

Japanese women, marriage migration and cultural identity: thinking through globalisation, diaspora and transnationalism

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Abstract

Marriage migration is a growing field of study which focuses predominately on women in general and third world women in particular. Most studies of marriage migration and international marriage offer detailed accounts of international mobility and call on theories of globalisation, diaspora and / or transnationalism to explain the phenomenon. This paper takes the historical and contemporary case of Japanese women marriage migrants to Australia to examine insights offered by these three approaches. In particular the paper shows how notions of diaspora and transnationalism offer useful ways to conceptualise the identity and mobility of past and contemporary marriage migrants whose physical, virtual and emotional connectivity zigzags back and forth from homeland to new home. The implications of this uneven situation for cultural and national identity is that at different points in time identities lapse and are renewed and revived in relation to different historical, economic and social conditions.

Keywords: Marriage Migration, International Marriage, Japanese Women, Diaspora, Globalisation, Transnationalism

Introduction

The growing field of marriage migration emphasises the migration and mobility of women in general, and women from the third world in particular (Piper 2003; Constable 2003; Suzuki 2007). This paper focuses on the marriage migration of women between wealthy nations in the case of post-war and contemporary Japanese women in Australia. It considers processes of identity formation in global, diasporic and transnational times. Following Stuart Hall (1990) cultural identity is not be understood as a transparent unproblematic accomplished fact but an in process production constituted within representation. Globalisation alone does not fully explain matters of national and cultural identity involved in international marriage and marriage migration. Globalisation has not straightforwardly rendered irrelevant

national and cultural identities, rather they have become hybridised, irregular and variable in ways that at times reinforce, and at others diminish identity.

International marriage has become increasingly common in the contemporary world and in the case of Japanese women and Australian men, romance and marriage is facilitated by advances in transportation and communications technology associated with globalisation. However, while globalisation might explain the increased opportunity for romantic encounters, it does not fully clarify why the contacts and connections with family, relatives and friends vary and are reconfigured through women's lives (Takeda 2009). Diaspora generally involves a notion of dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary or identity maintenance (Brubaker 2005). However the term has been 'stretched' over the past two decades such that it can no longer be regarded as 'an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact' and can be more fruitfully regarded as 'stances, project, claims, idioms, practices and so on' (Brubaker 2005: 13; Matthews 2002). This broad sense of the term better captures the identity practices of Japanese women marriage migrants where homeland orientation and identity maintenance is not consistent over time. Transnationalism refers to the nature and form of migrant multiple ties, interactions and links with two or more national locations (Vertovec 2004). Recent use of the term leads itself to understanding of woman's ongoing and yet uneven involvement with Japan, materially, virtually and emotionally (Takeda 2009). To advance this discussion this paper compares the marriage migration of Japanese women to Australia in the case of post WWII war brides and the case of contemporary international marriages. The paper then discusses globalisation and closes with insights offered by notions of diaspora and transnationalism that advance understanding of the uneven nature of cultural identity.

Marriage Migrants: War brides and international marriages

This section shows how the experience of marriage migration varies across time and place. It may be mediated by home and the experience of disruption and displacement, but it is also mediated by patriarchy, assimilationist / multicultural politics, economic opportunities, socio-economic position, cultural capital and racism.

Senso Hanayome or 'war bride' refers to Japanese women who married foreign military personnel stationed in Japan. In the late 1950s and early 1960s some 600-650 women married and migrated due to social and economic factors (Nagata 2001; Tamura 2001). Those war brides experienced severe food shortages due to the collapse of the Japanese economy. Many supported themselves and their families by working on military bases as maids, bargirls, waitresses, clerical workers and sales staff and this brought them into contact with servicemen. In light of poverty, lack of marriageable Japanese men and a general disillusionment with Japan, it is not surprising they regarded servicemen as offering fun, freedom and hope (Glenn 1986).

War-brides tended not to maintain ties with homeland. First, because many had limited resources and little time to sustain contact. Second, because many Japanese families opposed the marriage they withdrew support. Some women were told they had brought shame on the family and never to return home. Third, the Japanese media depicted war brides as disreputable women, bargirls and prostitutes. The stereotype persisted. War brides attending the Japanese government's annual convention for overseas Japanese 40 years later attracted negative responses in the Japanese press (Tamura 1997). Finally, many women found that they were unable to return because they lost their Japanese citizenship when they became naturalised.

Many war brides share similar settlement experiences. Separated and often alienated from family and support networks, they found themselves socially isolated due to

differences of culture, language, finance, and travel (Kim 1977) and to racial hostility (Creef 2000). They worked hard to assimilate, changed their names, gave their children English names and did not teach them Japanese (Tamura 1997). They stopped speaking Japanese even though few learnt to speak English with native proficiency, and ended up living more of their lives in English and overseas than in Japan (Nagata 2001).

Contemporary Japanese marriage involves a quite different set of circumstances to that of war brides. The development of affordable transportation and advancements in communication technology established social conditions that facilitate the possibility of increased international mobility, connection and encounters. The strong condition of Japanese *yen* and Japan's bubble economy in the late 1980s made international travel possible (Ichimoto 2004; Habu 2000) and the closeness and relative security of Australia made it a popular destination for Japanese women tourists, students and jobseekers.

In understanding the contemporary case of Japanese women it is not simply ease of travel and economic conditions that need to be accounted for, but ideational circumstances that have made Australia appealing. The concept of *akogare* (fantasy, longing, yearning) refers to the idealisation of western society by Japanese women (Kelsky 2002). The discourse operates like *Orientalism* (Said 2003) which depicts the west as relatively superior, more open, liberal and egalitarian than the east, and the east as uncivilised, backward, and pre-modern. *Akogare* reflects this orientalist juxtaposition and also references the internalisation of hierarchical political relations that continue to characterise western–Japanese interactions in the modern era. It projects western men as egalitarian and *yasashi* (sensitive) and Japanese men as

oppressive and insensitive. *Akogare* prompts many Japanese women to seek romantic relationships and international marriage with western men (Kelsky 2002).

In terms of settlement, contemporary Japanese brides, unlike war brides actively sustain connections with Japan. These involve regular trips to Japan and contacts with Japan through telephone and email. They are also enthusiastic about passing Japanese language and culture onto their children and believe Japanese language and culture are an important way of retaining connections between children and grandparents in Japan as well as expand their global opportunities. However, the connection with homeland is not straight forward and transnational links be they virtual or material are reconfigured by Japanese women at different points in time in relation to age, health, financial constraints and familiarity with computers and new technologies. For instance, women with young families may reduce their contacts with Japan, but these may be increased in the event of family problems or illness (Takeda 2009).

Globalisation

Globalisation refers to the massive social transformations that have occurred over the past few decades which now connect countries, communities and individuals thereby reducing the significance of geographical boundaries and national identities (Giddens 1990; Harvey 1989; Robertson 1992; Waters 1995). Globalisation emphasises an expansive and interlinked set of connections in a new and compressed world where interpersonal links across vast distances and nation-states are maintained through accessible travel, communications and a subjective sense of connection. Globalisation has transformed the economic, technological, social and political conditions of the 21st century making it easier for people to initiate and sustain distant friendships, relationships and marriage (Constable 2003; Plummer 2003; Thai 2008).

Globalisation provides some explanation for the growth of international marriage and how war brides, ostensibly assimilated to the west, have been able to revive their connections to Japan through travel and access to Japanese media, books and films. However, it requires an understanding of ideational forces such as *akogare* to explain women's desire for the west. It also requires an understanding of the mixed ethnicities forged of diasporic circumstances and the unevenness of transnational connections at different stages of life.

Diaspora

Diaspora is a useful conceptual tool because it highlights the significance of symbolic ties to homeland and the role of this in identity maintenance. Problematically however it is often reduced to archetypal notions of community which assume that diasporic groups constitute coherent homogenous entities. This is not the case with the Japanese community in Australia which is differentiated and stratified along lines of nationality, culture, class, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, migration, experience, and interaction with homeland (Nagata and Nagatomo 2007). What holds in terms of identity maintenance and connections to homeland for some Japanese migrants, does not necessarily hold for all. For instance business communities may practice resistance to assimilation and racism through self-segregation and close contact with Japan. War brides are disparately spread across Australia and may practice assimilation as a resistance to racism, until such time as access to travel and media make other practices possible. In the case of contemporary marriage migrants hybrid cultural identities and transnational connections are already in play.

Diaspora is used by Hall (1990) to emphasise the dynamic and ongoing process of hybridity and syncretism occurring on settlement where cultural identity becomes an

in process production forged from the multiple standpoints borne of migration and exile. For Hall (1990) displacement compels the unpredictable and imaginative occupation of culture and identity and generates vibrant and creative ways of expressing these in cultural production. This notion of diaspora comprises an ambivalent politics of positioning and being positioned, of identification and being identified, a politics antithetical to ethnic and cultural essentialism and open to future possibilities. It is a conception of cultural identity which lives with and through, difference and diversity.

Diaspora in this view underlines the flexibility of the marriage migrant experience and the ways cultural identity may be identified with at some points in time and become latent at others; it is modified and recreated according to circumstance and generation and it explains how new hybrid ethnicities arise. It is important to note however that since Japanese migrants comprise a highly differentiated group, the hybrid diasporic consciousness and weakening of national state identifications detailed by Ang (2001) may be differently undertaken by different groups at different points in time; they may lapse and later be reinvigorated. As stated earlier war brides were distanced from Japan for decades due to geographical distance, racism, and assimilation, however transnational connections enabled Japanese cultural identity to be revitalised. While recent marriage migrants are more able to maintain ongoing international connections but these too are discontinuous and change according to circumstance. Because diaspora theory pays little attention to specific processes of connectivity through which identities are sustained and hybridised it has a tendency to homogenise the diaspora experience. The notion of transnationalism discussed below brings these uneven processes of connectivity into view.

Transnationalism

The term transnationalism describes the nature and form of migrant involvement in two or more national locations to overcome distance and nation state borders to maintain multiple ties, links and interactions (Vertovec 2004). The term implies multiple interconnectivity extending beyond national borders at political, cultural and geographical levels (Szanton Blanc et al. 1992). It avoids viewing transnationalism in linear terms and emphasises the multiplicity of circumstance informing migrants' thinking, decision-making, changing lifestyles and practices (Wolf 2002). Migrants practicing transnationalism are referred to as transmigrants who 'take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns within a field of social relations that links together their country of origin and their country or countries of settlement' (Szanton Blanc et al. 1992: ix). Transmigrants are closely positioned within two cultural and national settings to comprise a unique but growing global phenomenon (Schiller and Fouron 2001). Consequently, transnationalism highlights the multiplicity of social relationships generated by individuals and is facilitated by forces of globalisation that have opened up national borders and diminished rigid geographical boundaries.

The disconnections and dislocations of migration are less meaningful for contemporary transmigrants because they are able to reside and be simultaneously involved in activities and decision making in two spaces. While this was not the case for warbrides, it is the case for contemporary Japanese marriage migrants where women regularly visit family members and in some cases where families may reside for long periods of time in both Japan and Australia. Relocation is an ongoing rather than an ultimate process (Takeda 2009). Understandings of transnationalism need further extending to elucidate the way emotions and feelings also flow across national boundaries. Subjective transnationalism, like the notion of diaspora identifies a

process of connection to homeland which is sustained at the level of emotions and subjective feelings (Wolf 2002). But despite travel and new communications technologies many women experience a sense of emotional conflict, loss and guilt which reinforces the actual distance between Australia and Japan. This is especially the case when loved ones need help. Marriage migration may well create a dual sense of home and a hybrid sense of connectivity to two cultural locations and identities but distance remains a barrier. At times they may feel closely connected as if distance has been transcended and they are able to flow between two spheres yet at other times they feel as if they are outside of both. In Australia this is especially the case when they experience racism and other exclusionary practices. Transnationalism thus comprises material and ideational connections which are uneven and vary over time (Takeda 2009).

Conclusion

This paper indicates that marriage migration is best understood through a careful amalgam of theories of globalisation, diaspora and transnationalism. It suggests that various aspects of these approaches advance our understanding of different dimensions of the marriage migration experience as well as clarifying the value and limits of the theories themselves. Notions of globalisation theory underline the signification of new forms of connectivity, but in the case of marriage migrants it is not so much that cultural and national identities wither away, rather that they are flexed in multiple practices of identity formation. Diaspora theory highlights this process by focusing on conditions of settlement to show how homeland and cultural identity maintenance become dynamic syncretic processes of identity formation. Finally, transnationalism highlights the actual process of connectivity. In the case of

contemporary marriage migrants it exposes the way physical, virtual and emotional connectivity zigzags back and forth from homeland to new home to work with different intensities at different times. What this means for cultural and national identity is that various forms of mobility are important; that there are historical, political, social, cultural, and economic constraints to mobility and identity maintenance among different groups, and that identities can lapse or be renewed and revived under different historical, economic and social conditions.

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