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From ethnic religion to generative selves: Pentecostalism among Nikkei Brazilian migrants in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Starting in the early 1990s, Brazil-derived Pentecostal denominations have flourished among Nikkei Brazilian migrant communities in Japan. While some researchers have characterized the phenomenon of Pentecostal conversion in this ethnographic context as a formation of ‘ethnic religion,’ the individuals often characterize themselves as primarily Christian. This article takes this apparent disconnect as the point of departure to investigate the relationship between ethnicity and religious identity. The concept of ethnic religion indicates an overlap between ethnic group and religious community, oftentimes prioritizing ethnic categories as the basic units of analysis. My ethnographic findings based on 14 months of fieldwork in Toyota, Japan, however, suggest that the very boundary of ‘ethnic group’ is fluid and unstable, which in turn shows that ethnicity cannot be taken as an analytical given. By tracing the varying narratives of four migrant converts, I detail the ways in which Pentecostalism in fact contributes to the proliferation of identities, both ethnic and non-ethnic. For example, migrant converts speak of Pentecostal ideas, practices, and networks as ‘Brazilian,’ ‘Japanese,’ and/or ‘just Christian,’ depending on the context. In conclusion, I argue that Pentecostal churches in this ethnographic context seem to give rise to generative selves rather than an ethnic religion.

KEYWORDS

Nikkei Brazilian; Christianity; ethnicity; religion; ethnic church; Japan; Pentecostalism

Opening: the pastor’s dream

‘This is my dream (Isso é o meu sonho),’ the pastor said with a smile.¹ We were in the main space of his church, Missão Apoio Toyota, where hundreds of Nikkei Brazilian migrants gathered every Sunday to listen to him preach.² On this particular weekday afternoon, however, the large room was empty except for the three of us – the pastor, his wife, and the anthropologist. He continued in Portuguese:

Once when I was preaching in São Paulo, I went to Igreja Nipo-Brasileira (Japanese-Brazilian Church). I arrived [...] and looked for the faces of descendants and didn’t find any. There

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¹The fieldwork setting was extremely multicultural and multi-linguistic. I adopt the following rule in this article. Japanese words are italicized; Portuguese words are underlined; Japanese words that have entered Portuguese-speaking migrants’ daily lexicon are marked by *both*. The exceptions to this rule include proper nouns, terms used in cited quotations, and words widely used in academic writing such as ‘Nikkei’.

²Missão Apoio means ‘Support Mission’ in Portuguese. All the names that appear in the article are pseudonyms, with the exception of Missão Apoio. Several scholars who studied the denomination have published using its real name (Quero & Shoji, 2014).

weren't any descendants at the church!³ I went up to the podium and saw bilingual hymnals and bibles in Japanese and Portuguese. But they were completely useless. Why? Because the children of descendants married and left, then the church was taken over by another group, migrants from Northeastern Brazil. The church had nipo (Japanese) in its name, but there was no one there who was nipo, not even the pastor.

He found it interesting that the presumed origin of the church indicated in its name (i.e. Japanese–Brazilian Church) did not match the makeup of its membership at the time of his visit. The congregants he saw were decidedly non-Nikkei. He then went on to elaborate on his experience's significance to the church he now led halfway around the globe in Toyota, Japan:

What happened there can happen here in Japan. Our desire is that, instead of leaving, we fulfill our role in this land. For this reason, I do not wish to separate the youth who speak good Japanese because they have the power to continue what we started here. [...] So our dream is that this church doesn't perish, that it fulfills its mission, and that it be the light in the world, and that all this will continue. [...] Someday, maybe it can be a church with a funny Portuguese name – Missão Apoio – with all-Japanese congregants who don't know a word of Portuguese!

He laughed wholeheartedly as his wife smiled by his side. The pastor's long-term dream is for his church to become native in Japan so that it no longer makes sense to prefix the church with ethnic markers such as 'Brazilian' or 'Nikkei.' He hopes that his church will one day go beyond its initial ethnic bounds to serve the people of the land, in his case the Japanese in Japan, just like the Japanese–Brazilian Church he once visited in Brazil. With phrases such as 'fulfill the mission' and 'be the light in the world,' he indicates that the future of the church depends not necessarily on the continuity of Brazilian or Nikkei ethnicity but instead on evangelization driven by Christian identity.

Encounter with god in the strange ancestral homeland: context and method

What is at stake in labeling a pattern of social formation such as Missão Apoio's as an 'ethnic' church when those studied often insist on the primacy of their 'Christian' subjectivity? This article tackles this question by taking the convergence of return migration and global Pentecostalism in transnational Japan as its site of analysis. Before I can unpack the question's theoretical import, a few words are in order regarding the context of my research.

In 1990, the Japanese government introduced a new type of visa available to foreigners of Japanese descent up to the third generation, a change mainly aimed at remedying the domestic shortage in unskilled manual labor. Given the dire state of the Brazilian national economy at the time, many of the roughly 1.4 million Nikkeis (Japanese Brazilians) in Brazil – the country with the largest population of Japanese descent in the world – started migrating to Japan. In Brazil, Nikkeis are stereotyped as a model minority with such positive images as industriousness, intelligence, and technological innovation. Many are indeed white-collar professionals securely in the middle- and upper classes (Lesser, 2007). In Japan, however, the majority of migrants become

³By 'descendant (descendente),' my informants generally meant to refer to Brazilians of Japanese descent.

unskilled foreign laborers. This drastic class downgrade from the ‘modern Nikkei’ in Brazil to the ‘backward Brazilian’ in Japan breeds a feeling of alienation among many Nikkei Brazilians – ironically, in their ancestral homeland (Tsuda, 2001). Today, there are roughly 178,000 Brazilian nationals (including Nikkei as well as non-Nikkei, who are often spouses or relatives) living in Japan, which makes them the fourth largest group of foreign residents in the country after Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos (Ministry of Justice (MOJ), 2014).

Just as Japanese immigrants brought Buddhism, Shinto, and other Japanese religions to Brazil in the early twentieth century (Maeyama, 1972), Nikkeis carried Brazilian religions to Japan with them, including Latin American Pentecostalism (Quero & Shoji, 2014). Although the legal system defines such migrants as ‘Japanese’ (at least partially), they are often marginalized in Japanese society for their ambiguous foreignness and working-class profile. In this context of contested belonging, many have been converting to Pentecostal Christianity in Japan (Shoji, 2014) – a religion that has grown exponentially in their home country of Brazil while flourishing among Brazilian expatriate communities across the globe (Mafra, 2003; Margolis, 2013).⁴ Through the ‘return’ migration of Nikkeis, Pentecostal Christianity from Brazil is gradually changing the religious landscape of Japan – a country where Christians make up less than 1% of the population (Tokyo Christian University, 2015).

This article is based on 14 months of fieldwork in Aichi Prefecture in Japan between 2012 and 2014. The primary research site was Toyota City, which is home to the headquarters of Toyota Motor Corporation. The presence of this multinational corporation gives rise to a significant demand for a flexible labor force in and around the city, attracting a sizable number of foreign workers. As a result, one of the largest Brazilian enclaves in Japan is also located in Toyota – a partially subsidized housing project called Homi Danchi (Linger, 2001).⁵ In 2014, more than half of the city’s 5120 Brazilians (2746) lived there with 3717 Japanese neighbors (Toyota City, 2014). During my fieldwork, I lived in the housing complex and participated in various activities that involved Brazilians and Japanese alike. Missão Apoio Toyota is about 15 minutes away from Homi Danchi by car. At the time of my fieldwork, the church had roughly 450 Brazilian members, the majority of whom lived in Homi Danchi. According to the results of the demographic survey I administered, roughly 70% converted in Japan after migrating.⁶ The flourishing of Pentecostal networks among the migrants indicates that Pentecostalism exerts a particular appeal in their life as migrants in the strange ancestral homeland (Ikeuchi, 2015, 2017).

The problem of the ‘ethnic church’: literature, question, and contribution

The few scholars who have studied Pentecostalism among Nikkei migrants in Japan tend to interpret the phenomenon of conversion as a quintessentially ethnic movement. In ‘The Making of “Brazilian Japanese” Pentecostalism,’ Rafael Shoji (2014) argues that

⁴Between 1970 and 2010, the percentage of the Brazilian population that identified with Protestantism increased more than fourfold from 5% to 22%. This exponential growth owes mostly to the expansion of Pentecostalism, which grew from 6% in 1991 to 13% in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2013).

⁵Some apartments in Homi Danchi are subsidized by Aichi Prefecture for low-income families.

⁶68.3% (127 out of 186 valid responses).

Pentecostal denominations have helped migrants in a new environment to rebuild social networks that can address the issues they face as Nikkei Brazilian *dekasseguis* (migrant workers). He suggests, 'In proportional terms, the Pentecostal churches have much more success in Japan due to a relatively large and optimized supply to meet the demand for an *ethnic religion*' (Shoji, 2014, p. 36, italics added). In a similar vein, Masanobu Yamada observes that 'Missão Apoio is an *ethnic church* born inside the Brazilian community' in Japan (Yamada, 2014, p. 68, italics added). By participating in Pentecostal activities, he notes, 'the *dekassegui* who are generally placed in a socially weak position as newcomer gain the opportunity to "bestow" the gospel and light of God to people in their host society' (2014, p. 73). He thus suggests that religious affiliation is a moral medium to combat negative images attached to Brazilian migrant identity in Japan.

In sum, both Shoji and Yamada conceptualize Pentecostalism primarily in ethnic terms by using such phrases as 'ethnic religion' and 'ethnic church.' Given that the great majority of congregants in the Brazil-derived Pentecostal denominations in Japan are Nikkei Brazilian, their conceptual reliance on the ethnic framework is reasonable from demographic and sociological perspectives. Such an analytical inclination toward ethnicity, however, risks striking a functionalist tone when it attributes Pentecostal conversion almost exclusively to the social needs for ethnic networks and identities. As David Smilde notes in his work on Latin American Pentecostalism (2007), discussing conversion solely in terms of its social motives and effects implicitly reinforces a view that people can will belief should it prove beneficial. Such a view in turn paints an unduly rationalist picture of the human mind in which agency is reduced to reacting to macro social forces in the most beneficial way possible. Furthermore, analytical frameworks that prioritize ethnic variables and invest them with foundational explanatory power run the risk of representing religion as an epiphenomenon of underlying ethnic negotiations. As a number of diaspora scholars have demonstrated, however, ethnicity can be just as constructed and imaginative as religion (Axel, 2004; Brodwin, 2003; Brubaker, 2005; Clifford, 1994; Hirsch & Miller, 2013; Kokot, Tölölyan, & Alfonso, 2004; Lesser, 2007; Vertovec, 1997). Therefore, explaining religion in ethnic terms without deconstructing ethnicity itself is analytically unsatisfactory.

The analytical framework I am critiquing here is that of ethnic particularism – the approach that prioritizes ethno-racial variables as constituting the primary and irreducible level of analysis onto which other kinds of social formations can be reduced. Ethnic particularism has received criticism from scholars in a broad range of fields from the study of Nikkei diaspora, to mobility studies, to the anthropology of religion. In his essay entitled 'Do Japanese Brazilians Exist?', Daniel Linger cautions researchers not to take ethnic groups as given units of analysis since such an approach at times perpetuates 'diaspora-thinking' (2003, p. 209). He observes, 'To characterize a set of persons as a diaspora is therefore to constitute an ethnic group and impute to it a historical trajectory, moral entitlements, and a collective mental state. This is powerful ideological work' (Linger, 2003, p. 210). To interpret religious conversion based solely on ethnic groups is to imply that ethnicity is somehow more real and valid as an analytical category than religion, when both are equally products of sociopolitical forces and psychological processes.

In fact, scholars in the broader field of mobility studies have recently become increasingly critical of their traditional overuse of ethnicity as a – if not the – favored

unit in the analysis of migrant incorporation in host society. In their article 'Beyond the Ethnic Lens,' Glick-Schiller and her colleagues point out that much of the scholarship on migrant settlement in Western nations 'conflates religion and ethnicity' (2006, p. 614). What they consider as the 'ethnic lens' paradigm gave rise to a profound disconnect between the subjects of research who speak of their groups and identities as primarily Christian, on the one hand, and the researchers who characterize their subjects as primarily Mexican, Nigerian, Korean, and so on, on the other hand. The authors do not advocate taking the informants' claims at face value. Rather, they call for careful scholarly examination of a 'Christian transnational social field' (Glick-Schiller et al., 2006, p. 619), in which Christian ideas, practices, and networks can shape migrants' shifting identities as powerfully as diasporic ethnicity.

Some scholars of religion who study global Christianity have voiced a similar concern. Ruth Marshall (2009), for instance, critiques what she considers to be the 'culturalist' bias of the social scientific literature on global Christianity in her work on Pentecostalism in Nigeria. According to her, scholars who take religion seriously should attempt to 'make sense of the inherent rationality of its disciplines and practices, over and above its social, cultural, or political functions' (Marshall, 2009, p. 3). For someone like Marshall, religion is not just an epiphenomenon of underlying sociocultural agendas such as ethnic identity negotiation.

To reiterate, this article tackles the following question: What is at stake in labeling a pattern of social formation such as Missão Apoio's as an 'ethnic' religion when those studied often insist on the primacy of their 'Christian' subjectivity, just like the pastor did in the opening vignette? As the growing body of literature on ethnicity and religion reveals, this question is of theoretical import in a number of fields. In light of the critiques of ethnic particularism, in what follows I aim to first demonstrate the fluid character of ethnic identity among Nikkei Pentecostal converts in Japan. I will do so by analyzing three different kinds of discourse that I repeatedly heard during fieldwork. The first discourse coded Pentecostalism as 'Brazilian' by virtue of emotional expressiveness. My Nikkei informants who evoked such a discourse often did so to contrast their supposed Brazilian warmth vis-à-vis the perceived coldness of the Japanese majority. The second discourse, in contrast, coded Pentecostalism as 'Japanese' due to the stereotyped orderliness and honesty of Japanese people. To many migrant converts, Christian righteousness resonated with Japanese politeness. The third and last discourse coded Pentecostalism just as 'Christian' and insisted on its transcendence from man-made ethnic boundaries. As with the pastor in the account of his dream, such a discourse often mobilized the rhetoric of a Christian mission to address – perhaps somewhat paradoxically – the prevalent sense of anxiety about assimilation among Nikkei migrants.

It is important to note that the three discourses were mutually inclusive. For instance, the same migrant converts who framed Pentecostalism as something Brazilian in one context would characterize it as a trans-ethnic reality shared by anyone who joins a Christian fellowship in another context. This fluidity suggests that Pentecostal ideas and practices generatively informed migrant converts' efforts to think through their ever-shifting sense of the self. In the conclusion, I will argue that Pentecostalism in this ethnographic context can be better understood as a *generative*, instead of an *ethnic*, movement. While the concept of ethnic religion too often presupposes an a priori existence of an ethnic group, the view of

Pentecostalism as a generative movement foregrounds how Pentecostalism reconstitutes the very boundaries of ethnicity, including the line between what is considered ‘ethnic identity’ and what is regarded as ‘religious identity.’ To this end, I will now turn to some of the relevant ethnographic findings.

Cold Japanese, warm Brazilian, and emotional Pentecostal

‘Any testimonies? How did God manifest in your life this week?’ Presbyterian Bruno asked the dozen attendants of his weekly home group gathering. It was around 10 pm on a Friday night, and we were sitting in a circle in the living room of his apartment. His three sons and some of the attendants’ children were playing in the next room. I could hear them chatter in a mixture of Japanese and Portuguese. The adults who sat in the room where the gathering was taking place, in contrast, spoke almost exclusively in Portuguese. Most were second- and third-generation Nikkei born and raised in various parts of Brazil who migrated to Japan in early adulthood. The home group meeting started with worship songs and then moved onto ‘messages (mensagens),’ or short sermons delivered by dedicated members. Now the presbyter – the leader of this particular home group – was soliciting testimonies.

After a few seconds, Mayumi slowly raised her hand and said she would start with a shy smile. She was a sansei (third-generation Nikkei) in her forties from Paraná, Brazil. She began by telling us where she and her husband had been the previous weekend, on 12 and 13 October 2013. They drove to Kyoto – which is 3 hours from Toyota – to attend an event called Empowered 21 All Japan. It was jointly organized by a number of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Japan and beyond. Roughly a third of the speakers included in the 2-day program were from abroad, including Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and the United States. Pastor Laelso Santos, the co-founder of Missão Apoio, was one of the featured speakers. Mayumi and her husband decided to go after seeing a poster for the event at their church.

Mayumi first showed us a short video she had recorded with her iPhone. The phone camera panned almost 180 degrees from one side of the hall to the other to capture the excited crowd that filled the venue. Many participants were praying aloud fervently to a dramatic tune played by the band on the stage. ‘Please listen. The people around me were praying in Japanese, it was so emotional,’ she said. We indeed heard a man’s voice, distinct due to his proximity to her phone, uttering words such as *kamisama* (God/god), *kansha shimasu* (I’m grateful), and *idai na ai* (great love). He sobbed as he prayed. When the video was over, she continued:

I could only make out *kamisama*, but I was moved that Japanese people – Japanese people, I’m telling you (japoneses mesmo, sabe) – were praying with so much emotion, shouting, crying, and even jumping. I had never seen that many Japanese filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with faith (cheia do Espírito Santo, cheia de fé). We Brazilians often think that Japanese are cold (japoneses são frios), but we are wrong! When the Spirit touches you, they too cannot help but express joy and gratitude.

A few other people who had also attended the event nodded in agreement. Apparently, the sight of expressive Japanese charismatics had made a lasting impression on them.

One congregant chimed in, 'We sometimes feel that all crentes [believers, or born-again Christians] are Brazilian, but that's not true!'

This scene unfolds in two diverging and yet interrelated tropes. On the one hand, Mayumi and others uphold the transcendence of Christian fellowship from ethnic boundaries such as the one between 'Japanese' and 'Brazilian.' This is a rather common claim in the speech genre of Christian testimony. She interprets emotional expressiveness as reflective of the capacity to feel the Holy Spirit, a key quality that mediates charismatic kin-making. By declaring that some Japanese indeed possess such a capacity, she is testifying to the universality of Christian kinship while simultaneously legitimizing and buttressing the Christian identity of those in the room through her testimony. As Peter Stromberg (1993) observed in his study of born-again conversion narrative, many Christian speech genres are 'constitutive.' That is, they are not mere 'factual' accounts of life events but rather transformative mediums that create and fortify Christian subjectivity.

On the other hand, the remarks made by Mayumi and her fellow congregants point to the widely shared images of Japanese and Brazilian ethnicities: 'Japanese are cold: Brazilians are warm (japoneses são frios: brasileiros são carinhosos)' (see also Linger, 2001, p. 290). Statements such as 'We Brazilians think that Japanese are cold but we are wrong!' paradoxically indicate that, to many migrant converts, the fervent style of Pentecostal worship is something stereotypically un-Japanese. It is instead considered more compatible with the supposedly Brazilian traits such as carinho, or emotional openness and affective warmth ('We sometimes feel that all crentes are Brazilian...'). Here, then, we can see a glimpse of discourse in which Pentecostalism mediates an expression of specific ethnic identity: Brazilian. Despite the frequent attempts to free Pentecostalism from any particular ethnic associations, my informants still let out remarks that paradoxically contradicted their own claims about God's universality (or universal accessibility, at least).

In sum, migrant converts such as Mayumi evoke a discourse that triangulates cold Japanese, warm Brazilian, and emotional Pentecostal. While she emphasizes the transcendent universality of Pentecostal identity, she also unwittingly frames Pentecostal worship as something specifically Brazilian by virtue of its emotional expressiveness. In other words, she speaks of her evolving Christian subjectivity as something universal and yet particular in the same breath. I do not argue that one of the tropes – Christian universalism or Brazilian ethnic expression – is more real than the other; my point here is not that Mayumi's testimony is actually about Christian identity formation or actually about ethnic identity negotiation, for it seems to simultaneously achieve both. It follows that neither religious nor ethnic identity precedes the other in the process of subject formation. Keeping this inclusive 'and/also' approach to identity in mind, we will now turn to the narratives of two other migrant converts.

Unorderly Brazilian, disciplined Japanese, and righteous Christian

Luana was a sansei woman born and raised in the city of São Paulo who converted to Pentecostal Christianity after migrating to Japan. Unlike many Nikkei migrants in Japan, she could speak intermediate Japanese. She attributed her linguistic ability to her 'very

Japanese (muito japonês)' upbringing in Brazil, which involved regular attendance at a Japanese language school. Although she was baptized in the Catholic Church at birth, during the interview she reminisced about the difficulties she had experienced in comprehending Catholic ideas and practices as a child. Her parents, who kept a small Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) at home, were 'no good' at answering her questions about the pope, mass, liturgy, and so on. Then, she continued in a mixture of Japanese and Portuguese:

This is why I know that for japoneses (Japanese people) it is even harder, because they don't have any Christian base. None. [...] I once met an old Japanese lady there on the bridge in Homi Danchi, and I said good morning. She said, 'Thank you for talking to me, no one talks with me.' So I said, '*lesu wa anata no koto aishite masuyo* (Jesus loves you).' She responded, 'Huh? *Dare ka shiranai* (I don't know who that is), but thank you anyway!' As she walked away, I said, 'But if you have any problems, pray to this Jesus, got it?' And she: 'Thank you for talking to me!'

She laughed wholeheartedly, and I did as well. The story she recounted had a comical touch to it. The elderly Japanese woman answered that she was not acquainted with anyone named '*lesu* (Jesus),' when Luana had made the remark about the love of Christ on an entirely different level. In this sense, Luana's story is about an interpretive failure. She then continued:

There [in Brazil], there is a lot of religiosity (religiosidade), even if you aren't practicing. Brazil is a Catholic country. So they have Catholic holidays. Many things are in reference to Christianity. So more or less, japoneses (Japanese people) there, when they ask, 'What holiday is today?' they always end up learning something about it.

The main emphasis of her story is the perceived lack of conceptual scaffolding to comprehend Christian idioms among the Japanese majority in contemporary Japan. She contrasts the non-Christianity of Japanese people with the 'Catholic religiosity' of Brazil, arguing that even those who are not practicing Catholics end up absorbing some Christian concepts by simply living there. She thus effectively puts Japan and Brazil on the opposite ends of the Christian continuum, one utterly non-Christian and the other thoroughly Christian.

In making this stark contrast, however, Luana makes an interesting rhetorical move. Her usage of the Portuguese word japonês (japoneses in plural) is a case in point. She uses the term to refer to both Brazilian citizens of Japanese descent in Brazil and Japanese nationals in contemporary Japan who have never emigrated. Here, she is conforming to the linguistic conventions in Brazil, where Japanese descendants are typically called simply japoneses rather than nipo-brasileiros (Japanese-Brazilian). In this particular case, however, she seems to construct one loose group out of people of Japanese descent in both Brazil and Japan, the two countries that she sets in opposition in terms of perceived Christian qualities. Based on her own experiences, she observes that japoneses in either country have difficulty comprehending Christian worldviews while those in Brazil have an advantage of constant exposure to Catholic customs and holidays. In her formulation of a Japanese/Brazilian dyad, then, Nikkei Brazilians are placed closer to the 'Japanese' end by virtue of their relative lack of familiarity with Christianity.

Luana thus emphasizes the non-Christian social environment of Japan by contrasting it to the Catholic Brazil. Unlike Mayumi, however, Luana does not speak from the standpoint of a brasileira (Brazilian) but instead self-identifies as a japonesa, relating empathically to the lack of 'Christian base' among the Japanese majority in Japan. Most migrant converts agree with Luana about the non-Christianity of Japanese people and society. One of the most common complaints in this regard is about the absence of Christmas holidays in Japan. Many remember the shock, if not resentment, that they initially felt when they found out that factories operated normally on Christmas Day, effectively barring them from having an all-day celebration with their families.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that some of the same migrant converts who perceive Japan to be decidedly non-Christian also paint Japan as an authentically Christian society in other contexts. Vinicius was a nisei (second-generation) man in his forties who had migrated to Japan with his issei (first-generation) father at the age of 16. He related the following in Portuguese when I asked if he felt 'Japanese' since he had naturalized more than a decade earlier:

No, I don't feel Japanese. It's hard. I only know the environment at the factory, that's the only social context that I'm used to. I don't know much else. But at the same time, I'm not really Brazilian either. If I go back to Brazil, people there would find me strange. I don't have the accent of my land (sotaque da minha terra) any more, for example. I have been living here for too long.

Here, Vinicius takes a third approach distinct from both Mayumi and Luana: He is neither Japanese nor Brazilian. While this uncertainty may give him a certain amount of anxiety, he nonetheless feels firm and clear about another facet of his self, which is Christian:

Also, I am a born-again Christian (crente) today. I converted here. So I can't follow certain practices that are very common in Brazil. Like, that crazy jeitinho [accomplishing something by circumventing rules and conventions] of Brazilians – people lie and break rules to get what they want, you know. As a crente, I can't do it any more, it's not right. Actually, living as a Christian is easier here since the Japanese are more honest – everything by the book. Japanese follow the rules and respect authority. Generally they have better discipline (mais educação), you see.

In his response, Vinicius attempts to relate to Japan not in terms of his ethnic identity but in a more complex and subtle way. He transforms the perceived politeness and honesty of Japanese people into irrefutable markers of their tacit Christianity: 'Living as a Christian is easier here since the Japanese are more honest.' He then juxtaposes his claim of Japanese politeness with the perceived prevalence of law-bending behaviors (jeitinho) in Brazil, arguing that Japan is in fact the right place for righteous Christians. What some Nikkei migrants laugh at as the rigidity of rule-obsessed Japanese thus turns into a desirable ethical trait called honesty to migrant converts such as Vinicius. In fact, Luana – who related that 'the Japanese don't have any Christian base' – also spoke about the modesty and respect of Japanese people later in the same interview. After she criticized what she viewed as the excessive sensuality of Brazilian culture (such as the Carnival), which she thought made it harder for men to live without sinning, she added: 'If my Lili [her seven-year-old daughter] were in Brazil, she would be walking around freely in a tiny top, her belly and legs all bare. So I prefer it here, it's more modest. More respect.'

While many migrant converts stress the non-Christianity of Japan, they also highlight its implicit Christianity, sometimes in the same breath. While this may appear contradictory, the inherent Christianity that some see in Japanese society lends legitimacy to their evolving born-again Christian identity in Japan. This is because a discourse that emphasizes moral qualities of Japanese people can consequently construct Japan as the right country to be in for Christians concerned with moral righteousness. Coupled with a common sense of a mission to evangelize the non-Christian nation, many migrant converts begin to embrace Japan as a place to be, if not as a home. The rhetorical triangulation of unorderly Brazilian, disciplined Japanese, and righteous Christian thus helps some migrants to craft a new sense of national belonging.

Exodus from motherlands: rhetoric of Christian transnationalism

Thus far I have detailed two major ways in which Nikkei Brazilian Pentecostal migrants narrate and affirm their Christian identities. One implicitly codes Pentecostalism as something Brazilian while the other finds some commonalities between supposedly Pentecostal and Japanese qualities. Before I provide a concluding analysis, I must introduce a third discourse about Pentecostalism that was equally prominent among migrant converts, which I call the rhetoric of Christian transnationalism. It asserts the transnational transcendence of Christian identity by foregrounding the primacy of trans-ethnic spiritual fellowship.

The congregants at Missão Apoio Toyota almost always employed this rhetoric when the church had visitors from other countries. During my fieldwork, for example, the Missão Apoio churches in and around Toyota received visiting pastors from the United States, Kenya, and Indonesia, among others. Regional events that many church members participated in, such as the aforementioned Empowered 21 All Japan, featured speakers from many nations ranging from South Africa to South Korea. Such events show that Pentecostal networks today constitute a transnational social field in which ideas, practices, people, and financial supports can travel (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2007).⁷ The transnational connectedness of Pentecostal circuits has been documented in various regions around the world (Austin-Broos, 2001; Van de Kamp, 2012; Vásquez, 1999). My Nikkei Brazilian informants who experienced such transnational connections tended to interpret them in moral terms by emphasizing what they saw as the gospel's universal appeal.

For example, during my fieldwork, I saw a handful of young members at Missão Apoio Toyota participate in short-term programs that combined English classes and overseas missions. Most of them seemed quite excited about such opportunities since it was generally their first time to spend a significant amount of time outside of Japan or Brazil. Lais was one such youth who chose to participate in an 'international mission' program in Australia. She was a 25-year-old *sansei* who mostly grew up in Londrina, Brazil, and Hiroshima, Japan. Her family, who first migrated to Japan when she was 4, moved back

⁷Levitt and Glick Schiller define a 'social field as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practice, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed.' They also clarify that 'National boundaries are not necessarily contiguous with the boundaries of social fields. National social fields are those that stay within national boundaries while transnational social fields connect actors through direct and indirect relations across borders' (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2007: 188).

and forth between the two countries twice before she managed to graduate from high school in Japan. Her family had been living in Toyota for roughly 5 years when I first met her. She spoke Japanese and Portuguese equally well although she feared her Portuguese was becoming a little rusty. She also felt she was bi-cultural, partly because of her *mestiça* (mixed) looks: 'I feel both Japanese and Brazilian. I know I can never be just Japanese because I look different. My father is not a Nikkei, you know. So I'm Brazilian, too. I am both.' This remark about her 'non-Japanese' appearance and the unattainability of 'just Japanese' identity indicates that Lais is familiar with the discourse surrounding *hāfu* [half, or mixed-raced persons] in Japan. That is, she seems to be aware of the ideology of racial purity in the country, which often excludes mixed-raced individuals from complete national belonging (Burkhardt, 1983; Carter, 2014; Fish, 2009; Rivas, 2015; Watarai, 2014). Rather than conforming to the rhetoric of *hāfu* and characterizing herself as 'half Japanese,' however, she insists on her double ethnic identity: 'I am both Japanese and Brazilian.'

Several weeks before her departure for Australia, Lais told me in Japanese: 'English is such an international language (*kokusaigo*). Learning it is important so I can evangelize and answer God's calling anywhere in the world.' While such programs usually lasted for several months, many participants returned with their own vivid images of Christian transnationalism. Upon her return to Toyota 3 months later, Lais commented on her experience with the following remark:

It was such an eye-opening experience. It is a big world out there. Even if we [she and other participants from various countries] couldn't understand each other, you could still pray together. It was amazing to see so many brothers and sisters, regardless of where they came from, carrying out God's work.

She then asked me if we could chat in English so she would not forget the speaking ability she had acquired.

Lais underscores the perceived transnational character of Christian fellowship by speaking about 'the world' she could access through English, the emotive power of prayer that unites people from different backgrounds, and the irrelevance of national origin to carry out 'God's work.' Interestingly, she does not characterize her very transnational – or at least bi-national – upbringing as 'international (*kokusaiteki*).' Rather, it was her time in English-speaking Australia that finally brought her in contact with 'the world out there.' Here, we can hear echoes of Japanese discourses of *kokusaika* (internationalization), which includes the idealization of English language (Goodman, 2007; Graburn, Ertl, & Kenji Tierney, 2008). Seen in this light, her view of Christian transnationalism has a certain amount of inclination toward the West. Nonetheless, to many Nikkei youngsters such as Lais, Christian transnationalism provided an alternative vision that helped them escape the perceived limits of ethnic belonging in two potential homelands. For instance, when her own sister advised her to choose Brazil as the destination for her mission trip because 'God put us in Japan and Brazil for a reason,' Lais responded that she could also carry out the mission work 'in the larger world (*motto hiroi sekai*).' To Lais, a Christian transnational social field represented something 'larger' than her two possible ethnic motherlands.

Peggy Levitt, who studied Brazilian charismatic churches in Boston, makes the following observation, which also resonates with the case of Brazil-derived Pentecostal churches in Japan:

Transnational migrants also use religion to delineate an alternative cartography of belonging. [...] The imagined moral and physical geographies that result may fall within national boundaries, transcend but coexist with them, or create new, alternative spaces that, for some individuals, have greater salience and inspire stronger loyalties than politically or nationally-defined spaces. (Levitt 2003, p. 861)

To some Nikkei migrants, Pentecostal networks indeed serve as a means to craft ‘an alternative cartography of belonging.’ In many ways, the rhetoric of Christian transnationalism challenges the discourse of ethnic particularism, which typically assumes the primacy of ethnic identity in people’s self-understandings.

Conclusion: from ethnic religion to generative religion

This article opened with a narrative offered by the pastor at Missão Apoio Toyota, in which he speaks about a vision for the future of his church. Evoking a missionary rhetoric of proselytization, he underscores the moral importance of continuing to ‘be the light in the world.’ He hopes that the Japan-raised youth at the church, many of whom speak fluent Japanese, will take on such a responsibility as Christians in the future. Importantly, he does not envision the future of his church as a reservoir of Brazilian ethnicity surviving in diaspora. Drawing on his past visit to Japanese–Brazilian Church in Brazil, which had lost all of its Nikkei members, he openly suggests that a loss of ethnic identity is not something born-again Christians should fear. In fact, he goes on to describe that what happened to the Japanese diasporic identity at Japanese–Brazilian Church in São Paulo can happen to the Brazilian diasporic identity at Missão Apoio in Toyota: ‘Someday, maybe it can be a church with a funny Portuguese name – Missão Apoio – with all-Japanese congregants who don’t know a word of Portuguese!’ The pastor’s dream thus unambiguously declares the primacy of Christian subjectivity over ethnic identities.

Although those studied often insist on the significance of their religious subjectivity, researchers tend to label a pattern of social formation such as Missão Apoio’s as an ethnic church. This article took this discrepancy as the point of departure to ask the following question: What is at stake in characterizing Pentecostal movements among Nikkei Brazilian migrants in Japan as manifestations of ‘ethnic religion’? How do individuals themselves create and negotiate certain subjectivities that the framework of ‘ethnic religion’ may at times foreclose? The following sections then turned to three major discourses that migrant converts at Missão Apoio employed to narrate their understandings of Pentecostal ideas, practices, and networks. The first discourse codes Pentecostalism as ‘Brazilian’ by virtue of its expressive and emotive worship style. The second interprets Pentecostalism as ‘Japanese’ due to its moral emphasis on honesty and modesty. The third rhetoric of Christian transnationalism refrains from reading particular ethnic meanings in Pentecostalism and insists on the universality of trans-ethnic Christian fellowship. I have also articulated four distinct narratives about ethnic identity by introducing four migrants. While all of them entered Japan on the

nikkei-jin ancestry-based visa, how they related who they were varied, ranging from 'Brazilian' to 'Japanese' to 'neither' to 'both.'

In sum, diversity and fluidity mark the ways in which migrant converts perceive Pentecostalism and express their ethnic identities in relation to Christian subjectivity. This observation points to the generative character of Pentecostalism. Instead of sustaining or creating an ethnic entity, Pentecostal idioms, practices, and networks help migrant converts think generatively about their ever-evolving sense of the self, at times ethnic and other times non-ethnic. Consequently, Pentecostalism in this ethnographic context is not so much of an 'ethnic religion,' if the term is meant to suggest some kind of correspondence between 'ethnic group' and 'religious community.' When ethnic identities can fluidly shift from 'Japanese' to 'Brazilian' to 'neither' to 'both,' how can we take 'ethnic group' as a basic unit of analysis? Likewise, when Pentecostalism can be something 'Brazilian,' 'Japanese,' and 'Christian,' how can we assume the existence of one unified 'religious community'? The relevant ethnographic findings suggest not the unification but the proliferation of identities among those migrants who participate in Pentecostal movements. When taken together, the narratives of four migrants disrupt both the unit of ethnic group and the boundary of religious community.

To reiterate, the term 'ethnic religion' risks constituting an entity – either ethnic or religious – where there is no such entity to start with. I make this critique from an ethnographic standpoint, largely based on participant observation and interview materials collected from fieldwork. At the same time, it is worth considering a possibility that, from sociological and demographic viewpoints, the concept of ethnic religion may hold more ground. After all, the majority of congregants at Missão Apoio Toyota were migrants who entered Japan on the long-term resident visa for *nikkei-jin*. While person-centered accounts of subjectivity may be fluid, the fact remains that most church members had to legally prove their Japanese ancestry at some point in the past. To some observers, this structural pattern serves as a sufficient justification to characterize the kind of Pentecostal movement enabled by Missão Apoio as an ethnic religion. Such a conceptual approach may indeed be particularly useful for demographic overviews and other statistically inclined projects.

Researchers who are interested in understanding multiple subject positions and varied social realities, however, need to approach the analytical framework of ethnic religion with caution. By implying that religion is about an ethnic group, or ethnicity about a religious unit, such a conceptual idiom risks painting a picture of a ready-made entity. In this particular ethnographic context, such an analytical position brings one dangerously close to the ideology of racial purity that underwrites the preferential visa treatment of foreigners deemed to possess 'Japanese blood' (Befu, 2001; Roth, 2002; Tsuda, 2003). This is because to take Nikkei ethnicity as an analytical given without deconstructing it is to accept the virtually same contours of diasporic group that the *nikkei-jin* visa policy presupposes (Linger, 2003).

My observation is that the Pentecostal movement provides migrants with various ways to think about their evolving multiple selves, some of which are not necessarily ethnic. When migrant converts insist on the irreducibility of Christian subjectivity, which they frequently do, it is not always analytically sound to contain such claims within the purview of ethnic identity negotiation. This is for two reasons: First, some of such claims arise from their interactions with the transnational social fields sustained by multinational church

networks, where some of the global connections formed in such social fields are not necessarily ethnic. Second, and more importantly, ethnicity is not ontologically prior to religion. In other words, ethnicity is not inherently more real than religion as an analytical category. As Barth argued decades ago, it is the incessant process of boundary maintenance that makes an ethnic group, not 'the cultural stuff that it encloses (1969, p. 15).' Ethnicity, just like 'Japaneseness' or 'Brazilianess,' is often a reified quality (Lesser, 1999; Weiner, 1997). To characterize some social formations as ethnic religion without reflecting on the fluidity of ethnicity itself is analytically incomplete.

For these reasons, I argue that the Pentecostal movement among Nikkei Brazilian migrants in Japan can be better understood as a generative, not an ethnic, religion. It enables them to narrate and reconfigure their shifting multifaceted subjectivities in generative ways, sometimes ethnic and other times non-ethnic. Rather than sustaining an ethnic group, Pentecostal ideas, practices, and spaces in this context give rise to generative selves.

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