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How diasporic ties emerge: Pan-American Nikkei communities and the Japanese state

Ayumi Takenaka

Abstract
This paper examines the development of global ethnic ties, focusing on pan-American Nikkei activities among later-generation descendants of Japanese immigrants. How do diasporic ties emerge across countries, and how are ties mobilized? Who promotes, and participates in, this process? Pan-American Nikkei activities emerged neither as a by-product of shared ancestry or experience nor as a result of continuous ties to their ancestral homeland. Instead, they emerged in response to changes taking place in their countries of residence. Precisely because Japanese descendants throughout the Americas became assimilated, acculturated and economically better off, community leaders had both the means and need to mobilize diasporic ties — in order to bolster their communities, and their status therein, in their respective countries. The most active participants in these activities were well-to-do community leaders.

Keywords: Diaspora; Japan; ethnicities; identity; role of sending state.

Every two years, people of Japanese ancestry from the Americas gather at the Pan-American Nikkei Association [PANA] convention. Though Japanese government officials are usually present, these conventions are fundamentally for and by Nikkei or the descendants of Japanese immigrants. Hundreds of Japanese descendants gather from across South and North America to ‘search for common Nikkei cultural identity’ (PANA 2003) or to ‘celebrate our roots and foster pride in our Japanese heritage’ (PANA 2001). At the 1999 convention in Chile, an organizer used the metaphor of a tree:

Nikkei are like a tree. We all come from different countries, but we all have common roots. With shared seeds and memories, we have
grown into different branches and leaves, producing different fruits and contributing to the whole tree. Our leaves have different cultures, Japanese and (North and South) American, but no matter what, it’s crucial to preserve our roots. That’s what we have in common. That’s the duty for every descendant of Japanese blood!

Even though participants spoke different languages (Spanish, Portuguese or English), many claimed ‘something common’, or, as Ricardo Hirota put it, ‘some affinity that we naturally feel toward Nikkei from other countries’. A businessman born in Argentina to Japanese immigrants, Mr Hirota regularly attended PANA conventions since he found it interesting and useful to meet other Nikkei for his own business. Participants, like him, were mostly second- and third-generation descendants of Japanese immigrants. Acculturated, assimilated and well-to-do in their respective countries, most spoke little Japanese and seemed to know little about their ancestral homeland.

Obviously, there were other Nikkei who showed little interest. Much of the ‘blood-based affinity’ claimed by PANA participants, for instance, did not seem to exist among those Latin Americans of Japanese descent in Japan who, officially being incorporated as ‘co-ethnic brethren’, were treated as foreign migrant labourers.1 The president of PANA nonetheless stressed the importance of common ethnic origins shared by all Nikkei: ‘We pan-American Nikkei all have double cultures (Japanese and American) and thus possess the kind of experiences, values, and know-how that Japanese don’t have’ (Nikkei Net 2005). The President, thus, stressed that it is shared experience and values that unite all pan-American Nikkei. As he claimed, there is believed to be something that all Nikkei shared by virtue of their background. And this assumption justified and promoted the existence of PANA.

Like Japanese descendants, many other ethnic peoples seek and celebrate their shared ethnic origins globally. Among them are Indian emigrants and their descendants. People of Indian origin [PIO] gather annually at conventions held by the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin [GOPIO] to ‘preserve Indian-ness...and common Indian heritage’ (GOPIO 2005) and claim that ‘a new global community of Indian origin has been developed’ among 20 million people of Indian origin around the globe (GOPIO 2007). Similarly, the World Jewish Congress, established in 1936 to ‘mobilize the world against the Nazi onslaught’, now aims to ‘intensify the bonds of world Jewry’ and ‘maintain its spiritual, cultural, and social heritage’ (World Jewish Congress 2005). The World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention hosts bi-annual gatherings to ‘enhance economic cooperation and promote better understanding among Chinese entre-
preneurs and business communities worldwide’ (World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention 2005).

Groups around the world engage in similar activities, using remarkably similar language, to foster their ‘unique’ culture. In so doing, they also make similar claims. First, ties are fundamentally rooted in their blood; because of sharing ancestry, there is affinity among co-ethnics dispersed across countries. Second, these co-ethnics share the same culture, history and experiences in different host countries. And, third, strengthening co-ethnic bonds is good for all—not simply for themselves, but for all humanity (Ang 2004). This claim-making is, indeed, at the heart of all diasporic projects. Consequently, any diasporic analysis should focus on how such claims are made, by whom and why.

Instead of analysing these questions, diaspora studies have largely neglected to examine how global ethnic ties are claimed, established and maintained, particularly on an institutional level. This is despite the fact that such ties are often considered an essential feature of a diasporic population. Dispersed to more than two destinations, diasporas, unlike emigrant communities, are expected not only to engage in some relationship with an actual or imagined homeland, but also to maintain ties across different destinations (Butler 2001; Safran 1999; White 2003). Although global diasporic institutions, such as PANA, are growing in number, analyses of ties, when examined, are revealed to be often limited to the bilateral relationship between diaspora in specific destinations and homeland (e.g. Sheffer 1986; Nyiri 2001; Smith 2003) and seldom extend to global multilateral ties across destinations (Yeung 1999). While a growing volume of global-scale diaspora studies has appeared (often in edited volumes), they tend to pay scant attention to links across destinations and focus instead on the situation of a specific ethnic group in a specific geographical locale (e.g. Ma and Cartier 2003; Adachi 2006; Lal 2006).

Indeed, diaspora studies have often assumed global ethnic ties as given. Instead of questioning the nature of group solidarity, studies have tended to presume it as a by-product of shared ancestry, equating ‘groups’ to a mere ethnic label (Anthias 1998; Butler 2001). Rather than asking who constitutes the Chinese diaspora and the Jewish diaspora and so on, diasporic memberships are simply assumed on the basis of shared ancestry (Brubaker 2005). Equating diaspora to ethnicity, however, runs the risk of ‘moving towards essentializing “diaspora” as an ethnic label rather than a framework of analysis’ by concentrating on the idiosyncrasies of specific groups (Butler 2001, p. 193).

At the same time, the nature of diasporic solidarity is often unexamined, because members of a diaspora are assumed to undergo similar experiences. According to Safran (1999), diasporic solidarity
emerges as a result of oppression, victimization and the memory of martyrdom. Diasporic ties, therefore, emerge as a liberating force against marginalization experienced in the host society (Ang 2004). Cohen (1997) also suggests that a sense of difference faced by members of diasporic groups causes them to identify with co-ethnics in other countries (Anthias 1998). Similarly, studies on transnationalism have pointed out that immigrants maintain on-going ties to their countries of origin due to their loss of social status and their racialized status in the host society. Maintaining such ties allows immigrants to ‘escape’ the stigma associated with their subordinated place in the host society’s racial and economic system by building their prestige in the sending community (e.g. Goldring 1998; Glick Schiller 1999). This ‘disadvantage hypothesis’, however, does not explain why such experiences necessarily lead to the growth of ethnic solidarity across borders (Anthias 1998). Nor does it explain when co-ethnic solidarity emerges across countries.

How, then, do diasporic ties emerge and how are they mobilized? Who promotes, and participates in, this process? And, more specifically, why do later-generation Japanese descendants, who are largely assimilated and acculturated, seek to cultivate co-ethnic ties at a time when they are often praised as ‘model minorities’ in their host countries?

As illustrated below, Japanese descendants across the Americas have cultivated diasporic ties, not so much because of marginalization and victimization, I argue, but because of their elevated social status and increasing assimilation in the host society as well as diasporas’ changing relationship to Japan. As successful, well-integrated members of their countries of birth, they had the resources to seek global ethnic ties. At the same time, they, as leaders of Japanese community institutions, had the motive to maintain their community amid growing intermarriage and distance away from Japan. In other words, Nikkei community leaders had both the means and the need to mobilize diasporic ties, precisely because they were well integrated – in order to bolster their communities, and their status therein, in their respected countries. Thus, the most active participants in global Nikkei activities, as Guarnizo, Portes and Haller (2003) indicated, were not marginalized immigrants suffering from stigma, but the economically successful in the host society. In seeking global institutional ties, leaders created stories about common culture and experience. And an underlying force behind this lay in changes that had taken place in their respective countries of residence, derived mostly from generational succession and acculturation, instead of their attachment to their ancestral homeland. The sections below describe the processes by, and context in, which PANA emerged and has evolved over time.
The findings reported in this paper are drawn from my ethnographic research in various communities of Japanese descent in the Americas between 1996 and 2005. I observed and participated in two PANA conventions – one in Santiago, Chile, in 1999 and the other in New York City in 2001. During and after the conventions, I interviewed about fifty participants, including organizers (from the host country), community leaders (from Mexico, Chile, Peru, USA and Brazil), government officials (from Japan) and ordinary participants of different nationalities and generations. After the New York convention, I spent two months in Los Angeles following former participants (and non-participants) of PANA and visiting key Japanese-American community associations. In addition, I collected and studied conference programmes, reports, speeches and other publications made available at every convention held since 1981. Moreover, the paper dwells on the interviews and participant observation I conducted in the Japanese-American and Peruvian communities in New York, Los Angeles, Lima and Tokyo. During the above time period, I participated in numerous community activities and interviewed over 150 Japanese descendants (most of whom had never participated in PANA) in these locales. Personal names used throughout the text are pseudonyms, except where individuals are directly cited from written texts.

Background: the development of overseas Japanese communities

Many of the Nikkei who participated in growing pan-ethnic activities were the descendants of Japanese immigrants who left Japan from the late nineteenth century through the 1960s. During this period, roughly 1 million people left Japan, mostly for the Americas (though there were pre-Second World War migratory flows to Asia in association with Japan’s colonialism). According to the Japanese government, there were 2.5 million Nikkei in 2002, the majority (99 per cent) living in the Americas, including 1.3 million in Brazil and 1 million in the US. Most of the emigrants were relatively uneducated peasants who hailed from poorer southern and south-western parts of the country.

Emigration began in the late nineteenth century as a direct outcome of Japan’s emigration policy. In an effort to modernize the country, the newly established Meiji government (1868–1911) encouraged emigration, partly as a way to reduce its rapidly growing population and partly as a means to increase foreign capital by way of remittances and acquiring Western technologies (Idei 1930; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1971). Subsequently, a significant number of emigrants were sent under state sponsorship, either directly or indirectly, with subsidies and assistance provided by the government. Under these programmes, the
majority of emigrants headed for the Americas to work on plantations as contract labourers.

As an extension of its emigration policy, the Japanese government also played a crucial role in immigrant settlement, helping to construct schools and set up associations, in an attempt to facilitate their adaptation in the new land. Financial resources poured in from Japan were so significant, especially in poorer South American countries, that they helped raise the community’s standing in the host societies by erecting numerous facilities of high quality (see Takenaka 2003).

As the second-generation foreign-born came to dominate the overseas Japanese population, the nature of governmental assistance shifted. The century-old ‘emigration’ policy became a ‘Nikkeijin’ policy, targeting the 

\textit{descendants} of Japanese emigrants, or later-generation foreign citizens of Japanese descent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2004). The Overseas Emigration Council of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained the shift: ‘Although emigration projects have traditionally been aimed at emigrants (i.e., Japanese citizens), it is both necessary and appropriate to extend these projects at least up to the third generation, as supporting them will indirectly help the emigrants’ (2000, p. 2).

Under the new scheme, governmental assistance was provided within the framework of international development. Japan continued to ‘help’ overseas Japanese communities, annually allocating about 2.6 billion yen, as part of its official development assistance [ODA]. In this process, the Overseas Japanese Association, a government organ established in 1957 to promote and facilitate emigration, became semi-privatized under the new name – the Association of \textit{Nikkei} and Japanese Abroad (emphasis added). And a major governmental organ in charge of post-war emigrant affairs, the Overseas Emigration Agency (Kaigai Iju Jigyodan), converted itself into a donor agency called the Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] in 1963. Because of the nature of monetary assistance extended to overseas communities [as ODA], Japan’s involvement in overseas community affairs was greater in South America than in North America. Consequently, Japanese communities in poorer South America have been more reliant on, and susceptible to, the influence of the Japanese government.

Japan maintained an interest in overseas Japanese communities, mostly because the 2.5 million Nikkei, while small in number, were politically and symbolically important to the government. The government believed that the status of Nikkei within their countries raised the image of Japan because of their symbolic connection to that country. For this reason, the government backed former President Alberto Fujimori of Peru, a son of Japanese immigrants (At the 1999 PANA convention, a JICA representative explained that Fujimori’s
failure would damage Japan’s image abroad. Japan increased its aid to his government, especially as the US cut its aid following Fujimori’s self-coup in 1992.) Japan also recognized the ‘value’ of Japanese descendants abroad as ‘cultural and diplomatic assets’ who would promote mutual understanding between Japan and their countries of residence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2004).

While resources from Japan helped improve the infrastructure and status of overseas Japanese communities, they also reinforced the hierarchical relationship between Japan and the recipient communities. This was most clearly manifested in their institutional relationship. Prior to the emergence of PANA, the major channel connecting overseas Japanese communities was the conventions organized by the Overseas Japanese Association (today’s semi-privatized ANJA).

The first convention on the overseas Japanese was held in Tokyo in 1957. Sponsored by the Japanese government, the event entailed speeches by members of the imperial family, politicians and bureaucrats, and concluded with a reception at the Prime Minister’s residence (ANJA 1979). Overseas community leaders were received ‘with enthusiasm’ (ANJA 1979), and the entire event was broadcast on national television. Ever since then, conventions have been held annually, in Japan and in Japanese, usually with members of the imperial family and top government officials present. Catering to Japanese emigrants and Japanese-speaking second-generation descendants, these conventions aimed to provide an opportunity for 200–300 community leaders from around the globe to gather ‘in their motherland’ and deliver a set of requests, such as for financial assistance, to the government (ANJA 1999).

Traditionally, then, Japanese immigrant communities were connected only through their bilateral and vertical ties to Japan. At the centre of their global network was Japan. Their mutual ties were maintained through their unequal relationship, and subordinate position, to their ‘motherland’ to which they collectively delivered requests and from which they received support, financial and otherwise. However, the 1980s began to see changes in this relationship with the emergence of PANA.

The emergence of the Pan-American Nikkei Association

PANA was conceived in 1981 in Mexico City by a group of second-generation Japanese community leaders from Mexico, Peru and the US. The organization set its initial objectives as: exchange information, diffusion of their ancestral culture and promotion of integration among its member states – Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, the US, Canada, Bolivia, Mexico, Peru.
Prior to this, there was a series of informal Nikkei activities across South American countries that helped establish PANA. These activities began, as early as the 1950s, among Nikkei baseball players from Peru, Brazil and Argentina. A sport predominantly played by Japanese and their descendants in these countries, baseball necessarily fostered friendship, according to a Japanese-Peruvian who told me that baseball players had to seek other Nikkei, as few played the sport in Peru. In 1967, another event took place when the Piratinga Sports and Cultural Association of Brazil and the Association of Peruvian Nisei University Students jointly sponsored a forum. The forum was for Nisei (second-generation) who, coming of age, began to express their voices in quest for their own identities. In hopes of distancing themselves from their Issei (first-generation) parents, young Nisei united themselves in organizing their own activities in their own languages (Spanish and Portuguese). This, then, indirectly led to another event a decade later – the more formal First Symposium of Nisei, held in 1979 in conjunction with the celebration of the eightieth anniversary of Japanese immigration to Peru. On this occasion, Nisei from Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and the US (in addition to a scholar from Japan) were invited to share their experiences in their own countries. The symposium, like the earlier forum, was meant to provide an opportunity to discuss issues believed to be unique to Nisei.

The First Symposium of Nisei sent ripples across the Americas. Soon after the event, the Japanese American Citizens League [JACL], a US civil rights organization formed among American Nisei, began to incorporate other Nisei into their organization. In 1980, when JACL held a convention in San Francisco celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, they invited delegates from Mexico and Canada to share the situation of Nisei in these countries. Around this time, JACL had also launched a major redress movement for the war-time internment of Japanese-Americans, and some Japanese Latin Americans in California, themselves war-time internees, took part in the movement. These Spanish-speaking JACL members contributed towards establishing pan-American Nisei connections (Honda 1989).

The president of the first Nisei Convention, Enrique Shibayama from Mexico, reflected in 1989: ‘At that time, 90% of the North American Nisei did not know much about their South American counterparts, so the idea was born on how to get acquainted with other people in the same circumstances, as a minority group’ (PANA 1989, p. 9). The underlying assumption was that these Nisei, regardless of their country of residence, faced similar circumstances as a minority. According to Honda, a columnist for a Japanese-American community newspaper, North and South American Nisei also believed that they were similarly treated as ‘second-class citizens’ by the Japanese government. Thus, they shared the desire for ‘a new relations with
Japan’ that ‘must be established on the basis that overseas Japanese are not Japanese subjects but citizens of the respective American nations’ (Honda 1989, p. 29). Uniting with other Nisei, they believed, would be an emancipating move toward raising their status vis-à-vis Japan (Ito 1981). With these shared interests, another symposium was held in Mexico City in 1981, two years after the successful First Symposium of Nisei in Lima. And this second symposium resulted, several months later, in the formation of the Pan-American Nikkei Association.

The Pan-American Nikkei Association was a significant departure from the Japanese government-led overseas Japanese conventions mentioned earlier. Above all, it began as a Nisei organization, for and by second-generation North and South Americans of Japanese descent. It thus emerged in an effort to affirm their status, first and foremost, as respected members of their own countries. The principal motto, as reflected in the slogan of its first convention, was: ‘Become the Best Citizens of Our Countries and Our Continent.’ Unlike the Japanese government-led conventions, PANA aimed to discuss common issues in the Americas rather than to cultivate ties to Japan. It was an attempt to develop lateral ties among later-generation non-Japanese citizens of Japanese descent. In a way, it was a movement away from Japan.

Consequently, there were initial tensions between pan-American Nisei and first-generation (Issei) immigrants and Japanese from Japan. The first Pan-American Nikkei convention in Mexico City was officially called the Pan-American Nisei Convention, and a separate meeting was held concurrently for Issei immigrants. According to Ito (1981), a journalist who participated in the first convention as a staff writer for the Overseas Japanese Association, various Japanese symbols were explicitly avoided during the convention. There was no display of the Japanese national flag. And Japanese was ‘deliberately’ excluded from the list of languages used during the meetings, even though it was the only common language between many South and North American Nisei (Ito 1981). Moreover, while the Japanese ambassador to Mexico was present at the Nisei Convention, he was not allowed to read congratulatory remarks sent by Japanese politicians. In addition, Ito reports, many Nisei participants vociferously complained about how they were looked down upon by Japanese from Japan, especially by Japanese businessmen present in their countries (ANJA 1981). As an observer from Japan, Ito took the First Nisei Convention as a ‘rejection of Japan’ (Asaka 1991).

In short, PANA did not emerge as a movement to seek their ‘common Japanese roots’, but to affirm their ‘American-ness’ and to distinguish themselves from their first-generation immigrant parents. Prompted by generational succession, PANA was made possible by (North and South) American-born Nisei who not only believed that
they faced different issues from their parents’ generation, but also had more resources than their usually poorer immigrant parents. More successful and wealthier, those Nisei also had a stake in fighting against what they perceived as Japan’s arrogance towards them.

The development and growth of the Pan-American Nikkei Association

Since its inception in 1981, PANA has grown and thrived. Its membership has increased from eight countries to the current twelve.\(^4\) Its participants have become more diverse over time, representing more nationalities and occupations as well as multiple generations. While the first convention attracted about 300 participants, the 2001 convention drew 500. And activities have expanded to include a variety of workshops for doctors, entrepreneurs, lawyers and youths. PANA has also supported, or participated in, a series of other global Nikkei activities, such as the pan-American karaoke singing contests, international Nikkei sports tournaments and Nikkei youth leaders’ workshops.

Behind this growth were a number of changes occurring over the past few decades. First, Nikkei grew richer as a whole, and there were more people who could afford to travel abroad to attend such conventions. Cheaper flights and greater access to technologies also made it easier to travel and communicate with Nikkei in other countries. More importantly, perhaps, PANA adopted a number of strategies to attract more participants. While the basic format of a three-day convention programme remained the same (opening ceremony and closing ceremony with keynote speeches, a reception hosted by a local Japanese embassy or consulate and thematic workshops in-between), the programme has become more entertaining over time. Each convention provides optional tours, such as ‘Sunset Supper Cruise on the Hudson’ during the 2001 convention in New York. A golf tournament (for which the Japanese government donates trophies, according to a representative of ANJA) now takes place concurrently with the convention (so that those interested only in playing golf can do so during the entire duration of the convention, said a conference organizer). And a youth programme is now organized separately in parallel to the adults’ programme so that ‘young people won’t be bored’ (a PANA leader) and ‘they should be freer to express their opinions’ (a youth leader).

Over time, PANA has also shifted in focus. While PANA started out to assert their ‘American’ identities, it has gradually shifted to emphasize more things Japanese. Leaders realized that too much emphasis on American (North or South) domestic issues did not serve well to bind all Nikkei together. The US redress movement, for instance, did not concern South American Nikkei as much (ANJA...
1982). At times, political issues, such as the Falkland/Benavides War, tore apart citizens of opposed countries (ANJA 1982). Consequently, leaders decided to focus more on commonalty; Nikkei were not only American, they reminded themselves, but were also Japanese. Around things Japanese, PANA committed itself to become an apolitical, cultural and primarily social organization.

In this process, PANA’s relationship to Japan shifted. Today, Japan plays an important, though symbolic, role in the conventions. While the first convention appeared as a ‘rejection of Japan’ to some observers (Ito 1981), today’s conventions are full of Japanese symbols – kimono, bonsai, origami and calligraphy (Creighton 2006). In addition to a reception hosted by the Japanese ambassador to the host country, messages from the Japanese Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister are delivered at every convention and the Japanese flag is openly displayed (at least in South America). Japanese government officials and high-rank dignitaries are also present as observers or guest speakers. To stress their common Japanese heritage, while continuing to emphasize their ‘American-ness’, leaders have placed a growing importance on values. Values, expressed through narratives, played a central role in today’s conventions.

**Narratives of Nikkei values**

Central to these narratives were hard work, responsibility and perseverance. These were the characteristics believed to be an inherent part of their culture, as the Japanese-Peruvian anthropologist Morimoto asserted, ‘discipline, honesty, and hard work are known as characteristics of people with Japanese blood’ (1992, p. 168). As a core concept, these values were repeatedly mentioned in speeches at every convention.

They were, then, delivered by authority figures of high status. At the New York convention in 2001, a US Senator of Japanese ancestry, Daniel Inouye, was invited as a keynote guest speaker. Introduced as one of the most successful Japanese-American political figures and the recipient of the highest award from the Emperor of Japan, the Grand Cordon of the Rising Sun, for his contributions to the better relationship between the US and Japan, the Senator told a story – a story about ‘how hard our ancestors worked’ and ‘how much they contributed to their adopted countries’ despite their background as poor and uneducated farmers. He attributed this to their values:

My grandparents impressed upon me the values of our ancestral land: oyakookkoo – respect and obedience of your parents; on – a debt of gratitude that must be honored; gaman – to quietly endure pain and suffering, discrimination, and prejudice; gambare – to
persevere even under impossible situations. . . . My grandparents and parents made it very clear to me that if I could always maintain these values, I would always be proud of myself. (PANA 2001, p. 4)

He then went on to describe in detail how much Japanese-Americans suffered and contributed during the Second World War. Highlighting the focal events of Japanese-American history – the internment, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team made up of Japanese-American soldiers and the post-war redress movement – he reiterated the essence of a common Japanese-American story: being victimized both by the Japanese and US governments, they still fought loyally for their own country.

During his hour-long speech, many Latin Americans in the audience were asleep or inattentive, not understanding the speech delivered in English. Some fretted about ‘so much internment stuff’ to which they could not quite relate. Others chatted about where to shop the next day. While the language used and concrete historical events cited in speeches varied from a host country to another, the essence of these speeches was virtually identical at every convention. They typically contained war-time stories of suffering and discrimination and hardships associated with immigration. A smattering of selective Japanese words was thrown in. These narratives also shared additional characteristics.

First, they were Nikkei success stories. Stressing how Nikkei ‘made it’ despite their hardships, narratives centred on demonstrating their success. In every country where the Nikkei were present, stories would go, Nikkei per capita income was above the national average and, on a per capita basis, there were more Nikkei professionals than professionals from any other ethnic group. Stories would also emphasize that Nikkei have held important political positions, including the highest rank in the Staff of the US Army, cabinet officials, governors and even a president, Alberto Fujimori of Peru. During his presidency (1990–2000), Fujimori was frequently referred to as an icon of their success. (Some PANA chapters, such as the one in the USA, supported his presidency with financial support.) In 1995, a convention organizer proclaimed, ‘President Fujimori is leading our way . . . with values such as work, honesty, sacrifice, and perseverance’ (PANA 1995, p. 10, emphasis in original), urging all Nikkei to become ‘little Fujimoris’ in their respective countries. (At the 2001 convention, a Peruvian representative delivered an hour-long speech in defence of the former President: if there was any wrongdoing at all during his term of office, it was not the responsibility of Fujimori, but of those around him.) These narratives emphasized that at the heart of Nikkei’s various accomplishments were their ‘unique’ values. And this, went the
argument, was evidenced by the uniform economic success of all Nikkei throughout the Americas.

Second, Nikkei narratives were an expression of Japanese descendants’ indebtedness to their immigrant ancestors. Their economic and political success, in stark contrast to the poverty and misery experienced by their parents and grandparents, activated their memory of hardships. A leader’s statement at a recent pan-American Nikkei Convention well illustrated this: ‘We all share the same past, having gone through much discrimination as descendants of Japanese immigrants. We must preserve our values and try hard to progress in order to honour our ancestors, so that they will be proud of their descent.’

While paying homage to their ancestors, these narratives also served to remember and celebrate their past. At a recent convention, a group of young Nikkei stressed the importance of remembering the past: ‘When we revaluate our identity, we must rediscover the values and past experiences. It is our responsibility to preserve our Nikkei history in order to understand our existence and experience as a community’ (PANA 1995). In collectively narrating their past, they created a common history, or ‘Nikkei history’, as they called it above. And this common history justified and motivated their present efforts to build pan-American unity. Thus, the past was deeply implicated in the present. Narratives of values served to link the past to the present.

Finally, Nikkei narratives were also about the future. Stories of the past and the present were used to mobilize the community for the future. At the 2001 convention, held under the theme of ‘Building Our Future, Remembering Our Past’, Senator Inouye concluded his speech by saying: ‘The future can be a good one if we never forget these great values that were brought over from the land of our ancestors a century ago.’

Narratives repeatedly stressed the importance of preserving their ‘traditional values’, fundamentally because these values had universal appeal. The values claimed to be their own were, in fact, identical to widely held virtues for success. Narratives of Nikkei success, indeed, resonated with a typical immigrant success story – arriving penniless in the new land, they gradually climb up the economic ladder by way of hard work. Subsequently, many other ethnics boasted about exactly the same values as being unique to them. (A 2005 Indian-American convention, held with the almost identical theme as PANA 2001, ‘Building on the Past, Shaping the Future’, also stressed the importance of maintaining similar ‘Indian’ values.). To attribute these universal values as their own, Nikkei leaders often used Japanese words, as the Senator spoke of oyakkookkoo, gaman, giri, as if the values were unique to Japanese culture. At the same time, these ‘unique’ values were ‘proven’ valid, precisely because they were
universal; they were good for all, and therefore, it was possible to claim, they should be preserved.

How did such narratives emerge? They emerged, I argue, as a product of Nikkei’s own economic success and that of Japan. Thus, half a century ago, when a war-torn Japan was struggling to lift itself out of poverty and most Japanese immigrants were poor, such narratives did not exist. In fact, Japanese descendants were not so proud of being Japanese the same way that they feel today. A Peruvian-born Japanese descendant in his 50s recalled how ashamed he felt to be Japanese when he was growing up: ‘There was absolutely nothing positive coming out of Japan especially after the war. At that time, there was a great invasion of American movies and they always depicted Japanese as savages and criminals. Whenever I saw such films, I wanted to hide myself in a hole.’ Only when a new generation of successful Nisei emerged and Japan became the world’s second largest economy in the 1970s, did their ‘traditional values’ emerge.

Narratives of ‘good, old values’ made sense to a group of economically successful PANA participants. And these values were further validated through speeches by successful figures of high status. Meanwhile, 300,000 or so Nikkei migrant labourers in Japan were never invited to PANA as guest speakers. Nor did they quite embrace Nikkei success stories the same way. Who, then, promoted and embraced these narratives?

Who participated in PANA and why?

Officially, PANA was open to all Nikkei as well as ‘sympathizers’, or non-Japanese descendants linked to the community through conjugal or familial ties or through personal interests. In reality, most of the 300–500 convention participants were affiliates of Nikkei community institutions, apart from a handful of well-to-do Nikkei, such as North American tourists, who could afford a $200–350 registration fee plus travel expenses. The majority of core participants, including organizers and leaders of PANA, were business owners or professionals (forty-five companies headed by Nikkei were enlisted in a business directory compiled at the Chilean convention in 1999). Out of younger participants listed in a youth directory in Chile, 20 per cent (nineteen out of ninety-five) worked as professionals, such as doctors, engineers and lawyers, 20 per cent were engaged in other corporate-related white-collar jobs, 6 per cent were artists and the rest (53 per cent) were students in higher education, pursuing either undergraduate or graduate degrees. Some participated merely as an excuse to travel, and some to see old friends. Regardless of their motives, the majority of participants had some contact with Nikkei communities in their respective countries, as PANA conventions were typically announced
through community-based newspapers and websites, and registration and travel arrangements were made through a local Nikkei travel agency. (Participants are asked to identify what institution they belong to or represent on the application form.) As community leaders and affiliates, many participants had a number of interests in common.

Reinvigorating Nikkei communities and identities

Leaders, in particular, were interested in reaffirming a sense of community through PANA. Prompted by growing acculturation into the host society, Nikkei communities throughout the Americas were undergoing a major transition. To leaders, the growing degree of racial mixing presented a threat to their communities. Also problematic was what they perceived as young Nikkei’s increasing aloofness from the community. At a PANA convention, Canadian representatives lamented how young Nikkei lacked interest in ‘being of Japanese origin’ and did not see ‘the benefits of being Nikkei’ (PANA 1995). Japanese-American community leaders found a recent Census report about the declining Japanese-American population so alarming that they discussed ways to build new alliances at a recent community event. Some saw ‘globalism’ as a way to go to overcome this ‘crisis’. A Japanese-American leader said at a PANA convention:

Later-generation Japanese-Americans will, for sure, lose Japanese-ness. They will continue to intermarry and lose the Japanese language, but values are more important than language. The essence of Japanese values is good for all humanity: respect for the elderly, respect for the authority and no violation of the law. So, we should work together to preserve these good values. To do so, participation in PANA activities helps. For sure, it has strengthened my own Nikkei identity.

Other participants also found that PANA helped them to rediscover their sense of identity. According to a director of the International Nikkei Research Project [INRP], a project examining global Nikkei communities by bringing together Nikkei researchers from across the Americas, learning about other Nikkei provided them with a ‘valuable magnifying glass through which we could better understand ourselves and others’ (PANA 2001).

Some found more differences than similarities. A Paraguayan-born woman in her 20s, who spoke fluent Japanese, said Japanese-Americans, who typically spoke little Japanese, were ‘basically American’. And to some Japanese-Americans, especially Nisei who fought to show loyalty to their country during the Second World War, hoisting the Japanese flag and singing Japan’s anthem, as commonly
practised at PANA conventions in South America, were incomprehensive and even offensive (Creighton 2006). Language barriers were also manifested; at every convention, Latin Americans and English-speaking North Americans typically formed separate groups, according to long-term observers.

Still, many participants found it interesting to discover both differences and similarities, as they believed it helped them learn about themselves. According to a US participant, discovering differences from, and similarities to, his ‘counterparts’ helped define who he was both in confirming his North American-ness and in discovering his Japanese side. In short, comparing experiences through PANA was believed to be good for cultivating awareness as Nikkei and ultimately for understanding ‘what is distinctive about people of Japanese ancestry in the Americas’ (Discover Nikkei 2007).

Defining themselves has indeed been a central activity at every PANA convention. Whenever Nikkei gathered, there were incessant debates over ‘who is Nikkei’ and ‘what is Nikkei’. That was partly because of growing diversity in community membership (due to generational succession and growing intermarriage) and partly because it deemed crucial, at least to leaders, to determine what unites them in order for institutions, such as PANA, to exist.

During a workshop on Nikkei identity at the 2001 convention, two ideas emerged and clashed. One was the view that Nikkei was a subjective identity, that it is, and should be, inclusive enough to encompass all who wish to identify as such. The other stressed ‘blood’ ties. ‘The Nikkei should refer to people of Japanese heritage and ancestry’, opined a Japanese-American Nisei. ‘Including white people as part of the definition makes no sense.’ Amid continuous debate between the two views, the INRP offered a compromise definition: Nikkei are:

persons of Japanese descent and descendants, who have emigrated from Japan and created unique communities and life styles within the context of the societies in which they live. It includes persons of mixed racial descent who identify themselves as Nikkei and those who have returned to Japan where they constitute separate identities form (sic) the Japanese population. (PANA 2001)

While debates over Nikkei identity seldom yielded definite conclusions, global Nikkei endeavours, such as PANA and INRP, themselves offered a crucial tool to heighten a sense of group identity. The INRP, initiated in 1999 by the Japanese-American National Museum to examine ‘the Nikkei culture and societies’, ‘the Nikkei world view’ and ‘the common Nikkei experience’ (INRP 2005), helped cultivate Nikkei identity, first, by assuming that a ‘group’ exists with a set of unique
characteristics and, then, by trying to identify its idiosyncrasies. By aiming to identify Nikkei’s ‘unique communities and life styles’, it also defined their membership, confirming their commonalties. Similarly, continuous debates over Nikkei identity at PANA conventions also promoted a sense of group by the very act of engaging participants in a collective quest for identity. As a result of organizing the 1999 convention, Chilean Nikkei youth, many of whom were of mixed descent, claimed to have developed a renewed sense of solidarity and subsequently led the initiative to launch a global PANA website. Another website, ‘Discover Nikkei’, has also sprung out of past conventions to provide Nikkei-related resources in three languages. While leaders hoped to assure the continuity and survival of their communities through these activities, other participants, too, saw benefits in cultivating networks.

**Enhancing recognition**

Through PANA, leaders also hoped to enhance their community’s standing in the host society. At every PANA convention, mayors, governors or other prominent individuals were invited from within and outside the community to deliver messages. At the New York Convention in 2001, the mayor of New York, a member of Congress, along with Senator Inouye and Congressman Matsui, sent messages to commemorate the occasion. In 1999, the Chilean organizers invited Senator Carlos Ominami Pascual, son of a Japanese immigrant, as a keynote speaker. At the Peruvian convention in 1995, then President Alberto Fujimori delivered a speech. The speeches and messages by these dignitaries reiterated how the Nikkei community has contributed to their country of residence – usually through their ‘values’ of hard work, honesty and perseverance. With recognition by the host societies, Nikkei leaders also aimed to enhance their status vis-à-vis Japan.

The Japanese government also acknowledged the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with overseas Japanese communities and supported, albeit indirectly, the development of PANA. An ANJA representative told me during the New York convention in 2001: ‘PANA is a good instrument to keep Nikkei interested in Japan.’ He added, ‘Our job is to increase the number of Japan sympathizers.’ This view reflected the Japanese government’s position, described earlier, that Nikkei abroad are important ‘diplomatic assets’ to Japan.

Japan however stressed the importance of establishing an equal partnership with overseas Nikkei communities. ‘Our policies must shift from “helping” these communities to “cooperating” with them as equal partners’, according to the Overseas Emigration Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2000, p. 3). Thus, the government
supports pan-American Nikkei activities, only because ‘there are emerging desires on their (Nikkei’s) part to study Japanese culture and confirm their Japanese roots. … [This is because] being assimilated into their host societies, Nikkei are beginning to worry that unless they make efforts, their bonds to Japan will disappear’ (p. 4).

PANA leaders welcomed this policy shift, as one leader commented. Now that we have achieved a high status (in the Americas), the Japanese want to collaborate with us. Japan needs us, and we need Japan to develop Nikkei identities, Japanese spirit, values, and professional skills. We are entering a new stage of equal partnership and mutual help. (PANA 1995)

Building ‘equal partnerships’ was important for PANA leaders as well as for the Japanese government, fundamentally because Nikkei in the Americas were successful. From the turn of the century throughout the 1960s, the Japanese government sent emigrants to the Americas and supported their settlement processes to help them succeed in the new land (especially in some South American countries). Consistent with the policy, it remains in Japan’s interest that Nikkei overseas continue to thrive in, and contribute to, their own countries, because that, in the government’s view, would contribute to positive images of Japan.

While Japan strove to maintain equal partnerships with overseas Nikkei, thousands of Nikkei migrant workers in Japan did not feel they were treated as equal partners. Perhaps this reflected a comment made by an officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during an interview. From the point of view of Japan’s emigration policy, he told me, ‘returning’ to Japan to take up factory work meant failure, because the policy aimed to encourage emigrants and their descendants to become successful in their adopted countries. If they had been successful, he implied, they would not have needed to leave their countries in the first place. The ties Japan sought with Nikkei, therefore, were extended only to Nikkei, and particularly to successful ones, in their own countries; as Fox (2007) found in the case of Hungarians, the idea of ‘co-ethnic ties’ worked only so long as co-ethnic descendants remained in their countries.

Conclusions

Economic success plays a key role in diasporic projects seeking solidarity and building institutional ties across countries. As a means and a motive, resources are indispensable to such projects, as stated by GOPIO (2007): ‘Most of the people of Indian origin have become highly successful in business and the professions. If their professional expertise and financial resources are to be pooled together, it will
benefit not only people of Indian origin but also their countries and India.’

Attempts to seek pan-American Nikkei solidarity emerged among successful Nisei (second-generation overseas Japanese) at a time when generational succession called for a new identity and relationship to Japan. In his study of Mexican, Italian and Polish cases, Smith (2003) states that sending-state diaspora relations evolve as a result of change in the state’s position in the global system, its domestic needs and migrants’ ability to influence homeland politics. Likewise, a shift in the relationship between Japan and overseas Nikkei communities, as well as the elevated status of these communities within their countries, set the stage for cultivating diasporic solidarity across the Americas. Pan-American Nikkei activities emerged, therefore, neither as a by-product of shared ancestry or experience nor as a result of continuous ties to their ancestral homeland. Rather, they emerged in response to changes that have taken place in the host societies. Global in scope, pan-American activities were nonetheless rooted in local contexts.

Narratives were instrumental in mobilizing diasporic ties. ‘Nikkei history’ of sufferings and ‘Nikkei values’ of hard work were fomented through diasporic projects, just as other ethnic peoples talked about the same values as their own in pursuing similar projects. In examining how diasporic ties emerge, therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to how narratives are created and told about their culture and experiences, rather than trying to identify the content of their shared culture and experiences. As Brubaker (2005) states, diaspora is not a bounded entity derived from shared ancestry and experience; it is an idiom and a project. Consequently, diasporic projects, like PANA, play a crucial role in cultivating and constructing ethnic identities.

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Notes

1. Since the late 1980s, large numbers of Latin Americans of Japanese descent have migrated to Japan. In 2005, there were over 376,000 South Americans officially registered in Japan (excluding undocumented workers), mostly from Brazil and Peru.
2. Japan has been involved more heavily in South America also because more emigrants were sent to South America under direct government sponsorship particularly after the Second World War.
3. Over 1,800 Japanese from Latin America (mostly Peru) were interned in Texas during the Second World War.
4. Current members are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, the USA and Venezuela.

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