

When a Hyphen Matters: Identity and the Children of International Marriages

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I first met 16-year old Takeshi when I interviewed his mother and grandmother, both Filipinas and both former entertainers, in a small café in Osaka sometime in 2010 for data gathering for my Ph.D. dissertation. Takeshi is a quiet boy who shyly admitted that he loves “adobo” (the quintessential “Filipino” food stewed in vinegar, garlic and soy sauce) and goes to a nearby Catholic church every Sunday to hear mass. Linda, his mother, proudly said that Takeshi might change his citizenship from Japanese to Filipino when he turns 20.

Kenji, whose Filipina mother, Chona, I met in a Bible camp organized by a Catholic Church in Nagoya, did not even bother to mask his negative feelings of having a Filipino lineage. His classmates bullied him when they learned that his mother is a Filipina and he does not like going to the Philippines because his relatives would often ask for gadgets and presents from Japan. However, he likes the idea of going to church every Sunday which he associates with his Filipina mother.

Takeshi and Kenji are children of marriages between Filipino women and Japanese men, and such unions, where one of the spouses comes from a different national or ethnic group, are called international marriages. But Takeshi and Kenji’s parents’ marriages are trajectories of international migration, where specifically these Filipina women crossed national borders to seek employment in the entertainment industry in Japan and eventually got married to Japanese men. Thus, within the context of international migration, international marriages go beyond socio-demographic differences of couples and legal aspects of the union and also put into perspective what sociologists Asuncion Frenosa-Flot and Gwenola Ricordeau term as “the dynamic interaction between nation states with diverse migration, citizenship, and family policies shaping the family formation process of couples, their social lives, sense making, and strategies.”²

Family formation and processes manifest the most complex and nuanced dynamics of international marriages. The inevitability of conflicts brought by differences in culture necessitates negotiating, asserting, bargaining or ceding of spaces where cultural encounters happen and where identity is formed or reconstructed. Raising children is one of these most potent spaces and Takeshi and Kenji show the complexities of straddling simultaneously two different cultures, resulting in ambivalence and fluidity of their identity/ies. Takeshi and Kenji’s circumstances are captured in various academic parlance: “children of mixed heritage,” “cross-cultural children,” “children born

¹ The author is currently co-writing with Drs. Viktoriya Kim and Beverley Ann Yamamoto of Osaka University the book *The Politics of International Marriage in Japan* which is on review by the Rutgers University Press, New Jersey.

² Auncion Frenosa-Flot and Gwendolin Ricordeau, eds., *International Marriages of Southeast Asian Women through the Lens of Citizenship* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

of/from international marriages.” Derogatory terms, however, have also emerged in Japan to describe Takeshi and Kenji: *hafu* (half), *daburu* (double), *konketsuji* (mixed-blood child). When we describe them as Filipino-Japanese or Japanese-Filipino, the hyphens linguistically indicate how identity is neatly placed in two dichotomies of ethnic groups, but Kenji and Takeshi have shown that this is not the case.

My research on international marriages and family formation, specifically those of Filipino and Japanese, has shown that assimilation processes cannot explain anymore the way migrants cope with and survive the difficulties of living in receiving countries. Globalization and ready access to information have more or less lessened the exilic nature of migration. Transnationalism allows migrants to establish ties, whether political or cultural, not only in the host country but also in the country of origin and thus the idea of home is now multilayered. Alienation has now several dimensions; it is no longer just isolation nor the lack of belongingness but the jolting realization that there is now a disconnected and disassociated relationship between symbols of their identity that were once familiar and their meanings. In the process, migrants look for a space where they can reconfigure their identity, negotiate meanings and make sense of the disjunctions. The Cultural Studies scholar Homi Bhaba³ calls this the “third space,” an in-between space, a space for negotiation which allows new subject positions to emerge. These positions emerge from the interweaving of the elements of the two cultures, challenging the validity and authenticity of any definitive or essentialist cultural identity. Thus, when Takeshi professes to love being a Filipino because “Filipinos are kinder and happier,” eats “adobo” and is a Roman Catholic, a religion he associates with his mother, and yet holds a Japanese passport, speaks Japanese and goes to Japanese schools, his identity becomes “hybrid”—an identity which is neither Filipino nor Japanese but an identity that is fluid and socially constructed within the context of international migration. What is being an “authentic” Japanese or Filipino is now displaced with “moments” of being Japanese or Filipino. And these moments are never-ending and are always unexpected, thus the disjunction and disconnection. For Takeshi and Kenji, the incommensurability of these “moments” and the constant negotiation is what define them as children of international marriages.

These moments of incommensurability and constant negotiation therefore give a new dimension to how we look at multiculturalism. Takeshi and Kenji’s narratives would tell us that it is in the everyday cultural encounters where multiculturalism is at play—those intimate, small moments interplaying with the social, political, economic or even historical structures which migrants utilize to construct strategies of action to diffuse or solve conflicts. Thus, we cannot reduce multiculturalism to “people of different cultures making beautiful music together” but rather how moments of “third space” and moments of unsettledness are being recognized and addressed by institutional structures and government policies. If this is the case, the hyphen in the identity of Takeshi and Kenji will no longer make sense.

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.

³ Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017).