

### "The last missionary to leave the temple should turn off the light": sociological remarks on the decline of Japanese "immigrant" Buddhism in Brazil

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Usarski, F. (2008). "The last missionary to leave the temple should turn off the light": sociological remarks on the decline of Japanese "immigrant" Buddhism in Brazil. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 35(1), 39-59. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-281958>

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Frank USARSKI

## “The Last Missionary to Leave the Temple Should Turn Off the Light”

Sociological Remarks on the Decline of  
Japanese “Immigrant” Buddhism in Brazil

Empirical data indicate that the so-called “Buddhism of yellow color” that is predominantly associated with Japanese “immigrant” Buddhism, is constantly in decline in terms of “explicit” adherents. After some methodological observations, this article gives an overview of the relevant statistical data. The last part discusses possible reasons for these negative dynamics, referring to causes within Buddhist institutions, the ethnic community, and at the level of the individual.

KEYWORDS: Japanese immigration — ethnic Buddhism — preservation of tradition — acculturation

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UNLIKE Western countries such as Germany, where Buddhism was introduced from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards through the efforts of a handful of occidental protagonists especially interested in Theravada Buddhism (USARSKI 1989), the history of Buddhism in Brazil was initiated with the arrival of the first Japanese (mostly of rural origin) in the port of Santos in 1908. For many decades thereafter, Japanese immigrant Buddhism, not exclusively (NAKAMAKI 2002) but predominantly in the form of Amida Buddhism, continued to be the only expression of Buddhism in the so-called largest Catholic country in the world. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1960s the traditional Soto Zen temple Busshinji, in the city of São Paulo, became the first and primary source for a small circle of non-Japanese pioneers interested in the practice of *zazen* (ROCHA 2006, 78). The same institution was for some time the spiritual home of perhaps *the* symbolic figure of the Brazilian branch of “conversion Buddhism,” Cláudia Souza de Murayama, alias “Monja Coen” (USARSKI 2006). Finally, in order to evaluate the influence of Japanese immigration on Brazilian Buddhism in general, one must not forget the high proportion of Pure Land and Nichiren Buddhist temples and centers within about three hundred Buddhist entities in Brazil, while keeping in mind that the Brazilian field has become as pluralistic as that of other countries (see FIGURE 1).

### *Problematization*

Headlines such as “Buddhism is leaving the temples,”<sup>1</sup> flanked by repeatedly published “news” in the Brazilian media regarding a supposed “boom” of the Brazilian sangha,<sup>2</sup> suggest that, after decades of relative encapsulation, traditional Japanese Buddhism has successfully gone through a process of acculturation and turned into a “trendy” religion. This optimistic image was severely challenged by an article published on 19 January 2001 by the weekly magazine *Isto é* whose title “Don’t let Buddhism disappear from Brazil” did not fit at all with previous reports about the almost inevitable advance of Buddhism. According to the article, the urgent issue, at least among representatives of

1. A quote from the headline of the main article “Além do templo - O budismo atrai mais adeptos no Brasil e seus seguidores assumem práticas engajadas” in the weekly magazine *Isto É*, 1 October 2003.

2. To quote just four examples: “O Brasil dos Budas” (The Brazil of the Buddhas), *Isto É*, March 1997; “Onda Zen” (The Success of Zen), *Elle*, June 1998; “O Budismo conquista o Brasil” (Buddhism conquers Brazil), *Corpo & Mente*, October 2000; “A ascensão do budismo no Brasil” (The Rise of Buddhism in Brazil), *Época*, June 2003.

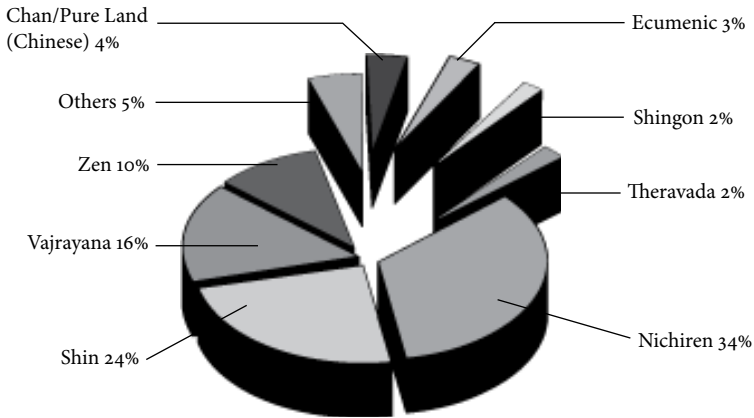


FIGURE 1. Proportions of Buddhist institutions in Brazil  
(SHOJI 2004, 34)

traditional Japanese Buddhist institutions, was not how to respond to a dramatic increase of conversions or to overcrowded sessions, retreats, and workshops, but to declining communities and internal difficulties such as the lack of staff in certain local temples.

While many readers might have been taken by surprise by these “revelations,” the *Isto é* report is not only in tune with similar statements from within traditional Japanese Buddhist communities, but also in line with the results of empirical research on the subject. One example for a pessimistic “emic” evaluation of the current situation of Japanese Buddhism is the statement of an official of the *Comunidade Budista Nichirensu* of São Paulo, who, in 1995, had already emphasized that “There are many, both within and outside the Japanese community, who think that Buddhism is only for older people, and that monks fulfill their functions only in terms of funeral rites” (FEDERAÇÃO DAS SEITAS BUDISTAS DO BRASIL 1995, 42). And in 2004 a leading Jodo Shinshu minister of São Paulo added that

When it comes to religious practice, one can easily notice that the descendents of immigrants are not very interested in what is happening in a Buddhist temple. They are more concerned with integrating themselves into Brazilian society than in maintaining the traditions of their ancestors. Therefore it is not an exaggeration to say that when the last immigrant dies, the only thing for the Buddhist missionaries to do is to close the temples and return to Japan. It would be convenient to turn off the light before leaving for the airport.

(GONÇALVES 2004)

As far as empirical research is concerned, the results of the last national censuses provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) are especially relevant. Nonetheless, when it comes to a closer look at “immigration Buddhism,” the IBGE studies must be interpreted with caution. The most crucial point here is the category of “color” or “race.” In the census’s questionnaire this appears as a fivefold-differentiated option to be correlated with other categories, including those subsumed under the heading “religion.” As for the identification of “immigrant Buddhists” the sub-category in the rubric “color” that spontaneously comes to mind is “yellow.” However, this is obviously an ambiguous association for epistemological, methodological, and political reasons.

The main argument against an overly ingenuous interpretation of the IBGE data is that the identification of a person’s color in the census derives from the self-declaration of an interviewee confronted with a concept that is not only vague but also has negative connotations. This being the case, it is by no means guaranteed that someone with an Asian background is in fact willing to agree that he is a Brazilian of “yellow color.” From an ethical-political point of view, the discomfort with the color/race question is caused by the implicit quality ranking of the suggested sub-categories of the item. Although it is true that the days of the overt proclamation of the ideal of a gradual “whitening” of Brazilian society and of racial stigmatization are over (SASAKI 2006, 100), more subtle social mechanisms, still capable of putting members of ethnic minorities under pressure, have prevailed. This is indicated by personal statements such as the following: “The Japanese always encountered resistance from the Brazilian side. Their strange customs sometimes provoked laughter [...] fear [...] or mistrust” (AZEVEDO 1994, 47). Analysts like Maeyama, opposing the image of Brazil as an exceptionally tolerant country, even speak of a tacit atmosphere of “cultural prejudice” that demands members “of different cultures, peoples, and ways of thinking” to “assimilate themselves into Luso-Brazilian culture which is commonly supposed to be the only ‘legitimate’ Brazilian culture” (MAEYAMA 1983a, 167).

If this observation is adequate, one has to take into account the possibility that a descendent of a Japanese immigrant family has internalized this latent expectation of his/her “complete” assimilation into Brazil’s mainstream culture and therefore judges the option “yellow” in the IBGE questionnaire as inappropriate since it does not reflect his/her efforts to become a fully integrated member of the Brazilian society. This is especially true for individuals born to ethnically mixed parents. However, the rejection of the subcategory “yellow” as a description of one’s own status does not necessarily imply that the interviewee has gotten rid of the self-concept of “Nippo-Brazilian.” Rather it would signal that in relation to the “Nippo” aspect of his/her “composed” individuality the “Brazilian” component has gained the upper hand.

Empirical data proves the pertinence of the above considerations. Due to both procreation and to a continuous flow of Japanese immigrants until 1973, com-

	White	Black	Yellow	Mulatto	Indigenous
1940	63.47	14.64	0.59	21.21	-
1950	61.66	10.96	0.63	26.54	-
1960	61.03	8.71	0.69	29.50	-
1980	54.23	5.92	0.56	38.85	-
1991	51.56	5.00	0.43	42.45	0.20
2000	53.74	6.21	0.45	38.45	0.43

FIGURE 2. Population of Brazil according to color or race (%)  
(Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística IBGE)

plemented by the Immigration of Chinese and Koreans from the 1950s onwards, the number of Brazilians with an Asian family background has increased constantly over the decades. As a consequence of these dynamics, it is estimated that currently more than 1.5 million Brazilians are of Asian origin, most of them (about 1.28 million) Japanese immigrants and their descendants (TSUDA 2000, 3). Figures provided by the IBGE show that, between 1980 and 2000, those of Japanese descent alone represented between 0.7 percent and 0.8 percent of the total Brazilian population (BELTRÃO, SUGAHARA AND KONTA 2006). However, the percentage of individuals predisposed to identify themselves as "yellow" did not correspond to these values (FIGURE 2).

Summing up, one has to bear in mind that correlating the variables "Buddhism" and "yellow" is heuristically limited in at least two ways. First, while Brazilian Buddhists who are not reluctant to identify themselves as "yellow" can be considered as adherents with an Asian family background, they are not necessarily Japanese descendants. Nonetheless, according to the numerical proportions between the nationalities in question (Japanese, Chinese, Korean), the numbers of Buddhists "of yellow color" do not lose their relevance in research on Japanese Buddhism in particular, as long as they are interpreted as predominant statistical tendencies within a wider context.

Second, in order to reduce the risk of distortion, one should be prepared for the possibility that a certain proportion of Brazilian Buddhists of Japanese origin appear in the statistics under a rubric other than that of Buddhists of "yellow color." With this in mind, the following section deals with the dynamics in both sub-fields of Brazilian Buddhism.

#### *The Statistical Evolution of "Buddhism of Yellow Color" in Brazil*

In 2000 only about 0.14 percent of the Brazilian population opted for the rubric "Buddhism" in the IBGE questionnaire. That is quite a modest value even if com-

pared to the number of adherents of religious minorities such as the Adventists (0.73 percent) or Jehovah's Witnesses (0.6 percent). A comparison of the last national censuses also negates the widespread idea that Buddhism is a constantly growing religion (FIGURE 3). The opposite is true, especially when one discards a relative distinction between ethnic Buddhism and the Buddhism of converts (NUMRICH 1996) and takes into account the negative dynamics of the Buddhist field in general between 1991 (236,405 Buddhists) and 2000 (214,873 Buddhists).

This recent decline of the total number of Brazilian Buddhists not only contradicts the numerical exaggerations common in the Brazilian media, but also indicates that one should not count on the possibility that a considerable number of "Nippo-Brazilians" who had refused to continue to declare themselves "yellow" in 2000 now appear under the rubric "Non-Yellow-Buddhist."

The negative dynamics in the subfield becomes even clearer when one considers the evolution of the segment "Buddhists of yellow color" over the last three decades. Compared to the 149,633 "Buddhists of yellow color" registered in 1970, the number of self-declared Buddhists of "yellow color" had dropped to 81,345 in 2000. That is a decline of 68,288 individuals of Asian origin predisposed to identify themselves as adherents of the religion of their forefathers. Complementary data from 1950—when 152,572 Buddhists were counted prior both to the first manifestations of converts to Buddhism in Brazil and to the statistically significant Chinese and Korean immigration to the country—proves that the decline of "Buddhism of yellow color" was an ongoing process throughout the second half of the twentieth century. However, the loss between 1950 and 1970 (2,939) was relatively unimportant and not comparable with the far more dramatic decrease of 59,692 individuals that occurred between 1970 and 1991.

From the standpoint of some representatives of traditional Japanese religious institutions, the situation in the local temples is even more worrying than that expressed by the modest numbers of "Buddhists of yellow color" at the national level. In 2004, the Reverend of the Apucarana Nambei Honganji in Apucarana, in the State of Paraná, lamented: "If we asked any of the hundreds of frequent visitors who flock to the temples on the weekend if they consider themselves to be Buddhists at all, we would be alarmed. Less than one percent of the visitors declare themselves to be Buddhists."<sup>3</sup> Another indication that the real situation is quite different from the stereotypical rhetoric of a "boom" in Buddhism is the modest situation of the Busshinji temple in the city of São Paulo. According to a local authority, only some thirty people, most of them non-Japanese Brazilians, regularly attend the institution's meetings.<sup>4</sup>

3. Message posted in the discussion list buddismo@topica.com. Accessed 23 September 2004.

4. cf. [http://www.ipcdigital.com/print\\_news.asp?descrIdioma=br&codNoticia=7538](http://www.ipcdigital.com/print_news.asp?descrIdioma=br&codNoticia=7538). Accessed 15 December 2007.

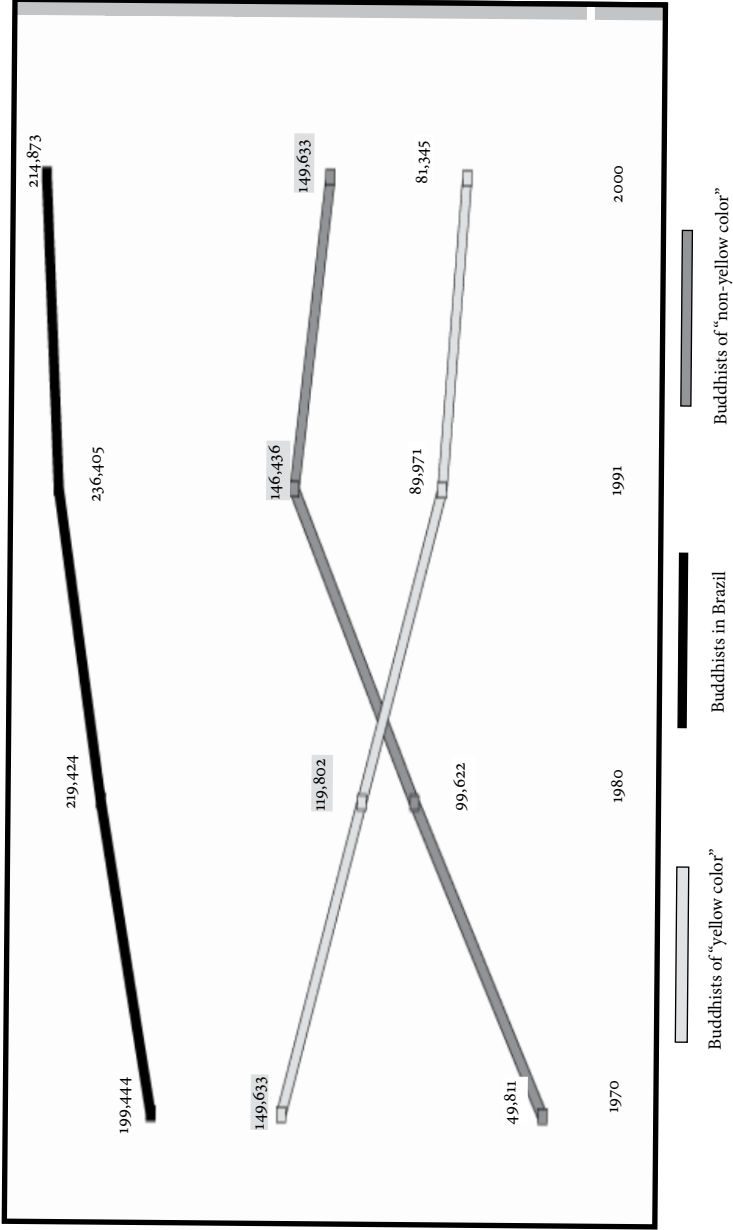


FIGURE 3. Numeric evolution of Buddhism in Brazil, 1970–2000 (IBGE)



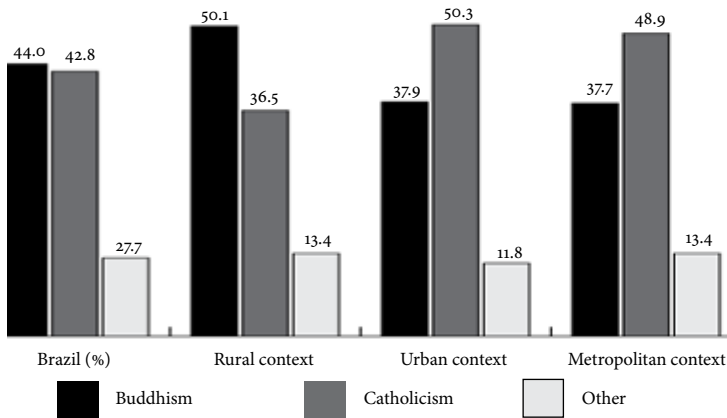


FIGURE 4. Religious preference among Japanese immigrants in percent (1958) (MAEYAMA 1973, 248)

*The Decline of “Buddhism of Yellow Color”  
from a Socio-Historical and Demographical Perspective*

The practice of traditional Japanese religion was generally an improvised affair within families or, at best, among like-minded neighbors (USARSKI, ed. 2002). This was due to restrictions on overt religious activities followed by the Japanese government in respect for the feelings of the predominantly Catholic Brazilian population, and also because of the desire of the immigrants to prosper quickly and return to their homeland as soon as possible. Occurring only in the 1950s, a general “resurrection” of Japanese religion (MORI 1992) initially favored the rapid institutionalization of traditional Japanese Buddhist temples in those urban surroundings to which a great number of immigrants, previously concentrated in rural zones, had begun to move in search of economic opportunities. However, the consolidation of Buddhism and urban migration represented two not fully congruent dynamics. On the one hand newly founded temples offered a space for social reintegration and the preservation of transplanted cultural capital. On the other hand, the shift from demographically “dense” colonies to socio-structural and ideologically heterogeneous cities implied the weakening of the plausibility structure that had been collectively constructed according to traditional Japanese values.

This discrepancy was already evident by the end of the 1950s, the decade in which a series of Japanese Buddhist institutions were inaugurated in Brazil. According to relevant studies, when immigration began, only a minority of the Japanese who settled in Brazil were Christians (FUJII and SMITH 1959, 14). Data from 1958 draws a completely different picture. At that time, only 44.5 percent of Japanese living in Brazil still felt committed to their traditional religion, a dramatic change that was particularly significant in urban surroundings, where

50.3percent had already converted to Catholicism, while in rural areas the corresponding value was 36.5 percent (FIGURE 4).

Complementary data indicate that, in the same year, the tendency to abandon traditional Japanese religion was stronger among the younger members of the Japanese immigrant community (FIGURE 5). While more than two-thirds of the immigrants born in Japan declared themselves to be Buddhists, this percentage had dropped dramatically to 29.9 percent among the following generation born in Brazil, and to only 19 percent in the third generation (MAEYAMA 1973, 248).

The long-term consequences of the difficulties in maintaining traditional Buddhism within families of Japanese origin is mirrored by relevant data derived from the National Census conducted in 1950 and in 2000.

In 2000, despite an increase of about 15 percent in Brazil's population over the 1990s, 45.13 percent of "Buddhists of yellow color" were older than 60 while only 12.19 percent were younger than 20. The significance of these proportions becomes clear if one compares these values with corresponding figures provided by the IBGE in 1950, indicating an inverse relation to that time, when the majority (51.52 percent) of "Buddhists of yellow color" were younger than 20, while less than 5 percent were older than 60 (FIGURE 6).

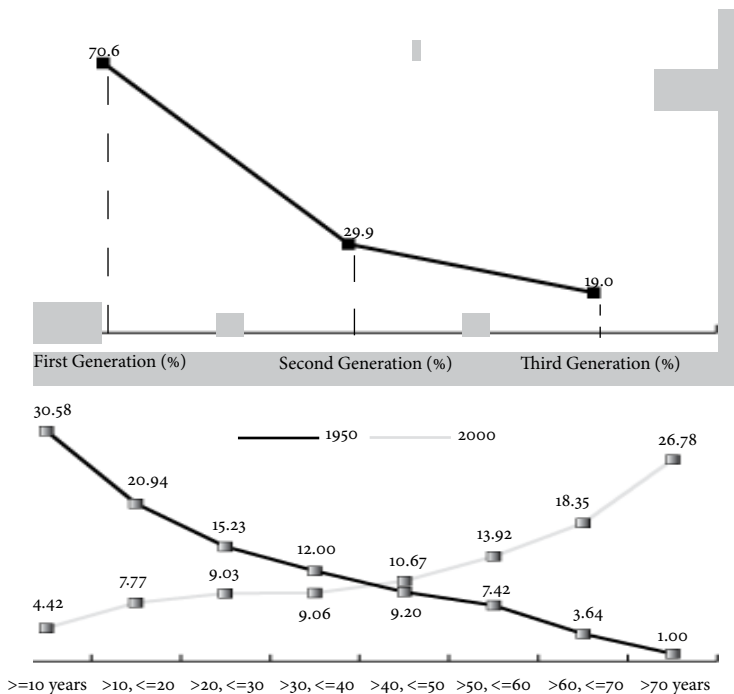


FIGURE 6. "Buddhism of yellow color" according to age groups in 1950 and 2000 (in percent).  
 Source: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)

According to the theoretical assumption that a religion “must maintain a level of fertility sufficient to at least offset member mortality” in order to survive (STARK 1996, 140) this evolution poses a major challenge for a religious community incapable of attracting non-Japanese descendents.

*Causes for the Decline of “Buddhism of Yellow Color” in Brazil*

The following discussion of possible causes for the decline of “Buddhism of yellow color” in Brazil is organized according to three “levels” of reflection.

The first level consists of the identification of dysfunctional elements on the part of Japanese Buddhist institutions. The second level corresponds to problems of maintaining and transmitting religious heritage within the ethnic community. Aspects primarily associated with individuals are located on the third level. Needless to say, these three levels are intimately related empirically and this distinction is made for analytical purposes only.

DEFICITS AT THE LEVEL OF BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONS

Theorists favoring rational explanations suggest that religious demand generally does not develop in a “vacuum” but as a positive response to manifest supplies provided by competing local religious institutions (FINKE 1997). Seen from this angle, Buddhism in general and Japanese Buddhism in particular is not in a very comfortable position in Brazil, simply because the majority of its institutions are concentrated in the south-east and the south of the country, that is, in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Paraná, and Rio Grande do Sul (FIGURE 7), that is, in those federal states that for decades have been preferred by Japanese immigrants and their descendents.

Although geographical accessibility to the physical facilities of a religion is an important prerequisite for success in a religious market, “suppliers” clearly need more than mere geographical presence in order to keep up with competitors.

In this sense, even if a local institution runs traditional Japanese Buddhism, it generally suffers from two major infrastructural limitations: first, the concentration of the temple activities in the hands of only a few individuals; and, second, the lack of a consistent strategy in general, and of linguistic competence in particular, that would be capable of attracting a wider audience, not only from outside but also from inside the ethnic Japanese context. Both aspects are addressed by a Honpa Honganji minister who, now back in Japan, looks back to his time in Brazil, and complains: “The Japanese authorities in the temple are not only incapable of transmitting the religious heritage to the young Nikkei, they are also unwilling to share their responsibility with any Brazilian. That is the reason why today only Japanese-speaking adherents frequent the temples. All this reminds me of an old people’s home.”<sup>5</sup>

5. Quote from an email message sent by Kyoya Imai on 11 September 2007.

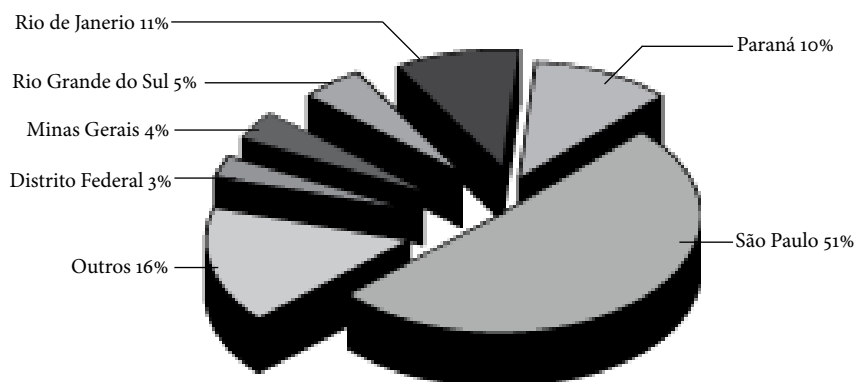


FIGURE 7. Geographic distribution of Buddhist institutions in Brazil (SHOJI 2004, 35)

The first part of the above criticism emphasizes the lack of space offered to Brazilians willing to engage themselves in temple affairs. This aspect has been academically discussed in reference to the hypothesis of the co-existence of two more or less “incompatible” congregations in traditional temples, that is, where a “parallel” group of converted Buddhists is involved. This constellation has negative effects for the future of ethnic Buddhism in Brazil, as indicated by the following words of a Brazilian Nichiren Shoshu authority: “Generally, monks from Japan come with the pretension to teach Buddhism here as a philosophy or as a Japanese ideology. But I do not think that this works. This is a land of Samba, of beaches, of Carnival. This is not Japan. The philosophy might come from there, but we have to adapt it to local conditions” (FEDERAÇÃO DAS SEITAS BUDISTAS DO BRASIL 1995, 42).

A more fundamental problem exists when, due to the lack of religious “manpower,” a community is left without a resident religious authority, hence without a regular weekly schedule. One concrete example is the Honpa Honganji branch, which runs about forty-five institutions. However, only the headquarters in the city of São Paulo has religious staff, while, for example, more than twenty communities in the interior of the state<sup>6</sup> and three in the Federal State of Paraná<sup>7</sup> do not enjoy the permanent presence of a local reverend and, instead of maintaining regular temple activities, depend on the visits of a religious authority from another city in order to be properly attended.

6. In Bernardo do Campo, Álvares Machado, Adamantina, Andradina, Cafelândia, Dracena, Flórida Paulista, Guararapes, Itu, Junqueirópolis, Lucélia, Mirandópolis, Osvaldo Cruz, Pacaembu, Piedade, Pilar do Sul, Pereira Barreto, Pompéia, São José dos Campos, Tremembé, Tupi Paulista, and Votuporanga.

7. In Curitiba, Mandaguari, and Paranavaí.

The second infrastructural deficit is the lack of a consistent strategy in general, and in particular, of linguistic competence. These can be regarded as long-term consequences of the historical circumstances under which “immigration Buddhism” was introduced to Brazil, at a time when Japanese immigrants were still convinced that their residence in their host country would be temporary. In accordance with this attitude, until the 1950s the majority of Japanese Buddhist schools refrained from adequately organizing themselves. This was counter-productive in terms not only of internal consolidation and external expansion, but also of the experiences of what it meant to systematically transplant an ethnically differentiated non-Christian religion into a predominantly Catholic, Portuguese-speaking society. If subsequent efforts were made in order to compensate for these failures, they were insufficient. This is especially true in terms of continuing linguistic restrictions, as indicated by the following statement:

The starting point of efficient missionary work in Brazilian territory should be ... a clear-sighted translation of the basic religious texts of this school into Portuguese. It is essential to undertake this task with a certain urgency, because Japanese immigration ended some time ago. The old immigrants who understood Japanese are dead, and most of their descendants are not familiar with the language of their ancestors.... If, in this respect, nothing is done quickly, the mission could be forced to put an end to its activities at the moment the last Japanese immigrant to Brazil leaves this world.

(GONÇALVES 1995, 9)

#### *Problems of Maintaining Traditional Religiosity Within the Ethnic Community*

The direction taken by the assimilation of an immigrant group in its new surroundings is a function of two contradictory logics: the desire to maintain the cultural heritage brought to the country of immigration; and the demand for integration according to the patterns of the host society.

During the first decades of immigration, the cultivation of traditional Japanese values in favor of the cohesion of the family and solidarity among its members was not only an expression of the immigrants’ intention to stay in Brazil only as long as necessary, but also a means of strengthening the group’s collective identity as a means of combating strong external anti-Japanese sentiments (STADNIKY 2001).

After World War II, this “inward” orientation was increasingly challenged as the host society offered economic opportunities in exchange for assimilation. Socio-demographic mobility in response to these opportunities contributed both to the growing flexibility of communication patterns and disfavor of the Japanese language, and to the expansion of social networks beyond the ethnic enclave. Both dynamics affected the plausibility structure that had formerly facilitated the maintenance and transmission of collective cultural heritage,

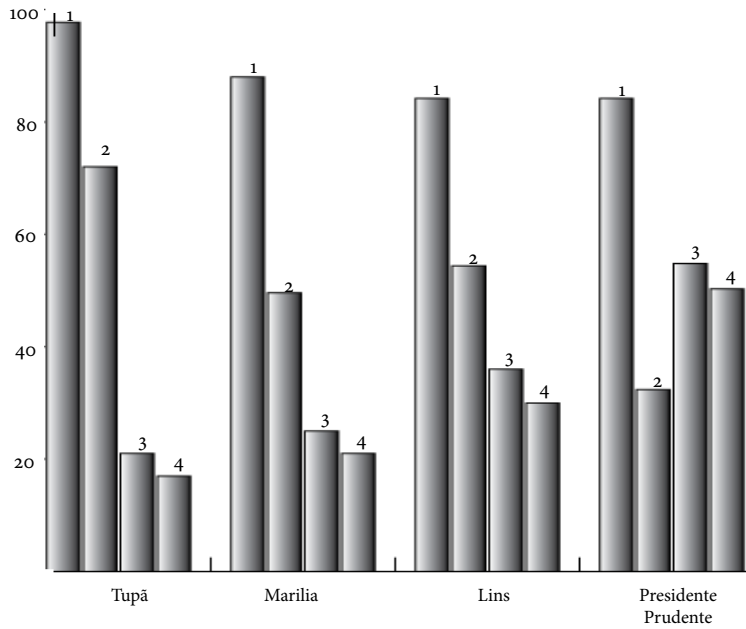


FIGURE 8. Maintenance of language and religion in 1940 (percent)  
 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 1951, 48–79)

including Buddhism traditionally practiced as “the religion of the household inherited from the family ancestors” (MAEYAMA 1983b, 206).

The negative impact of the language shift has to do with the fact that language is the basic tool of expressing, preserving, and transmitting one’s culture, hence an instrument of critical importance for keeping the family’s religious memory alive. Seen from this angle, and remembering the paucity of religious material translated into Portuguese, one can interpret the gradual decline of the Japanese language in Brazil a result of the parent’s failure of transmitting it to their children.

While this process became more obvious during the 1950s, empirical studies prove a corresponding tendency as early as the 1940s, a time of rigid political

measures imposed by the nationalistic regime of Getúlio Vargas, including the revision of immigration laws, a compulsory assimilation program for foreigners, and the prohibition of the public use of foreign languages.

Relevant statistics can be found in an early IBGE study on demographical characteristics of four Japanese immigration “colonies” located in the state of São Paulo. As the figure below indicates, by 1940 a significant number of immigrants and their descendents had already abandoned their traditional religion, a tendency most accentuated among community members younger than twenty. However, this predisposition was less significant in the Tupã colony where some 98 percent still preferred Japanese as the principal means of communication. In opposition, the highest percentage of individuals who had abandoned Japanese religions were found in Presidente Prudente, a finding that is not only positively correlated with the relatively low percentage of colony members sticking to their original language, but also with the relatively low percentage of individuals handicapped by difficulties of speaking Portuguese fluently.

According to later studies, in 1988 less than forty-five percent of the Brazilian descendents of Japanese immigrants used Portuguese at home while thirty-three percent had no knowledge of the language of their ancestors. This tendency was most accentuated in urban surroundings, where the percentage of Portuguese speaking Nikkei was 66.25 percent while only 6 percent were still speaking elaborate Japanese (CARVALHO 2003, 39–40). This trend is in sharp contrast to the ongoing dominance of the Japanese language in traditional Japanese temples.

In addition to the religious side effects resulting from the shift from Japanese to Portuguese as the principal language of a constantly growing number of “Nippo-Brazilians,” efforts to maintain cultural capital within the colonies were challenged by an increase in interethnic marriages, hence by a practice that “reflects an abandonment of a preference for one’s own ethnic group” and represents “a means to challenge the traditional family system” (CARVALHO 2003, 41).

Until the 1940s, interethnic marriage was a rare option for Japanese immigrants. Less than two percent of the community members born in Japan and less than six percent of the Nikkeis were married to a partner of non-Japanese origin (LESSER 1999, 104). After World War II the situation changed gradually. Although a strong hesitation against interethnic marriage persisted on a collective level, socioeconomic factors including the family status of the potential bride or groom’s heritage were often capable of overcoming the parents’ resistance, even if their children saw inter-marriage as an opportunity “to ‘erase’ their Japanese traits” (CARVALHO 2003, 41). As a result, at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s the rate of interethnic marriage for those of Japanese descent was 18.36 percent for males and 7.63 percent for females. According to more recent data, today interethnic marriage is more the norm rather than the exception. In 1988 more than 49.5 percent of “Nippo-Brazilians” nationwide were married to a partner of non-Japanese descent (CARVALHO 2003, 43).

The negative role of this growing trend for the maintenance of traditional cultural capital within the Japanese community is obvious. Ethnic inter-marriage, being both racially and ideologically a "mixed zone," demands mutual respect from the couple and concessions towards their respective inherited convictions and values of their partners. This is in contrast to an ethnically homogeneous family, whose generally dense plausibility structure protects them from the experience of religious contingency and offers a framework for the more or less coherent transmission of a traditional world view. The reconstruction of social reality within the newly formed family may lead to a critical reconsideration of religious matters previously supposed to be self-evident as well as "negotiations" over the correct course of the children's socialization. If the dialogue is constructive, it enriches the religious repertoire of the family. However, from the perspective of the involved individuals, the wider horizon of "acceptable" religious options may result in a reduced commitment to the particular religious community in which they have grown up. A more relaxed attitude towards one's symbolic heritage is, in the long term, even more counterproductive for the detailed and differentiated transmission of religious knowledge and spiritual practices to the following generation. One expression of this tendency, present especially within ethnically mixed families, is the statement of a leading Jodo Shinshu minister in São Paulo who claimed in a 1999 interview that for many younger "Nippo-Brazilians" the *butsudan* has lost its significance. Not fully understood in terms of its religious purpose, it is often associated with the esthetically peculiar nostalgic interior of the grandparents home, where it is supposedly maintained as an esthetically obsolete and old-fashioned collection of paraphernalia.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Problems of Maintaining Traditional Japanese Religiosity at the Individual Level*

In the last decades, a disproportionately high percentage of Japanese-Brazilians has successfully made use of the opportunities offered by an "emerging" country and its institutions of higher education (ADACHI 2004). In 1985, 13 percent of students and 47 percent of faculty at the University of São Paulo were of Japanese descent (CARVALHO 2003, 38). According to the last national census, about 18 percent of the Brazilian population belongs to the economically privileged stratum of society, with a monthly income five times higher than the minimum wage, which at the time was more than one thousand, nine hundred Brazilian Reais. The percentage of Brazilians of "yellow color" was more than three times higher at this income level (55.36 percent).

This and other similar data prove the following: a) "the extent to which the second- or third-generation immigrants have shifted away from the occupation and employment patterns of their parents and grandparents" (CARVALHO 2003, 45); b) the identification of younger Japanese descendants with Brazil as their

8. Quote from my interview with Shaku Riman (Mário Ricardo Gonçalves), 10 March 1999.



permanent homeland, worthy of a long term “investment” of time and energy in the education and training necessary for an individual career that will be remunerated according to the system of gratification inherent in a capitalist, technological society; and c) their consent to modern principles and values such as individualism, rationalism, autonomy and competition.

Against this background, the question of possible causes for the decline of “Buddhism of yellow color” in Brazil at the individual level can be answered in at least two ways. Firstly, compared with the identity of first generation immigrants, the advanced processes of an individual’s “acculturation” and active integration of younger descendents into their “host society” corresponds to a personality structure in which three relevant components have been reconfigured according to a new hierarchical order. These are: the self-recognition associated with secular existence as a Brazilian, ethnic origin as a Japanese, and religious commitment to Buddhism (CHANDLER 1998). While one can imagine that older immigrants saw themselves as Japanese Buddhists who came to Brazil by destiny, the younger descendents, although conscious of their Japanese heritage, are Brazilians. Religious heritage remains an issue of identity only for those who appear in the IBGE studies as explicitly “Buddhist,” though in the majority of such cases, this identity is far from being an internalized “master-status.”

Secondly, adherence to Buddhism is clearly not an obstacle to individual success. However, if it is true that—as it has been demonstrated for Umbanda and Pentecostalism (FRY and HOWE 1975)—the attraction of a religion depends on its capacity to address the concrete conflicts experienced by its clientele, then one can question the degree to which apparently “otherworldly” oriented Pure Land Buddhist currents (based on faith, devotion and hope in the transformative potential of a merciful transcendent being) cater to a “modern” predisposed individual. This individual’s primary concern is his or her professional life “here and now,” guided by principles such as rationalism, autonomy and competition (BLOOM 1998, 46) and who might be better served by a more compatible spiritual practice within the spectrum of new Japanese religions (MORI 1992, 587).

### *Conclusion*

A detailed look at the statistical data referring to “Buddhism of yellow color” in Brazil reveals that the headline “Buddhism is leaving the temples” is perfectly adequate, but in a sense contrary to that suggested by the journalists responsible for the quoted article and, hence, to that understood by the average reader. Instead of confirming the idea that traditional Buddhism, once exclusively attending to the religious necessities of Japanese immigrant families, has begun to attract a wider audience, the phrase “Buddhism is leaving the temples” alludes to a possible future when the facilities of traditional Buddhists communities are left empty of local practitioners. In various cases, such an inauspicious scene



FIGURE 9. 2007 Calendar (photo for January), distributed by the Buddhist Community Soto Zenshu of South America

is already foreshadowed by the constant decline of visitors, as indicated by the photo (FIGURE 9), showing a handful of practitioners seemingly “lost” in the quite spacious assembly hall of the Zenguenji Temple in Mogi das Cruzes, São Paulo.

As various statements prove, authorities in the local temples are conscious of this precarious situation, but they do not necessarily agree with its evaluation. Seen from a more pessimistic perspective, the currently weakened status of traditional Buddhism will continue for quite some time, given that such a state is considered symptomatic for a lengthy process of thorough acculturation to new conditions, as was the case for the historically complex circumstances under which Buddhism was once transplanted to Japan and China. Seen in a more optimistic light, signs of improvement are already visible, for example the creation of the national umbrella organization *Colegiado Budista Brasileiro* and the active involvement of traditional Japanese Buddhist currents in this organization, reflecting efforts to stimulate the engagement of younger Japanese descendents in Buddhist communities (GONÇALVES 2005, 206–207).

It may be a relief for the leaders of traditional Japanese Buddhist authorities in Brazil that the statistical decline of the communities of “Buddhists of yellow color” is not restricted to Brazil, but a tendency also observable in the United States. While this negative trend is less accentuated in ethnically-rooted North American Zen temples (ASAI and WILLIAMS 1999), Shin Buddhist institutions

have suffered from the same problems as their “sister” communities in Brazil (BLOOM 1998; TANAKA 1999). In both countries religious activities were concentrated on the needs of the ethnic community. Here and there the Japanese language continues to play a key role in the temples, at the cost of alienating members and sympathizers who do not understand it. There is also the common problem of aging clergy and the difficulty of replacing retired ministers with younger Japanese descendants willing to sacrifice their professional ambitions and inner-worldly success for the maintenance of the religious tradition of their forefathers. In both Brazilian and North American temples, the hierarchical structure and the importance of the nuclear family as the basic religious unit are in tension with egalitarian principles and with the individualism fostered by a modern democratic society. Finally, in both countries, Japanese Buddhism is confronted with its image as a foreign religion, with the consequence that the number of converts remains insignificant.

However, while it seems that Japanese Buddhist authorities in Brazil often face the crisis too passively, North American Shin Buddhists have taken at least two initiatives to make a virtue out of necessity (BLOOM 1998). The first initiative consists of “Americanization” at the national administrative level, leading to more effective ecumenical interchange and more competent participation in the political sphere. Secondly, motivated by signs of a kind of “ethnic revival,” temple authorities are focusing on members of the youngest/newest generation of Japanese descendants, seeking to strengthen their commitment to their religious community, rather than dispersing resources for the propagation of their faith to a wider audience. One strategy in this context is the increase in so-called “dharma schools” associated with local temples, including the design and promotion of study-material more in tune with the current *zeitgeist*. This striving for ideological change is best illustrated by the emphasis on the egalitarian character of Buddhism and, vice versa, of the relativization of the religious importance of traditional Japanese patterns of social behavior.

Whether these measures will be adequate for the survival of Japanese Buddhist communities in the US remains a mystery. Even less certain is if they will work for Brazil. Whatever measures will be taken, the future of “Buddhism of yellow color” in Brazil will continue to be an intriguing field of study.

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