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*Novos Caminhos na Formação
de uma Rede de Pesquisadores*

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✎ *Editado por*

Chiyoko Mita
Hugo Córdova Quero
Aaron Litvin
Sumiko Haino

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CENTER FOR LUSOPHONE STUDIES
Central Library Building, 6 Floor, Room L-612
Sophia University
Director of the Center: Mauro Neves
7-1 Kioi-cho, Chiyoda-ku
102-8554 Tokyo, Japan
Phone & Fax: 03-3238-3536
E-mail: celuso@sophia.ac.jp

ポルトガル語圏研究所
発行者 マウロ・ネーヴェス
102-8554 東京都千代田区紀尾井町7-1
上智大学 中央図書館6階 (L-612)
Tel/Fax: 03-3238-3536
E-mail: celuso@sophia.ac.jp

Japanese Immigrants in Brazil and Brazilian *Dekasseguis* in Japan: Continuity of the Migration's Imaginary vs. Reality

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Pauline Cherrier

Ph.D candidate in political sciences at the University of Lyon (France); and Scholar from the Monbukagakusho at Musashi University

Keywords: ethnic media; *dekasseguis*; Japanese immigrants in Brazil; migration's imaginary; migrants' success stories.

Ao longo da minha pesquisa de doutorado em ciências políticas sobre a representação dos Brasileiros na mídia japonesa, tanto na mídia da comunidade como na mídia japonesa, percebi algumas recorrências no tratamento dos dois movimentos migratórios: do Japão para o Brasil e do Brasil para o Japão. Na ocasião da celebração do centenário da imigração japonesa no Brasil que chegou a ser chamada o “ano do intercâmbio Brasil-Japão”, essa tendência aumentou a tal ponto que eu queria mostrar como o uso permanente do mesmo imaginário pode insinuar idéias que não condizem com a realidade dos migrantes. Já que a maioria dos *dekasseguis* é de origem japonesa, é indubitável que existem similaridades nesses dois fenômenos migratórios. Nas propagandas de bancos, no jornais, nos logotipos e símbolos usados nessa comemoração, as imagens e a retórica que ficaram na versão oficial da imigração japonesa no Brasil, vista como uma história de sucesso, estão sendo utilizadas para descrever a situação dos *dekasseguis* brasileiros no Japão. Essa associação de idéias feita pelos discursos midiáticos pode enganá-los ao induzi-los a pensar que eles vão automaticamente seguir o mesmo caminho de sucesso do que os seus antepassados. Porém, nem a realidade dos imigrantes de 1908 nem as condições migratórias dessa época têm muito em comum com a situação dos atuais *dekasseguis* no Japão.

私の専門は、政治とメディアです。その専門の中でも、現在私が集中して研究しているテーマが二つあります。一つは「外国人に対する日本政府の政策」、もう一つは「日本のメディアとポルトガル語で書かれたエスニックメディアにおける日系ブラジル人の表象」です。今から100年前の1908年、第1回目のブラジル移民となる日本人が、ブラジルに渡りました。そこで、今年はこの移民100周年を記念して、「ブラジル移民100年日本ブラジル交流年」あるいは、「日伯交流年」とされています。また今年、日本で働いているブラジル人の出稼ぎが始まって20年という記念の年でもあります。そこで、この「日伯交流」に際して、メディアの中では、この二つの移民の歴史や経験の違いなどについて、積極的な話し合いが行われてきました。今年の記念の年が、双方にどのような意味を与えるのか、エスニックメディアは、移民の共同意識にどのような影響を及ぼしてきたのか、今日は、そのテーマについて報告したいと思います。

1. Introduction

The research I am currently conducting deals with the representation of Brazilians in both the Brazilian ethnic media and Japanese media in order to study how they are emerging in the Japanese public space. I would like to focus in this presentation on one of the aspects I have grown to notice in my research, namely the recurrent association made between Japanese immigrants in Brazil and Brazilian migrants working in Japan. While the two groups are ethnically bound to one another, considering that most of the Brazilians workers in Japan are of Japanese descent, a discourse on the similarity of their experience may bear deceiving effects. Images, symbols, and rhetoric of success are explicitly used in the media, therefore creating a sense of common fate between the two groups of migrants: in effect, they are depicted as going through the same experience, only at different periods in time. The commemoration of the “year of the Japanese Brazilian exchange” also plays an important part in the symbolic association of the two groups of migrants. I would like to show how this production of a common imaginary in the media tends to wipe out the differences of the socio-political and economical context, proper to of each migratory movement.

2. The “year of the Japanese Brazilian exchange”

Since the first Japanese emigration to Brazil started in 1908, we celebrate in 2008 the centenary of this immigration. This event has been prepared in advance in Japan and even more so in Brazil, where Brazilians of Japanese ancestry are seen as a model minority. This Japanese community also called in Portuguese *colônia japonesa*, contributed to the development of the city of São Paulo and the economy of its state, especially in the agricultural field. Japanese immigrants’ official history is retraced in a museum taken care of by the *Bunkyo*, the Brazilian association of Japanese culture¹. These Japanese institutions are situated in *Liberdade*, the oriental quarter of the city (*Bairro Oriental*), first occupied by Italians before that the Japanese immigrants who left coffee plantations to settle in the city arrived. This place gained oriental ornaments when in the 1970s the municipality of São Paulo decided to officially pay homage to the Japanese tribute. Even if the majority of *Nikkei*-Brazilians do not live there anymore, it remains the center of traditional Japanese cultural and political events and activities, organized mainly by the *Bunkyo*.

Although São Paulo is not Brazil’s capital, it is simultaneously the core of South-American and national economy, and the beating heart of Brazilian culture. Consequently, public and political representation in such a city resonates far beyond its own walls. An official committee, mainly composed of *Nikkei*-Brazilians, had been charged to organize cultural events for the celebration of the centenary of the Japanese presence in Brazil. As soon as January 2007 the walls of one of the main central veins of São Paulo, the *tunel da Avenida Paulista*, were covered of graffiti (Gregorio 2008) dedicated to the history of Japanese immigrants, thereby becoming part and parcel of São Paulo’s collective memory.

However, such a celebration could not ignore the changes that the Japanese community of Brazil had been through in the past 20 years. In 1990 the implementation of the “Plan Collor” triggered off an unprecedented economic crisis that matched the great Japanese demand of labor force. Thanks to the modification of the Japanese immigration law, also in 1990, foreigners of Japanese descent were allowed to come and work temporarily in Japan as unskilled workers. From then on, the *decassegui* phenomenon, meaning in Japanese “to leave temporarily one’s place in order to earn money”, was under way to deeply affect the Japanese community in

¹ *Sociedade Brasileira de Cultura Japonesa e de Assistência Social.*

Brazil, which consequently lost almost one third of its *Nikkei*-Brazilian population.²

Therefore, the centenary of the Japanese immigration to Brazil could not be celebrated without mentioning the *Nikkei*-Brazilian migration to Japan, often referred to as the return of the Japanese to their homeland. This is why 2008 officially became the “year of the Japanese Brazilian exchange”³ celebrated both by Japan and Brazil, yet in different ways. These very differences, in effect, imply a discrepancy between migrants’ experiences.

First of all, the denomination chosen for the commemoration, the “year of the Japanese Brazilian exchange”, conveys an idea of a reciprocal exchange between both countries; Whether Brazilian influence in Japan is as well represented and accepted as Japanese influence in Brazil is subject to reflection. Indeed, if *Nikkei*-Brazilians already reached its fifth generation, whether the community will permanently settle in Japan is still debated. Moreover, the Brazilian presence in Japan should be considered in the context of recent global migration tendencies. Migration is no longer considered as definitive as it used to be when the first Japanese crossed the ocean in 1908. Even if the first generation of Japanese emigrants came to Brazil with a *dekassegui* mindset, planning to come back to Japan, their perception of time and migration had to differ from nowadays’. Thanks to new information and communication technologies, it became possible to live in a foreign country, while psychologically severed from one’s host society and connected to one’s homeland and culture from abroad. This is what can happen in Japanese areas with a high concentration of Brazilian population, such as the so-called Brazilian cities of Oizumi or Hamamatsu, where ethnic businesses and facilities turned limited contact with the Japanese into a livable situation. This kind of immersion helps Brazilians in their integration to the Brazilian community of Japan but not in the Japanese society. Indeed, the majority of Brazilian *dekasseguis* in Japan still consider themselves as temporary migrants, independently of the actual length of their stay in Japan.

Advertisement or articles in the Brazilian ethnic media often present images and ideas expressing a similarity in the experience of Japanese immigrants in Brazil and their *dekassegui* descendants. For instance, *Kasato maru*, the ship that brought the first Japanese immigrants to Brazil on the 18th of July 1908, or images of plants and flowers, commonly used as symbols of the Japanese contribution to the Brazilian agriculture, are recurrent across contemporary media types. Indeed, as we already mentioned, the Japanese community became famous, especially in the state and city of São Paulo, for having played a determining part in the development of agriculture in Brazil. This is why they were called “the kings of agriculture” (Horikawa 2007b) or were said to be “disciplined and naturally gifted to take care of plants [...] to justify the success of the Japanese in the country” (Horikawa 2007a). Having reached a relatively high social position in the local society, the general conception of their history is that of a “success story”, as exemplified by the following description: “Our history: After fights, dramas and conflicts, some of them ended up in defeats and others in moving success stories”.⁴

3. Rhetoric of success

When Japanese emigrants left their country a century ago, they were carrying with them the hope to succeed in Brazil, described by Japanese emigration companies as the land of the “trees of golden fruits”.⁵ In the same way, nowadays, “Brazilians of gold” are said to be

² See Tsuda (1999) for a detailed analysis of the migration of *Nikkei*-Brazilians and their motivations.

³ “Ano do intercâmbio Brasil-Japão”.

⁴ Quote from “Nossa história” (2008): “[...] Após lutas, dramas e conflitos, alguns terminam em fracasso, e outros em comoventes histórias de sucesso”.

⁵ “Mortos-vivos que Partem em Busca das Arvores dos Frutos de Ouro”, in Handa (1980:99).

“*dekasseguis* who managed to make their dreams come true thanks to their working experience in Japan [...] returning to the homeland”.⁶

All economic migrants looking for better living conditions abroad, share the same types of hopes and expectations so that their experience can be summed up in this way: “There is only one objective for migrants: work hard, save the maximum of money and come back home enriched, as fast as possible”.⁷

Such an objective is said to be attainable by the *Sebrae*⁸, an official association providing Brazilian *dekasseguis* with support to help them “successfully” reintegrating the Brazilian labor market. *Sebrae* advises migrants to invest money and open businesses, guaranteeing success, as is promised in adverts like: “Success stories: *dekassegui* businessmen” (*Sebrae* 2006) or “Partnership is the key to success in the assistance to small businesses” (*Sebrae* 2007).

This rhetoric of success is also exploited by the Brazilian ethnic media which articles’ evocative titles such as “Successful business requires dedication” (Jubelini 2007a, 2007b) or “How to be successful step by step in 2008” (Nambu 2007c) are common. The free magazine entitled, *Gambare!*, distributed with the newspaper *Tudo Bem* exemplifies the constant use of success’ lexical field. The imperative form of the title itself, *Gambare!*, coming from the Japanese *gambaru* meaning to make one’s best, exhorts Brazilians in Japan to strive for success. Although “the road to success is hard and does not only require efforts and dedication but also planning and persistence”,⁹, the recurrent display of *dekasseguis*’ success stories may lure people into thinking that anyone can “make [his] own star shine”.¹⁰ The model used by Jacques Lacan for the analysis of subjectivity dividing it in a real, a symbolic, and an imaginary dimension, can be applied to this rhetoric of success (Lacan 1978, 1999). The reality of migrants’ hard work, combined to an imagined success and to *dekasseguis*’ symbolic inscription in their ancestors’ history (Lamizet 2002:35) would then be the main components of Brazilian *dekasseguis*’ identity. This symbolic and imagined continuity of *dekasseguis*’ experience in Japan with their ancestors’ experience in Brazil could unconsciously transmit the idea of a common fate according to which *dekasseguis* would be predestined to succeed?

4. Differences in migrants’ experiences

The downside to the so-called Japanese “success” in Brazil yet questions the validity of this discourse. Brazilians of Japanese descent became “successful” thanks to the efforts and dedication of the first generation of migrants. If the Japanese have successfully been integrated in the Brazilian society reaching a relatively high social status, the first generation of migrants failed to achieve their initial goal. In other words, Japanese migrants had to abandon their ideal of coming back to their homeland to start dedicating themselves to climb the Brazilian social ladder.

The conception according to which “The fourth generation of first Japanese immigrants are

6 “Veja as histórias dos *dekasseguis* que conseguiram realizar seus sonhos no Brasil graças ao trabalho no Japão [...] ex *dekasseguis* relatam como alcançaram seus objetivos ao voltar para a terra natal” (Nambu 2007a).

7 “O objetivo dos viajantes é um só: trabalhar duro. economizar ao máximo e voltar para casa de bolsos bem cheios, o mais rápido possível” (Oyama 2007).

8 *Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas*.

9 “[...] O caminho para o sucesso é arduo e implica (além de esforço e dedicação) muito planejamento e persistência” (Nambu 2007a).

10 “Faça a sua estrela brilhar” (Shinyashiki 2007). In this special article Roberto Shinyashiki shows how Brazilians can make their dream come true. Roberto Shinyashiki is a “successful” *Nikkei* also columnist for the magazine *Gambare!* See Shinyahishi (2008).

repeating the saga of their ancestors, the other way around¹¹ has been commonly accepted. However, if *dekasseguis* were to follow the path traced by their ancestors, they would eventually become successful in Japan: this is neither their intention nor the definition of success usually promoted by Brazilian media. On the contrary, “Make money in Japan, come back to Brazil and manage to have a better life there is [said to be] the objective of any *dekassegui*”¹² so that the ideal happy ending to a *dekassegui* story has to take place in Brazil. Successful *dekasseguis* are indeed migrants who “achieved their objectives returning to their homeland”.¹³ Whereas, at the beginning of the *dekassegui* migration to Japan, *Nikkei*-Brazilians’ homeland was said to be Japan with such titles as “descendants come back to their ancestor’s land”,¹⁴ it is now mainly said to be Brazil. This inversion of rhetoric in media discourses emphasizes how Japanese-Brazilian migration’s imaginary is exploited according to the prevailing political discourse.

Unlike the Japanese who were compelled to assimilate to Brazil both by the Japanese government and by Vargas’ dictatorship, Brazilian *dekasseguis* have not officially, until now, been submitted to such pressures. Brazilian authorities have rather tended to consider them as temporary workers in Japan who are “not counted as financial exiles because they are part of a group that comes back to their homeland”.¹⁵ This might be linked with the amount of remittances that *dekasseguis* send each year to Brazil, and that they would not send anymore once they decide to build their life in Japan (Ishi 2003a, 2003b).

It is still early to assert with assurance the future of the Brazilian community in Japan. The question of how they should be called and considered has not yet been resolved, leaving the debate open to conjectures and speculations. Pedro Corrêa Costa, Brazil’s vice-consul in Tokyo, stated that considering the tendency of Brazilians’ settlement in Japan, they should now rather be called emigrants than *dekasseguis*.¹⁶ In the same way, Brazilian ethnic media communicates more and more cases of successful Brazilians, not only in Brazil, but also in Japan.

On the one hand, the evolution of *dekasseguis*’ status remains different from their ancestors’ who were first considered as emigrants by Japanese authorities before they officially became immigrants in Brazil. At the time of the Japanese emigration to Brazil, *dekasseguis* were Japanese workers who migrated to other parts of Japan. On the other hand, my point is that the general meaning of success in Brazilian *dekasseguis*’ collective conscience is still to come back enriched to Brazil. This dream of prosperity in Brazil is what shapes migrants’ imaginary and representation of themselves as it is reflected in the ethnic media.

Finally, *dekasseguis*’ symbolic assimilation to their ancestors does not match migrants’ reality if we consider the inner composition of the Brazilian community of Japan. Brazilian *dekasseguis* in Japan are not only composed of *Nikkei*-Brazilians, but also of their spouses and relatives for whom the history of Japanese immigration in Brazil has no resonance in their collective consciousness.

11 “A quarta geração dos primeiros imigrantes repete a saga dos ante-passados. Só que em sentido contrário” (*Estado de São Paulo* 1995).

12 “Fazer um dinheiro no Japão, voltar ao Brasil e, lá, conseguir uma vida melhor. Simplificando, esse é o objetivo de qualquer *dekassegui*” (Nanbu 2007a).

13 “Ex-*dekasseguis* relatam como alcançaram seus objetivos ao voltar para a terra natal” (Nanbu 2007b).

14 “Descendentes voltam à terra dos bisavós” (Nanbu 2007b).

15 “Também não são contados como exilados econômicos porque são um grupo que retorna à terra natal” (*International Press* 2007).

16 “Autor de um estudo sobre a comunidade brasileira no Japão, Pedro Corrêa Costa, vice-cônsul do Brasil em Tóquio, afirma que os sinais de que os brasileiros estão se fixando definitivamente por lá são tão evidentes que eles não podem mais ser chamados de *dekasseguis* — palavra que quer dizer ‘trabalhadores temporários’. “Já são emigrantes”, afirma Costa” (Oyama 2007).

6. Conclusion

Under the influence of globalization and of information and communication technologies, traditional conceptions of migration, immigration and emigration have been blurred, and it is now possible to be living in a foreign country while remaining closely connected and even immersed in one's homeland and culture. Brazilian ethnic media in Japan indeed helps *dekasseguis* staying attached to the Brazilian reality. The analysis of one of its recurrent discourses revealed how this media also plays with migrants' imaginary and representations. The constant association of *dekasseguis'* fate and success with their ancestors' may lure migrants into thinking, even if it remains unconscious, that their working period in Japan guarantees this success they are running after. Deluded by the illusion that they are in total control of their fate, migrants may also feel guilty, in case they do not manage to reach their goal. While ethnic media represents migrants' collective conscience, it could also foster the gap existing between their imaginary and reality.

If *dekassegui* phenomenon and Japanese emigration to Brazil cannot be really compared on a time scale, the commemoration of the "year of the Japanese Brazilian exchange" actually shed the light on the unbalanced situation existing between Japan and Brazil. Whereas the centenary of the Japanese immigration acquired national visibility as it officially gained a role in São Paulo and Rio's carnival, the 20 years of Brazilian migration to Japan comparatively resonate but feebly in the Japanese public space. By considering the continuity of migrants' images and the common fate between Brazilian *dekasseguis* and their Japanese ancestors, we could have expected this commemoration to celebrate Brazilians' success in Japan in the same way that Japanese success and contribution are officially and nationally celebrated in Brazil. Even though almost one fourth of the Brazilian workers in Japan now benefit from a permanent resident visa and actively sustain national economy, Japan is still reluctant to admit their permanent settlement, so that the visibility of the celebration of the 20 years of Brazilian migration to Japan remains mainly limited to places where they are concentrated.

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