When Identity Does Not Help: kinship and migration in the Brazilian context

Igor José de Renó Machado

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When Identity Does Not Help: kinship and migration in the Brazilian context

Igor José de Renó Machado[1]

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7811-2641
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Abstract:

Based on a particular appropriation of the concept of "relatedness" - a concept constructed within what we can call "new kinship" - I present a critical reading of the concept of identity and propose a more dynamic alternative to the concept in question.

Resumo

A partir de uma apropriação particular do conceito de "relacionalidade", no que podemos chamar de "novo parentesco", apresento uma leitura crítica do conceito de identidade e proponho uma alternativa mais dinâmica ao conceito em questão.

To consider the questions that interweave kinship/relatedness and immigration, we follow two distinct ethnographic routes: international

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1   Titular Professor, Federal University of Sao Carlos, Brazil. Social Sciences Department.

migration from the region of Governador Valadares (M.G.) and Japanese immigration to Brazil, through a series of distinct ethnographies produced about this theme by my research group. The studies have indicated the possibility to criticize understanding identity based on the concept of relatedness, as we will come to see. The current state of the reflection is indicated by the finding that the idea of "identity" has hidden a large field of differences internal to groups considered homogeneously (such as Japanese-descendants, for example), in addition to having created in advance the existence of the "groups" that are to be explained. We find that relatedness allows defining "groups" based on their own criteria. I have developed the idea of "differentialities" to consider these condensations of common practices, values and shared lives.

In Valadares, based on ethnographies conducted in the most humble neighborhoods that are the source of most of the emigrants, we identified a dynamic that we call "nano-houses" ((Machado 2010). We found that this is one of the main stimuli to international mobility, built as a detour to realizing a desire inscribed in the kinship orders. "Nano-houses" are the desire to centralize a set of relationships and "socialities." This centralization demands a material expression of support: one's own home that is capable of congregating the nuclear family and bringing together the extended family and friends. It is this material support that invariably indicates independence in relation to the other socialities. With the home, one can "centralize," without it, one can only be centralized.

This perception of need for material resources to centralize "immaterial" relationships articulates the desire for immigration, as an option to shorten the process: to earn more money quickly, return, have a business and prosper economically and in relations. This process was described ethnographically, from – we can say - bottom to top. But it presupposes another

concept of kinship based on the notion of *relatedness (Carsten 2004)*, in an effort to understand the practical results of the analyses of emigration in Governador Valardes. The option for kinship as an analytical route led us to reflect on the diversity of the immigrant experience. The relationship between immigrant Valadarense kinship and the production of the life of the immigrant in the country of reception indicates that the notion of identity obscures the entire process: what was seen as "identity" based on the experience of the Valadarense immigrants in Portugal, for example, came to be seen as nothing more and nothing less than kinship.

But the development of this reflection about diversity only advanced as a theoretical reflection based on the second kinship route that we took upon studying the Japanese presence in Brazil. In relation to the "Japaneses," we were interested in the diversity of Japanese experience in Brazil, enriched by the analysis of Valadarense kinship in its imbrications with emigration. Using the idea of "multiple Japanesicities" when looking at the Japanese descendants allowed us to establish an alternative, particularly involving other ways to consider Japanese-descendent kinships (Machado 2011).

The option for multiple Japanesicities is derived from a concern with complex processes within something generic such as a "Japanese-descendent identity." To look to the internal differences as "Japanesicities" facilitated a de-hierarchization of the analysis: to see Japanesicity as multiple allows us to avoid analyzing the conditions of these subjects as "more or less" Japanese, but as Japanese *in their own way.* What I call Japanesicities can be seen as a "tangle" of lines (Ingold 2007), of trajectories that are experienced and traveled together, producing a tangle, a ball of self-referred trajectories. These tangled paths produce something like ontologies, which are the fruit of sharing of perspectives along the trajectory. In this sense, the tangles are totalities, but a type of totality that is found in a ball of yarn: just pull the thread to unroll it and ravel it up again

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in new tangles.

The Japanesicities, on the other hand, indicate a break with the notion of margins, limits and static distinctions between Japaneses and Brazilians. There are situations and processes that generate an encompassing, which eliminates, subverts or destabilizes some presumptions. There are processes of production of Japaneses that go beyond consanguinity – which is so important among the Japanese and Japanese descendants, as various studies indicate – and racial markings. There are non-descendants who become "more" Japanese than descendants, following criteria of these Japanesicities. That is, there are non-consanguine kinships constantly operating, tangling a facile definition of Japanese, based on racial markers (narrow eyes).

The look at Japanesicities allows a shift between race and ethnicity, or even "culture": Japanesicity has contours that can go beyond the universe of the descendants. The idea of Japanesicities rests, therefore, exactly on that which is of interest to us: the production of kinship. When we consider a different field of relations (not limited by consanguinity), we find Japanese kinships that encompass various possibilities, which can even encompass non-descendants and exclude descendants. That is, we bring to the forefront the way that the subjects operate their relations, establishing kinship networks that escape a more traditional perspective.

The recourse to differentiality appears to us to be useful for considering the enormous variation of Japanese experiences in Brazil, mainly by leading to an *a priori* negation of the group. This negation allowed us to present something new, mainly concerning the extension and definition of *who are* the Japanese. From a traditional point of view, the definition of the Japanese-descendants is always mediated by a phenotypical appreciation: Japanese blood, a Japanese face. That is, it is always tied to, even if not explicitly, Japanese kinship. The group is always defined by the biological contours, to then think of other

possible differentiations. To escape biology allows us to think of Japanesicities as fluid ontological processes that avoid that avoid seeing a population as being limited by blood.

The ethnography in Valadares was able to demonstrate a kinship in movement, articulating the circulation of people, goods, feelings, ideas and powers. We can say that this example shows us what kinship *does* in Valadares. The "Japanese examples," so to speak, through the contrast that they offer among each other and with the study in Valadares, indicate various processes articulating the experience, which we have provisorily called differentialities. These same studies indicate that these differentialities are intensely related to Japanese kinships in Brazil. We also perceive the "complex imbrication" that is related to a doubt about the relationship between identity and relatedness, given that the studies indicate that the commonly used notion of identity reifies the existence of the group.

The reification appears when we deal generically with the "Japanese descendants," eliminating the differences internal to this set as essential for the understanding of the social dynamics. The differentiality allows the perception that the group "Japanese descendants" is not necessarily constituted by consanguinities and that non-descendants can be part of this group, and descendants may not. This dimension escapes the concept of identity.

Identity theory has dialoged with the criticism of culture since the end of the 1980s, stimulated by Cultural Studies, so that one can speak of behaviors, shared signs, relations between groups (as long as they are eminently fleeting) without speaking specifically of culture, but of subjects who bear various identities. The practical effect was the opportunity to speak of the "identity of the immigrants," for example as one spoke of the "culture of immigrants." Identity is a term that allows speaking of "Brazilian identity" and also of the "identity of Pentecostal Brazilians." There does not appear to be a problem of a

"set theory." This is possible with support from a theory of borders or limits to difference. Defining the focus on the line that separates, independently from the "cultural" (or identity) contents, the question of what the identity identifies, is less important, as long as it is contained in the limits that define the group. That is, to speak of identity, the group (or collective, or community, etc.) should be defined *a priori*. The concern, in reality, is with what identifies the identity of a *previously defined* group.

This issue remains problematic although it is an anthropological issue – that of difference. This leads us to speak of it always as identity. When the internal difference of the immigrant population came to call more attention, the notion of identity appears less efficient. On one hand, it was amorphous, with an hierarchization of difference, and on the other, it induced the imagination of similarity, of uniformity. Mainly, it led to thinking of this difference as accessory, transitory and superficial. This superficiality is not able to deal with the diversity of the processes as various "differentialities."

I sought to summarize how we think of difference at the heart of migrant "communities, articulating a concept that would escape the idea of "identity." The provisory concept of differentiality allows us to think of the processes involved with the Japanese presence in Brazil: we think of Japanesicities. On the other hand, we think of Valadarense kinship to express similar phenomena in Governador Valadares: as a infinitesimal variation of the familiar forms in Valadares - as Valardarense differentiality, articulated mainly by kinship. The Valadarense kinship and the Japanese kinships that we analyze have in common the production of differentialities, nearly as structural expressions. Whether in the course of the discontinuous Valadarense ethnography, whose data highlight an encompassing kinship, or in the course of the multiple ethnographies of the Japanesicities, whose narrative decants the kinship, we have a single complex imbrication between kinship (relatedness),

differentialities and i/emigration. Both processes demonstrate that the concept of identity may not account for the difference produced by the subjects.

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