BETWEEN BRAZIL AND JAPAN: 
Identities out of Place

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Ⅰ. Introduction

Japan and Brazil are bound together by multiple migration waves: the Japanese first left for Brazil in 1908 and from the 1990s onwards Brazilians have been migrating to Japan, now forming the third largest foreigners’ community of the country (210,032 Brazilians registered in 2012; Ministry of Justice). Indeed, the revision of Japanese immigration law in 1990, allowing foreigners of Japanese origin, also called nikkeijin to work in Japan, triggered off what would also be known in Portuguese as the “dekasegi phenomenon”.

As shown by migrants who carry along their own culture but also reinvent new ones in their host society, cultures are constantly re-defined: this study consists of an analysis of the cultural encounter prompted by migrations between the two countries. Our study of plural identities through places, social practices, modes of expressions, cultural mediations, hopes to unveil the mechanisms at work in identity making processes. We hope to disclose the way both Brazilian national identity was shaped by Japanese immigrants and the way the reverse migration influenced Japanese society and perception of identity.

Our theoretical framing borrows from different fields such as, psychoanalysis of a Lacanian orientation, semiotics and political science, all of them putting forward the paramount importance of language as a political tool of communication. This emphasis on the premise that language lies at the core of any human and social activity, will lead us to pay a special attention to words, naming and designations of the migration and migrants themselves in Brazilian and Japanese public spaces. Our fieldwork embraces discourses circulating in the public space in its traditional acceptation defined by media (newspapers, radio, television) and in the virtual space of Internet (blogs, You Tube, web journalism). Our work will mainly consist in analyzing discourses without trying to evaluate their real influence: we chose to rather focus on their meanings and significations, although knowing that they may only represent a limited portion of migrants’ opinion.

We will first contextualize each migratory movement within its geographical space and history (Part 1) before moving on to the analysis of myths, utopias, clichés and stereotypes of
migrants and what they reveal of Brazilian and Japanese collective imaginaries (Part 2). Our study of representations will be completed by the examination of migrants’ official and institutional representation in political institutions and in the media, Brazilian ethnic media in Japan standing for Brazilians’ main representative and political expression tool (Part 3). Our study will hopefully enable us to attest the political dimension of discourses on identity and culture (or multiculturalism), expressing the tensions existing between what a nation really is and its ideal, what this nation wishes to be, or to become.

II. Historical and Geographical Context of the Japanese-Brazilian Migration

At the beginning of the 20th century, Japan and Brazil were concurrently crafting their political identities on completely opposed concepts. Whereas Japan was relying on an ethnic and cultural homogeneity, Brazil was relying on multi-ethnicity and plurality. A sort of inferiority complex shadowed both Brazilian and Japanese national identities. Brazil’s advocacy for miscegenation was a way to phase out Brazilians’ black and indigenous origins, considered shameful, and Japan’s obsession in legitimating its uniqueness had to do with its complex towards China, Korea and then the West. At the same time in history, both countries turned to Europe, the ‘West’, to look for new models for a modernized political identity. While Japan claimed its homogeneity to prevent foreigners to ever become Japanese, Brazil’s professed miscegenation would allow any foreigner to become Brazilian.

Japanese immigrants who carried with them Japanese nationalism from the Meiji era had to find their own space in a modernizing Brazil, which was also in search of its own collective identity. A century later, Japanese-Brazilians will bring their Brazil to Japan, forcing the latter to experience multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism.

The Meiji era was a period of great changes for Japanese economy mainly prioritizing industrial development, excluding most farmers to benefit from economic growth. Rural exodus, limited opportunities in the job market as well as rapid population growth incited the government to actively promote emigration as a means to relieve the economic crisis of the farming sector.

At the end of the 19th century, Japanese emigration was first directed to Hawaii, the West coast of the United States and then to Canada. In 1908, as a result of American hostility against Japanese immigrants, California’s gentleman’s agreement banned further Japanese immigration to the United States. Later on, international depression of the 1920s combined with Japanese military conquests in Asia prompted fears against Japan, seen as the Yellow peril. In 1924 the Quota Immigration Act definitively banned Japanese emigration to the United States, redirecting emigration flows entirely towards Brazil. Japan would then try to guarantee a successful integration of Japanese emigrants, imposing new conditions for emigration (family migration) and aiming at migrants’ permanent settlement. Although Japanese immigrants were brought to Brazil to work in coffee plantations in order to replace former slaves, they were lured into believing that Brazil was a “golden land” where they could achieve rapid success and wealth.

Nonetheless, hostility against them would soon rise in Brazil as well where Getulio Vargas overthrew the ruling elite by a military coup in
1930. Throughout the 1930s, Getulio Vargas would progressively transform Brazil into a dictatorship. Ethnic miscegenation was by then a means to a political end to achieve a “racial democracy”. Brazilian modern national identity was theorized by Gilberto Freyre as the result of miscegenation between white Portuguese colonizers, black African slaves and indigenous Indians. Brazilian white ruling elite favored ethnic miscegenation with white people, thought of as an element of modernization. Brazilian authorities also imposed assimilationist policies on ethnic minorities: as Japanese immigrants were believed to resist both ethnic and cultural assimilation to Brazil, their immigration was restricted in 1934 and in 1937.

When Brazil officially took part in World War II in 1942 on the side of the Allied forces, the Japanese were seen as political threats suspected of plotting against Brazilians. Submitted to violent assimilationist pressures (Japanese schools were shut down, Japanese newspapers and language forbidden), radical Japanese immigrants actually enrolled in nationalist armed groups, the most famous of which was Shindô Renmei. When Japan lost the war, Kachigumi Japanese tried to persuade other immigrants that Japan had in reality won the war. Makegumi Japanese who had resigned themselves to endorse Japan’s actual defeat, also giving up on their ideal of ever coming back to Japan, were the victims of Shindô Renmei’s attacks, accused by them of betraying Japanese nation and emperor.

Caught between Japanese and Brazilian nationalisms, Japanese prewar emigrants eventually remained in Brazil. Their contribution in the agricultural field and their rapid upward social mobility in São Paulo city (in the 1970s a great number of nisei enrolled in top ranking University of São Paulo) helped them to be positively seen as a “model minority”. Japan’s investments and opening of joint ventures in Brazil in the 1970s as well as its rise as the second biggest economic power worldwide also served their good reputation. Overall, the Japanese social and economic integration in Brazil helped them altering the prejudices they suffered from during the war. Mainly working as highly qualified workers and white collars in Brazil, rampant inflation and economic crisis throughout the 1980s led Japanese-Brazilians to massively leave for Japan to work in factories. 1990’s revision of Japanese immigration law aimed at resolving Japanese labor force shortage while preserving ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Contrary to Japanese authorities’ expectations, Nikkei-Brazilians experienced cultural shocks at their arrival in Japan, compelling them to identify as Brazilians and no longer as Japanese.

The majority of Nikkei-Brazilians came from an urban and multiethnic background, leaving the city of São Paulo for Japanese remote industrial areas. Therefore dekasegi migrants in Japan had to adapt to a new professional factory environment and to new spatial bearings.

São Paulo is indeed known as the economic capital of Latin America and as one of the most dangerous and violent cities in the world. Grinding poverty of the many coexists with the wealth of the few creating an atmosphere of permanent violence and insecurity. Brazilians’ perception and experience of public space were filled with fear and insecurity reflecting the inherent division of Brazilian society.

In Japan, Brazilians’ settlements generally follow factories’ economic needs. As they make up a flexible thus mobile workforce, they are likely to be found wherever and whenever their labor is needed. Most of the first dekasegi migrants were mainly single men intending to save money before returning to Brazil hired in car assembly and electronic factories in the Kantô region (Gunma, Nagano, Kanagawa, Saitama and Ibaraki
prefectures). From 1993 to 1997 subcontractors running small businesses hired them in remote areas far from the Aichi-Shizuoka-Gunma axis, such as Nagano prefecture.

From 1998 onwards, Brazilians moved to the Southwestern part of the country: Aichi, Gifu, Mie, Shiga and Shizuoka prefectures. Dekasegi migrants’ difficulty to reintegrate Brazilian labor market combined with the latent possibility to work in Japan for better wages often caused them be caught in a migrating vicious circle. As family migration began replacing single men’s migration, Nikkei-Brazilian communities emerged and brokers’ agencies (hiring companies) no longer rented collective dorms but rather individual housing. In public housing complexes (kôdan-ken’ei jûtaku), which access is available for low-wage workers, cohabitation problems between Japanese and Brazilians often occurred. Complains about Brazilians’ lack of respect of common rules such as selective sorting of waste, noise, and car parking were recurrent. Cultural contentions also emerged from Brazilians’ social and cultural recreational practices: while Japanese are used to socialize in bars and izakaya, Brazilians are accustomed to have friends over in their apartment. Reproaching Brazilians with being too loud, not only in public space, but also in their own private spaces, may derive from their actual need to (re) create social ties in Japan. While such behaviors may be interpreted as communitarian, they also testify Brazilians’ integration to the country.

In cities with a strong presence of Brazilians, such as Hamamatsu (Aichi prefecture), Brazilian ethnic businesses and facilities developed to such an extent that Brazilians could almost live with no ties to Japanese society. While Nikkei-Brazilians were expected to be physically and culturally Japanese, their display of cultural Brazilian-ness caused the disruption of Japan’s harmonious public space. In remote and rural areas, cultural discrimination may have encouraged the strengthening of Nikkei-Brazilian communities. Yet again some communitarian behaviors may derive from Brazilian social practices. In Brazil, their higher social status is a reason to feel threatened when in public space, they tend to gather in closed places (like shopping centers). In Japan, these closed places serve to recreate a space protecting them from their loss of social status within mainstream society.

Whereas dekasegi migration was initially thought of as temporary, Nikkei Brazilians actually settled down in Japan over the past 20 years. In 2008, one third of Brazilians had changed their temporary visa (teijûsha) for a permanent resident visa (eijûsha). Yet in 2009, post-Lehman shock’s economic crisis caused the majority of Brazilians to lose their jobs, also leading some of them to return to Brazil.

### III. Cultural and Aesthetical Dimensions of the Migration

How migrants identify themselves and are identified in political discourses reveal the evolution of their status in their society of origin and in their host society. Indeed, Japanese prewar emigrants saw themselves as ‘dekasegi imin’, temporary migrants in Brazil. However, Japan sent them to colonies, shokumin-chi, offering facilities (schools, associations, banks, etc.) in order to encourage their permanent and successful settlement, ijû, in Brazil. Such emigration policy was then qualified of, kimin seisaku, dumping policy, uncovering migrants’ feelings.

According to the Brazilian myth of origin, Brazilians are divided between ethnic categories,
Blacks, Whites, Indians and mixed blood Brazilians. There are Brazilian words for mixed-blood Brazilians of white and black descent, of white and indigenous descent and of black and indigenous descent, yet there is none for Brazilians of Japanese origin. The Japanese in Brazil are basically called “Japanese” in Portuguese. This lack of naming reveals both Brazilian reluctances to ethnically embrace the Japanese as Brazilians and Japanese reluctances to marry with Brazilians (endogamy prevailed among first and second generation immigrants, issei and nissei).

Identified as Japanese in Brazil, Nikkei-Brazilians discovered their cultural Brazilian-ness in Japan. Newly identified as Brazilians in Japan, they suffered from the image of Brazil as a third world country. As factory workers they were socially looked down upon. And eventually as Nikkei who did not culturally behave like the Japanese, they were put aside.

Yet Brazilians in Japan form a compound category made of a minority of non-Nikkei Brazilians and a majority of Nikkei Brazilians among which we find “pure” (ethnically Japanese) Nikkei and mixed-blood Nikkei-Brazilians. Mixed-blood Nikkei-Brazilians, like other mixed-blood Japanese, commonly called ha-fu (from the English ‘half”), are more easily subject to identity category switching. Thanks to the valorization of ha-fu images in Japanese media from the 1960s onwards, mixed-blood Nikkei-Brazilians now often work as models in Japan. In Brazil, they are more likely to identify as fully Brazilian than “pure” Nikkei Brazilians with Japanese physical traits. In Japan, they also have access to careers as models as opposed to “pure” Nikkei Brazilians who just look like the Japanese. Yet those Nikkei-Brazilian models are mainly hired in Japan because they are cheaper than other foreign models (they already live in Japan and some of them speak Japanese), therefore remaining, like their dekasegi families, defined by their economic function. Brazilians’ identity in Japan is mainly shaped by their working experience as unqualified dekasegi workers hired for temporary contracts: their social position overpowers their ethnic origin.

In contrast, Japanese-Brazilians already seen as successful by other Brazilians, were considered as privileged emigrants, lucky to have access to the first world’s wealth. Brazil, like most emigration countries, fostered a myth of emigrants’ success abroad. Nikkei-Brazilians’ migration to Japan inscribed them into a mythical fate of success providing them with a transcendent interpretation of their reality.

The rhetoric of Brazilians’ success is used in advertising campaigns of Brazilian banks specialized in international transfers. Thanks to their savings earned in Japan, Brazilian companies incite dekasegi migrants to become successful entrepreneurs in Brazil. The promotion of the entrepreneur figure, whether in Brazil or Japan, enhances the concern of migrants’ potential loss of control over their lives. Myths of success hardly conceal migrants’ disillusionments and failures: deceived expectations coincide with every stages of migrants’ ordeal. For Nikkei-Brazilians, deception is a two way process. As much as they were lured into imagining Japan as a welcoming motherland, the Japanese deluded themselves with the idea that they would be culturally similar to them, as confirms ex-ministry of Justice Kono Taro when he assessed that Nikkei Brazilians’ migration was a failure.

Severed from their country of origin, migrants create fantasized images no longer matching their country’s reality. When in Japan, dekasegi migrants experience saudade, nostalgia for a sublimated Brazil, and undergo the ‘head in two worlds syndrome’, torn between Japan and Brazil. Their experience of saudade led them to establish Brazilian communities. As facilities and ethnic
shops provide them with everything they could find in Brazil, they may eventually stay longer in Japan, postponing their coveted return to Brazil, meanwhile strengthening their bonds in Japan.

Nikkei-Brazilians carry the weight of (un)success yet only the ones whose experience in Japan led them to succeed in Brazil positively reintegrate the Brazilian myth of Japanese immigrants’ success. The rest of them will either be seen as unsuccessful Nikkei-Brazilians in Brazil or become Brazilian emigrants in Japan, leaving their home country behind them. Migrants are confronted with experiences of displacement, nostalgia, regain or loss of control, success and failure. Their discourses testify of their attempt to seize power over their new identity. Indeed, Nikkei-Brazilian artists, whether in Japan or in Brazil, show attempts to escape from the stereotypes society confines them in. In Brazil, most of Nikkei-Brazilian artists’ attempts to escape from Japanese exotic stereotypes seem to fall through. Whether they play Brazilian pagode or other Afro-Brazilian types of music, they are always reminded of their Japanese origin by non-Nikkei Brazilians, hence their hyphenated identification as Nikkei-Brazilians rather than Brazilians (Lesser; 2003). Nikkei-Brazilian artists assuming their double identity, mostly fall into the category of “community artists” as karaoke singers whose audience is mainly composed of other Nikkei-Brazilians.

In Japan, mainstream representations of Brazilian culture in Tokyo are devoid of immigrants’ influences. Music, bossa nova, samba, Nikkei Brazilian models, etc. epitomize Tokyo’s exotic images of Brazil disconnected from Brazilians’ reality in Japan. Asakusa samba carnival became one of Tokyo’s most touristic attractions although its participants and organizers are mainly Japanese. On the one hand, Brazilian immigrants’ culture is excluded from displays of Brazilian-ness in Tokyo, but on the other, the official representation of Brazilians’ culture in local areas (Oizumi carnival) is also framed by Japan’s multicultural policy.

Since 2006, Japanese Ministry of Communication and Internal Affairs launched the promotion of multicultural coexistence, tabunka kyôsei, as a national objective. Japanese multiculturalism came into effect for the translation in different languages of administrative documents and emergency natural catastrophes and for the organization of multicultural festivals at local levels. While displays of foreigners’ typical cultures are supposed to create a better understanding of their cultural differences, they may also fuel the myth of Japanese ethnic and cultural homogeneity: confronted to foreigners’ differences, the Japanese may eventually be reassured about their own cultural integrity.

Tokyo’s demand for exoticism and Japan’s official multicultural framework in local areas are both restraining the representation of Brazilian culture. Therefore, unfiltered Brazilian migrants’ culture is only visible in Brazilian community spaces supported by Brazilian ethnic media. Hip-hop, as a cultural movement created by underrepresented minorities to raise their voice and political claims, provides Nikkei-Brazilian artists with consistent tools of expression, enabling them to gain public representation.

### IV. Political and Institutional Dimensions of the Migration

Nowadays, most Nikkei-Brazilians in Japan feel they are neither represented in Brazil nor in Japan. As opposed to oldcomers whose fight for better political representation derives from their
feeling of belonging to Japan, Nikkei-Brazilians’ illusion of pending return to Brazil long kept them away from any political commitment. However Brazilians’ actual settlement in Japan called for a better political representation especially in localities where they form important communities. Lacking of national guidelines for their treatment and integration in Japan, local authorities had to find solutions by themselves. Since 2001, the Congress of Major cities with high concentrations of foreign residents (gaikokuin shuju toshi kaigi) strives to gain more attention from national authorities regarding newcomers’ related issues such as education, social security, alien registration problems. Indeed, one of newcomers’ major problems is the education of Brazilian children. Adaptation troubles faced by Brazilian newcomer children in Japanese schools (language, ijime, etc.) coupled with the lack of obligation of education for foreign children in Japan caused many of them to drop out of school. Most of Brazilian private schools do not permit their students to pursue higher education in Japanese universities, and sometimes not even in Brazilian universities. Caught between limited future perspective for studies and precarious studying conditions, some Brazilian teenagers give up school at an early age to start working in factories. Others may even, in some extreme cases, fall into delinquency.

The Brazilian question in Japan took a radical turn when 2008’s economic crisis caused Brazilians to massively lose their jobs and emphasized the need for a better organization and representation of the community. Communitarian Brazilian leaders formed in February 2009 the NNBJ, National network for Brazilians in Japan, as an attempt to put an end to Brazilians’ disorganization and to transfer Brazilians’ claims to Japanese authorities. Although criticized, NNBJ remains the first national attempt to structure Brazilian communities of Japan. Until then, Brazilian ethnic media mainly guaranteed their representation.

At the turn of the 21st century, Brazilian media in Japan merely consisted in two weekly newspapers *International Press* and *Jornal Tudo Bem* and of Brazilian cable television. During the first years of Brazilian emigration to Japan, ethnic media played a structuring role providing *dekasegi* workers with practical information for daily life in Japan, such as job offers, and conveyed information about Brazil for emigrants to stay connected with their home country’s reality. Along with the establishment of Brazilian communities, newspapers shifted their focus from Brazilian news to community-oriented topics.

Brazilian ethnic media in Japan developed its own practices, increasingly hiring ex-*dekasegi* workers (mostly factory workers) often without any prior experience in this field. This practice allows ethnic media to make greater financial benefits and guarantees Brazilian ethnic media to closely stay closely connected to migrants’ reality and to eventually represent them appropriately. Brazilian ethnic media endorses the role of Nikkei-Brazilians’ community spokesman, following and guiding the evolution and change of migrants’ status in their host society. Accordingly, when in 2008 Japan’s economic crisis made it necessary for Brazilians to master Japanese in order to integrate new sectors of the job market, *International Press* started publishing articles in Japanese with lexical support.

The advent of Internet contributed transforming media contents as well as journalism practices. Brazilians growing connection to Internet in Japan granted them with powerful tools of self-expression, sometimes acting on the web as self-taught journalists. Their cyber activity through You Tube channels, blogs or social networks may incite them to think of themselves as global citizens virtually participating in the creation of a borderless world and to identify as citizens.
of the world. Yet, Internet users actually re-territorialize the web by creating their own community spaces. Brazilians in Japan gather in social network “Orkut” communities dedicated to life in Japanese cities (for example “Brazilians in Hamamatsu”), using the Internet to reinforce their links with their community rather than filling in communication bridges with the Japanese. The Internet fuels Brazilians’ identity redefinition in Japan, endowing them with a virtual refuge for a potentially repressed cordiality, since they may not have completely achieved their integration in their Japanese social environment.

When 2008 officially became the year of Japan-Brazil exchange; Brazil and Japan jointly celebrated the centenary of Japanese immigration to Brazil and Nikkei-Brazilians gained unprecedented attention in Brazilian mass media. In Brazil, Japanese immigration was even celebrated in Brazilian carnival, a key event in the formation of Brazilian national identity, indicating its incorporation into Brazil’s national history and mythology. Nonetheless, Japanese-Brazilians, up the sixth generation, are still identified as Japanese: according to some media reports it would be more “natural” for them to enjoy the practice of judo, as a Japanese traditional martial art, than liking soccer, Brazil’s national sport. Although culturally integrated, Nikkei-Brazilians seem to have not yet been included within the boundaries of Brazilian ethnic identity. However, since the Japanese are positively perceived, this exclusion is not discriminatory.

Nikkei-Brazilians living in Japan were rather excluded from 2008’s commemorations. The celebrations of the centenary mainly put the emphasis on Japanese immigration to Brazil, putting aside the representation of Brazilian emigration to Japan. Immigrants-oriented celebrations for the centenary only took place in cities with high concentrations of Brazilians, but were absent from Tokyo. Only the Japanese emperor, as he stated Japan’s need to welcome Brazilians as much as the Japanese were welcomed in Brazil a century ago, actually paid them an official tribute, symbolically including them within 2008’s festivities. Brazilians of Japan rather gained media attention at the end of 2008, when the economic crisis stroke Japan (Lehman shock). When Japanese exportations decreased of 40% in one year especially in the electronic and car manufacturing sectors, Brazilian workers massively lost their jobs. Since a great number of Brazilians were living in apartments provided by their brokers’ agencies and also did not automatically benefit from unemployment insurance, losing their job led them to lose any kind of income and become homeless.

Sudden rise of precariousness among Brazilians was greatly covered by Japanese and Brazilian media. The disclosure on Brazilian television of Nikkei-Brazilians’ hardships in Japan debunked the myth of their success, especially in the eyes of non-Nikkei Brazilians. However in Japan, Nikkei-Brazilians’ portrait during the crisis actually matched previous prejudices towards both Japanese emigrants and Nikkei-Brazilian immigrants essentially depicted as unfortunate victims. Yet Brazilian workers, far from remaining passive during the crisis, demonstrated for the first time in December 2008 in Hamamatsu city to protest against their unfair treatment calling on Japanese authorities to take political steps. Brazilians’ protests spread in major cities as well as in industrial areas where unemployment among Brazilians sometimes attained 70%, and even reached Tokyo. Brazilians’ demonstration in Tokyo, thoroughly covered by main Japanese media, turned their crisis into a national issue no longer relegated to the background.

Japanese authorities were prompt to react and Japanese Ministry of education (MEXT) took
emergency measures in the field of education as soon as in January 2009. MEXT’s emergency plan supported Japanese schools to accept more Brazilian students and provided some Brazilian schools with financial help to prevent them from shutting down. As far as work was concerned, Japanese Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare (MHLW) recommended Japanese companies to train Brazilian workers thanks to Japanese language and professional qualification courses. Such training courses were offered and implemented by local Hello Work agencies where additional bilingual staff was sent for the occasion. This first set of measures constituted one of Japan’s first national demonstrations of will to actually integrate Brazilians, helping them to change their social position through work and education. While Brazilians’ withdrawal in ethnic communities had been tolerated during two decades, Japan now insisted that they should fully integrate Japanese society.

In contrast, the kikokushien jigyô, a controversial financial help for return, officially encouraged Brazilians to go back home. Starting from April 2009, unemployed Brazilians and their families were granted respectively 300,000 yen and 200,000 yen to cover air transportation fees to Brazil, on condition that they would not return to Japan before three years (April 2012). This “return plan” was interpreted as a cancellation of Nikkei’s visa “privilege” in Japan, and as a way to “get rid” of them. In only one year Brazilian population in Japan decreased of 14.4%: 312,582 Brazilians were registered in 2008 against 267,456 in 2009 (MOJ; 2010). However, only 20,000 of the approximately 45,000 Brazilians who returned home actually did so with Japan’s financial help.

Japan’s help for Nikkei-Brazilians’ return actually disclosed the country’s uncertainties as far as immigration is concerned. It also confirmed that in a context of economic turmoil, identity protectionist reflexes come first and command Japanese immigration policy still guided by a utilitarian and short-term vision. Brazilians had always been considered as means to an economic end, and their presence in Japan was only tolerated as long as they could serve national economy. In 2009, Brazilians were summoned to either rapidly integrate into Japanese society or leave the country, causing most of them to feel rejected and used.

V. Conclusion

Nikkei-Brazilians may have discovered their Brazilian-ness in Japan, but they have created over years a new identity maybe not yet Japanese but surely no longer entirely Brazilian. Their encounter with the Japanese gave way to new identities shaking and challenging common acceptations of Japanese national myths. Often subjected to reality’s economic or historical constraints, migrants embody the real dimension of the political field: they compel nations to face their obligations. Immigrants also confront nations with their ideals, offering them a new image of themselves that they may accept or refuse to acknowledge. Ethnic or cultural tensions arise when nations show reluctances to accept their new real face, thus denying immigrants’ contribution to the renewal of their identity.

Multiculturalism will only become real if Japan accepts to fully acknowledge foreigners: their culture as well as their social rights and contribution for the future of the nation. To do so, Japan would have to think of foreigners as
potential forces, not only in the restricted domains of economy or fashion, and implement social policies to relieve them from bearing the burden of integrating Japanese society only by their own means.

Japan is changing. As witnesses 2009’s historic change of government, Murata Renho’s nomination in Kan Naoto’s Cabinet in June 2010 provided hopes for a better consideration of plural identities. Since immigrants’ presence in their host society is not seen as given, they must strive to conquer their position and space. If welcomed by their host societies, when they achieve social integration, immigrants may, as Roberto Da Matta used to say about ethnographers, turn the exotic images they carry along into more familiar ones, and maybe one day into national ones.