being shaped in this migration. Both Western and Japanese academic literature is included in presenting this debate. An analysis then follows of the scholarly approach that defines the concepts of “identity” and “cultural identity” as two distinct concepts. This bifurcation is not followed in the theoretical framework of this dissertation, since the viewpoint is adopted that identity is being constructed within the context of social interaction by means of developing socio-cultural differences.

Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of the different stages of the Japanese migration to Brazil as well as of the process of integration and assimilation throughout the twentieth century. These historical stages are marked and characterised by the impact of, and responses

to, government policies in the two countries. Within very different settings, marked by transition and transformation, the research focuses on how Japanese migrants and their descendants tried to find their place in the Brazilian society. It is asked what the contexts and situations are that contributed to the construction of the identity of the descendants of the Japanese migrants in Brazil. This analysis is crucial in this study, because in spite of the Japanese descendants' assimilation to Brazilian culture and their integration in Brazil, they nevertheless remained attached to a Japanese identity. It is this attachment to the identity of the previous generations that constitutes the foundation for the concept of "return" migration. Within this framework attention is paid to the paradox that emerges from this migration. The results of this chapter provide an outline of the political, economic, and socio-cultural process that helped shape the construction of the identity of Japanese Brazilians in Brazil as well as in Japan.

Based on the analysis of the reports of first-generation migrants, obtained through the fieldwork, chapter 3 clarifies who the migrants are and what motivates their "return". For this research topics have been selected that belong to the sphere of ethnic encounter and the daily life of the migrant families, in particular situations that illuminate the paradox of identity, the role of support structures, and the migrants' experiences in work situations, where differences with the Japanese often manifest themselves. Finally, the impact on these migrants of the worldwide economic crisis, which began in 2008, is documented by highlighting the measures taken by the Japanese government as well as by using reports in newspapers as well as stories told by migrants. This situation shows the vulnerability of this group of migrants, whose numbers started to decline and have continued to decline ever since.

Chapter 4 focuses on the family situation within the "return" migration, based on an analysis of the stories of both first- and second-generation migrants. For this purpose situations have been analysed and compared that belong to the daily life of the individual families of the case studies. Topics include the partner choice, raising the children at home, education, and the effects of these decisions and practices. Through the prism of ethnic and cultural diversity, the various results are being described and analysed with regard to the children's integration in the school system and the construction of their identity. These analyses are complemented with information showing how the families of Japanese-Brazilian migrants are being perceived by the Japanese population. Finally, a number of activities are

singled out that are pertinent to the concept of transnationalism and show how transnationalism manifests itself in these families.

The chapters 3 and 4 reveal the significance that the migrant families themselves attach to their life as “return” migrants in Japan. In addition, these chapters explain how the construction of identity and transnationalism is taking shape based on choices made by parents. These decisions in turn have an impact on whether or not family plans will be revisited and redefined, their temporary stay will be extended, or permanent residence in Japan will be sought. Analysing these processes of pondering and decision making helps to understand why some migrants prolonged their stay and others returned to Brazil, while still others decided to settle permanently in Japan.

This study also argues that the term “return” is inadequate to describe the migration of Japanese Brazilians to Japan. As the analyses indicate, the concept of “return” loses content in the course of the years and does not leave room for the additional movement of those returning to Brazil or planning to return after their retirement, or of the second generation dreaming to migrate to Brazil or elsewhere. In these cases one is dealing with the characteristic features of a circular migration between the two countries. This dissertation, therefore, aims to do justice to the dynamics of the back-and-forth movement between Brazil and Japan.

This study also indicates that the Japanese-Brazilian migrants to Japan were motivated by a combination of factors most of which are related to the economic crisis in Brazil in the 1980s and the early 1990s. This crisis affected the Japanese Brazilians who belonged to the Brazilian middle class and lower middle class, whose standard of life decreased and whose expectations for the future vanished, regardless of their level of education. It is precisely the awareness of a lack of better prospects in Brazil that is reflected in the individual circumstances of social and economic deprivation as well as estrangement, of citizens who felt compelled to leave the country in order to find better opportunities in the future. This observation is crucial if one wants to understand who are the migrants involved in this migration. It also helps to disprove the claim of a number of scholars who analyse and describe this migration solely on economic and financial grounds. At the same time the findings of chapter 3 demonstrate – in contrast to the claim made by other scholars – that the migrants, when they embarked for Japan were well aware of the work and life situation that they were going to encounter as *dekasegi* (temporary workers).

Rather than assuming that the migrants' experiences in Japan were negative and that they had a negative perception of Japan, chapters 3 and 4 show that no uniform conclusion can be drawn. It has become obvious that the Japanese-Brazilian migration to Japan is far from a homogeneous movement. In contrast to what is widely assumed in existing literature, the present research makes clear that most migrants, regardless of whether they are idealising their possible future return to Brazil, indicate that they have a positive feeling about their migration experience, even after the culture shock that they underwent.

This is not to say that there are no migrants who do have a negative perception of the country and the migration. It is important, however, to understand that the research bears out that the Japanese-Brazilian migrants constitute a heterogeneous group and that this heterogeneity affects the diverse intrinsic motivations and the many different facets that characterise the life of this group. These findings show that for many Japanese Brazilians migration is a temporary transnational experience. This is particularly true for those migrant families who invest in Brazilian education for their children in Japan, families who indicate their intention to return to Brazil after their children graduate from Japanese school and reach adulthood, or families who send their children to Brazil for education and to live with family there. For many of these migrants the initial goal of their temporary migration has not changed, only the period of their stay has been extended, mainly due to their family context and to the fact that they needed more time to realise their plans than they had anticipated. Another equally significant part of the informants show clear signs of a more permanent relocation in Japan, such as the purchase of their own house. These are the migrants who develop a certain degree of affinity with Japanese culture or who have been successful in adjusting to life in this country. They are the ones who have a positive perception of their life in Japan, even though most of them have remained in low-skilled jobs. They also have the expectation that Japan will offer better opportunities in the future for themselves and for their children.

With regard to the question of identity, the analyses of chapters 3 and 4 show that the migrants after "returning" to Japan continue to negotiate their identity in a relational context. The contradictions in the informants' statements – depending on the person to whom they speak – show the Japanese-Brazilian identity as ambivalent, composed as it is of elements that reflect aspects of different origin in the past and functioning, therefore, as a dynamic and strategic entity. This means that the identity which is adopted in a specific situation reflects

the preferred option among alternatives that correlate with elements of the historical and cultural context of the person in question. Identity, therefore, fluctuates as a result of the various connections that are made within the context of social relations.

This study also shows that the differences in cultural baggage have a significant impact on the integration of the second generation Japanese-Brazilian migrants into the Japanese school system. It is obvious that the process of integration is less difficult for migrant children who do not have conflicts concerning their identity. These are the children who have a Japanese appearance and a Japanese name and who master the Japanese language as their mother tongue. The way these migrant children act indicates that the focus of their identity construction is on the Japanese society. Most of these second-generation migrants deliberately transcend the cultural differences that are associated with Brazilian culture. Children of families with only one parent of Japanese descent and children with foreign names do not have this option. In response, they will develop a strong awareness that they are different from the Japanese and are *gaijin* (foreigners). These children experience serious difficulties in their attempt to integrate into the Japanese school system. The evidence provided by this study indicates that these children are more likely to develop conflicts around their identity, mainly because of their appearance as well as cultural differences. It still is unclear, therefore, how the future of this group of second-generation migrants will shape itself in Japan. Regardless of their outward appearance and culture, attending a Japanese school does not guarantee future success or an effective learning process, since retaking a class after failure is not an option in Japan until middle school. The future of these second-generation children will depend on how they develop their spoken language skills and, even more so, on their ability in writing and reading. Only when they fully master the language will this second generation be able and sufficiently equipped to compete with their Japanese peers.