Layered Migrant Identities: The Case of Filipino Nikkeijin Workers in Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of transnational migration to the ethnic consciousness of Philippine nikkeijins. Exploring the effects of migrant experiences to the construction of ethnic identity, this paper argues that while the experience of transnational migration reveal various layers of national and ethnic consciousness, more exclusivist ethnic borders within and even beyond national identities are created and modified depending on the underlying social conditions experienced by the migrants. The study utilizes in-depth interviews of fifty (50) Filipino nikkeijins in Aichi Prefecture, Japan. Mostly workers in Japanese industrial factories, these nikkeijins belong to the third generation of descendants of Japanese nationals who emigrated to the Philippines before and during the Pacific War.

Keywords: nikkeijin, identities, ethnicity, migration, sansei

1. Introduction

Japan's economic growth has driven a massive inflow of foreign workers who have ancestral ties in Japan. Known for being economic migrants in their forefathers' land, nikkei are "people of Japanese descent living outside Japan, including those who have returned or emigrated to Japan" (Ohno, 2007, p. 243). During the Meiji era, the Japanese government promoted emigration to resolve the problems resulting from population growth and worsening incidence of rural poverty. Many Japanese, particularly farmers travelled to the Brazilian shores in order to escape impoverishment in the countryside. They worked in coffee plantations until they made sufficient money "to live comfortably in their ancestral home" (Knight, 2002, p. 16). Within Asia, Japanese preferred Manchuria, Korea, the Philippines, and other Pacific islands.

The Japanese migrants had started to enter the Philippine islands as contracted laborers for an American road project between 1903 and 1904. After the expiration of their contracts, a significant number of them remained in the country to "engage in retail trade, develop vegetable farms around Baguio, or find wage work in nearby mining projects" (Mabunay, 2006, p. 140). Eventually, their number further expanded during the booming of plantation companies before the war. Some data estimate a total of 13,065 Japanese residents who inhabited Southern Philippines, sustaining intermarriages that eventually produced thousands of Nikkei offspring (Ohno, 2006).

In the early 1990s, the Japanese Government opened the country's borders to the descendants of those emigrants including their spouses and children who sought employment in various industries suffering from labor shortages. Since nikkeijin*s* possess legal documents (usually long term visas), they are "in limited supply and great demand" (Rebick, 2005). Compared to other low-skilled workers, their salaries tend to be higher, with accompanying benefits which are not enjoyed by undocumented foreigners. They were usually preferred in middle-sized companies which generally avoid undocumented workers.

While the flow of nikkeijin from Brazil, Peru, and other Latin American countries remained robust during the 1990s, the Philippine nikkeijins were not immediately recognized during the decade. Since most of them did not possess *koseki tohon* (family registry document), the Japanese government held insufficient legal basis to assess their ancestry and the citizenship of their parents and grandparents. Pragmatic during those days, many parents of the Filipino nikkei descendants purposely refused to register their marriage with their Filipino partners in their *koseki* in order to retain the Filipino citizenship of their spouse and children.

By retaining Filipino citizenship, the opportunity of owning land and other properties in the Philippines was not questioned by the Philippine authorities. For some who had kept their *koseki tohon* before the war, they had to burn or throw such documents due to the threat of discrimination and physical harm during the aftermath of the world war when anti-Japanese sentiment was very strong in various areas of the archipelago (Ohno, 2007). Most second generation nikkei had changed their surnames into Filipino or Chinese surnames to avoid being distinguished as Japanese mestizo. As a survival strategy, the descendants had "abandoned relevant documents showing their relationship with their Japanese husbands and fathers in order to conceal their Japaneseness" (Ohno, 2007, p. 248).

Eventually, the Japanese government has recognized these Filipino nikkeijins before the end of the twentieth century. Massive migration has been propelled by various organizations, "foundations," brokers, and institutions that facilitated the papers and employment of Filipino nikkeijins. Today, most of them are long term or permanent residents in Japan. According to Iijima and Ohno (2010), many of them are living in Japan for over 10 years, hence revealing "the progressing tendency in the protraction or settlement of their stay" (p. 86). The experience of migration may potentially modify ethnic identification, especially in the case of the nikkeijins who have Filipino and Japanese blood, and who have experienced settling in both homelands. This investigation, then, inquires how transnational migration impact on the ethnic consciousness and identities of the Filipino nikkeijin workers in Japan. This paper presents the layering and decentering of identities amidst shifting socio-economic environment and hierarchical power relations within and beyond the migrants' workplaces.

2. Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted among 50 third generation (sansei) nikkeijins who are presently working in Aichi Prefecture (Central Japan). Interviewees were asked to narrate their migrant experiences, labor conditions, relationship with fellow workers, and their perception on ethnicity and identity.

In the absence of an accurate statistical data about the distribution of Filipino nikkeijin*s*, it is safe to assume that Aichi is one of the hubs of Filipino nikkei workers because of the presence of both medium and large industries that hire foreign workers. In Ohno and Iijima's recent nationwide survey of Filipino nikkeijin*s* in 2010, majority of the respondents reside in the said prefecture (70 persons, 33%). This is followed by Kagawa (50 persons), Fukushima(49), and Tokyo(8).

Since 1977, Aichi has hosted industries that manufacture and ship various products, triggering a demand on factory workforce during the period of economic expansion. Since then, it has accommodated global companies known in the world of aerospace, precision ceramics, electronic equipment, and automotive industry most specially Toyota Motors. In addition, traditional industries such as textiles, agriculture and pottery remain vibrant throughout the prefectural area (Aichi Prefectural Government, 2011).

3. Assertion of Identities

Ethnicity has been described by constructivist scholars as fluid and mutable - a "product of social ascriptions," and "a kind of labeling process engaged in by oneself and others." (Nagel, 1994, p. 154) Contrary to the conventional wisdom that ethnic composition is purely primordial, a large pool of modern literature illustrates the dynamism of ethnicity, a component that may be constructed, reconstructed, and even negotiated.

Ethnic identity becomes 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 and Miller, 2009, p. 41) shaped by various cultural, social, and other forces. This research exposes the dynamic multiple identities of the Filipino nikkeijins after undergoing dislocation and experiencing "different" labor conditions in their respective factories. The narratives of 50 interviewees reveal that there are four shades of identities that become salient in a particular situation or social environment: Filipino identity, ethnolinguistic identity, nikkei identity and transnational identity.

3.1. Deeply Ingrained Filipino Identity

Nikkeijins talked about their simple lifestyle in their province, the low cost of living, and the happiness that everybody shared in the simplest ways.

Such themes, although commonly unheard in the Philippines, apparently contrast the hectic routine and demanding way of life in Japan. Notwithstanding the socio-economic rewards of being a nikkei, they passionately affirmed their loyalty to their homeland, the Philippines. For them, there were too much meaningful thoughts and memories in the land where they were born and raised.

As Angelo from La Union reminisced:

> Life was still better in the Philippines. No matter how hard it was to earn money, people were happy. There was fun everywhere. Where's happiness in Japan, by the way? Everyone is too much focused on work, work, work, and happiness is nowhere to be found. I still prefer the Philippines.

Joan from Davao City also said:

> I love the Philippines. That's the place where I was born. Life is difficult and challenging, but you feel loved by the people. In Japan, you don't even feel that they care for you.

While most narratives focused on the lifestyle in the Philippines, Princess has related her 'Filipino-ness' to gender traits:

> I am a Filipino. I can't feel any Japanese trait in my personality. In my opinion, Japanese women are weak and subservient. I'm not like that. I have a strong personality.

Furthermore, nikkeijins tend to create an ethnic boundary which separates them from the other nationalities or races. In a working environment composed of multi-ethnic laborers, nikkeijins tend to identify themselves as "Filipinos" regardless of their legal status as a "descendant of a Japanese national" and the physical feature of some who possess Japanese facial feature. Creating an exclusive racial grouping, a dense ethnic border unifies Filipinos albeit the existing internal factions on different dimensions (as it will be discussed later). Filipino nikkeijins generally support their fellow countrymen during times of distress and mistreatment. Having witnessed how Japanese superiors abuse their comrades, Filipino nikkeijins tend to be argumentative in defending the rights of their fellow Filipinos. In various issues, nikkeijins exhibit "deterritorialized nationalism" to support their countrymen and lambast those who mistreat the Filipinos. Alfred has admitted that he feels offended whenever other ethnicities criticize the Filipinos:

> Look at my physical feature. I still look like a Japanese, in some aspects. My eyes are obviously Japanese. Look. But the truth is, my heart, feelings, culture…everything is very Filipino. Beliefs? Principles? Very Filipino. That's why when I hear some Japanese or other nationalities saying something against Filipinos, I feel offended. It really hurts me.

Ernesto also felt the same way:

> Filipinos are all over Japan. And whether we admit it or not, many of them are doing crazy things ('kalokohan'). Japanese people are keeping an eye on us because we are foreigners, and they usually witness the crazy things that Filipino people do. That's why they say a lot of bad things against the Filipinos. What they say is true, but we are hurt. The truth hurts.

Because of the presence of relatives in their workplace, the system of communication and instruction is also localized in their own dialect. There were sufficient support groups that organize gatherings, cook Filipino dishes, and transmit social practices and traditions to Japan. Beyond the borders of a nation-state, elements of 'home culture' are carried and embraced in the destination country. It is important to note that the nikkeijins exhibit such behavior similar to ordinary Filipino migrants who are scattered around the globe but continuously embracing the social and cultural practices from the native homeland.

3.2. Ethnolinguistic Identities

Ethnolinguistic groupings develop a certain degree of animosity among several regionalistic groups. Back in the Philippines, ethnolinguistic groupings are potential basis for political and social contestations. Filipino people usually support the political candidates belonging to the same ethnolinguistic group. In addition, there are historical marks of social division, aggravated by the conventional stereotypes of each group:

> …some particular low-land peoples stand out by virtue of their visibility in Philippine history. Tagalogs, for example, figured prominently in the revolution against Spain, while Ilocanos dominated the stream of early Filipino migrants to the United States. And again, there are the local ethnic stereotypes of some lowland peoples that even casual visitors to the country may soon encounter: Cebuanos are happy go lucky, Ilocanos are thrifty, Pampanguenios are good cooks, Bikolanos love their chili peppers, and so on. (Eder, 2004, p. 629)

While such stereotypes have faded to some extent as modernity and globalization shape the "metro culture" within the urban areas of the Philippines, such ethnic ascription becomes apparent when actual encounter of rival groups take place during the experience of migration. For instance, a number of my interviewees had mentioned that these stereotypes did not matter when they were still working in Metro Manila. However, when they migrated and entered the Japanese factory, they have been associated to a particular regionalistic group, either Visayan, Ilocano, Tagalog, Kapampangan, or Bicolano.

3.2.1. Stereotyping and Ethnic Attribution

Clashes often occur among the dominant groupings, usually between Ilocanos and Visaya, or Tagalogs and Visaya. The reasons of the conflict are usually rooted to ethnic attribution of certain negative attitude. For instance, a significant number of interviewees from Davao City believe that Luzon-based nikkeijins specifically those who grew up in Manila looked down on nikkeijins and other Filipinos who came from the Visayan and Mindanao islands. Hence, they think that these nikkeijins from Manila are boastful ("mayabang) and arrogant (arogante). Leah shared her experience:

> But really, majority of those nikkeijins from Manila… they are too proud of themselves... I heard my workmate from Manila cursed my friend from Davao. I witnessed how she cursed him! She even said "You're stupid. Stay in the mountains where you belong. So, is it because he came from Mindanao, or Davao for her to say that he belongs to the mountains? I was just silently laughing… because actually, it's pretty obvious that those people from Mindanao are better educated than her. And I'm sure that my friends from Mindanao are better well-off than her.

Lito from Manila has also shared some insights:

> I think these Visayan people are oversensitive. We don't discriminate them. Everyone is just equal. It's just that they have an 'attitude' of being too loud. Talkative, and loud.

And Jasmine, from Baguio, has also shared some sentiments against Visayans:

> The real problem is… we have no sense of unity. Selfishness. Visayans have their own group, and they support each other in front of the leader… but they just support themselves… I haven't received any help from them. When there's an opportunity for overtime, they take all available slots… for themselves. Being so selfish.

Analyzing the dynamics of stereotyping within the Filipino circle, it can be inferred that animosity is developed due to language misunderstanding that leads to ethnic attribution. For instance, my Tagalog interviewees told me that they do not socialize often with the Visayans because they tend to speak their regional language even though there are non-Visayan speaking Filipinos in the group. To avoid boredom in a conversation that they don't understand, Tagalog nikkeis simply limit their interaction with the Visayans. On the other hand, Visayans feel that these Tagalogs conceitedly avoid them for the reason of arrogance and superiority complex. Similarly, an Ilocano interviewee who is not fluent in Visayan and Tagalog language told me that he would rather go home straight from work than talk with some workmates because he is not confident with his Tagalog or English. Because of his introvert behavior, his fellow nikkeijins criticized him for being a snob and "boastful (mayabang)."

3.2.2. Language Issues

The intertwining of language and nationhood remains delicate and highly political in the case of the Philippines. Historically, the designation of the national language had been a fierce battle among various ethnolinguistic groups in the country. Of course, the Visayans had remarkably waged a legal war against the propagation and mode of standardization of Tagalog. In the end, Filipino language, which is primarily based on Tagalog was selected as the "Manila Lingua Franca."

Although the intention of designating this national language is to embrace a linguistic symbol of unity and national identity, it seemed that ethnic division and misunderstanding are inevitable. While the language has been taught in schools since its designation in 1937, it is apparent that the national language is "accepted for symbolic purposes and not for utility" (Gonzales, 2000, p. 7).

In reality, many Filipinos who were raised outside the Tagalog region have only learned the basics of the language in schools. It takes years for them to master the Filipino language upon migrating to Manila. It is unfortunate, then, for those who have not resided in Tagalog-speaking areas because they are usually seen as the object of ridicule and insult due to their strong accent or weak Filipino language proficiency. Since Manila is viewed as the hub of urbanity and the center of the country's economy, the language of the city has also been associated with modern lifestyle and even elitism. Hence, there is a compelling expectation that "modern Filipinos" must fluently speak Tagalog. This expectation poses serious problems for nikkeijin migrants.

On the other hand, nikkeijins who were born and raised in Manila or Northern Luzon think that the Visayan nikkeijins are exclusivist and gossipers. As previously mentioned, the common complaint against them is their usage of the Visayan language regardless of the presence of other Filipinos who cannot understand the language. For Tagalog-speaking nikkeis, Visayan nikkeijins are insensitive and rude. Candice has an interesting account of her first job experience:

> I used to work in this factory of wires. It was such a bad experience, really. Almost everyone is Visaya, and they were usually talking about me. I can't understand them! My dad is Ilonggo, but we grew up in Quezon City. I used to ignore them whenever they do that to me, but I felt offended when they call me the "Tagalog lady." I heard them gossiping about this "Tagalog lady"… "she's like this, and like that!" I was emotionally tortured, so I resigned from that company after a few days.

At some point of the narrative, she continued her ire:

> I was in Itami Denki, that's where my mom used to work. The area was dirty, the job was boring… because we just put sticker to the items all day long… and the people around me were unbelievably sickening. I was pissed off ('bwisit') with those Visayan people. Those Visayan men were maliciously looking at me…and it was just so disgusting! There was even a time when a guy put his arm on my shoulder, oh no.

The experience of being called a "Tagalog lady" has strengthened her self-identity of being a Tagalog, reinforcing a strong conviction that to be a Tagalog is totally different from being a Visaya. Regardless of the topic of the conversation, those who cannot understand the Visayan language asked themselves, "Am I the topic of their conversation?" The thought that they were the subject of the gossips has caused embarrassment and humiliation. Traumatized by those experiences, Candice refuses to work in a factory line dominated by Visayan people.

It is interesting to note that miscommunication caused by ethnolinguistic differences has led to mounting problems, while the dynamics of communication between two unrelated cultures has shown different outcomes. For instance, many interviewees commented that they don't really care when their Japanese managers are publicly humiliating them because they don't understand Nihongo. When discussions are done in Japanese and they heard their names being mentioned, they don't really feel insulted because of the language barrier. This reaction is also applicable for those who felt that the Brazilians are talking about them. The narratives of the nikkeijins demonstrate that they are more sensitive to fellow Filipinos who have the choice of speaking either English or Tagalog, than those Japanese or Brazilians who can only speak Japanese or Portuguese. It also highlights the fact that since Filipino nikkeijins inhabit the inner circle of Filipino community, their racial connectedness warrants consistence of cultural and linguistic understanding. This expectation is not imposed to those groups outside the ethnic borders of the Filipinos.

3.2.3. Intersection of Ethnic and Social Status

Mostly associated with ethnolinguistic groupings is an attribution of social status to the group. Nikkeijins from rural provinces are usually perceived as poor and uneducated folks, a perception that is clearly inaccurate. In fact, most interviewees from Southern Philippines had decent work in the Philippines before migrating to Japan. While some nikkeis did not finish college, a significant number were able to obtain university diploma.

Most verbal confrontations inside the factory are caused by personal issues that are clearly not related to ethnolingustic differences. However, when conflicts arise, fellow nikkei from the same province eventually become involved as they try to support their comrades. In effect, simple personal bickering becomes an ethnolinguistic-regionalistic war inside the kaisha.

When I asked my interviewees about the deeper reasons of factions and conflicts, the most common theme of their responses centers on education. Even the ability of speaking English is commonly linked to educational background. Antonette, a Davaoena herself, mentioned that most workers from her province were not able to go to school due to utmost poverty when they were still young. Thus, their "socializing skills," according to Antonette, are very low. In contrast to the Visayans, those who resided in Baguio and other areas close to the US bases have a comparative advantage of speaking English. This ability, according to Antonette, boosts their egos to feel that "they dominate the community." Supporting this claim, Bembem mentioned how she was offended by various street words that they say like "bobo," "tanga," "gago," – all referring to the concept of stupidity. She believes that these words are only used by unrefined and uneducated people. But for Bembem, it is not only the Visayan nikkeis who utter such words. Tagalogs and Ilocanos have bitter expressions that offend other workmates. The use of such cruel words escalates tension between groups.

> Camz has confirmed the arrogance of the 'non-Visayan groups,' specially the 'Tagalogs':
>
> The thing is, many Filipinos are just so proud of themselves. Arrogant. It's probably because they have been staying here for a long time, so they are now capable of buying anything they want. They have huge savings. They are very rich. But seeing them, listening to their words, and watching them talk…Oh, I really feel I wouldn't survive being with them. I want to just earn some money and escape from the kaisha, because I'm scared to adopt their attitude. They have unusual character that you wouldn't be proud of. Oh yes, I am proud to be a Filipino, but I am also ashamed of saying that I am a Filipino just like them…

Aside from education, financial or economic status is also an agitating issue among the nikkeijins. Surprisingly, the topic of financial status was generally brought up by youth nikkeijins with ages 25 and below. Responding to my query on the causes of conflicts, they argue that Luzon-based nikkeis think that they (Visayans) belong to the "poorest of the poor." Daniella made an interesting remark when she said,

> Its funny that they think we belong to the lowest class, while the truth is… we are even richer than they are. I want to show them our land titles and business so that they would finally shut up. I want to slap their faces using the land titles of my family. We are from Mindanao, yes, Mindanao…and many millionaires come from Mindanao. Look at Manny Pacquiao! (laugh) Seriously, it's not just a province like what they are thinking. It's more than that, and I can proudly say that we are better than them.

From the point of view of Cedrick, a descendant from Manila, nikkeijins are generally "between middle class and poor." Being a migrant worker for almost fifteen years, Cedrick has observed that Filipino nikkeis are not really destitute although there are some who were impoverished by their accumulated debts in the Philippines. Cedrick knows very few Filipino nikkeijins who are extremely poor, but not all of them are from the Southern region. Hence, he thinks that Daniella's accusation that Tagalogs see them as impoverished was merely a product of self-pitying and imagination. While he thinks that some Tagalogs can be arrogant, it is not fair to generalize the behavior of the Manila nikkeis. Citing how stressful factory work is, Cedrick claims that the emotional state of a migrant can always be affected by overworking in an environment with no adequate social support.

3.3. Superficial Nikkei Identity

The nikkeijins' Japanese identity does not easily develop partly because of the xenophobic social attitude of the host society. The fictive notion of cultural homogeneity is still widely believed in spite of the efforts of the national government to redesign a society that can be called multicultural. On one hand, this internationalization project accompanied by globalization is gradually changing the social psyche. On the other hand, deeply rooted anti-foreign sentiment resurfaces as the country suffers economic decline in the past years. As Yoshino (1997, p. 210-211) argued, this internationalization campaign may "paradoxically produce the unintended consequence of promoting cultural nationalism."

The author further claimed that racial and cultural nationalism "has tenacious roots in Japan" and such patriotic doctrine has caused fear that the influx of foreign workers may "endanger the racial harmony of Japanese society."

My nikkeijin interviewees believe that the society views them as *gaijins* (foreigner) regardless of the degree of their relation to their Japanese ancestors. In fact, even their Japanese relatives do not constantly communicate with them. Apparently,   this attribution as *gaijins* (foreigners) does not cause identity confusion or emotional disappointment as they strongly identify themselves as Filipinos. Unlike the Brazilian nikkeijins who identified themselves as "ethnically Japanese" prior to migration, Filipino nikkeijins did not experience such painful rejection that developed into what Tsuda (2003) has called counteridentities. It is interesting to note that when they arrived in Japan, they see themselves as Filipino workers, probably comparable to the OFWs or Overseas Filipino Workers who have earned the reputation of being the "new heroes" of the Philippines because of the economic and social remittances that they have contributed which kept the economy afloat amidst the tremendous crises of the past decades. Highlighting their viewpoints on being Filipino migrants, it shows that these nikkeijins feel social and political recognition as they support family members and non-migrant relatives in their home communities. For them, while they are treated as strangers or unwanted outsiders in Japan, they are well-commended heroes in the Philippines.

However, ethnic identity as widely debated transforms and decenters to address the persisting dilemma of an individual or group. Some identities become recreational as they are utilized on a particular occasion. Similarly, the nikkeijin identity manifests on various situations in order to contest power in the chaotic working space. To illustrate, Filipino nikkeijins tend to argue that they are not ordinary Filipino migrants because of their nikkei-ness. In asserting such claim, they also criticize other migrants who are "different" from them. For the nikkeijins, the *Japayukisan (Filipino entertainer/ hostess), fake* nikkeijin*s* and *bilogs* or overstayers must be blamed for damaging the image of the Philippines in Japan. In fact, they support the government's initiative to crack down the illegal immigrants in order to improve the peace and order situation in the country. With the statements against these groups of Filipinos, they support the government's view that human exploitation can be curbed by tightening the immigration policies, repatriating the Japayukis and deporting the illegal migrants.

Do the nikkeijins feel that their sentiment against fellow Filipinos is anti-nationalistic? Not at all. Filipino nikkeijins think that eliminating the negative images of Japayukis and bilogs will significantly benefit the Filipinos. Reiterating that they are purely Filipino, in consciousness and spirit, Dina, a nikkei from Bicol said:

> "We are real Filipinos. And we love the Philippines, that's where we were born. The Japayukis, do they really love the Philippines when they show the Philippine flag in front of their omise? Or when they deliberately use the word FILIPINA to name their club or to advertise their clubs? That's very shameful. That's not being nationalistic. That's foolish."

The statement expresses the outrage of nikkeijins against Japayukis and owners of the clubs who display the Philippine flag in front of the omise (club) to indicate that there are entertainers from the Philippines inside the facility. For them, it is anti-Philippines, a shame to the nation.

True enough, the ethnic self-identification of nikkeijins is usually "Filipino" in orientation. Although they project themselves as the "rightful & nationalistic" Filipino migrants, nikkeijins unconsciously negate the principle of nationalism by asserting their "higher status" based on their ethnic nikkeijin-ness. While they tend to think that they are demonstrating utmost allegiance to the Philippines, nikkeijins fail to realize that justifying their "higher status" apparently defeats the symbolic value of Filipino nationalism. The narratives below show examples of how nikkeijins assert the existence of their nikkei ethnic blood to prove that they are "of higher status."

Marissa, 28 years old from Davao said, "*I was insulted when the manager thought I was a Japayuki. Of course not. I am a* nikkeijin*. I deserve to be treated as a nikkei*."

Anton, 33 years old from Manila also said, "*Why is it so easy to abuse the Filipinos and other foreigners? We are not robots, we get tired! And yes, we are not merely foreigners. We have Japanese blood too*."

Ellen, 42 years old from Bicol also ranted, "*We are different from those Filipinos that they encounter in night clubs. We have valid visa. And it's not just a visa, it's an ethnic right because we have nikkei blood.*"

Those expressions evidently assert the "nikkeijin identity" of the Filipino descendants. Moreover, the statements also show that these nikkeijins have correlated discrimination to the failure of the Japanese society to recognize their ethnicity as descendants of Japanese nationals. Nikkeijin women expressed their disappointment for being identified as "entertainers" while Filipino nikkei men and even women cried foul for being associated with the group of "*bilogs*" or overstayers and other illegal groups in Japan. Sheila again, commented:

> They are making a lot of money ('yumayaman') because of us, the descendants. Without the nikkeijins, who will operate their kaisha? What will happen to their factory lines? The point is, they have to take care of their manpower. That's us. They have to treat us right. Don't treat us like, somebody from omise(club)… or somebody that can be bought. Treat us like the way they treat the Japanese workers.

The statements cited above have significant implications on the notion and operationalization of nationalism. There seems to be an irony with the moral assertion of being the "good" Filipino migrant who is imbued with the ideals of nationalism, and at the same time, being a privileged migrant who has higher status due to the existence of an ethnic Japanese blood. In other words, the idea of having a nikkeijin identity makes them think that they are "not of equal footing" with ordinary Filipino migrants. Instead, they have higher legal status and they deserve better treatment within the society and workplace. It is an evident paradox to proclaim their "loyalty to the Philippines" and at the same time, create a border that segregates the 'bad Filipino foreigners' while putting themselves in the upper echelon of the migrant hierarchy because of their Nikkei blood.

In sum, the statements above illustrate how nikkeijins assert an identity that they have not thoroughly internalized. In this process of assertion, the principle of blood ties becomes instrumental to seek political rights and authority. Metaphorically, this identity is worn as the outer layer of a heavily-filled ethnic coating in order to display a cultural marker of racial right that puts the nikkeijins on a higher status compared to the other migrant workers.

3.4. Transnational Identity

Claiming that they are connected to both countries, some nikkeijins exhibit the identity of being transnational migrants. As the Davao-born nikkeijin Vienna clearly explained, "My homeland is the Philippines but I am 'at home' in Japan. I've been working here for almost a decade, but my heart still lives in the Philippines. Actually I don't feel the physical distance anymore, because I've always felt my connection to the Philippines."

Even more fascinating are the cases of the nikkeijin youths who are all engaged in factory jobs. With ages 17 to 21, these nikkeijins are presently working to save money for their tuition fees in the Philippines. Some nikkei have been circular migrants as they study in Manila and come back to Japan periodically to earn monies. With young minds and vulnerable perspectives, these nikkeis are still indecisive whether they would stay in Japan for a long term or short term. Moving back and forth, the dynamics of repetitive migration constructs a transnational identity in which the sense of belongingness is projected to include both the home and host countries. Asked where real home is, Jeffrey replied, "We say that we are just temporary migrants here. But when we start our schooling in the Philippines, we also say that we are just temporarily staying in school because we are going back to Japan. I'm also confused, but I would say I belong to both places."

Transnational consciousness also develops when a nikkeijin immigrant becomes deliberately involved in affecting changes beyond one's nation-state. For instance, Portes (2010) argued that transnational immigrants in the developed world do not abandon their kin and communities, nor their cultural loyalties and historical attachments. As previously discussed, the social ties between nikkei migrants and their families in the Philippines have been fortified not only by economic transfer of remittances, but also by their interactive communications through the internet or phone calls. The most compelling evidence of such robust transnational linkage is the flow of remittances. Usually sent through banks, professional couriers, and other formal and informal channels, remittances have always supported the household investments of immediate families and relatives who were left in the Philippines. Majority of nikkeijins are continuously sending money for the construction of their house, hospitalization or medicines of a close relative, or financial support for the establishment of a new business. Moreover, my interview results indicate that remittances were highly invested in human capital, proved by narratives on how they supported the education of younger siblings, cousins, nieces or nephews in the home country. Some nikkeijins have even provided weekly allowances aside from the periodic tuition fees.

While the return of investment is not immediate, it can be argued that this has a positive impact on home communities and even in the macro economy. The effects are too complicated to quantify, but there are empirical correlation between education and national development, as well as its implications on democratic institutions and social cohesion (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, & Sianesi, 1999). Interestingly, a significant number of nikkeijins are circular migrants who shuttle back and forth between the Philippines and Japan for various reasons. While some have established business in the Philippines, others simply say that they have family members in both countries. The duration of stay in both areas is usually indefinite, depending on the needs of livelihood and other personal circumstances. This dynamics of going "back and forth" clearly affects the ethnic identities of nikkeijins due to their exposure to both social environments and culture.

4. Conclusion

Concomitant to the dynamics of ethnic boundaries, identity is composed of various layers. The inner layer seemed to be solidified by Filipino values, tradition, and a nationalistic fervor of contributing and going back to the country. He sees himself as a Filipino prior to migration, during migration, and even after migration. He asserts this identity to take pride on the positive aspects of Filipino culture: being "fun-loving people," religious, family-oriented, cosmopolitan. On the contrary, a moral dilemma causes "identity decentering" as nikkejins antagonize fellow Filipinos who have failed to maintain constructive character in the migrant community. Furthermore, the events, experiences and perception of discrimination instigate a resurgence of nikkeijin 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. 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." The outer layers are more fluid and permeable, as ethnolinguistic identities resurface in times of interpersonal squabbles and regionalistic confrontations while nikkei identity becomes more vigorous as a reaction to social non-recognition. Ethnic identity renders certain utility and meaning as the experience of migration pressures the nikkeijins to assimilate and embrace Japanese-ness. Further complicating the dynamics of self-identification is the practice of transnationalism when migrants connect the host and home communities. Ethnic as well as non-ethnic identities such as gender, generation, religion, and even clan membership result to a multidimensional, complex array of self-identities that are in constant transition.

Layered identities do not equate to a structured-layered cultural behavior. Having partial Japanese blood does not mean assimilation is certain, and having Filipino physique and upbringing does not translate to a pure Filipino identity. Even those with hybrid racial feature do not automatically lead to a dual identity phenomenon marked by stability and balance of cultural behavior. Similar to Le Espiritu's (2002) study of Fil-Am, the construction of culture is "neither an extension of the original culture," (p. 169) nor a conformity to the dominant culture. Ethnic identity, along with its underlying meaning and content may change its external layers to address a particular dilemma and respond to the flux of the changing socio-political and economic environment. The inner layer, however, is pivoted on Filipino-ness that may be unrecognized by a long-term migrant. As Aguilar (1996, as cited in Aguilar, 2002, p. 17) puts it, "Although their relationship to the homeland can be replete with contradictions, the everyday challenges faced by labor migrants in the international workplace ineluctably result in the reinforcement and deepening of national identity." Covered with multilayered identifications, the often disregarded Filipino identity remains intact as nikkeijin migrants plan for a permanent homecoming to their homeland, continuously maintain transnational ties with their community, consciously and actively practice symbolic Filipino ethnicity in Japan, struggle to shape their children and the new nikkeijin generation to speak Philippine language and embrace the Filipino culture.

The narratives of the nikkeijins ultimately debunk simplistic assumptions on the development of nikkei identity – that they have dual identities, or that they easily assimilate due to cultural proximity. Such identity is neither fixed / layered nor shifting in a predictable social event, time, and circumstances. Convoluted in its layering and complex in its positioning, identities shuffles, interact, coalesce and even ignite in various dimensions. As ethnic borders expand or dwindle, the process of identity reconstruction occurs.

And while evidence shows that underneath all the layers, the often disregarded Filipino identity exist, the continuous processes of negotiation and identity reconstruction may alter the trajectory most specially in the younger and higher generation nikkei who were born and raised in Japan. In spite of active socialization from their parents, their constructed meaning of homeland and national imagining may no longer be pivoted on Filipino identity.

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