STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LANDS: A STORY OF JAPANESE BRAZILIANS

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“Strangers in their own Lands: A Story of Japanese Brazilians”

Yana and her friends chat enthusiastically about their latest favorite Japanese singers and
fashion after class, occasionally bursting into laughs. As they hang out near the exit of their tiny
school building, other students walk by down the busy hallway. Yana looks like any other
Japanese teenager, but she doesn’t sound like one. Yana and her friends speak Portuguese.

Yana Ueda Arashiro, 15, is the daughter of Japanese-Brazilian parents living in Japan. She was
born in Tokyo and has lived in Japan her entire life. But her slight accent when she speaks
Japanese outs her as “a foreigner” among Japanese kids, just like many other Japanese-Brazilian
students at the Escola Opção, a private Brazilian school in Joso city of Ibaraki Prefecture, a
suburb of Tokyo.

Yana moved from the central prefecture of Nagano to Ibaraki in early 2014 because of her
father’s job. She says that’s when things started to change for her at school.

“[Some of my classmates] were talking behind my back. Even when I talked to them, they would
ignore me,” Yana says. “If I touched them, they would say they were infected by a virus.”

The bullying was so bad for Yana, a third-generation Japanese Brazilian, that she refused to go to
the local public school. A few months later, her parents decided to send her to the private
Brazilian school several miles from their home.

Yana and her family are among more than 170,000 Japanese Brazilians who are striving to
assimilate in Japan. At their peak in the mid-2000s, more than 300,000 Japanese Brazilians
found themselves moving back to the homeland they or their ancestors had left decades before. It
is a highly unusual migration story that says much about the turbulent histories of the two
countries and the fierce Japanese rejection of foreign cultures, which experts say is a factor in
Japan’s economic stagnation since the 1990s. Many Brazilian families face a tough decision
between remaining in Japan’s highly homogeneous society and going back to Brazil with its
economic and political woes.

To support its economic growth in the 1980s and the early 1990s, Japan needed foreign workers
to fill the booming labor market. As a result, the Japanese government deregulated its strict
immigration laws in 1990 to allow first- to third-generation descendants of Japanese emigrants,
many of them from South American countries, including Brazil and Peru, to live and work as
low-skilled auto or electronics plant workers in Japan for at least three years.

Yana’s father Fabio moved from Curitiba, the capital of the southern Brazilian state of Paraná, to
Tokyo in the spring of 1990. A temp agency in Brazil had arranged for him to work as a truck
driver. The country Fabio left was facing economic disaster. After the end of its decades-long
military rule in 1985, Brazil suffered from hyperinflation that reached almost 3,000 percent and
in 1990 it defaulted on its national debts. Prior to his departure, Fabio was a college student
majoring in physical therapy. He had to drop out of school because the tuition became so high he
couldn’t afford it anymore. Moreover, the local cafeteria his parents ran was losing money. So
when the government of Japan decided to grant temporary visas to foreign nationals of Japanese
descent, Fabio jumped at the opportunity. His original plan was to work in Japan for a year and earn enough money to finish college in Brazil. As he did not know the language and customs, his life in Japan was hard at the beginning.

“People [in Japan] were cold to me. I was surprised to find out they were not friendly – unlike in Brazil,” Fabio says. “I cried in bed almost every day for the first month.”

As he learned how to speak Japanese and made much more money than in Brazil, however, Fabio decided to continue working in Japan and eventually met his future wife Natalia, a Japanese Brazilian immigrant from Santos, a southern coastal city in the São Paulo state. After holding low-skilled manual-labor jobs for more than a decade, including at a garbage company and auto parts factory, Fabio, 48, now works as a manager at a Tokyo branch of Banco do Brasil, the largest Brazilian bank, and is raising three kids in a medium-sized two-story house in the suburb of Japan’s capital.

According to Japan’s Ministry of Justice, the number of Brazilians living in Japan increased more than five times, to 316,967 in 2007 at their peak from 56,429 in 1990, when the temporary workers’ program started. Takeyuki Tsuda, professor of anthropology at Arizona State University, who conducted an extensive study of Japanese Brazilian workers in the 1990s, says from an economic standpoint the program succeeded at filling Japan’s unskilled labor shortage, but it was a social failure. He says the Japanese government decided to recruit Japanese Brazilians – many of whom had never lived in Japan or spoken Japanese – on the assumption that they would be able to assimilate in society better than other migrant workers because they were ethnically Japanese. Instead, those Japanese Brazilians have become ethnically alienated and socioeconomically marginalized in Japan, often facing discrimination.

“This attests to the ethnic exclusivity in Japan compared to other countries,” Tsuda said. “I do not think [Japanese Brazilians] will ever be ethnically accepted in Japan.”

The story of Fabio – climbing from a low-skilled laborer to a bank manager – sounds like a Japanese dream. But even today he has trouble fitting into Japanese society. Fabio has a strong Portuguese accent when he speaks Japanese. And although he looks Japanese, the way he dresses on his days off – a tank top and shorts, revealing a large tattoo on his shoulder – is an easy giveaway to his status as a foreigner in Japan.

“Even now, I have very few Japanese friends and most of them are from work,” Fabio says. But he says he prefers to stay in Japan rather than go back to Brazil. “It is a safe country. Also if you work, you get paid as promised. In Brazil, even if you get paid, you need a side job to make a living,” he continues. “Considering personal security, Japan is a much better place for my kids too.”

His mother Saeo Ueda, who still lives in Curitiba, shares the same concerns about Brazil’s safety and job opportunities.

“Of course, I want them to come home,” she says about her family. “But I’m also worried about what they would do if they come back here.”

Saeo, an 83-year-old first-generation Japanese Brazilian, has lived and worked in Brazil all her life. Although she has dual citizenship from both Brazil and Japan, Saeo says she feels more
comfortable living in Brazil and considers herself more Brazilian than Japanese. Having worked for a decade at the cafeteria owned by her late husband Hachisuke, a Japanese native, Saeco still enjoys cooking traditional Brazilian street food, such as *coxinhas* (deep fried chicken croquettes) and kibes (deep fried beef croquettes), and feeding her grandchildren whom she lives with.

The daughter of Japanese immigrants who moved from the southern prefecture of Kagoshima in the early 1920s to seek opportunities in Brazil during an economic boom fueled by coffee exports, Saeco says she has faced little discrimination in Brazil. Born in the rural town of Santo Anastácio in São Paulo, she grew up on coffee and cotton farms on land cultivated by Japanese immigrants and attended a private Japanese school. As a newly industrialized nation in the early 1900s, Japan was suffering from overpopulation and poverty, mostly in its rural areas. To address these issues, the Japanese government promoted emigration and more than 240,000 Japanese nationals moved to Brazil between the early 1990s and the 1970s, with a decade of disruption during and after World War II.

Susumu Miyao, former director of the Center for Japanese-Brazilian Studies, a São Paulo-based research center dedicated to issues of Japanese Brazilian immigration, says that after the war many Japanese immigrants decided to stay in Brazil and educate their children in Portuguese—a shift from the focus on teaching the Japanese language and its customs. He says the assimilation of Japanese immigrants and their descendants into Brazilian society has been a success.

“Here in Brazil, we face very little discrimination and prejudice,” says Miyao, a first-generation Japanese Brazilian. “The image [of Japanese Brazilians] is that we are honest, diligent and virtuous. We have a very good reputation.”

Having served other Brazilians at the cafeteria owned by her husband in Curitiba for more than a decade, Saeco agrees.

“Brazilian people have been so good to us. They often say things like ‘Japanese people are smart,’” Saeco says. “So I always wonder why Japanese people bully Brazilians [in Japan]. Do they feel Brazilians get in their way because there are so many?”

As for Fabio, he says that even after 25 years of living in Japan he still does not fully understand its people and customs. “Japanese people often ask you to bow your head [to ask for something]. But in Brazil we don’t have such a custom because we think everyone is equal.” But at the same time Fabio says he admires much about the Japanese people’s work ethic, including keeping promises and being always industrious.

“I want my kids to pick what’s best for them [from the two countries].” Fabio says. “I want them to be serious and diligent, but also happy-go-lucky like people in Brazil.”

Yana still looks pained when she talks about her experience of being bullied at the Japanese public school. But in addition to her regular classes at the *Escola Opção*, she now takes a manicuring lesson every Saturday at a local community center, where Japanese college students volunteer to teach different skills and subjects to Japanese Brazilian children. Yana says she still does not know what she wants to do in the future. But one thing she knows is that she wants to be useful and help other Brazilians in need.
After the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011, Yana, along with her mother and two younger brothers, spent three months with her family and other relatives in Brazil. She says she remembers her relatives took her to markets where she saw many colorful fruits and vegetables she’d never seen before. That experience, Yana says, triggered her interest in learning more about Brazil.

“I want to learn more about my country and also the country where I live now,” Yana says. “Japanese people tell me I am Brazilian. And Brazilian people tell me I look Japanese. But I feel there are always two countries inside me. And that's a good feeling,” Yana says with a smile.

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Links to the video stories
Yana’s Story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXIqOu7FF10
Fabio’s Story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbL3BgCfptA
Saeco’s Story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2tBTzQpZKA