

# Perceived Discrimination in Ancestral Homeland: Filipino *Nikkeijins* and the Dynamics of Migrant Resistance

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The Immigration Control Act of 1990 formally allowed the *nikkeijins* or descendants of Japanese nationals who were born in foreign countries to enter Japan and work without restriction. Following the rapid migration of Latin American *nikkeis*, thousands of Filipino *nikkeijins* had taken advantage of their “ethnic right” by working in Japanese factories. In spite of the privileges bestowed upon them, issues about discrimination, prejudice, and even exploitation had been reported in various fora.

This paper examines the reconfiguration of ethnic self-identification as Filipino *nikkeijins* face social discrimination in Japan. The narratives of second and third generation Filipino *nikkeijins* reveal that such experiences of prejudice and social stigma had reinforced their *nikkeijin* identity amidst the dominant Filipino consciousness. The study correlates the experiences of marginalization to the dynamics of migrant resistance and ethnic self-identification.

*Keywords: nikkeijin, ethnicity, discrimination, identity*

## INTRODUCTION

After closing the gates of the entertainment market for the *Japayukis*, the Filipino migrant population in Japan has been reduced to factory workers, trainees, and wives of Japanese husbands. The red light districts in the areas of *Sakae* are no longer dominated by Filipino entertainers, while the vibrant Filipino clubs have either shut down or transferred to smaller buildings. Interestingly, although tens of thousands had already left Japan, the spirit of the *Japayuki-san* remains intact as the saying ‘Japan, Japan - *sagot sa kahirapan*’ (Japan, Japan – our

solution to poverty) remains a well-liked aphorism within the Filipino communities.

Indeed, new immigrants have always believed that going to Japan is the smartest strategy to improve their economic condition. International migration, as traditional theories would contend, is driven by the affluence and manpower shortage in the destination country and the lack of good employment opportunities in the source country. However, the controversial issue in the post-1990 migrant workers of Japan is the arrival of the *nikkeijins* or the descendants of Japanese nationals who were born in foreign countries. Mostly coming from Latin American countries,

these *nikkeijins* have been raised by middle class Japanese families. Exposed to the cultural facets of Japanese communities, *nikkeijins*, particularly those who came from Brazil had identified themselves as genuine Japanese until the so-called ethnic homecoming to the land of their ancestors. In this particular case, migration is more than an economic strategy considering the ethnic ties and cultural affection that they have developed to their ethnic homeland. While economic factors initially propelled migration, there are significant forces such as “historical, ethnic, and socio-cultural variables that act as transnational connection channels between the sending and receiving countries” (Knight, 2002, p.18).

Having a “Japanese blood” is a passport to enter the state territory, but not the ‘inner facets’ of Japanese society. Upon arrival in Japan, *nikkeijins* are expected to assimilate without difficulty because of their ethnic construction. Scholars, however, have observed that there are cases wherein members of a specific group invoke ethnicity as a “criterion for self-identification” and ultimately a means to “maximize the power of a group in a situation of market competition” (Castles & Miller, 2009, p. 36). This observation is evidently reflective of the case of *nikkeijins* who uphold the symbolic value of their ethnicity in order to compete in the labor market of Japan. While legal documents guarantee their entry, the prospect of being employed in a decent workplace and acquiring fair employment benefits still depends on the migrant’s networks and social capital. Furthermore, the *nikkeijins*’ everyday experiences within and outside their workplaces eventually challenge their self-identities as they also begin to defy their ethnic loyalties. Ethnic dilemmas become more complicated and controversial as these Japanese descendants experience perplexity on how the society treats them: an ethnic Japanese or a mere outsider?

This paper looks at the dynamics of resistance as Filipino *nikkeijins* confront the challenges of marginalization and discrimination in their very own ethnic homeland. It examines the interplay of identity and counteridentity as *nikkeijins*

simultaneously accommodate and weigh the components of both Filipino and Japanese culture and utilize it in striving for assimilation and acceptance. To further analyze the dynamics of *nikkeijin* identity, the study highlights the component of ethnic self-identification. Amidst the pressure to uphold Japanese ethnicity in order to achieve career growth on one hand, and sustain Filipino mores and customs to maintain strong social ties with “kababayans” on the other hand, how do the *nikkeijins* see themselves? I argue that the fluidity of ethnic self-identification is often shaped by the conflicting perceptions of positive ethnic attribution and negative ethnic discrimination. While self-identification to a particular ethnicity or nation influence the construction of perceived discrimination, the experience of prejudice and marginalization also reconfigures ethnic self-identification.

Ethnicity, as constructivists put it, is neither concrete nor immutable. It is a “product of social ascriptions, a kind of labeling process engaged in by oneself and others” (Barth, 1969, as cited in Nagel, 1994, p.154). Through this perspective, ethnic identity is relative to the situation and experiences, including the social and historical worldview of an individual. A Filipino *nikkeijin*, having been born and raised in a certain region of southern Philippines, and being aware of having a “Japanese blood” from the lineage of a nationalist ancestor (i.e. member of the Japanese Imperial Army during the Pacific War) would logically create an ethnic construction distinct from a typical Filipino or Japanese national. Such ethnic identity may even be reinforced when *nikkeijins* reunite with their families in Japan and engage themselves with the Japanese community. This assumption serves as the basis of this investigation.

Ethnic identity becomes even more fragile during periods of dislocations and migration when one is challenged by a dominating culture of the host society. It is often argued that immigrants and their descendants “do not have a static, closed, and homogeneous ethnic identity, but rather dynamic multiple identities” (Castles & Miller, 2009, p.

41) shaped by various cultural, social, and other forces. There has been a growing interest among sociologists on the process of acculturation and the role of the changing cultural environment to the alteration or formation of a renewed identity. While other migrants strive to assimilate, others simply resist no matter how their original ethnic identity hinders upward mobility. It is imperative, then, to “look at the level of pride and esteem derived from belonging to one’s group” (Sands & Berry, 1993, as cited in Nesdale, Rooney, & Smith, 1997, p. 571) which may stir contentment and feelings of efficacy, hence retaining original ethnic consciousness during migration.

Another interesting concept that has been linked to the construction of ethnic identity is the experience of social discrimination. While there are vital dimensions of racial identity that influence the antecedents of perceived racial discrimination (Seller & Shelton, 2003), there is also an obvious trend that functions in a reverse manner. This means discrimination and racial prejudice may possibly reinforce group solidarity and eventually strengthen ethnic identity. Challenged by derogatory social labeling and prejudice, discriminated individuals seek other co-ethnics who suffer the same dilemma. Ethnic bonds serve as comfort zones, sometimes solidifying to evolve as a social movement. In some cases, the development of a group identity helps to diffuse the effects of stigmatization while improving intragroup attitudes in overcoming the perceived discrimination (Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann, & Snider, 2001). While ethnic solidarity is often viewed as a common relief to the experienced oppression, this argument was countered by Lee (2003) who conducted a study of Asian Americans and concluded that ethnic identity did not moderate nor mediate the effects of discrimination, although other group orientation demonstrated a “moderator effect” on community well-being.

The rich literature on the dynamics of migrant identity focuses on the marginalized groups in America and other developed states. Research on return migration, on one hand, has explored

the experiences of exiles, asylum, and politically persecuted migrants (see Cassarino, 2004; Safran, 1991; Dustmann, Bentolila, & Faini, 1996). The *nikkeijins*, on the other hand, exhibit an interesting and unique case of ‘return’ due to their “ethnic right” to reside and work in the host society. This study is based on life history interviews of 50 Filipino *nikkeijins* who had worked in Japanese factories or *kaisha* (which literally means a “company”) located in Nagoya City, Japan. The city is known for its large Filipino communities composed of trainees, entertainers, and *nikkeijins*.

### **POSITIVE MINORITIES, OR JAPANESE LEFT BEHIND?**

While a large body of literature on migration highlights the marginalization of economic migrants from poor societies who are totally ‘foreign’ to the host society, the case of the *nikkeijins* demonstrates a unique feature. Most, if not all of these Brazilian *nikkeijins* came from middle class, educated, and economically stable families. After the World War, Japanese immigrants from Brazil, Peru, and Mexico have become relatively prosperous and economically well-established (Masterson & Funada-Classen, 2004, p. 226). Their children—the second and third generation *nikkeijins*—had the privilege of being raised without financial difficulties although the economic crisis in the 1980s had failed their hopes of further improving their economic condition. Hence, they resolved to seek greener pasture in their ethnic homeland. Migration, in this case, is not driven by absolute poverty and desperation. Instead, the temporary sojourn which they call ‘*dekasegi*’ is practiced as a quicker approach to obtain higher amount of wage in order to sustain or improve their socio-economic condition. Tsuda (1999) called it relative deprivation to contextualize the aspiration of the middle class *nikkeijins* who felt unsatisfied with their status due to the increasing economic wants.

Interestingly, the economic prestige of the *nikkeijins* was even accompanied by social admiration. The image of being a “Japanese” in Brazil entails positive implications: they are often differentiated from the negative aspects of ‘Brazilianess’. As such, they hold a ‘positive minority’ status, which is concomitant to the economic and cultural prestige of Japan. This status is usually “a source of pride and self-esteem,” often endorsing “a sense of superiority over what is considered Brazilian” (Tsuda, 2003, pp. 82-83). It is worth noting that *nikkeijins* in general have been exposed to the cultural facets of Japan within Latin America. Some had even attended *nikkeijin* schools, while others were raised according to the customs and traditions of the Japanese.

In terms of educational background, a significant proportion of *nikkeijins* have university diplomas. It is even known within the Latin American academic community that prestigious schools have substantial *nikkei* population. Even in Peruvian case, most *nikkeijin* migrants who left the crisis-ridden country were graduates of Peru’s universities, and most held high school diplomas (Masterson & Funada-Classen, 2004). *Nikkeijins* continuously emerge in various fields most especially in commerce.

The case of the Filipino *nikkeijins* is different to a certain degree. While the Japanese emigrants and their children had enjoyed economic prosperity by controlling several hemp and other agricultural industries before the 1940s, such economic legacy suddenly ended when the Pacific War broke out. At the height of the anti-Japanese sentiment following the defeat of Japan in 1945, the so-called “war orphans” who were apparently ‘nisei’ (second generation) faced strong ethnic hostility and were deprived of their families’ land, houses, domestic animals, and other valuables (Ohno, 2006). The widespread war images attributed to Japanese cruelty had caused strong animosity between the Filipinos and the so-called ‘Japanese left behind,’ as Professor Ohno put it. Nisei *nikkeijins*, who had been victimized by utmost discrimination opted to change their Japanese

names to accepted Filipino names. They also destroyed all the documents that associated them to a Japanese family.

The loss of their economic properties and deliberate concealment of Japanese ethnicity had eventually led to the waning of *nikkeijin* culture in the Philippines. Worried of being bullied in schools or even in their respective neighborhood, descendants of the Japanese emigrants painstakingly declared their full ‘Filipino identity’ until gradual assimilation took place. With such identity kept unrevealed for five decades, some third and fourth generation *nikkeijins* were not even aware of their ethnic roots. Half of my interviewees had discovered their *nikkeijin* identity during their high school or college days in the late 1990s. It was only during the said decade when both the Philippine and Japanese governments, in collaboration with some NGOs, initiated the search for the remaining descendants in the country.

Given the fact that the current generations of *nikkeijin* are well-assimilated to the socio-cultural way of life in the Philippines, they are not necessarily considered a “positive minority.” In fact, most of them no longer feel that the society treats them like *mestizos* or mixed blooded Filipinos. Their socio-economic status has only improved at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Having benefited from their parents who migrated to Japan in the late 1990s, the third and fourth generation *nikkeijins* have been raised and educated with adequate financial support. Because of this, more than half of my second and third generation interviewees are also college graduates and they claimed that their education was accomplished through the remittances of parents or relatives who worked in Japan. While roughly all the respondents declared that migration to Japan is initiated by economic incentives, only a number of them had suffered from severe economic poverty. Remarkably, the results of the life history interviews of second and third generation *nikkeijins* show that despite perceiving ‘poverty’ prior to migration, their families own agricultural lands, retail stores, food shops, and other small

business enterprises. Through their perceived motivation, it can be surmised that the recent migration of *sansei* (third generation) and *yonsei* (fourth generation) was propelled by relative deprivation similar to the case of the Brazilians.

The high degree of assimilation and the historical ‘concealment’ of Japanese identity manifestly influence the current trend of ethnic self-identification among Filipino *nikkeijins*. When asked about their ethnic identity, the common response was “*Pinoy ako*. (I am Filipino.)” The same response was also obtained when the interviewees were asked about their national allegiance or loyalty. The next section of this paper expounds this issue on self-identification.

### **DEFINING THEMSELVES: JAP-PINOYS BEFORE MIGRATION**

Ohno and Iijima’s (2010) report of a nationwide survey revealed that majority of their *nikkeijin* respondents see themselves as “Filipinos” whereas only a quarter identify themselves as Japanese. With more than 30% saying that they have two homelands (the Philippines and Japan), the authors interpreted the data by claiming that “many of them have dual identities, the sense of belongingness similarly spanning the two countries” (Ohno & Iijima, 2010, p. 87). The dualism of identity warrants further investigation due to the complexities of its variables and underlying factors. *Nikkeijins*, especially the *sansei* (third generation), are inclined to say that they are full Filipino in heart and spirit, but the latter part of the interview revealed that some of them tend to have “dual consciousness” with regard to the issue of ethnicity. A minority of those interviewed said they can also “feel” the Japanese within them.

My in-depth interviews confirmed the dominance of “Filipino” ethnic identity among Filipino *nikkeijins* in Japan. In fact, none of my interviewees claimed that they are more

Japanese, or they have equal ethnic allegiance to the Philippines and Japan. It is interesting to note that even *nisei* interviewees asserted their Filipino-ness and their loyalty to their birthplace. Regardless of the degree of generation (*issei*, *nisei* or *sansei*), these descendants tend to associate themselves with the Filipino community.

Prior to migration, the ethnic consciousness was merely Filipino. For some *nikkeijins* who had been aware of their Japanese lineage, reforming their Filipino identity is practically useless and risky. A *yonsei* (fourth generation) from Davao admitted through her essay that she felt hurt when people make fun of her Japanese ancestors. She confessed:

Yes, I am a Japanese descendant. The kind of slit in my eyes told everyone that I was one. But who wants to be identified with the aggressors of world war? I do not want to be called a *Yakuza*. Or a *Japayuki-san*. Or a granddaughter of a comfort woman. These are the common Filipino images of the Japanese. (Khanser & Dela Pena, 2009, p. 14)

This girl’s essay is a typical sentiment of many *nikkeijin* women in the Philippines. Results of my interview explain the hesitation of younger descendants to expose their Japanese background. Especially during the late 1990s and early 2000s, women processing their visa to Japan were perceived as *Japayuki-san* or entertainers. As one renowned dean of a nursing college in Davao told me, “*How can you encourage nurses to work in Japan? Here in Davao, if people notice that you are going to the Japanese Consulate to process a visa, you are already labeled as Japayuki.*” The same viewpoint was echoed by three of my interviewees who mentioned that they were not enthusiastic to go to Japan because of this social ascription. For them, acquiring such negative reputation may put themselves and their families to a very shameful situation.

Those who come from indigenous groups even experience worse than the situation of ‘urban’

*nikkeijin*. Unfortunately, they face marginalization on two grounds. First, as a Japanese descendant who is related to the perpetrators of war; and second, as a member of an indigenous group. As the *yonsei* writer wrote:

I am a Filipino even if I was discriminated at once in a while [sic] for being a Bagobo Tagabawa. Even if I tell everyone that I come from the picturesque and magical Mount Apo, also the tallest mountain in the country, still it could not compensate for the negative image given to us indigenous people. And right now, right here in Davao, I am at ease calling myself Filipino but never a Japanese descendant. (Khanser & Dela Pena, 2009, p. 14)

The essay from the *yonsei* Bagobo girl shows that although the war-induced anti-Japanese sentiment has completely vanished in the past decades, *nikkeijins* are still not free from prejudice and stereotyping. Most often, typical bullying and labeling of ‘*being a comfort woman’s granddaughter*’ are merely jokes without intended negative connotation. However, some *nikkeijins* feel offended because of the fact that they are genuine Japanese descendants and they are aware of the historical deconstructions of those labels.

Although it is clear that there has been no deliberate persecution of contemporary *nikkeijins* in the Philippines, the aforementioned discourses in the public sphere have contributed to the strong enforcement of Filipino identity. While there is no intentional attempt to “hide” their Japanese blood, there is also no enthusiasm to expose or even strengthen their Japaneseness (i.e. studying Nihongo, learning Japanese culture, tracking Japanese relatives). To be able to avoid being bullied, teased, or even asked about issues on comfort women, war crimes, *Japayuki*, and *yakuza*, *nikkeijins* prefer to identify themselves as ordinary Filipinos.

## THE MIGRATION PHASE: LABOR CONDITION AND DISCRIMINATION

Japan has been known as a negative case in the literature of migration studies due to the tight regulation that limit the inflow of foreign workers as compared to the positive cases of developed countries (Bartram, 2000). Despite the demographic crisis that has been causing labor shortages, Japan refused to ease the policies that hinder the acceptance of foreign workers. From the glorious days of economic boom until the current global recession, the country has maintained cultural exclusiveness in recruitment and selection of its employees, whether skilled or not. The national government has implemented policies that unintentionally produce ‘racialized hierarchy’ which ascribes jobs, wages, rights and privileges to certain groups of foreigners (Shipper, 2008). In this hierarchy, the highest are the *zainichi* Korean and *nikkeijin* who have better jobs, higher pay, and better working conditions. In fact, the *nikkeijins* tend to be much preferred in middle-sized companies which provide them higher wages compared to other foreign workers (Rebick, 2005). It should be noted that the foremost reason for the acceptance of *nikkeijins* in Japan is their presumed ability to easily assimilate with the society due to the assumption of ethnic upbringing. Even before the process of migration, Brazilian *nikkeijins* were molded to act like genuine Japanese even in a Latin American setting. As previously argued, many of them view migration as an “opportunity to experience the true Japanese culture, discover their ancestral roots, and acquire useful technical skills whilst they were in Japan” (Knight, 2002, p.16).

In spite of their legal status, the *nikkeijins* still confront societal rejection and marginalization that implicitly distorts their notion of self-identity. The situation of the Brazilians is a case in point: while they were perceived as culturally ‘Japanese’ in Brazil, they were seen as culturally Brazilian and hence, a foreigner or outsider in Japan. The ethnic stigma which is usually ascribed to those who cannot speak fluent Japanese has been attributed

to the “low Brazilian culture” that often leads to “a deficient culture of work” (Tsuda, 2003). With such experiences, the response of the Brazilian *nikkeijins* have varied from adaptation to the formation of counteridentities. Tsuda illustrated such identity distortions by using the concept of resistance which he explained as “the behavior that demonstrates a refusal or unwillingness to assimilate to the culture of the dominant group” (2003, p. 265). This is usually exhibited by acting Brazilian or speaking their local tongue instead of adjusting their language and cultural practices to the host society.

It can be argued that the Filipino *nikkeijins* have slighter degree of perceived discrimination in Japan. Compared to the Latin Americans, Filipino *nikkeis* had no expectation of being ‘welcomed’ as a ‘Japanese descendant’ in Japan. Their sojourn is merely economic, without having an intention to discover their ancestral roots nor study their ancestor’s language, heritage, and culture. While the Latin American counterparts had been exposed to the Japanese traditions in their respective *nikkeijin* communities, Filipino *nikkeis* have not practiced any Japanese custom in their home communities. Even those who attended *nikkeijin* schools in Davao City are only able to speak basic Japanese expressions but they have not observed any tradition within their respective families. Because of this, there is less tendency to develop ethnic attachment to the ancestral homeland. They did not sense a feeling of belongingness to the Japanese race.

Many of the interviewed *nikkeijins* believe that they did not experience being severely discriminated, although they think that discrimination against Filipino *nikkeijins* happens extensively in Japan. Interview results exhibit the prominence of group level perception of discrimination than individual level discrimination. They narrated how their groupmates or Filipino *nikkeijin* friends were badly treated, or they recounted the marginalization of Filipino *nikkeijins* in general. Schildkraut (2005)

explained that this perception of group level discrimination is even more potent and influential to the process of identity construction.

The next section discusses the usually perceived forms of marginalization within and outside the workplace and their self-reflection regarding the incident. Although there were stories about verbal abuse and other forms of prejudice that happened to their friends or workmates, I have chosen the accounts of those *nikkeijins* who personally experienced discrimination or prejudice within the *kaisha* (factory).

### PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

The concept of discrimination involves several philosophical and legal viewpoints which are not free from cultural bias. Legal luminaries, political scientists, and independent think tanks have offered their working definitions of the concept that is usually intertwined with the ideology of racism. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination [ICEAFRD] has attempted to shed light on the issue by offering their own definition:

...the term “racial discrimination” shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life. (United Nations General Assembly, 1965, art. 1)

This comprehensive definition calls for further understanding of subjective notions of human rights and freedoms. Nevertheless, it highlights the important prohibition on unequal treatment based on race, color, and ethnic origin.

Discrimination, according to Pager and Shepherd (2008) may be motivated by prejudice, stereotypes, or racism although those concepts are distinct from discrimination. Since the data is derived from a perception study, the notion of discrimination encompasses broad social issues as viewed by the interviewees. I limited the discussion to the commonly perceived issues such as inhumane workload, limited labor rights, workplace hierarchy, and social stigma.

### ***Inhumane Workload***

All interviewees had experienced severe physical and mental stress during their first few months in Japan. The recollections of that period are usually depicted as “inhumane.” Factory managers and assembly line leaders are perceived as uncompassionate without a sense of empathy. One of my female interviewees, 21 year old Cams, recalled her experience:

I was carrying heavy steel parts, and we had to move really quick. Obviously, it’s a job for male workers. But I was already there and I can’t complain. There was a time when my dad, who was working at the same company but different department suddenly saw me. He tried lifting the steel and he realized how heavy those were. He pitied me, and somehow he wanted to help me, but he simply can’t.

While factory workers had expected an extremely difficult workload prior to employment, it is the idea of having “inhumane” tasks that bothered them. Cams, for instance, described herself as an underweight, typically-short young lady who was assigned to work in a very hot part of the factory where it is very difficult to breath. Her task, she lamented, is to lift and move steel parts.

Randy, 35 year old *sansei*, has complained about the adamant response of line leaders when they reported that the machine was moving too fast and that they had limited manpower to accomplish the quota. According to him, they

were treated like “robots” that can be manipulated by verbal orders. Japanese bosses, according to the interviewees, do not consider the fact that they were exhausted due to the ‘brutal’ workload. An aging *nisei* woman from Cavite commented:

I am 48 years old. I have served Sony for a long time, and they must be thankful for my loyalty. But they must understand that I am also an aging person and there are times that they must simply understand what I mean by...I need a break, I am tired, gomen (sorry). But no, I don’t think the line leader is concerned about me.

Another 28 year old *sansei* mentioned that the most difficult aspect of their *kaisha* job is to work during night time and force their brains to sleep during day time. Aside from that, they had to work in extreme temperature: either very cold during winter, or extremely hot during summer. Andy illustrates, saying:

It’s extremely difficult. I had expectations that the workload is really tough. But it’s even harder, unimaginable. Twelve hours working like a machine. Not allowed to sit, not allowed to drink. I really wonder if they know that we are also humans.

The working conditions in Japanese factories usually depend on the demands of production and the attitude of the management to the employees. True enough, there are few *nikkeijins* who are currently enjoying their working environment and the routine that they do everyday. It seems that those accounts of ‘hardship’ occurred during the recent period of economic recession when the *kaisha* management laid-off several workers to save costs on manpower. Consequently, a limited number of line employees were pressured to accomplish the quota that was usually produced by a large workforce. As evident in various accounts of sickness and deterioration of physical strength, such practice has been detrimental to the health and well-being of the employees. Moreover, it has

caused conflicts among workers and a number of serious accidents due to the stressful routine and timeframe.

### ***Limited Labor Rights***

Among all the migrant communities in Japan, *nikkeijins* have the advantage of being protected by labor laws. As previously mentioned, *nikkeijins* are still the most legitimate foreign workers considering their Japanese upbringing. Roth further explained the relative advantage of being a *nikkei*:

They had greater flexibility to find different employment and could also sometimes engage the legal system, with the help of Japanese volunteers, to sue their employers when their rights were violated, potentially forcing their employers to accommodate a degree of difference. (2002, p. 9)

Since a significant number of Filipino *nikkeijins* have completed university education with some professional experiences in the Philippines, they are more or less aware of the principles of their rights. While there are legal safeguards to protect them from exploitation and labor abuse, they argued that such policies are not implemented well especially in small *kaishas*. Some interviewees like Marissa, Camille, and Reynold shared their political views in relation to the marginalization of *nikkeijins*.

Prior to migration, they had thought that Japan, an industrialized and first world country, strictly guarantees the rights and protection of the working populace. However, Marissa's words express their common disappointment when she said: *"Everywhere in the world, there are campaigns to promote equality and rights of workers. Here, foreigners don't have those rights... but we are not merely foreigners; we are ethnically Japanese, aren't we? Where's human dignity and social protection, when the system itself forces unwanted workers to just resign and leave Japan in the soonest time?"* Marissa

was talking about the government's initiative to financially support the Brazilian *nikkeijins* who have decided to repatriate to Brazil during the height of the global recession. For her, it is an insult not only for the Brazilian Japanese, but also for all the *nikkeijins* in Japan.

*"If they recognize our blood, we should have freedom to work. Are we free to choose work? The law says yes. But in reality, it's just kaisha. Educated or not, it is kaisha. Factory work, it is,"* expressed by Camille, a holder of a university diploma in Education. She said that although there are few *nikkeijins* working in schools, it is still extremely difficult for them to secure full time employment. She also thinks that English language schools in Japan prioritize the "Caucasian-looking Americans" for the teaching job, and Japanese nationals for the staffs. In public high school, some of her relatives were hired as "Assistant Language Teachers." The word "assistant," according to Camille, is already a form of discrimination considering that some of her *nikkeijin* relatives have Masters degree and long teaching experience in the Philippines.

There were also complaints about the distribution of benefits. The case of Peter is very interesting. He started to work in a small factory at the age of 16. He was minor, with no health insurance and other employment documents. His broker told him that he can engage in a part time work as long as he conceals his real age. Earning less than 900 yen per hour, Peter realized that such amount cannot be earned by a high school graduate in their province. Unfortunately, Peter's male organ has been strained by lifting textile particles in the factory. He was confined in the hospital for several days.

Carrying no health insurance, the broker partially shouldered the medical expenses. However, he received nothing from the company as he was eventually disallowed from engaging in part-time work. The broker claimed that it was his fault to do such kind of work because he was fully aware of his status as a minor with no adequate labor documents.

The incident occurred three years ago. Now, Peter reflected on those memories. “*Horrible. I was scared. I was a minor, and I couldn’t even speak and understand Japanese that time. I was cheated, wasn’t I?*,” disappointed Peter recalled.

It is not surprising that a number of my interviewees do not have health insurance at all. Since they are the so-called “disposable workforce,” limited benefits are offered by the companies especially the small ones. Many of the interviewees recalled how their friends and relatives were suddenly laid-off during the recent global recession without advanced notification that would have had allowed them to look for other jobs. The working environment and the management, according to those who have experienced working in other countries, are totally anti-laborers.

“*There’s no venue to voice out our concerns,*” according to Reynold, a *nikkeijin* who is actively helping other migrants through their support organization. “It’s strange that people cannot even organize themselves and stage a rally against the management,” an activist tone came out from Reynold. Instead of encouraging fellow workers to mobilize a group, Reynold opted to participate in a migrant advocacy or NGO that supports the plights of Filipino migrants.

### **Workplace Hierarchy**

There is a common sentiment that Japanese workers occupy the highest position in the *kaisha*’s hierarchy while the Brazilian *nikkeijins* occupy a lower rank. Nonetheless, Filipino *nikkeijins* have lower position compared to the Brazilians (not necessarily the lowest, to give place to the non-*nikkei* South Asians and Middle Eastern workers).

Filipino *nikkeijins* feel that the Brazilians receive better treatment in terms of salary, benefits and job distribution. Half of my interviewees believe that Brazilian *nikkeis* receive higher salary, while the other half says the wage is fair but the overtime distribution is not. Because line leaders and *kaisha* managers prioritize

Brazilian *nikkeijins* to do most of the overtime work, their salaries become significantly higher. Most especially during lean season and period of economic recession, overtime work is given to limited workers; hence ethnic groups tend to compete to get a fair share.

Alfred’s narration is very interesting. Although he has several Brazilian *nikkeijin* friends, he felt sorry for those Filipinos who were victims of discrimination. After an exhausting work, he approached their Japanese manager and inquired:

I asked him why he treats Brazilians better. He said “its because these Brazilians helped us during the time when our economy was really bad. We need to somehow pay them for that help. I really got mad. I said “but hey, you need to pay us too for your wrongdoings and abuses during the war!

Alfred has turned emotional probably due to physical exhaustion and emotional stress. Upon realizing that the Japanese manager himself confirmed the special treatment to Brazilians, he got upset and argumentative. Similar to Alfred, Shaina had also confronted her boss for verbally reprimanding the Filipino *nikkeijins* who broke a piece of machine. When I expressed my opinion that it is just fair to reprimand erring employees, she responded:

No, no... I don’t think they are fair. They love the Brazilians...and I can’t understand why they love these Brazilians although we work harder than them. Brazilians work really hard when the Japanese boss is looking at them...but when the boss leaves the area, they start to relax and chat.

Filipino *nikkeijins* also feel that Brazilians are accepted by the Japanese nationals as “partially-Japanese” while Filipino *nikkeijins* are regarded as totally foreigners. In effect, Japanese bosses are kinder and more patient to the Brazilian *nikkeis* than other nationals. For instance, when something goes wrong in the manufacturing line, Filipinos are usually reprimanded in front of other workers while Brazilians who were “at-fault” are ignored. This observation is actually

consistent with Professor Tsuda's ethnographic remarks when he said "Even when a few of them made serious mistakes or were clearly slow and clumsy on the job, they were not chastised or reprimanded..." (Tsuda, 2003, p. 137). Tsuda claimed that this attitude is a "behavioral norm" to completely stay calm and tolerant to the erring workers, but it seems different in the case of the Filipino *nikkeijins*.

Within or beyond the Japanese *kaisha*, ethnicity is structured from the most accepted to the most rejected. Tsuda's (2003, pp. 134-135) remarked on the notion of outsiders and impurity exemplify the vertical ascription based on skin color and the overall image of the country. He noted that American *nikkeijins* are "not considered as impure" due to the perception that they come from "clean" First World. Brazilian *nikkeijins*, on the other hand, evoke negative perception due to the reported incidence of poverty and crimes. It can be argued, then, that Filipino *nikkeijins* are situated below the position of the Brazilians whose country is now gaining prestige as a growing economy in Latin America. The Philippines, a developing country that has been known as an exporter of human capital, has created a not-so-good image due to the presence of illegal Filipino migrants and overstayers known as "bilog." These illegal aliens have been associated to the systematized syndicates and crimes in Japan.

### **Social Stigma**

Stigma can be viewed in the perspective of an interactive dynamics between an attribute and stereotype. With this conceptualization, stigma is "a mark (attribute) that links a person to an undesirable characteristic (stereotype)" (Jones et al., 1984, as cited in Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 365). A central feature of social stigma, according to Crocker and Quinn (2000) is devaluation and dehumanization by others.

As early as the 1960s, there were already observations on Japanese people's sensitivities to racial colors. Dark color, or black in extreme cases, has been associated with many undesirable

traits. While white complexion symbolizes cleanliness and purity, the opposite goes with dark color (Wagatsuma, 1967, p. 431).

Coming from a tropical country with vast spaces of farms and agricultural areas, Filipino *nikkeijins*, in general, have dark complexion. Since they have mixed Filipino and Japanese blood, their skin color differs from the typical "lighter-skinned Japanese" or Caucasian-looking Brazilians. Those who were exposed to their farms have dark complexion, making them "obvious" Southeast Asian with very minimal East Asian physical feature. Thus, a *sansei* commented "Our color makes us different from them. They (the Japanese) think that people of our color are inferior. They do not even socialize with us... They actually forgot that we have Japanese blood too."

With a dark skin color comes different social stereotypes and perceived ethnic attributes. Such "dark Asian color" implies that they have low paying job, or the 3k job (*kitsui, kitanai, kiken*, which is difficult, dirty, and dangerous) that a typical Japanese usually avoids. Male foreigners who usually work as construction workers, factory workers, cooks, and kitchen helpers are known as "unskilled workers" and a significant number of them do not possess the necessary visa to work. According to the Immigration Bureau, at the end of 2005, about 194,000 foreigners were overstaying their visa while 30,000 entered Japan with forged passport or by other illegal methods (Shipper, 2008, p.46). With this large number of illegal Asian workers, a social stereotype has been attached to the non-Japanese Asians engaged in "unskilled" work—they might be illegal.

"*But we are nikkeijins! We have a visa. We are not even Peke-jin! (fake nikkeijin),*" complained by Ramon, a 40 year old factory worker. "*They must be careful to distinguish the illegal from the legal foreigners,*" added by Ramon who has been asked by police officers to show his alien registration card while walking from work. He thought that he was suspected of being a "criminal" because of his color. Ramon was offended by the repeated inspection since it happened to him thrice. While

he acknowledged that there were several fake *nikkeijins* who had bought *koseki tohon* from some Japanese syndicates, the authorities and the Japanese public in general should not think that all of them, or majority of them are illegal foreigners.

Another stereotype appended to Filipinos especially to the women is the image of a *Japayuki-san* or an entertainer. Although it is a known fact that Filipinos are working in different sectors around the world, it is only in Japan where most of them serve as entertainers (Yu-Jose, 2007, p.70). While early entertainers in the 1950s played jazz music and other American repertoire, the industry has evolved to a red light amusement dominated by female Filipinos in the 80s and 90s. These *Japayukis* had been extremely vulnerable due to their working status and socio-economic conditions (Osteria, 1994). Even though they have engaged in artistic and cultural performances in small bars, they are commonly presumed to be working in a sex-related industry that is typically controlled by criminal syndicates (David, 1991, p.13). In spite of the fact that their presence in Japanese entertainment areas had been diminished by the New Immigration Law implemented in 2005, the “social stigma” and the presumption that “Filipino women in Japan are most likely *Japayukis*” are still widespread among Japanese nationals.

The awareness that they are “perceived as *Japayukis*” is evident in my interview results. As previously mentioned, some Filipino *nikkei* women hesitated to process their visas in the late 1990s to avoid being labeled as *Japayuki*. They lamented the fact that they were still subjected to such prejudice when they arrived in Japan. As Marissa said, “*For ordinary Japanese in our factory, all Filipinas are Japayukis. Well, how can we blame them? A lot of my Filipino co-workers are indeed former entertainers. Japanese, then, think that we are all club dancers!*”

Most of my female interviewees were offended when they feel that they were seen like *Japayukis*. In fact, *nikkeijins* themselves agree to the negative images of *Japayukis* in Japanese society—usually “*urusai*” (noisy, loud), “*tsisamosa*” (gossipers),

and uneducated. Some of them pointed out that the *Japayuki*’s use of Nihongo language is very different due their exposure to the pubs and clubs, and the fact that majority of those entertainers were not able to continue even their high school education.

## SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

The linkage of social marginalization and the reinforcement of ethnic identity has been debated within political and sociological fora focusing on the immigrant’s case. Certainly, there are trends of correlation, with some scholars arguing that “marginalization forms the basis for the culture of identity groups” (Brown, 1995, as cited in Bernstein, 2005, p.50). Schildkraut (2005), in a study of Latino identity in America, interpreted the multinomial logit analysis with the following remarks: “While the perception of individual-level discrimination has no effect on self-identification, the perception of group-level discrimination does make people more likely to identify as Latin than as American” (p. 294). The author argued that self-identification affects how people interpret the treatment of their group and of themselves in society, and the relationship between the two variables are probably reciprocal. This section examines the correlation of these variables by focusing on ethnic adaptation and resistance. The last part attempts to connect the perception of discrimination to the dynamics of identity and self-identification. How did the Filipino *nikkeijins* respond to those experiences described above?

First, there are clear indicators of resistance to absolute acculturation. Similar to the response of the Brazilians, Filipino *nikkeijins* tend to use the Filipino language to talk with their fellow Filipinos, isolate themselves from the Japanese groups, and refuse to comply with the “impractical and inconvenient” policies of Japanese companies. A number of my interviewees had also admitted that they ignore the typical *kaisha culture* that dictates them to work on holidays during busy

seasons, limit their vacation to one week or less, and report to work even when they feel sick.

Although there are several venues to learn the Japanese language, most *nikkeijins* are satisfied with their limited language ability. In Ohno and Iijima's (2010) survey, only four percent of the respondents identify themselves as fluent speakers. Majority can speak "broken" or very limited Japanese. As suggested in the research results, one possible reason for the language problem is the lack of interaction with their local communities as they spend most of the time commuting between their houses and workplaces. While it is true that there are no opportunities for interaction, my interviewees also disclosed that they would rather intermingle with those whom they can easily communicate with (i.e. Filipinos, or other Filipino *nikkeijins*, or English speaking foreigners) during their limited break time or holiday. Speaking Japanese, as one *nisei nikkeijin* described it, "*is nothing but a stressful activity.*" In other words, there are noted cases of deliberate avoidance of interaction with Japanese groups.

This resistance is also evident for those parents who told me that they want their children to be raised and educated in the Philippines. To make sure that they still retain the Filipino identity, they speak to their children using Filipino or Bisayan language. When their children respond in Japanese, they ask them to repeat it in Filipino. Although it is common for parents to teach their mother tongue to their children, it is interesting to look at their line of reasoning. Some Filipino *nikkeijin* parents say that the children in Japanese society are becoming rude and easy-go-lucky. Thus, they do not want their children to absorb the "negative" traits of contemporary culture of younger generations in Japan. It is important for them to "combat" such bad behavior.

Second, *nikkeijins* have increased motivation for a "permanent homecoming." As they were not intending to stay in Japan for good, a number of my interviewees revealed that their "temporary sojourn" would be cut short due to various reasons. Daniella, a 27 year old *sansei* disclosed her recent concerns: "*how about*

*career growth?*" When she came to Japan three years ago, she thought that factory work is just a tentative job since she has a university degree in Psychology. She was optimistic that having a "*nikkeijin* status" will give her an access to the employment opportunities available for local Japanese. Luckily, she was hired by an English language and preparatory school in Nagoya City. After two years of teaching, she realized that the management system of *kaisha* is almost similar to the school system. Aside from the stressful working environment, Daniella added, "*they couldn't give a permanent position. Japanese staffs get full-time status on their first year. I've been teaching for several semesters but the owner would only offer part time...that means no benefits, no salary increase, nothing.*" She concluded that there is no room for professional advancement for the Filipinos including *nikkeijins* in Japan. Daniella and her family has already left Japan last August 2012.

Danilo, a *sansei* worker of a "bento" shop, is also looking forward to an early homecoming this Christmas. He initially planned to spend his productive years in Japan together with his wife and two children. However, he has changed his plans after his realization that they would always be seen as "*gaijins*" in Japan. Danilo is worried that he could not send his children to senior high school and college due to their status as flexible part-time worker. Both Danilo and his wife aspired for a better working opportunity but they have lost patience and hope. Danilo plans to open a "buy-and-sell" shop in Davao City within this year. "*At least, in the Philippines, I could enroll my children to private schools and they can even go to college. I guess we can afford it by this time. If we stay in Japan, they will be factory workers like us,*" Danilo explained.

Third, there has been a more explicit reinforcement of self-identification to Japanese ethnicity. This is a very interesting point, considering that prior to migration, *nikkeijins* refuse to emphasize their Japaneseness. But as they share their experiences in the *kaisha*, they tend to articulate their *nikkeijin* attributes:

“But we also have Japanese blood, we are not just illegal migrants.”

“My grandfather is Japanese, they should treat me better because I am also a Japanese!”

“I am a *nikkei*, and I’m not a fake one. I am not a *Japayuki*. I work with dignity.”

“My great grandfather fought for this country... I am *Pinoy* (Filipino), but I am also Japanese. I wish that all Japanese would recognize that.”

These expressions signify the assertion of a *nikkei* identity that has been disregarded prior to migration. The statements clearly show that the Filipino *nikkeijins* have correlated discrimination to the failure of the Japanese society to recognize their ethnic identity as descendants of Japanese. Narrations of *nikkeijin* women emphasize their angst for being identified as “entertainers” while men highlight the tormenting stigma that associates them to the group of “*bilogs*” or overstayers and other illegal groups in Japan.

It is also worth noting that the social stigma has reinforced a boundary between the *nikkeijins* and the non-*nikkeijins*. However, it is not similar to the case of Peruvians wherein Peru *nikkeis* tend to separate themselves to the general non-*nikkei* Peruvians (see Takenaka, 2003). Filipino *nikkeijins*, having been deeply attached to the Filipino community in Japan, simply detach themselves from the “undesirable Filipino workers” such as illegal migrants or *Bilogs* or the *Japayukis*. Interviewees were very selective to the use of words, as they pointed out that they are true Filipinos who easily get along with other Filipino migrants. But when the discourse goes to the issue of social stigma, they tend to argue that they are different from those illegal workers or entertainers who carry negative images in Japanese society.

## CONCLUSION

The literature on *nikkeijin* studies focusing on the Latin American migrants consistently argues that the return to the ancestral homeland is not only propelled by economic wanting but also by ethnic attachment. This ethnic awareness was developed throughout the formative years of those descendants not only by “symbolic ethnicity” but also through the continuous circular trend of migration among their compatriots. The case of the Filipino *nikkeijins* shows that there is an absence of the ethnic element, considering that they were raised without the consciousness of being a descendant. Due to the remnants of wartime memories, the older generation *nikkeijins* had to conceal their identity and strive for complete assimilation.

At present, discrimination against Japanese descendants in the Philippines has completely stopped. In fact, the economic prowess of Japan being the third largest economy in the world accompanied by the cultural popularity of anime and other forms of modern entertainment has contributed to the construction of a “benevolent, technologically advanced and economically affluent country” in the minds of ordinary Filipinos (Vilog, 2008, p. 79). Japanese descendants in the Philippines are no longer seen as foes, but middle class individuals who usually own lands or small and medium business enterprises. Although they carry positive images in Philippine society, my interviewees reveal that most of them had recollections of being victims of social stigma, usually ascribing their families to comfort women, *Japayuki*, or *yakuza*. Some *nikkeijins* may recognize these as mere jokes; still it has become offensive due to the sensitive history of their ethnic roots. Few of my interviewees had serious recollections of prejudice against their parents or grandparents who were identified with Japanese lineage. Some of them were even asked by their grandparents to hide their genuine ethnicity due to the threat of racial prejudice. The overall consequence of these perceived, imagined or experienced discrimination in the Philippines

is to simply adhere to the publicly known identity without reinforcing their *Japanese-ness*. Thus, they have become complete Filipinos without any trace of being a *nikkeijin*.

What happens, then, to the *nikkeijins* who had left their hometown to explore the employment opportunities in Japan? After months and years of working in Japanese *kaisha*, various experiences and perceptions of prejudice and marginalization had initiated the assertion of “Japanese-ness.” Having experienced discrimination, they began to reflect on their situation vis-à-vis their legal status. The events, experiences, and perception of discrimination instigate a resurgence of ethnic recognition. In this ordeal, the status of being a *nikkeijin*, which was formerly regarded as a mere “legal” ascription, is reconstructed as a meaningful ethnic identity. Hence, they declare that they have Japanese blood and they must have a place in Japanese society. In this paper, I argue that the contextualization of ethnic self-identification has been influenced by the experiences of prejudice. Clearly, the assertion of being a ‘*nikkeijin*’ is a reaction to the accumulated feelings of being mistreated combined with personal disapproval to the current labor system that they perceive as “unfair.” Among my interviewees, there was no recollection of violence that erupted due to the aforementioned issues although there are anecdotes of verbal argumentation and orchestrated disobedience (e.g. not going to *kaisha* with three or four workmates).

Does the assertion of Japanese ethnicity among Filipino *nikkeis* suggest a resurgence of *counteridentity*? It is interesting to note that the Brazilians shifted to become ‘more and more Brazilian,’ an exhibition of counteridentity to respond to the perceived marginalization of the dominating society. The case of Filipino *nikkeis* is different in such a way that the extent of this identity reconfiguration seems limited to self-identification, without any significant effect on cultural behavior or ethnic allegiance. However, while they assert their ‘Japanese blood,’ the resistance to assimilation is still very evident

through their refusal to interact with Japanese groups and their motivation to go back to the Philippines in the soonest time possible. During the interview sessions, they talked about the positive attributes of the Philippines and the Filipinos (like the warmth and sympathy of friends, hospitality to foreigners, and inherent religiosity). Consequently, they clarified that the presence of their *nikkeijin* blood does not diminish their *Filipino-ness*. The narratives in this study have confirmed that ‘pride and self-esteem’ generated by the positive traits of one’s culture significantly contribute to the retention of identity despite dislocation. Furthermore, it demonstrates that ethnic self-identification is negotiated by the dynamics of perceived discrimination and positive ethnic attribution.

Schildkraut’s contention that ethnic self-identification affects the construction of perceived discrimination is more evident in Brazilian case due to their high expectations of being accommodated to the inner facets of Japanese society. It is clear that the Filipino *nikkeijins* did not have such ethnic attachment, hence less expectation to the Japanese society. Most Filipino *nikkeijins* had experienced the ‘Japanese work culture shock’ not because of ethnic affinity but because of their former professional status in the Philippines (e.g. many of them are teachers or white collar workers in the Philippines). Combining all the social pressure and experienced alienation, *nikkeijins* respond by confronting status quo and contending that they have “rights” as descendants of Japanese nationals.

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