

Book Review

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Reviewed by

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Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil. By Daniela de Carvalho. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, 202 pages, ISBN: 0-7007-1582-7 (hardcover), US \$75.00.

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*T*his study deals with the descendants of the Japanese (Jap. *Nikkeijin*) in Brazil and the migration of some of these descendants to Japan in the 1990s. The Japanese and their descendants are one of the most researched ethnic groups in Brazil and one merit of Carvalho's book is to present many of these studies in a summarized form and to a wider public. In the following paragraphs I will review the history of *Nikkeijin* in Brazil and Japan, highlighting some interpretations of the book. Further, I will indicate some important consequences of the studies of the *Nikkeijin* for the concept of an ethnic Buddhism in Western countries. Although she does not discuss religion in detail, Carvalho's book shows that the Brazilian *Nikkeijin* represent an interesting challenge for theories of ethnic religiosity, since the *Nikkeijin* can be understood as a group that is independent from both the Japanese and

Brazilians.

Part one of Carvalho's book is focused on the Japanese migration to Brazil, initiated in 1908, but intensified in the 1920s and 1930s. In Chapter one, Carvalho shows that in the pre-war period the Japanese in Brazil moved from contracted workers to settlers organized independently or promoted by the Japanese government (p. 7). Social life replicated Japanese customs, and there was little interaction with Brazilians. The Second World War and the following years proved to be a very hard challenge for the community as it was organized around a nationalistic devotion to Japan and its main symbol at this time, the Emperor, who was suggested by Takashi Maeyama to be a tutelary *kami* for all the Japanese in Brazil. On the other side, Brazil itself submitted to a nationalistic and authoritarian regime from the 1930s on, under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas. Between these two nationalisms, the *Nikkeijin* suffered restrictions during the Second World War and had serious problems accepting that Japan was defeated. Many Japanese in Brazil, unable to understand the news media in Portuguese and having their education and worldview centered on Japanese invincibility and superiority, claimed that Japan had won the war and that the news coverage in English and Portuguese was fabricated in order to fool them. These events provoked traumatic confrontation in the community between the the *Nikkei* who believed in the Japanese victory (Jap. *kachegumi*) and those that accepted the Japanese defeat (Jap. *makegumi*). Carvalho finds (p. 60ff) that class division in the community was probably an important factor in this split, one that even led to murder and terrorist actions from the *makegumi* faction. The 1960s and 1970s were marked by the

progressive integration of the Japanese in Brazil, after their decision to remain. Simultaneously a new wave of Japanese immigration occurred, many of them coming from former Japanese colonies (p. 26).

At this time a *Nikkei* ethnic identity began to be constructed, mirroring the decision for permanent settlement. In Chapter two, Carvalho describes the ascendance of the Japanese community in Brazil according to social and educational indicators (p. 36). The Japanese achieved considerable success in Brazil, where racial prejudice is said to be nonexistent, although racial ideologies were common arguments in the discussion of Asian immigration to Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century. In Chapter three the focus is on the systematization of the transformation of ethnic identity from immigrant workers (Jap. *Dekasegi*) to *Nikkeijin*. At this point Carvalho critiques theories of assimilation and notes the participation of officials and of government in the promotion of Japanese culture and permanent settlement, something not adequately appreciated in earlier research, according to Carvalho (p. 52). The boundaries of ethnic identity are demonstrated as statements of difference between the *Nikkeijin* and the Brazilians, following a constructivist view. Although there remain many divisions inside the community in terms of generation, waves of migration, and prefectures of origin, Carvalho believes the *Nikkei* can still be seen as an independent ethnic group.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the reverse migration of Brazilian *Nikkeijin* to Japan, mainly since the 1990s. Based on the criterion of "blood" (ethnicity), the

Japanese government allowed the *Nikkeijin* to legally work in Japan, mainly in difficult industrial jobs. In Brazil they are called *Dekasegi*, echoing the epithet of their ancestors, but in reverse. The most recent data (1998) shows the number of *Nikkeijin* residents in Japan is 274,691, of whom around eighty-one percent are Brazilian. In Japan the *Nikkeijin* have built ethnic communities and are known as "Brazilians." Many live without contact with the larger Japanese society and consume Brazilian products and media. The last chapter of Carvalho's book, as well as her conclusions, are centered on this construction of *Nikkei* identity as a minority group in Japan, at the same time as they were considered an ethnic minority in Brazil.

The two processes that influence *Nikkei* identity are negotiated bilaterally with the respective majority societies. In Brazil, the *Nikkei* are native in culture and language, but they do not share the "racial" type usually identified as Brazilian. In Japan, the *Nikkeijin* fit theoretically into the Japanese identity constructed on the tradition of valuing 'blood' (p. 118), but of course their lack of cultural and linguistic competence isolate them from interaction with the Japanese, imposing on them a low level of "Japaneseness." In Brazil, family life and many *Nikkei* associations promote Buddhism and typical Japanese traditions. Therefore the Japanese culture is not completely strange to many *Nikkeijin*. Still, in Japan *Nikkeijin* valorize Brazilian symbols such as samba and carnival, and in this way try to reinforce positive aspects of Brazil as a way to establish difference from the Japanese. Many *Nikkeijin* act as is contextually expected by the majority society in which they find themselves, justifying the label "Japanese" in Brazil and

"Brazilian" in Japan.

This mixing of identity brings up interesting points for the study of Buddhism in Western countries. Since Carvalho does not discuss this matter, I would like to interweave her study with some of my own findings. More generally, these contextualized and mixed cultural patterns suggest a rethinking of ethnic Buddhism, because the descendants of immigrants continuously redefine ethnic difference. The assumption of progressive adaptation can also be misleading because in fact multiple migrations can occur in today's globalized Buddhism, including a reverse flux back to Asia. There are *Nikkeijin* who have emigrated many times as temporary workers to Japan, which has further implications for the construction of difference. The importance of race and culture in the definitions of ethnicity must be complemented by a more interactionist view of ethnic groups. The *Nikkeijin*, for example, are an independent ethnic group who have created commonalities with and differences from both Japanese and Brazilians.

Moreover, with this ongoing migration of persons, religious institutions need to more quickly redefine themselves. *Nikkei* Buddhist temples in Brazil, especially Shin Buddhism, are now confronted with the necessity of having to strategize for social survival. Many of these temples have until now been understood as missions, but the rethinking of ethnic matters is something being accelerated by new conditions. Regarding the interaction of Buddhism and other religions, a comparison of patterns of behavior from the same ethnic group in different societies can give us many important insights. Individuals with

multiple religious practices are found in Japan as much as they are in Brazil. In both countries, religions frequently assume functional and contextual aspects in the follower's life. This is in contrast to the majority of Western countries. Historically in Japan, Shinto was seen as the primary religion, serving as a national unifier and used at birth ceremonies. In Brazil, Catholicism assumes this role, something that has progressively differentiated the religious life of Brazilian *Nikkei*, many of whom attend Catholic, Buddhist, and even Afro-Brazilian rituals. Traditional Japanese Buddhism, the worship of ancestors, and other forms of familiar religiosity assumed a more ethnic character for the *Nikkei*. Conversely, in Japan, Catholicism and even Afro-Brazilian religions are frequently emphasized in the *Nikkei* communities. In the Japanese context, *these* are the ethnic religions that differentiate the Brazilian *Nikkeijin* from the Japanese people. In this sense, Buddhism's role as an ethnic religion is lost in Japan, though preserved in Brazil with a different pattern of ritual division.

As the patterns of *Nikkei* Buddhist practice and their combinations with other religions reveal, ethnic Buddhism is not static, but develops through the multiple interactions of the ethnic group, sometimes in transnational environments. Carvalho's study indicates that religiosity is contextually constructed and based on differences emerging through interaction. As she states in a more general way, quoting Robin Cohen, "Like a player concealing a deck of cards from the other contestants, the individual pulls out a knave — or a religion, an ethnicity, a lifestyle — as the context deems a particular choice desirable or appropriate" (p. 146).