

Imagined Ethnicity and Rites of Institution: An Ethnographic Analysis of Transnational Schooling of *Nikkeis* from Brazil

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abstract

Much has been said about the difficulties that Latin American children of foreign Japanese descent (Nikkei) face in the Japanese school system since the implementation of Japan's new immigration law in 1990. The underlying monolingualism and cultural exclusion of the school system are often blamed for these difficulties. However, little detailed analysis has been provided on ethnonational belonging and the standardization of education, and their cultural practices. This study attempts to provide a missing piece of ethnographic analysis in this area. This paper focuses on the school rituals and the transition experiences of the child must traverse national borders during his or her elementary school years. Through the experiences of these Nikkei Brazilian sixth graders, the study presents an ethnographic investigation into how imagined Japanese nationalized ethnicity constrains the Nikkeis' involvement in Japanese schooling and the society at large. The study took place at a local elementary school in an urban multi-ethnic context. Despite efforts at ameliorating the marginal position of children of foreign origins, some hegemonic structural influences have remained from Japanese ethnonational identity, positioning the children against the meritocracy of Japanese school system and the society at large. The personal and collective senses of continuity tied to the experience of Japanese national "ethos" were intimately connected to the symbolic efficacy of the academic credentials of the students. This national "ethos" emerges from the rituals of the school, for which the graduation ceremony is the final institutional rite. In this complexity, the role of Gakkyu, or class, is the most salient constitutive element. This study suggests that the structural analysis of Gakkyu will be crucial in any further study of these issues.

Since the advent of the modern era, nationality and ethnicity have come to play a central part of the child's "development"—a trajectory through time and space, in which a nation, "an imagined political community", that is "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1991, p.6)—provides a significant context. The original idea of national education systems was to foster social solidarity and national cohesion, as Durkheim noted. From a Gramscian per-

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spective, it was to “promote a ‘national-popular’ cultural hegemony defined predominantly by the dominant classes” (Green, 1997, p.27). In the case of modern Japan, its role was significant in the making of a nation initiated by cultural elites, in which “Japanese” national and ethnic identities have been historically constructed and imagined.¹ The invented and prevailing *Kokugo* or national language and national rituals have permeated throughout the nation by means of its school system.² This has had the effect of standardizing the child’s learning and developmental process.

The number of Latin American “*Nikkei*” children of Japanese descent, attending Japanese schools has substantially increased since the implementation of Japan’s new immigration control act of 1990. This law conferred legal employment and residential status upon those foreign Japanese descendants up to the third generation, along with their spouses and children.³ It has become apparent, however, that these standardized national endeavors have tended to hinder the schooling of children crossing national borders. Much has been said about the difficulties faced by these children in the Japanese school system, and its underlying mono-lingualism and cultural exclusion are often blamed (Ota 2000, Shimizu and Shimizu 2001, Miyajima and Ota 2005, Sakuma 2006). However, little detailed analysis has been conducted on the latter issue in the light of national belonging and cultural practice.

This study attempts to provide a missing piece of ethnographic analysis in this area of research. It focuses on school rituals and the transition of the child crossing national borders of the school system. By studying the experiences of Masami and Shogo, Brazilian *Nikkei* (foreign Japanese descendant) sixth-graders crossing the borders of the national school system, this paper presents an ethnographic investigation into how this imagined Japanese ethnicity in the context of nationhood constrains the *Nikkei*’s involvement in Japanese schooling and the society at large. The study focuses on their experiences at a local public elementary school situated in an urban multi-ethnic context, which I will call Kawabe Elementary School.⁴

1 Background

In 1999 and 2000, when I conducted my fieldwork,⁵ approximately ten percent of the children at Kawabe Elementary School were from overseas countries, with those from Latin America making up a larger proportion than those from Korea, the Philippines, and China. Most of the families of these *Nikkei* students are former immigrants from Okinawa to Latin America, arriving both before and after World War II. As a result of economic distress in these countries, as well as Japan’s implementation of its new immigration control act in 1990, these families came to Japan as unskilled laborers. They are among 300,000 reverse migrants from Latin American countries currently residing in Japan, of which Brazilians are the largest number.

The area in which the Kawabe Elementary School is situated has a history of migration of laborers from Okinawa and the Korean Peninsula dating back to the 1920s, during Japan’s colonial era. The school is situated in Kawabe-cho (or Kawabe-town), with approximately 23,000 residents, and is located in the Kaigan ward, which is one of 18 wards comprising this city in eastern Japan. During my fieldwork, about 2,000 Latin American nationals resided in this ward (excluding those of dual nationality); of these, 1,400 were Brazilian nationals. Two percent of the ward’s residents were foreign nationals. Due to the revised immigration control act of 1990, the number of Latin American nationals increased to approximately the same number as Korean nationals, who had been the largest group of foreign nationals.

Among the 22 elementary schools in the Kaigan ward, Kawabe School had the largest number of Latin American nationals. The area's demographics can be seen as a reflection of Japan's colonial era and economic development, which brought people of various backgrounds together. The development of the industrial area in Kaigan ward in the 1920s brought people from Okinawa and the Korean Peninsula to the Kawabe-cho area. Incidentally, those from the Korean Peninsula were mostly forced migrant workers under Japan's colonial policy. Many eventually settled in Kawabe-cho.

Immediately after World War II, the area had a large influx of Okinawans, especially those who had been relocated to the Pacific Islands as part of Japan's war strategy. The gathering place in the area for these people later became known as "association of people from Okinawa" (*Okinawa-kenjinkai*), which developed into a core network of the Okinawans living in this area. Through this network, an influx of seasonal migrant workers arrived from Okinawa during Japan's rapid economic growth in the 1960s.

Over the subsequent decades, this Okinawan network was extended to Latin America, which brought first generation Japanese-Brazilian migrants possessing Japanese citizenship. Due to the implementation of Japan's immigration control act in 1990, the flow of migration to this area greatly increased. Many of the migrants from Brazil were former immigrants to Okinawa Colonia in Bolivia, a settlement established in 1954 by the government of Ryukyu (the present Okinawa), the U.S. and Bolivia during the U.S. occupation of Okinawa from 1945 to 1972. Repeated flooding had forced many of them to move to other countries in Latin America, mostly to Brazil.

In stark contrast to its colonial policy, Japan's restrictions on foreign national workers after World War II continued until the new immigration law was implemented in 1990, while still prohibiting the employment of other foreign workers in the country.

However, in contradiction to this inclusive immigration policy for the *Nikkei*, the Japanese public education system is intended primarily for Japanese nationals who speak Japanese as their first language. This is well documented by the fact that the National Guidelines of Education have no mention of foreign national children. Nor has there been enacted any official curriculum for Japanese language instruction or for instruction in the language of the foreign national student. The national educational policy appears to be governed by the official assumption of imagined ethnic homogeneity, whereas *Nikkei* migration has brought linguistic and cultural diversity to local schools in Japan.

Lacking sufficient educational support from the governmental level, the municipal boards of education generally have had to fill the gap (Ota 2000, Miyajima and Ota 2005). In response to the increasing number of *Nikkei* children from Latin America, in 1993 the City Board of Education for the Kawabe Elementary School instituted *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* or "International Classroom," a supplementary classroom for children of foreign origin to improve their Japanese language and academic skills.

The City Board of Education regulates the establishment of *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* solely for *Gaikokujin jido seito* (foreign national students) who do not have a "conversational command" of Japanese. This occurs only when a school has more than five foreign national students who meet the criteria. At Kawabe, students skipped their homeroom classes to study in this classroom several hours a week. In the 1999-2000 academic year, 18 students from first to sixth grade attended *Kokusai Kyoshitsu*, in which Shogo and Masami were the only sixth graders. These students hailed from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, China, Peru, and the Philippines.

However, there was no official curriculum for *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* program, and therefore,

the teachers themselves for the most part created the materials and course strategies that would meet these children's educational needs. My ethnographic observation at the school revolved around this class, in which I also served as a voluntary assistant teacher. I conducted participant observation throughout the academic year. My visits to the school were made under a flexible arrangement with Mr. Yamada, a *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* teacher, and I attended the school two to three days every week. I was generously encouraged to participate in almost all activities of the school. My research at the school was conducted over a period three consecutive academic years.

The residents of Korean and Okinawan ancestry have suffered a history of deep-rooted discrimination. In response, for the last several years the school has been active in Human Rights education regarding the children of non-Japanese descent and foreign nationalities, and those who have been at the margins of the school system and Japanese society. Human Rights education has taken the form of grassroots collaboration movements. As a result, there have been some signs of change in the way people think about their national and ethnic backgrounds, and that of the Other, which ultimately is related to being "different" in the context of "Japanese culture", a concept intimately tied to building of the modern nation-state (Ivy 1995, Fujitani 1993). These changes helped to ameliorate the marginal position of children of foreign origin at the school. Nonetheless, it also tended to marginalize *Nikkei* students, as they are positioned against the meritocracy of Japanese school system and the society at large. That is to say, some hegemonic structural influences remain in Japanese ethnonational identity.

2 Analytic Framework

To illustrate these persistent structural influences, this study looks at the friction that two sixth-graders, Masami and Shogo, experienced toward the curricular structures in Japan and in Brazil. The results of the study suggest that a sense of personal and collective continuity tied to the experience of Japanese national "ethos" is intimately connected to the academic performance of the students. Given the highly centralized structure of the Japanese national school system, this national "ethos" emerged from everyday rituals and school events centered around the role of "class" or *Gakkyu*, a modern invention of learning system originated in the 19th century U.K. (Yanagi 2005).⁶ The graduation ceremony is the last phase functioning as a rite of passage.

To gain a sense of the personal and collective continuity observed at the school, I refer to Myerhoff's research (1977). In her study of one graduation ceremony at an urban social center for Jewish senior citizens in California, she points out that the graduation ceremony embeds two distinct senses of continuity provided by rituals. These are "a sense of unity as a person (individual-biological continuity)" in moving on to a different institutional setting; and there is also "the sense of being 'one people' as part of the whole group (collective-historical continuity)" (ibid., p.218). Citing Goffman's notion of frame, which is defined as "the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives" (1974, p.13), Myerhoff suggests that the frame is the most salient characteristic of rituals, that a collective ceremony includes certain aspects, and that "ritual is in part a form" which provides "certain meanings to its contents" (1977, p.8).

Given this link between the frame and the ritual, I refer to Bateson's anthropological notion of "ethos," which focuses on culture, rather than focusing, with Geertz, on people (Cf. Varenne 1984). Geertz observes that, "a people's ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their

world that life reflects” (1973, p.127), whereas Bateson postulates ethos as a “culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and emotions of individuals” (1958, p.220) and regards this as a fundamental aspect of culture together with ritual, structure, and pragmatic functioning, which are mutually constitutive. Since this study focuses on the constituent elements of the ethos involving the participants at the local school, an ethos of “culture” becomes rather more important than an ethos of “the people.”⁷ So the analysis of my study focuses on system, that is, the ritual, structure, and pragmatic functioning of the local school in the context of nation, rather than on the motivational psychology of people.⁸

3 To Participate or Not To Participate / Collective and Personal

Any social system such as a school fosters rituals—a series of strict routines cognitively embodied by its participants (Fukushima, 2001). For the participants, the meaning of ritual is secondary; the ritual as practiced is a rigorous routine tacitly transmitted and historically formed (ibid). Children transferring from overseas schools are strangers to the tacit knowledge of the Japanese national school system. By following how Masami and Shogo dealt with the rituals of the local school through their *Gakkyu* or class activities, we may gain some insight into the relationship between a sense of continuity and a sense of unity emerging in a school.

Rituals and social interactions cannot be maintained unless participants take part in the process (Goffman, 1959). In this regard, this local school was doing quite well. It had a reputation of having a good spirit of teamwork. The school’s Sports Festival (*Undokai*) was especially well known for this trait. Much energy and time was spent on engaging in teamwork. And the same can be said about the graduation ceremony. Guests praised how effective the collaboration was at the ceremony.

Shogo, Masami, and other children transferring from Brazil to the local school, came from another national reality of schooling. It was therefore a new experience to engage in non-academic collective activities - *Tokubetsu katsudo* (or special activities), as well as in the graduation ceremony, which are not common in Brazilian elementary schools. The special activities are placed in the national guidelines for the curriculum and aim to cultivate the student’s social and character development through group activities (Cf. Tsuneyoshi, 1994). They consist of (a) classroom activities (including guidance during school lunch); (b) pupil council meetings, (c) club activities; and (c) school events (including ceremonial events, sports events, school excursions, and cultural festivals). These embody rigorous routines and tacit knowledge.

Both Masami and Shogo had four years of schooling in Brazil, which were centered more on academic learning, and included exams taken regularly to proceed to the next level. Academic discipline had been a main focus in their schools in Brazil. For example, three exams were required for student evaluation every semester. In order to proceed to the next grade level, one must have at least fifty points out of a hundred in each of seven subjects. If a student has less than fifty points for more than three subjects, the student must repeat the same grade level.

In contrast, no such exams are given in Japanese elementary schools and grade level is related to the student’s age. Masami took the special activities rather seriously and was able to share emotional and physical experiences with classmates, but Shogo was reluctant to participate and withdrew from the school. Although Shogo eventually attended the graduation ceremony, he skipped the practice sessions and did not attend the prerequisite ceremony called *Tabidachi no kai*, which

literally means “a gathering for setting off on a journey”. This is a farewell gathering in which students express gratitude to their parents and teachers. Shogo complained about the practices, once asking Mr. Yamada, the *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* teacher, the purpose of such activities. He also insisted that all Brazilians would find it meaningless. Shogo also skipped other special activities such as the graduation trip and the year-end meeting of “multi-cultural” activities for students of foreign origin, in which soon-to-be graduating sixth graders each gave a speech to junior participants.

Ultimately, Shogo did not go through the phases of these school rituals that the rest of his classmates went through. Indeed, these ritual phases are interconnecting, with a graduation ceremony that functioned as a rite of passage for the graduates by linking the institutional gap of elementary and middle school. The former placed much emphasis on moral and interpersonal development with egalitarian practices, the latter on a rigid hierarchy of senior-junior relations of social organization, as well as scholastic attainment and its concomitant competitiveness. Students’ grades in middle school are recorded and evaluated for admission into the high school. Through the rite of passage, the students made the transition from one set of educational disciplines and rules to another.

Bourdieu (1991, p. 117) points out that the notion “rites of passage” which was developed by Van Gennep (1960) and was further explicitly and systematically developed by Victor Turner (1969), does not address one of the essential effects of rites, that is “separating those who have undergone it, not from those who have not yet undergone it, but from those who will not undergo it in any sense, and thereby instituting a lasting difference between those to whom the rite pertains and those to whom it does not pertain.” Arguing that all rites tend to consecrate or legitimate an arbitrary boundary, Bourdieu suggests that the symbolic efficacy of institutional rites should be considered in analysis, in which academic credentials are one of these rites (*ibid.*).

Non-academic Activities and Academic Credentials

Shogo was reluctant to proceed to middle school and would say, “I couldn’t stand three more years!”, “I hate school!”, “Japanese schools are shit (*Nihon no gakko wa kuso!*)” He wanted to start work soon after he had finished elementary school and was even prepared to drop out of school to start work. His older brother had begun working after he had dropped out of school in the fifth grade. Shogo was fourteen years old, two years older than his classmates, just as his older brother had been. They had been placed two grade levels lower when they transferred to the school, since their parents thought it would be best for their Japanese language acquisition. Incidentally, their parents did not know that the Japanese school system does not allow students to skip grade levels and the school also was not aware of the parents’ intentions. Like many *Nikkei* parents at the school, they could speak little Japanese upon their arrival in Japan. The father was a second-generation Okinawan immigrant to Brazil and did not speak Japanese at all, while the mother was a first-generation Okinawan immigrant to Brazil and had a little knowledge of the language. The family continued to communicate in Portuguese at home in Japan. Teachers were worried that two years’ age difference made Shogo uncomfortable with participating in school activities.

Shogo was reluctant to come to school everyday. Whenever he was absent, Shogo’s home-room teacher, Ms. Hamada, and Mr. Yamada, the *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* teacher, would call his home and remind Shogo to come to school, which he usually did. Shogo spent much more time in *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* during the latter half of the academic year when the school spent more time in non-academic activities to strengthen the circle of friendship among the sixth graders.

Mr. Yamada, worried about Shogo's future, persuaded him to seriously consider proceeding to middle school, and if possible going to high school, telling him that most middle school students go on to high school in Japan and that without a high school diploma it would be difficult to find a secure job. Seeing Shogo's reluctance to heed his advice, Mr. Yamada would tell Shogo that he would need a secure job once he started a family.

In *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* Shogo often talked about the work his father and brother did. His father who had owned a store in Sao Paulo, Brazil, worked as an electrician. His father, due to Brazil's dismal economy, closed his business and migrated to Japan. Shogo's brother was working at a factory that manufactured automobile parts after he dropped out of the local elementary school. Shogo had been to their workplaces and had helped them in their jobs a few times. He would proudly describe to us, with great relish, the details of their work and the assistance he provided. And he would also eagerly tell us how much money they earned per hour. Their salaries were relatively sufficient, but only because they worked much longer hours than the standard national average.

Shogo's conceptualization of the world of work was based on the form of work done by his father and brother, who earned hourly wages. On one occasion Shogo asked Ms. Nagao and I during a *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* lesson how much money we earned per hour by teaching at the school, assuming that we were a part of the same salary system as his father and brother. Shogo found more meaning in work than in going to school. He said that if he were to go to high school, then he would have to go on to study at university, otherwise it would be meaningless. He also mentioned that none of his family members had graduated from high school in Brazil.

However, Shogo was a student with a keen intelligence and was an A student at his school in Brazil. Although he was reluctant to do school work, once he became interested in a task, he would focus on it and learn earnestly with considerable concentration until he had mastered that task. For instance, *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* had a word processor, belonging to Mr. Yamada but was for use by the students. For the students to use it, they needed to master complicated operational skills that required a substantial knowledge of *Kanji* (Chinese character), *Hiragana* (Japanese alphabet) and the Roman alphabet. Shogo quickly mastered the skill through a trial-and-error strategy, while Masami and Chie were still trying to figure out its operational system even after a month's time. They were amazed at Shogo's quick mastery, saying, "He sure is smart!"⁹ Likewise, Shogo took the initiative when we tried using Brazilian textbooks for studying arithmetic. Not only could he solve the problems easily but he also voluntarily compared arithmetic terms by using a Japanese-Portuguese dictionary. Despite his high intelligence, however, Shogo was behind his peers academically, because he had missed so many homeroom classes.

At the graduation ceremony his mother seemed very proud when Shogo received his elementary school diploma. She was so pleased and her eyes became moist as she said that Shogo was the first person in her family to graduate from Japanese elementary school, a feat her eldest son did not accomplish. Shogo did continue on to middle school and joined a soccer club, but eventually he dropped out of school and started working, like his older brother.¹⁰

Shogo's reluctance to participate in non-academic activities and his lack of having "common sense" about Japanese schooling in general (Cf. Garfinkel, 1984), coincided with his marginality regarding academic credentials.

Collective Experience of Emotion

While Shogo was on the verge of obtaining his elementary school credentials, Masami was trying to identify herself with the school. Unlike Shogo, she had transferred to the grade level appropriate for her age. Although she found the school's curriculum rather nonsensical, she participated in every special activity, albeit with a great deal of anxiety.

There was one occasion when I was talking with Masami and her fifth grade cousin, Chie, during a recess. When I asked them if they thought Japanese school was easier than Brazilian school, Masami and Chie explained to me that both the Japanese and the Brazilian school systems were tough in different ways. They were quite acquainted with Japanese secondary education, since their brother and sisters were attending a public high school and a middle school in Kaigan ward. They perceived that students in Brazilian elementary schools had to study constantly to pass exams to proceed to the next grade level, whereas students in Japanese elementary school could advance to the next grade level "without studying," and that it was the same situation in middle school. However, they also knew that they had to study for high school entrance exams, so they felt it was also tough going to school in Japan. I asked what Masami thought about the Brazilian government's plan to abolish the present system and convert it to one similar to the Japanese system. "Then, nobody would study," she replied. "Advancing to the next grade level without studying would make people stupid. I don't want to be stupid."

Masami never skipped school unless she was sick. She took her academic work seriously and studied hard to catch up to her classmates, saying that she thought she was working harder than the rest of her classmates because she would not be able to keep up with the class lessons otherwise. She told me that she did not want to be treated as special because she was a foreigner (*Gaikokujin*).

Masami gained enormous confidence and went through an emotional transformation by participating in *Tokubetsu katsudo* (or special activities), especially those that she had to perform in front of an audience. For example, in a focused study lesson about Human Rights,¹¹ Masami had to give a reading of a poem that she had composed.

The Human Rights Education at the Kawabe was initiated by a teacher who recalls that the starting point had been the presence of especially vulnerable children in need of special attention (*Kininaruko*). The lessons were carried out with the following theme: Recognizing the Human Rights of every person, the study lessons seek to create a classroom intolerant of discrimination and prejudice—a class or *Gakkyu* centering on "*Kininaruko*." In the academic year from April 1999 to March 2000, the City Board of Education appointed the school as a center for Human Rights education concerning the education of foreign national students residing in Japan (*Zainichi Gaikokujin Kyoiku*). The school held open lessons on human rights education for the public every month.

Masami's homeroom teacher, Ms. Noda, planned a lesson where her students wrote a poem regarding the things about themselves that they most wanted to hide from others, and then they had to read the poem aloud in front of the audience.

Masami did her presentation with a group of students. Each dealt with issues such as being called "lunch box," being overweight, and being a child of a single parent. The poets sat at desks placed in front of the blackboard. They read their poems in turn to the audience, which consisted of parents, teachers of the local school, and a *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* teacher of a neighboring Middle School. While they were reading their poems, I saw Ms. Hayashi, the chief of Human Rights Education; turn her back to the wall and wipe away her tears. Kawabe Elementary School, especial-

ly Masami's class, had many children with complicated family circumstances—some children were raised by grandparents, others were raised by single parents, and some had parents who were getting divorced. Mr. Yamada said that Masami was fortunate in terms of family circumstances.

Masami wrote a poem about her experience at the sports festival. Her heart ached when she was chosen to be an athlete in a relay race. Being shy, it was devastating for her. She read her poem entitled "A Word Dwells on My Heart":

"Get set! Go!"
 A relay began
 "Oh, No," pit-a-pat
 When I ran, my mind went blank
 Couldn't think any
 The race was over
 "Good job!"
 Though everyone says it often
 The word
 I've kept in my heart

Masami had been very anxious and she often talked about the presentation and practiced it in *Kokusai Kyoshitsu*. After her poetry reading, Masami came to *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* with a relieved look, and said, "Did you see my presentation? Were you there when I was asked a question and I responded? Now I feel like I could say what I want to say without being shy."

In another focused study lesson the following semester, one that was joined by all four classes of sixth grade, Masami did another presentation. In so doing, she cleared another hurdle. This lesson was especially prepared for sixth graders who would be soon graduating. The theme was: "It's forty days till graduation day: In *Tabidachi no kai* (the meeting to celebrate embarking on a journey) let us capture the present moment by reflecting on the events that changed our lives." Each class prepared a collaborative poem or an essay and gave a presentation in the audiovisual room. The lesson was accompanied by a video presentation and a speech delivered by a guest speaker. Much energy and time had been spent in practice. Masami, again, was very nervous until the day of the presentation and afterward, she felt very good about herself. This time, she was particularly moved by a guest speaker's talk about his experience of having lost his left eye from cancer. "Listening to his talk, I feel like I could also be brave and not give up," Masami later said to me.

Shogo also joined this lesson—but at the last minute. Mr. Yamada had encouraged him to attend the lesson when he was studying in *Kokusai Kyoshitsu*. Mr. Yamada told Shogo that he would understand that he was not the only one who was struggling. Shogo's homeroom teacher, Ms. Hamada also stopped by the *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* to remind him of the lesson. Shogo continued to remain at school in the afternoon for the focused study lesson performance; otherwise he would skip afternoon classes and go home. In the focused study lesson, his class did a recitation of the poem "To live" as an ensemble.¹² Having skipped the practices for this lesson, Shogo stood with his classmates and pretended to recite the poem. Indeed, Shogo had missed many of the activities quoted in the poem.

"To Live"

The fact that we are alive
The fact that we are living this moment

Is to become thirsty
Is to feel sunshine filtering through foliage
Is to suddenly remember a melody of a song
Is to sneeze
Is to hold your hand

The fact that we are alive
The fact that we are living this moment

Is to swim
I wanted to swim with everybody
I mastered the crawl
For the first time, broke the twenty seconds
“Alright!” We’re going to win with a new record

Is the sports festival
I had hated it until then
But, this year did my best for not wanting to regret
And won the first prize in a footrace
I mastered *Chango* (Korean drum)
Gained confidence in myself having played a cheerleader

Is the sports tournament
I competed in a broad jump, and did my best with the cheering of Sawada-sensei
Ran 100 meters, and felt wind

Is the graduation trip
Wonderful scenery
“Don’t give up,” Shimada-sensei told us, so we were able to continue
I became friends with someone I didn’t get along with
And made true friends

Is a ball game
Though we lost the game, I could be proud of myself running after the ball
Is soccer
I dribbled and shot a goal
Enjoyed passing a ball with teammates
It made me happy to take part in the game

Is sorrow of the heart
The moment I found out I was being betrayed by a friend, I was sad, I was angry
But I won’t do the same and won’t cause others to have these feelings

I was called “Korean” but I can endure much more than before
 I dyed my hair but nothing changed
 With a few words I hurt others

With so many things we’ve grown up a little bit

The fact that we are alive
 The fact that we are living this moment
 The fact that we cry
 The fact that we laugh
 The fact that we get angry
 The fact that we can believe
 Freedom
 And sharing joy with others

The fact that we are alive
 The fact that we are living this moment
 This moment, with friends, we can play
 This moment, with friends, we can play a game
 This moment, with friends, we can play baseball
 This moment, with friends, we can be absorbed in *Kendo* (Japanese fencing)
 This moment, the present time is passing

The fact that we are alive
 The fact that we are living this moment

To return to Bourdieu’s remarks on rites of passage (1991), having missed the activities mentioned in the poem, Shogo not only lacked academic credentials but also the collective experience felt by his classmates. This emotional experience was linked to a collective identification process in the local school. Since Masami participated in the rituals, her experiences somewhat connected with her personal and collective sense of continuity, and she quite effectively went through the “rites of institution.” On the contrary, Shogo’s personal continuity did not quite engage with that of the school as he could not identify with most of the school rituals.

4 Toward Redefining Schooling

These contrasting experiences of Masami and Shogo reveal the complex personal and collective senses of continuity and sense of unity which emerge in the Japanese school system. And it was connected to the system of Japanese national “ethos”.

We may say that academic learning in the school was intimately tied to this making of continuity in the context of Japanese ethnonational identity and the meritocracy of Japanese school system, in which much of the focus is on examinations at the middle school level. Furthermore, this tends to determine the students’ future course and their position in Japanese social stratification, in which children who cross the borders of nations are often placed at its margins.

We also may surmise that the role of class or *Gakkyu* was the most salient aspect in this mechanism, functioning as a unit of academic and non-academic activity. As we have seen, Shogo was reluctant to participate in this compulsory “learning community”, which placed great importance on the emotional experience of developing interpersonal relationships among students. Instead he remained at the periphery of this “community of practice” and did not become a “full participant” (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Consequently, he neglected to acquire essential academic credentials.

Here it seems unlikely that Shogo’s problem originated solely in the differences in cultural practice between the school systems of Japan and Brazil. Rather, for further analysis, we may look at the unique presence of *Gakkyu* as a constituting element of the practice. As pointed out by Yanagi, the current practice of *Gakkyu* in Japanese school is not a product of an innate cultural practice, but of acculturation in Japan’s modern-state building, historically constructed, reconstructed, and sustained by its discourse (2005). The practice of *Gakkyu* standardizes both the academic tasks and the emotional development of the student, such that the student’s trajectory through time and space occurs according to a national pattern. For those like Shogo who cross national borders, it can be a difficult task to join in this process of standardization.

Given these circumstances, it may be noted that when we try to define a new kind of schooling in Japan with migrant children transferring from another national reality of schooling, the historical and institutional context of the personal and collective senses of continuity—the situatedness of activities in the context of national belonging—needs to be addressed, and the structural analysis of *Gakkyu* is crucial to these endeavors.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Oguma (1995), (1998), Fujitani (1996), Sakai, DeBary, and Iyotani (1996).
- 2 See, for example, Lee (1996), Yoshimi (1999), Yasuda (2000), (2006)a, (2006)b, Mashiko (2001).
- 3 The revised law was implemented on 1 Jun 1990, and introduced ten new categories of residential status for foreign nationals: *Legal/Accounting Services, Medical Services, Researcher, Instructor, Specialist in Humanities/International Activities, Intra-company Transferee, Cultural Activities, Pre-College Students, Department of Permanent Resident, and Long-term Resident* (Shimada, 1997). The category “Long-term resident” is now applied to third-generation *Nikkei*. This status imposes no legal restriction on any activities undertaken during their residence in Japan, suggesting that they are legally authorized to work in both skilled and unskilled jobs (ibid.).
- 4 I have used pseudonyms for Kawabe Elementary School and the names of all the persons and the places in this study.
- 5 This paper is partially drawn from a chapter of my dissertation (Takato 2004). Its anthropological fieldwork was conducted over a period of seventeen months in and outside of the school.
- 6 Originally *Gakkyu* or class was adopted from the class system that emerged from schooling in the United Kingdom in the late 19th century. The UK class system was created to efficiently educate the masses during the industrial revolution (Yanagi 2005). Whereas in Japan the society still consisted of mostly rural communities with a strong sense of belonging to one’s local community, the original class system developed for the industrial society had to be changed in order to increase students’ attendance in schools, thus placing a great burden on non-academic collective activity (the current special activity or *Tokubetsu Katsudo* in the National Guidelines of the Curriculum) to create a strong sense of belonging among the school participants (ibid.,). Yanagi says that in this process, the prevailing discourse on *Gakkyu*, which emphasizes cooperativeness and emotional experience among participants of the school, had to be produced and reproduced (ibid.,).
- 7 As Varenne reminds us in the critique of Batson’s *Naven* (1958), “ethos is the ethos of Iatmul culture, not the ethos of Iatmul men.”
- 8 In this analysis, I refer to comments by Varenne and McDermott (1998), who suggest that “Culture has less to do with the habits we acquire than with the houses we inhabit” (p.14).
- 9 The following account demonstrates Shogo’s way of “learning”. On at least one occasion fifteen minutes prior to the end of a Japanese lesson, Shogo was losing concentration. He started to play with the word processor. He typed “表通り (*Omoiedori*, meaning main street)” with *Hiragana* (Japanese Phonetics). The character was in the text he was studying. He was trying to see if the Chinese character would appear in the screen. He was struggling with typing

the keys for Japanese Phonetics. I suggested trying Roman alphabet instead. This he mastered quickly. The character “面” appeared (it has the same sound as 表). I asked him if it was the only character appeared. He then pressed a key and “表” appeared. Shogo questioned if these were the only characters matching the sound “*Omote*.” We looked into a dictionary (of classical Chinese explained in Japanese). We then confirmed that these were the only characters.

- 10 Students from Brazil and other countries in Latin America in Kawabe Middle School tended to find the strict discipline commonly observed in Japanese middle schools very difficult to adjust to. Consequently, quite a few of them skipped school or eventually dropped out (according to one of the *Kokusai Kyoshitsu* teachers, in a comment to me). Also, it may be assumed that Shogo’s falling behind his class academically in elementary school had a negative affect on his level of achievement in middle school.
- 11 The lessons are planned and carried out as part of the school’s *Jyuten-kenkyu Jyugyo* (focused study lessons). The focused study lessons can range from academic subjects to Human Rights education -- as was the case with Kawabe. One or two classes (*Gakkyu*) from each grade level regularly open their lessons to visitors, consisting of teachers from the school, students’ parents, teaching consultants from the City’s Board of Education, and a principal at one of the city’s other elementary schools. Subsequently, two meetings are held to give teachers feedback.
- 12 A poet, Shuntaro Tanigawa’s poem “To Live” was adapted for the lesson.

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