

Religiosity and Social Support Networks in the lives of Brazilian women and their families in Japan

Religiosidade e Rede de Apoio Social na vida das mulheres brasileiras e suas famílias no Japão

Regina Yoshie Matsue

Doctor of Anthropology. Adjunct professor at the post-graduate program in Public Health at the Universidade de Fortaleza.

Address: Avenida Washington Soares, 1.321, Bloco S, sala 01, CEP 60811-341, Fortaleza, CE, Brazil.

E-mail: rymatsue08@yahoo.com

Resumo

As brasileiras no Japão vivem um estado de dupla discriminação no mercado de trabalho; como migrantes e como mulheres. Neste contexto, a mulher brasileira é alienada socialmente. Este artigo visa explorar o impacto e o sentido da religiosidade na vida destas mulheres e de suas famílias. O estudo é de natureza etnográfica. A pesquisa de campo: observação participante das várias atividades e celebrações do grupo católico e entrevistas com mulheres foi realizada sistematicamente no período de janeiro a junho de 2006, sendo complementado por coleta de dados em junho de 2008 na Diocese de Saitama. Esta Diocese está localizada na região de *Kanto* e inclui as províncias de Saitama, Gunma, Tochigi e Ibaraki. As missas têm uma participação média de cinquenta a sessenta pessoas, sendo a maioria mulheres. No total foram realizadas quinze entrevistas com as mulheres de vinte e cinco a cinquenta anos que frequentavam periodicamente as paróquias. A situação de alienação social pode levar ao aparecimento das “perturbações físico-morais”, impelindo as brasileiras a buscarem ajuda nos grupos religiosos. A partir das atividades e práticas religiosas, as brasileiras estabelecem campos de significação e o senso de sua própria identidade na sociedade japonesa. A certeza de poder contar com o apoio do grupo gera conforto para os migrantes que vivem em um ambiente incerto na sociedade receptora. Assim, a busca pela religiosidade pelas migrantes denota três imperativos: busca por apoio social material e/ou emocional, orientação na educação dos filhos e a necessidade de afirmação da identidade.

Palavras-chave: Migrantes brasileiras; Alienação social; Perturbação físico-moral; Religiosidade; Identidade.

Abstract

Brazilian women in Japan face twofold discrimination in the job market: as women and as migrants. In this context, Brazilian women are socially alienated. This study explores the impact and the meaning of religiosity in the lives of these women and their families. The study has an ethnographic approach. The field research included participant observation of a Catholic group's activities and celebrations; interviews with women were also systematically conducted from January to June 2006, and complemented by data collected in the Saitama diocese during June 2008. This diocese is located in the Kanto region and includes the prefectures of Saitama, Gunma, Tochigi and Ibaraki. Around fifty people attended the services, the majority women. Fifteen interviews were conducted with women who frequented the services; their ages varied from twenty five to fifty years old. The situation of social alienation can cause "physical-moral perturbation", which drives the Brazilian women to search for help from religious groups. Through religious activities and practices, the Brazilians establish codes of meaning and the sense of their own identity within Japanese society. The certainty of being able to rely on the network of social support offered by the group provides comfort for these women, who are living in an insecure environment in the host country. In this way, Brazilian women's search for religiosity implies three aspects vital to their lives in Japan: the search for social, material, and emotional support, religious orientation for their children, and the need to affirm their identity.

Keywords: Brazilian Women Migrants; Social Alienation; Physical-Moral Disturbance; Religiosity; Identity.

Introduction

The economic crisis Brazil faced at the end of the 1980s, combined with the scarcity of labor in Japan's manufacturing sector, provoked a large movement of Japanese-Brazilian workers to that country. The migratory contingent was composed, in that period, exclusively of Japanese citizens, mostly men, who had migrated to Brazil after the war and/or were children of Japanese people who had Japanese citizenship. This is because, until the 1990s, Japan did not legally accept non-specialized foreign labor to work in the country (Yamanaka and Piper, 2005).

However, the problem of scarce labor for manufacturing brought the Japanese government to change the law in 1990. Since that time, Japanese legislation allows the entrance of children of Japanese citizens, and second-generation members of their families (*nissei*) who came to have the right to a three-year work visa, and a one-year visa was allowed for third-generation members (*sansei*), both of which could be renewed. Many descendants and their families then began a massive migratory process, since this visa gave them the right to reside and work in the country for an undetermined amount of time (Tsuda, 2006).

At present, there are approximately 215,000 Brazilians living and working in Japan. It is estimated that 45% of this population is composed of women (Yamanaka, 2005). Since the beginning of the migratory process, the Brazilians in Japan have organized themselves within their communities in order to seek alternative means of socialization and services. The Brazilian community has a strong presence in some cities such as Hamamatsu, located in Shizuoka prefecture, Oizumi, in Gunma prefecture, and in many other cities in various locations and regions around the country. On the one hand, the network of services created by these communities simplifies the lives of the Brazilian migrants who have stores selling Brazilian products, supermarkets, restaurants, travel agencies, beauty salons, banks, etc. at their disposal. On the other hand, however, the Brazilians tend to live isolated in their communities, without much contact and support from local society.

This phenomenon, known as “reverse migration”, or the *dekasegi* phenomenon, has awakened interest and become a topic of academic studies among Brazilian and foreign researchers in various areas. The studies point to the difficulties faced by these migrants and the subsequent formation and marginalization of the Brazilian community in Japan (Roth, 2002; Lesser, 2003; Tsuda, 2003, 2006). Others also show problems related to the health and well-being of these migrants, since they, besides being socially marginalized, are exposed to stressful working conditions (Tsuda, 2003; Miyasaka et al., 2007; Matsue, 2012).

Among the studies that were conducted, however, there are few that treat the conditions of Brazilian women working in Japan. The works of Keiko Yamanaka stand out in this area; her works discuss the discriminatory practices faced by migrant women in the work environment, practices which are based on racial and gender-related ideologies (Yamanaka, 2003; Yamanaka and Piper, 2005).

In this context of marginalization, the Brazilian women search for refuge and ways to face their problems in activities that take place inside their own community, among family and friends and religious-based support groups and services. There is, however, a gap in the surveys that consider the role that religiosity and social support groups play in migrants’ quality of life. The majority of the population of migrants is made up of Catholics (Matsue, 2006, 2012), for this reason, we opted to analyze the meaning of religiosity and the impact of its support in the daily life of Brazilian women in Japan¹. This project is the partial result of field research carried out between January and June of 2006, and was supplemented by data collected in June, 2008.

Ethnicity, migration, and gender

The law that opened the doors to Japan for workers considered to be ethnically Japanese inspires a controversial debate. The law is based on political discourses of racial homogeneity in the Japanese nation. On the one hand, descendants of Japanese citizens are accepted due to the fact that they belong to a Japanese family lineage, even if the link is distant. Family links are based on blood ties and, in many Japanese political discourses supporting this law, we can verify the allusion to blood ties with the foreign-born children and grandchildren of Japanese people (Roth, 2002; Tsuda 2006). Therefore, the ideology of racial homogeneity is maintained while at the same time finding a way of alleviating the problem of labor scarcity. Nevertheless, this policy of accepting Japanese-Brazilian workers in Japan as a way of maintaining the ideal of racial homogeneity becomes ambiguous.

Japanese people, according to theories of Japanese cultural identity (*nihonjinron*²), are defined by three criteria of homogeneity: race/blood, culture/language, and territory (Befu, 2001). The Japanese-Brazilians are racially Japanese, and are registered in the family records in their location of origin based on their family surname. However, they sin by being culturally Brazilian and not dominating the Japanese language as they are expected to.

From this perspective, many Japanese descendants who considered themselves to be “Japanese in Brazil” and who had strong links to the ethnic and imaginary homeland of their ancestors, are rejected in Japan as foreigners. From this point, the process is inverted, and these individuals begin to identify themselves strongly with Brazil in the migratory

1 There are other religious groups active among the Brazilians in Japan which are not analyzed in this article. Among them we can highlight the Evangelical and Pentecostal groups such as the Assemblies of God, Baptist Church, Foursquare Church and Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, as well as other groups from new Japanese religions such as *Seicho-no-Ie* and the Messianic Church. These groups publicize their activities through their members, their own publications, and/or classified advertisements in the newspapers with large circulation within the Brazilian community in Japan such as the “International Press” and “Tudo Bem”.

2 The myth of cultural and racial homogeneity in the Japanese nation originated in the 19th century. Folklorists, writers, anthropologists, and others brought traces of ethos, esthetics, ecology, language, social structure, cultural origin, racial origin, and politics to the surface that aimed to convince the reader that centuries of isolation had established the ideal conditions for the unique and homogenous formation of the Japanese people and nation (Befu, 2001). In contrast, historical evidence shows commercial contact in the port of Nagasaki before and during the medieval period and in the colonial period, demonstrating that there was always the presence of diverse ethnic groups in Japan such as the Chinese, the Ainu, the Rykyus from Okinawa, and the Koreans, and more recently, immigrants from southeast Asia and Latin America (Lie, 2004)

context. Due to this “inversion” of position, many researchers classify Brazilian migrants in Japan as a “doubly marginalized” group or a “double diaspora” (Tsuda, 2006). In this sense, as Hall (2005) observed, the process of constructing and reproducing the identity of the diaspora should be perceived as something constantly in transformation, varying according to the historical and cultural context in which the group is located. Identity has become a “movable celebration”; continuously transformed in relation to the forms by which we are represented or which are requested by the cultural systems that surround us.

The majority of Brazilian migrants are from the middle class, working as liberal professionals or in small businesses. In Japan, however, 90% of the migrants invariably become manual laborers: working on automobile production lines, producing parts, electronics, food, chemicals, and other products, regardless of their social position in the profession they practiced before. The workers are employed through large businesses that contract out the migrants’ activities to small companies which provide parts to the large industries. Consequently, the Brazilians are not formal employees and are contracted temporarily, without the same status and rights that local workers enjoy such as stability, pensions, unemployment and health insurance, and the possibility of rising through the job ranks. This form of hiring relieves the employer of social responsibilities for the immigrants, making them into disposable and cheap labor (Yamanaka and Piper, 2005).

Added to this, the Brazilians do a completely impersonal, mechanical, and repetitive type of work. This type of work is stigmatized as the “three Ks”: *kiken* (hazardous), *kitsui* (arduous), and *kitanai* (dirty), scorned by Japanese workers and done by second-class citizens or immigrants. This working situation, connected with the state of social marginalization in which the migrants live between two countries without effectively participating in the social life of either, causes a feeling of rootlessness (Tsuda, 2006). The migrants find themselves locked into a situation of social anomy (Durkheim, 2005). On the one hand, the norms, values and socio-cultural codes of the country of origin no longer have

any strength nor relevance in the new context. And, on the other hand, the standard and cultural norms of the host country have no meaning to them. The sense of life is lost or becomes confused in the migratory context, leaving a type of void in which society no longer can exercise control over its members, or leaves them to their own devices.

In the face of this reality, many Brazilian workers and their families live in a process of circular migration between Brazil and Japan, in which readaptation to both countries is difficult (Yamanaka and Piper, 2005). Others have been living in Japan for twenty years with a temporary visa or permanent status. In recent years, Brazilian workers’ tendency to stay in Japan has brought a series of implications with relation to the socio-economic and political status, and the future of these migrants and their children. In this scenario of exclusion and marginalization, issues of citizenship, health, education, and social and political participation have become pressing.

Recently the situation of Brazilian workers became even more precarious. In February of 2009, as a result of the world economic crisis of 2008, it was estimated that 15% of the Brazilian workers who lived in Japan faced the threat of losing their jobs, having their salaries reduced, or were already unemployed (Magalhães, 2009). In 2011, environmental catastrophe struck: the earthquake, followed by a tsunami and the nuclear accident in the Northeast region rocked the country’s economy. Places far from the most stricken areas also suffered from the consequences of the crisis; temporary workers did not get their contracts renewed or extended, and the leisure sector suffered a great loss of business. The lack of parts in the factories also impeded the national chain of production, which caused them to operate at reduced capacity. The unemployment rate reached a level of 4.6% in June of 2011 (Martins, 2011), and consequently, the vulnerability of migrant workers increased.

In this context unfavorable to migrant workers, the Brazilian women who migrated at an economically active age accompanied by their partners and children faced a working environment that was even more precarious than that of the men. This began with a salary that was up to a third less than men’s

salaries, even though women did the same jobs as men. This salary disparity is the greatest among developed countries (Shuto, 2009).

This practice, based on the sexual division of labor, is justified by the ideology of the state, which has been in force since the Meiji era, which esteems the man's role as the provider of the family. This means exclusive dedication to the company, while the women is left with reproduction and the role of "professional housewife", a good administrator of domestic tasks who, at the same time, tutors the children to perform in school. The state motto is that women should be *good wives, wise mothers* (Hirao, 2001; Sekiguchi 2010). This patriarchic model is at the center of Japan's economic growth, in which the family unit becomes a productive enterprise.

In the patriarchic model, gender relations are asymmetrical, showing a differentiation between the sexes that restricts behaviors and conduct in which masculine domination is produced. This form of action is considered appropriate and inevitable, as if it were "the natural order of things", based on the *habitus* which rules life in society. The *habitus*, according to Bourdieu (1999), represents mental and bodily schemes of perception, comprehension and action which guide a practical knowledge of the implicit laws of social function acquired by socialization. In this sense, there is a perpetuation of the relationship of dominance between the genders, since the agents internalize the social codes and values, at the same time that they externalize them in their actions. In this way, the *habitus* tends to produce practices molded by the social structures that generate them, and these are reproduced and legitimized in the action of the social actors.

As a consequence of this model which was in force during the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japanese women were discouraged from pursuing a career after marriage. In observing the rate of women's participation in the Japanese job market, a M-shaped curve can be seen; the first peak occurs when the women enter the job market at 20 to 24 years of age, the period at which approximately 70% of the female population is employed. The curve, however, suffers an abrupt drop during the 30-35 year period, a time which is exclusively dedicated to domestic tasks. Women who insist on continuing to work

after becoming mothers are discriminated against and stigmatized as divorced mothers or belonging to a less-favored portion of the population. In middle age, women tend to return to the job market when the work of educating children has been accomplished. Nevertheless, they invariably become temporary, non-specialized workers, without the same labor rights as men (Shuto, 2009; Sekiguchi, 2010).

On the other hand, as shown by Bourdieu (1999), the women are provided with the agency to interfere, to resist, or to change the reality in which they live. In this perspective, in the 1980s, women connected to the feminist movement organized and united with the international community, pressuring the government to take measures in the direction of creating conditions which were more favorable to women in the workplace. As a result of this movement, in 1985 a law was passed providing "Equal Employment Opportunities" (Yamanaka and Piper, 2005). However, in practice, companies continued to follow the rules of the State's traditional model based on inequality of the sexual roles.

Due to the patriarchic ideology of the State, the Japanese educational system offers few options to support mothers; there are few full-time child care settings for newborns, and school activities and meetings from preschool through elementary school require weekly participation (Hirao, 2001). Additionally, housekeepers or nannies to help the mothers with domestic tasks are not available. The Brazilian women who migrate with small children or who give birth in Japan face this system, receiving little or no support from the State in caring for their children. For these mothers, the job market is small; others opt for sporadic or temporary work in small companies, others work informally within the Brazilian community itself, caring for other mothers' children or selling box lunches.

In 1999, the Equal Employment Opportunities law was revised. However, this revision did not alter matters related to inequality between men and women at work, but simply abolished restrictive measures related to overtime, night shifts, and vacations for women. It should be stressed that payment for these periods is higher than for conventional workdays and schedules (Yamamoto, 2006). Many Brazilian women, therefore, were attracted to the

job market at periods which were conducive to the routines of mothers and housewives.

Despite this scenario which does not favor Brazilian workers, a large interest on the part of Japanese entrepreneurs and small industries in hiring these women is noted. Approximately 84% of the Brazilian women in Japan are workers in the automobile and electronic component industries (Yamamoto, 2006). For the employers, hiring these women is ideal, as the majority are relatively young, motivated to work in order to supplement the family's income, willing to receive a lower salary than men, and to carry out services which are scorned by the majority of Japanese women (Yamanaka and Piper, 2005). The situation of legality of these workers creates an ideal availability; the employer can depend on their work in a constant manner, but it can be temporary, in the periods when there is demand. This excuses the employers from labor rights and obligations that would be paid to a native. The Brazilian female worker represents low-cost, disposable labor; cheaper than her male compatriots, she contributes to the preservation of the model of production that discriminates and exploits women.

This situation can exercise, over time, a negative effect on the quality of life of these women, making them vulnerable to various health problems. Studies show that at least 3% of migrants are diagnosed with depression and mental illness (Tsuda, 2003; Miyasaka et al., 2007). And even if they seek professional help, difficulty with the Japanese language impedes them from expressing themselves correctly.

How do Brazilian women deal with this impasse they experience in Japan? In this context, many of them find support and solidarity among their peers: family members, groups of friends, and the Brazilian community in general. In this way, the "little Brazils" began to arise on the margins of Japanese society.

Methodology

The study is ethnographic in nature. The field research, participant observation of various activities and celebrations of the Catholic group and interviews with the women, was conducted systematically in the period of January-July 2006, and was complemented with data collection in June 2008 in the Saitama

diocese. This diocese covers Saitama and Gunma prefectures, where cities with a large concentration of Brazilians are located: Oizumi and Ota. Approximately 10% of the population of both cities is made up of Brazilians. It also includes Tochigi and Ibaraki prefectures, where there are small and sparse communities of Brazilians. There are around twelve churches that offer masses and religious services in Portuguese in this region, where approximately 30,000 Brazilian Catholics live (Statistics of the Catholic Church in Japan, 2005).

The masses had an average participation of 50 to 60 people, the majority women. In all, 15 interviews were conducted with women between 25 and 50 years of age who periodically frequented the activities and services in offered in Portuguese by the Japanese parishes. In order to understand the experiences, searches, and meanings of the practice and the involvement of the women in the group, the interviews were conducted individually, and in depth. We consider this technique to be dynamic and flexible, useful for capturing a reality, both for questions related to the intimate feelings of the interviewee, as well as for describing the complex processes in which they are involved.

The interviews were organized and analyzed based on the preparation of the women's narrative about the meanings of religiosity. We sought to analyze the relationship between the individual and the culture, contributing to the development or the maintenance of attitudes of values in specific contexts and, consequently, of meanings. The narratives are not simply accounts of experience; they favor shared experience and the organization of behavior, always emphasizing the relationship between the plurality of facts and their meanings for the subject (Bruner, 2004). The narratives were interpreted in the light of concepts surrounding the totality of the phenomenon known as "physical-moral" disturbance in the area of health/disease (Duarte, 1986, 1994, 2003) and usages surrounding ethnic identity (Oliveira, 2003, 2005).

Religion and Health

In recent decades, interest in religious and spiritual practices with relation to the health/sickness

process has become evident. In Brazil, studies have examined the relationship between spirituality and the aspects of mental health, of palliative care, and of social support (Duarte, 1986, 1994, 2003; Paiva, 2007; Valla, 2011). Such studies reflect a more holistic conception of health in questioning the Cartesian concept, considering the importance of the interconnection between the so-called psychic and physical disturbances and how emotions act on the brain as well as the body (Hacking, 2005).

Duarte (1994), in the area of the anthropology of health, criticized the dualistic model of biomedicine that separates body from mind. The author uses the term “physical-moral disturbance” to propose a mediation and connection between these two planes which make up a person. The representation of disturbances in lower classes of Brazilian society does not obey biomedicine’s principles of individualizing rationality. It dissolves the totality of the experience and singularity of the events of health/illness present in the personal account (Duarte, 2003).

The quality of the “physical-moral”, in turn, brings the necessary and pervasive overlap between the physical level, the bodily level, and the relational level of the human experience and all that which, in another part, is opposed to it, related to the old spiritual and the recent psychic. Along these lines, Duarte (2003) indicates a confluence of aspects of health/illness and the social and religious context. These two dimensions of social life maintain intimate connections, both from the side of cosmological structures and of beliefs as well as by the integration practiced in systems of cure and/or therapeutic trajectories, in which religious facts that are experienced mix with facts classified as medical or psychiatric. In this way, to understand human phenomena, it is critical that the totality intertwined in the term “physical-moral” be considered, as disturbances of this nature reflect the fundamental symbolical and cultural conditions of human experience.

From this perspective, comprehension of the sickness/health phenomenon demands the understanding of the entirety of personal identity, indicating the possible connections between the physical and moral dimension and the mobilizing actions and reactions of meaning. Religiosity offers elements of the connection between the two dimensions, and

meanings of the principles of action. Therefore, the therapeutic power of religion can be exercised by the direct mobilization of meaning, influencing the emotions, behavior, and the cognition of the people involved. Belief in something divine, and a vision of the world based on doctrine and on faith give more meaning and coherence to life, and, overall, give emotional support to confront and interpret critical situations (Valla, 2011).

Additionally, religion mobilizes the feeling of identity and belonging to a group. The desire to have one’s rights recognized, among these the right to possess an identity, is a reality that imposes itself into the social world as something primordial and vital. Nevertheless, disregard and disrespect are similar to wounds or moral offenses and, consequently, are like a negation of the recognition of identity (Oliveira, 2005). In this way, social and/or cultural identity emphasize values that build and make them persevere and which also, eventually, make them conform or rebel depending on the circumstances of how the group is located in the social context.

The religious groups offer moral support to maintain values and cultural and religious identity, guiding the education of children and activities related to care and prevention; they are related to crises and conflicts that are personal, connected to family and social (juvenile delinquency, violence, etc.) (Maton and Wells, 1995). In this way, it there is no doubt that religious affiliation can promote the well-being of the group in mobilizing human and institutional resources to recognize alternative cultural and religious values, encouraging their empowerment.

As we shall see below, the religious group is the mobilizer of meaning, plays an important role in the life of the Brazilian women in Japan, and is the place for socialization, community participation and mobilization of meanings for the migrants *par excellence*. Nevertheless, we cannot neglect to mention that behind these religious activities of guidance and support, whether spiritual or material, there is an ecclesiastical structure that exercises power which, indirectly, controls the personal and moral conduct of its members (Miller and Rose, 1990). There is, on the part of religious groups, an action that regulates the subject’s actions and the capacities within an *ethos* and a vision of the world. This

ethos is legitimated by the group and supplies the bases from which the subjects give meaning to their lives and reconstruct their identities. The group, in turn, demands certain control of the individuals' actions, mobilizing the members to defend and disseminate such values and ideas (Matsue, 2012).

Discussion of the results

Until the end of the 1980s, the number of Catholics in Japan was small, less than 1% of the country's population. However, with the arrival of foreigners from Catholic countries in recent years, the number of Catholics in Japan has doubled (Matsue, 2006). In the immigrants, the Catholic church has seen a possibility for growth that was unimaginable decades ago. With the arrival of many immigrants from Catholic countries such as Brazil, Peru, and the Philippines, there has also been an increase in the need for assistance and services in the local parishes of Japan's Catholic churches.

However, for the local population, the participation of groups of foreigners in their parishes is seen as an "invasion" (Nelson, 2002; Matsue, 2006). As a result, although the migrants are occupying the empty pews in the churches that generally have few congregants and difficulty attracting young or new Japanese members, they are slighted and treated like "visitors" by the local community. In this way, the participation of foreigners in the local parishes is still precarious. Due to Catholicism's own history of prohibition and persecution in the past, together with the group mentality which has difficulty accepting what is "different", Catholic communities in Japan are closed and averse to opening and changes.

The peculiar situation of interethnic contact between Brazilians and Japanese in the parishes reveals a context of interethnic friction; a state in which the two ethnic groups are irreversibly connected to each other, despite the contradictions expressed through the manifested conflicts or latent tensions between them (Oliveira, 2003). In this way, due to the cultural and linguistic differences, the Brazilian migrants are marginalized and make up a group outside Japanese society. Keeping this scenario in mind, the Brazilian women prefer to meet up only with Brazilian members, avoiding contact with the local community.

We Brazilians admire the disciplined way that the Japanese hold their masses. There are no children making noise, the music is played on an organ, it's very organized. However, we don't feel at home, since we know that the Japanese are uncomfortable with our mess... (member of the Tsuchiura community, February 2006).

In Japanese cities with a large concentration of Brazilians, this conflicting situation has brought about the creation of distinct and separate communities in the local Catholic churches. The monthly masses in Portuguese and liturgical services such as baptism, catechism courses, first communion and confirmation for children and adults become happenings for only the Brazilians, conducted separately. In parallel, the Catholic church represented the place of socialization, contact networks, social assistance and counseling that the Brazilian women did not find in the official agencies connected with migration.

When I arrived here it was a big shock, because everything is very different and even worse, I was stuck at home. I had no contact with Japan until I got married, my husband understands and speaks Japanese. And right away when I arrived I couldn't work for two [years] because my two daughters were small. I stayed at home the whole time. It was a very sad time in my life; I couldn't take it and I got depressed... It was then that I went to the church to be able to socialize a bit and ask the Brazilian priest for help, it saved me, because I felt welcomed and I began to improve, from then on I began to participate in the masses, in the community activities (member of the Tsuchiura community, February 2006).

As soon as I arrived in Japan, I began to work as an hourly employee at a frozen food factory. But soon I got pregnant, I tried to hide my pregnancy for some time, but I knew that if my boss found out I was pregnant he would fire me. And that's what happened, when I was in my sixth month he realized I was slow and I couldn't carry the big boxes with the containers we packed. I panicked, what would I do at home alone, my husband worked until late at night... The only place I could find a little solace was in the church and in the group of friends I made there. I managed to find a place where I felt at home... (member of the Tomobe community, March 2006).

In the above accounts, it can be seen that “being perturbed” led the women to react by seeking actions that mobilize meaning. The situation of crisis, or the experience of nervous disturbance, represents a disruption in a person’s regular forms and functions and necessarily results in suffering, whether this is understood in the more restrictive physical sense, or in the farther-reaching moral sense. In this way, the physical-moral seeks to reconstitute the character of connections in the relationships between corporality and all other dimensions of social life, including the spiritual or transcendental (Duarte, 2003). Religious affiliation represents a specific way for the women to react in the face of alienation or suffering, and a way of recovering meaning for their lives. Thus, the religious group represented a manner of reconstituting the social pattern and the social relationships of the Brazilian migrants in the host society.

The experience of migration interconnects values, subjectivities, and a certain cultural standard that is manifested from ethnic identity. In this sense, the migrants utilize the space of the church as a place to recreate their culture and identity. In this space, the migrants physically reconstruct the visual representations and objects of adoration, including ceremonies, rituals and celebration of saints’ days that pertain to the religious context. It is worth stressing that Catholicism, despite its presence in various countries, has diverse variations and practices (Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). In replicating their own forms of adoration and celebration rituals, the migrants reinforce cultural and ethnic continuity in their children’s generation. In this way, the Brazilian women’s search for Catholic practices and values reflect a preoccupation with the religious education of their children who are being educated in Japan.

My family in Brazil is very Catholic, my mother is a devout practitioner. When I arrived here I began to be worried about the education of my children. I went to look for help and soon found a group of Brazilian women at the church who met at the church on Sunday for the children’s catechism. There they helped me a lot, guiding my children, since they need to learn Catholic values: what is right and wrong, to respect your neighbor and have solidarity with other people. I can’t imagine my life without

my faith. God forbid that my kids grew up like the Japanese, without religion! My children grew up in Japan, but they know that they are Brazilian and I want to maintain the tradition (member of the Tsuchiura community, June 2006).

I was brought up in the bosom of the Catholic church, every Sunday we went to mass and we always participated in all the church’s activities. So life as a family and in the church was always very important to me. I came to Japan to pursue a dream, but I realized that life here is very lonely. In the beginning everything was new and I thought it was great, but over the years it got difficult. I had my daughter here and couldn’t work anymore. As soon as my daughter entered Japanese school I had various problems; she didn’t want to speak Portuguese at home any more and was embarrassed when I showed up at school. I had to be firm with her, always emphasizing that although we lived in Japan, we are Brazilian. In the catechism group she started to make friends with other Brazilian children and now she speaks Portuguese when she is with Brazilians. For me, it is important to maintain our identity as Brazilians (member of the Tsuchiura community).

The contrasting character of ethnic identity implies a confrontation with other identity and is done based on a system of representations of ideological and/or religious content (Oliveira, 2003). In the above statements, religiosity is associated with the ethnic identity of the group; here the contrasting identity seems to be made up of the essence of ethnic identity, in other words, based on what this defines. Brazilian ethnicity is affirmed in the negation of Japanese identity, seen ethnocentrically by the Brazilians. Catholicism then represents the base on which the Brazilians construct the difference between “being Brazilian” as opposed to “being Japanese” in their children’s generation. For many women, “being Catholic is synonymous with being Brazilian”, representing a strong tool for differentiation, identity, meaning, and, at the same time, moral and cultural guidance.

Religious affiliation gives meaning and direction to the lives of the women and differentiates them from the Japanese. In this way, the children are encouraged to follow Catholic teaching, as the catechism and first communion classes are taught

in Portuguese. We stress that this is the reaction of Brazilian mothers opposing the model which imposes itself; due to the assimilationist pressure of the Japanese educational system, the majority of Brazilian children educated in Japan do not speak Portuguese fluently (Riordan, 2005).

The Brazilian women reconstruct, from the activities and practices of the religious group, a series of presuppositions, explicative models, values and standards of behavior that make up the essential components of their daily life in Japan. It is through these practices and activities that the Brazilian women establish codes of meaning and a sense of their own identity. In this sense, identity is profoundly connected to the sustenance of maintaining daily life (Hita, 1998). Nevertheless, in the case of the Brazilian women in Japan, the daily reality is always under threat and in crisis, as the external environment is hostile to development of prospects for the future.

My husband and I came to Japan young, when we got married I was 21, I left school for business administration. We thought we would work, earn money, and come back right away, but we ended up staying... we had two daughters, and never managed to save to really come back. It's already been 16 years that we're here, I don't regret it, I think that here we are more secure than in Brazil, but sometimes I think about going back, but what would I do there? For now, we are staying... (member of the Tomobe community, June 2008).

I'd like to give my daughter a better life, I don't want her to have the same fate as me: having to subject herself to heavy work in a factory. But I worry, I think about returning to Brazil and she could go to university there, since here in Japan it is very expensive. But the problem is that if we return, it will be hard to get a good job. Wow, how I regret coming here, how stupid, throwing away college for this, if I could go back in time it would be different... but at least we have this space in the church to have our meetings, exchange ideas, and vent on the weekends (member of the Tsuchiura community, June 2008).

Prospects for the future of the Brazilian women and their families are dismal, this situation of “deterritorialization” (Appadurai, 1991) causes disturbances on a moral and physical level. On the one hand, the Brazilian women find themselves trapped in a scenario of precarious work which offers no possibility of rising through the ranks or personal growth. On the other hand, having been away for many years, the prospects of returning and being employed are difficult, creating a situation of double social and economic alienation.

Final Considerations

Brazilian women have become a vulnerable minority in Japan, since they are not only socially marginalized, they are exposed to unfavorable work conditions. The situation of vulnerability could lead to the appearance of “physical-moral disturbances”. This concept considers the way emotions are reflected in health, since the beginning of an illness can be related to an unbalanced emotional reaction in a person, frequently caused by what is generally called stress, by feeling threatened in one's environment. In this perspective, contact with people outside the family, maintenance of identity and religiosity contribute to the maintenance of the pillars organizing daily life, they are the fundamental elements of people's physical and mental well-being, as a threat to any one of these pillars represents a serious threat to health and well-being.

In this article we have sought to reflect on the role of religiosity in the life of Brazilian women and their families in Japan. The situation of social exclusion impels these women to seek help in religious groups. Religious practices connected with the group's power of cohesion represent sympathetic and creative ways of dealing with daily difficulties. The certainty of being able to depend on the group's support creates comfort for the migrants who live in an uncertain environment in the host society. In this way, the migrants' search for religiosity reflects three imperatives: the search for social, material, and/or emotional support, guidance in educating their children, and the need to affirm their identity.

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