

**XXIII INTERNACIONAL CONGRESS OF THE
LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION - LASA
6 – 8 September 2001 – Washington, D. C.**

HIS35

THE SAGA OF OKINAWAN IMMIGRANTS IN SÃO PAULO

Sônia Maria de Freitas*

*** Ph.D. in History from the University of São Paulo. Coordinator of the Sector of Oral History of the Memorial of the Immigrant/ Museum of Immigration, of the Secretariat of Culture of the State of São Paulo, Brazil.**

Ji daí no Nagare

(Time that flies)

From the era of Tôh to the Yamato era,
From the Yamato to the Americanized age,
The change in Utiná is strange.
We used to go to Naha and return on foot. Today I go and come back seated!
We don't even miss the past. We used to count our money;
One kuan, two kuans, but today?
Even counting money's changed! Formerly, the old and young
could be distinguished by the way they dressed.
Today? Father, son and everyone
seem all of one same age. The women used to take pride in their beautiful long hair.
Today? It's all shorn off, flattened or permed,
to look most like a pigeon's nest! Today they use high heels and
sway this way and that,
resembling turtles. They shorten their tight skirts and jeans turn-ups. They tie up their knees and, with their
stuck-out bottoms, they strut like peacocks. Seeing a young woman from behind,
but looking straight ahead:
'turn your face', wrinkles of your 60 years. At heart, forever a 17 to 18 -year old
But in the corners of your eyes, disguised wrinkles, undisguisable...
Ah, natural folds that grow on us!

Translation (Okinawan-Portuguese) by Paulo Yamashiro

(Portuguese-English) by.....& Michael L. Jordan

Glossary

The Tôh era – ancient China

Yamato – ancient Japan

Naha (capital of the province of Okinawa)

Utiná – Okinawa in the local dialect)

THE SAGA OF THE OKINAWAN IMMIGRANTS IN SÃO PAULO

Sônia Maria de Freitas

This present study deals with the distinct characteristics of Japanese immigration, begun in 1908, within the overall picture of immigration into the State of São Paulo. The peculiarities and specific characteristics of the Okinawan¹ immigration into the State are here presented. On the basis of the contact made with the community, through its associations and leading figures, 14 interviews were held with immigrants and their descendants using the methodology of oral history, and 50 questionnaires especially addressed to the Okinawans who participated in certain of their associations were applied. Immigrants who came after the Second World War and at the beginning of the fifties were heard and it was discovered that the majority of the immigrants interviewed for this research project had arrived in Brazil in the late 20s and early 30s. The most frequent period for the births of those who filled out our questionnaire – was that of the second, third and fourth decades of last century, while the largest numbers of arrivals in Brazil occurred in the 30s and 50s.

Our research revealed the saga of the immigrants from Okinawa in São Paulo: their origin, the journey they made, their destination, their work both in country and city, their leisure activities, religion, culture, prejudices and divisions and reconstruction of their ethnic identity for their first generation descendants.

Japanese immigration was subsidized initially by the Brazilian and, later, by the Japanese government. Many immigrants died on their long voyage of 50 to 60 days because of the terrible conditions they faced on the ships that brought them. The immigrants of the first decades came to work on the coffee plantations and were distributed in the regions close to the Mogiana, Paulista, Northwestern and Western railroads of the State and elsewhere. Experiments were made with various agricultural colonies created by private groups and by Japanese colonization companies that acquired land or which received concessions, which, as from 1917, were all, merged in the Companhia Ultramarina de Empreendimentos (*Kaigai Kogyo Kabushiki Kaisha* – K.K.K.K.).²

According to data provided by the General Consulate of Japan, more than 255,580 Japanese citizens entered Brazil between 1908 and 1986. Thus it was that São Paulo became the city with the largest number of Japanese inhabitants outside Japan. It is estimated that today, including Okinawans and their descendants, they constitute a contingent of some 1.35 million people.

The lists of ships coming from Japan, to be found among the records preserved by the Immigration Museum, demonstrate the importance of this wave of immigration. Between 1908 and 1973, 796 ships arrived at the port of Santos, at an average rate of 12 per year or one per month. Twenty ships arrived during the period from 1912 to 1918, which shows that, even though the number of ships was small, they continued to arrive, despite the occurrence of the First World War. After this period, there was a gradual increase in the number of arrivals, but these were interrupted in 1941, when the Second World War was at its height. The Buenos Aires Maru, which arrived in Brazil on 12th August, was the last ship to bring Japanese immigrants. Immigration from Japan was resumed on 6th December 1950, with the arrival of the Boissevai. The last ship to transport immigrants of which we have knowledge, was the Nippon Maru, which docked in Santos on 27th March 1973.³

Of the 47 Japanese provinces, Okinawa was the one which contributed the most immigrants into São Paulo, representing 12% of the total.

Shosei Miyagui states that 270,000 Okinawans live outside Japan:

“Brazil (being the country that) houses the largest number, with 120 thousand people, followed by the United States (including the Hawaiian islands) with 65 thousand. Then follow Peru, with 42 thousand people and Argentina with 30 thousand, as well as Canada with 1,200 people and Mexico with 700”.⁴

The first group of Japanese immigrants arrived in Brazil on board the Kasato Maru, and disembarked in the port of the city of Santos, in São Paulo State, on 16th June 1908.

“Of the 781 Japanese who formed this pioneer contingent, 325 – or 41.6% - had been born on Okinawa. They set out from the port of Kobe and arrived at the port of Santos, after the long voyage of 51 days”.⁵

According to the report of the writer and journalist José Yamashiro, “almost all the Okinawans of the Kasato Maru fled from the farms on which they had been placed. The majority of them concentrated in Santos, where they formed the first, though small, Okinawan colony in Brazil”.⁶

Entry of immigrants from Okinawa and Kagoshima into Brazil was prohibited in 1913. It was alleged that the Okinawans did not fulfil their work contracts and fled from the farms, quarreled with their farm managers, had the habit of going about naked, spoke in a dialect and that their married women had their hands tattooed with the *Hajitchi*, symbol of their married status (equivalent to the wedding ring of the

Westerner). This prohibition was suspended in 1916, due to the reduced entry of European immigrants because of the First World War. Okinawan immigration was once more prohibited in 1920, but taken up again in 1926, due to a movement organized by the Okinawans in Brazil.⁷ They fled from the coffee plantations along the railroad into Argentina, a journey many of them made on foot, or they returned to Santos in the hope of returning to Japan.

Once in Santos, many of them became stevedores who carried 60-kilo sacks of coffee at 60 réis per sack for a 10-hour working day – sacks which weighed more than they themselves did! However, the majority of them dedicated their efforts to horticulture in the suburbs of Campo Grande, Macuco and Ponta da Praia. Some of the immigrants went to construct the Santos-Juquiá railroad, along which they created several agricultural settlements in the Ribeira river valley.

Others worked on the construction of the Noroeste, Sorocabana railroad and on that which linked Campo Grande, in South Mato Grosso State, to Bolivia. These immigrants ended up by installing themselves in Campo Grande, where they met up with Okinawans coming from Peru, who had crossed the Andes on donkeys. Initially they grew rice and coffee, but, from the 20s, they dedicated their efforts to horticulture and developed the green belt, constituted by the vegetable gardens that surround the city of São Paulo even now.

At the Immigrants' Hostel

After disembarking in Santos, these immigrants were taken to the Immigrants' Hostel, in the city of São Paulo. The Okinawan Ruikiti Yamashiro who, after a 57-day voyage from Kobe to Santos, disembarked on 29th April 1912, recounts his stay there:

“When we arrived at the Immigrants' Hostel in São Paulo, at 10 p.m., we ate dinner straight away. The Okinawans, sick of the terrible food they were served on board during the long voyage, found that served in the Hostel very tasty. However, I and the immigrants from other provinces, complained of the fatty dishes. We slept on beds for the first time in our lives. (In Japan we used to sleep on *tatame*.) There was nothing to cover ourselves with. We took a thin blanket out of our hand-baggage. It was a cold, May night in São Paulo. I lay awake the whole night. I still remember the long wait for the dawn. (...) We stayed for a week in the Immigrants' Hostel for inspection and exams on the part of the health authorities, withdrawal of our baggage and the necessary steps for the distribution of the immigrants to the farms.

On the morning of the 6th May, all the Okinawan families were sent to the Santa Lúcia ranch, at the Pederneiras station on the Paulista railroad, guided by the young interpreter Tsuguo Kishimoto”.⁸

Culture shock

Once settled into the houses provided by the farmers, they set out in the morning, at the sound of the bell, to their work at the coffee harvest. A piece of cloth, a sieve and a ladder were their most important working tools.

The cultural shock, arising from the differences in customs, caused surprise and created comical situations among the immigrants of different origins:

“(…) the strange dress used by the Okinawans must have caused a none too flattering impression among the European colonists; women using men’s shirts and a shirt with no underclothes. Spanish ‘aunts’ would have opened their skirts to show the Japanese their knickers. (...) After the day’s work, the Okinawans would take their baths and then take their ease as in their homeland: wearing a *yukata* (a light kimono used after bathing) or a *nemaki* (kimono for sleeping) or else with a kind of short Okinawan pajama. And they presented themselves like this without any embarrassment in the presence of the *gaijin* (foreigners)”.⁹

Work in the countryside and in the city

The majority of those questioned (35 people) had been destined for the countryside and were mainly concentrated in the counties of Bauru, Aliança, Presidente Prudente, Araçatuba, Miracatu, Paraguaçu Paulista, among others, and along the Santos-Juquiá railroad (Itariri, Ana Dias, Juquiá). Those who were initially destined for the city (15 people) were concentrated mainly in the counties of Santo André, São Caetano, Campinas, Santos, Lins and also in the capital. A considerable proportion (31 people) dedicated their efforts to agriculture as their initial activity, and as final professions the most numerous were: in commerce (10), farmers (5), salesmen in street markets (5), among others. We were able to identify more than 45 different professional activities exercised by their descendants, the most representative being those of the teacher, civil servant, engineer, dentist, doctor and systems analyst, but the predominant professions among the descendants were the same as exercised by their parents: shopkeeping (42), farming (10), and street-market salesmen (8).

In the countryside

A large number of these Okinawans were destined for work on the coffee plantations in the State of São Paulo. In the northwest region of the State, they went, among other places, to the Aliança ranch situated in the neighborhood of the city of Lins. On this ranch they met up with immigrants from other regions and cities of Japan, such as Tokyo, Osaka and Kiryu.

One group of Okinawans had as their destination the cities of Capem and Campo Grande, the latter being the capital of the Mato Grosso do Sul State, where they went to construct the Northwestern Railroad from 1910 on. In accordance with the report of Akamine, Chibata and Yamazato, members of the Okinawa Association of the city, in the suburbs of Campo Grande, the Okinawans planted vegetables, which they carried on their backs to sell in the street-markets, and worked on the coffee and sugar-cane plantations, these later/latter(?) for the production of brandy. Some immigrants rented land to plant rice and, in 1938, founded the Agricultural Cooperative of Campo Grande which then commercialized the rice, potato and coffee crops.¹⁰ Another experiment in Campo Grande took place on the Rincão ranch, owned by Gonshiro Nacao. More than 200 families of Okinawans lived on this ranch, cutting the forest covering and planting coffee. Initially, Nacao worked from 1911 to 1917 on the construction of the Northwestern railroad and later became a coffee grower and housebuilder, and finally created a business empire.

Some went to the State of Paraná, mainly to Londrina, Cambará and Cornélio Procopio.

On the Santos-Juquiá Railroad

Many of the Okinawan immigrants established themselves along the Santos-Juquiá railroad between the 10s and 30s. This railroad was finished in 1915 by the Southern São Paulo Railway Company, for which many of these immigrants had worked. In 1928 the railroad became state property, taking its present name and becoming a branch line of the Sorocabana Railroad.¹¹

About the time of the inauguration of the railroad, the Companhia Paulista de Terras e Colonização began to sell or rent land at very low prices. This attracted Japanese immigrants, specially the Okinawans, who “had had some bitter experiences on the coffee plantations and/or as stevedores on the Santos docks”.¹²

Ana Dias, Itariri, Alecrim (now Pedro de Toledo), Pedro Barros, Miracatu, Biguá, Cedro and Juquiá were colonies which arose spontaneously along this railroad, on land which the immigrants acquired or rented from the Companhia Paulista de

Terras e Colonização. In this region 77.2% of the population consisted of Okinawans or their descendants – according to the 1950 census.¹³

The capital suffered from frosts in the winter hindering the cultivation of salad and other vegetables. The region between Santos and Juquiá had a climate very similar to that on Okinawa, propitious, therefore, to this kind of agriculture:

“(…) many left the coffee plantations and came to the coastal region, to the Santos-Juquiá railroad, because the climate is similar to that of Okinawa; the geographical characteristics strongly recalled the island of Okinawa, green on one side with the sea close by, with a temperature just the same as that of Okinawa, and, for these reasons, the larger part of the Okinawan immigrants stayed in this area”.¹⁴

Initially they planted rice, beans and maize, but later took to market-gardening planting green beans, tomatoes, lettuce, eggplant, peppers, cabbage, and tubers such as manioc and sweet potato; still later they began to cultivate bananas and produced charcoal. The crops of salad vegetables and bananas were taken to the wholesalers and supplied the cities of Santos and São Paulo. In the 30s the banana trade exceeded that of any of the other crops.

The region became the principal banana-producing region, leading to economic expansion and to the resulting transformation of the colonies into counties. In Itariri, the immigrants were encouraged by the also immigrant and former teacher of the colony, Seian Hanashiro, who became a great exporter of the product to Argentina and Uruguay. In Cedro, Riukiti Yamashiro played an important role as one of the leaders of the colony, which he represented before the Brazilian and Japanese governments. Then, in 1922, the Japanese Association of the Santos-Juquiá Railroad was organized, only to be dissolved at the end of the 20s. Local leaders then formed Japanese associations, independent of each other.

The Japanese government sent financial help for medical assistance to the immigrants who suffered from illnesses and epidemics of malaria, typhus, diphtheria, cholera and even ‘foot-worm’. They also received money for the construction of schools in the colonies. On the Santos-Juquiá railroad, schools were built in the colonies of Itariri, Ana Dias and Cedro,

The Cedro School was inaugurated on 11th February 1925, with the participation of members of the community. According to the manuscript left by Riukiti Yamashiro, who arrived in Cedro in 1915 and was of the founders of this colony:

“Immediately after the inauguration, the building was offered to the State government. Then the first qualified teacher arrived to give

lessons. The State schooling benefited not only the children of Japanese, but also those of other local inhabitants. The Japanese colony was able to use the school building for Japanese language classes. It since became a center of community life, headquarters of the Japanese Association, which held its meetings there, as also celebrations such as the Emperor's birthday, always with an *undokai*, a sports event in which everybody, men, women, the elderly and children participated. The main purpose of the *undokai* was the fraternization of the immigrants and their families”¹⁵

The later decadence of the Santos-Juquiá region was related to economic, cultural and social factors, among them, that of its natural limitations, the mountainous topography, which hindered the expansion of the cultivation of the banana, and of the aging of the immigrants who preferred to accompany their children when they moved to the capital and the cities in the interior of the State.

In the cities

In several of the cities in the interior of the State such as Pompéia, Bastos, Tupã, Marília, Osvaldo Cruz, Lucélia and Presidente Prudente, the Okinawans became small-scale producers of cotton, peanuts and rice. They opened small establishments such as pubs, bakeries, pastry shops, restaurants, stores and bazaars, as well as working in street-markets.

The immigrants in the urban context sought better standards of living and working conditions. In the cities they created the ‘green belts’, the market gardens on the outskirts of São Paulo, planting salad and other vegetables and fruit, thus helping to cater to the needs of the city; they were also active – as they still are – as fruit and vegetable tradesmen, selling pasties/(pastries?) and flowers, in the street markets and the big central markets.

The Immigrants after the Second World War

The entry of Japan into the Second World War inspired, in some families in Brazil, a heightened feeling of nationalism, so much so that they sent their sons to their homeland to fight as soldiers. In the memoirs of Jorge Seiken Hanashiro, who was in Okinawa from 1939 to 1949, together with his three brothers, for this reason, are to be found the memories of the Japanese preparations for the war and of the war itself, as also of the commemorations held when Japan conquered a Chinese city, and of the marches organized to inspire the fighting spirit of the soldier. He only

succeeded in returning in 1949, through the Swiss Consulate and because he had Brazilian nationality and passport. He worked on the American base on Okinawa:

“I served on the American base as a ‘boy’, woke at 5 o’clock, went to the kitchen and lit the paraffin stove, a pressure stove (...) I had to pump it to build up the pressure, and then I made the coffee. Later in the afternoon I made ice cream. The American army came well prepared; they even had ice cream. In the morning I made pancakes and served the American soldiers, then I had to do the cleaning, and wash the saucepans and wash-up the dishes. I did all that for about 4 or 5 months; afterwards I had to go back to school because they made the boys and girls (...)go to school, they improvised a school with classrooms, and the adults worked on the land. There were many who had no parents, because they had died during the war. So, to protect the children, they put them in lodgings”.¹⁶

Shinko Akamine, who worked for the Americans as an office boy after the war, also swept, cleaned and polished shoes. He remembers the difficulties they had in finding food during the war:

“(...) at that time there was no salt, we used to go and get sea-water at night and then mixed that sea-water. We used to eat it with those shoots we collected; that’s how we lived. Then my Granny used to say this: ‘remember, if the goats eat something, you can eat it too because it’s not dangerous’, thus the old folk used to teach hereabouts, but it’s just that we aren’t goats; it’s difficult to eat those things. We used to eat ‘cambuquira’ there, which we here call stew, and also sweet potato (...)”.¹⁷

Differently from those quoted previously, who had the land as their destination, many of the immigrants who came after the Second World War became salesmen with stalls, selling fruit and vegetables and pasties. They also practiced sewing, working for Jews and Arabs, according to the report of Shinji Yonamine:

“(...) due to the trust that the Arab colony, or even the Jewish, inspired in the Japanese colony at that time, one did not ask for receipts, or names, nor did we take any notes, in complete confidence they would hand over to them that large quantity of pieces of cloth for sewing, and the folk from Okinawa would take it home and work on it from morning to night, everybody from children to grandparents; they even used to work at night. It was on the basis of this work that the folk began to buy green grocers’ shops, open shops to sell building materials, that is, to go on to more profitable business and, together

with this, they also succeeded in getting a university education for their children”.¹⁸

In São Paulo City

Various motives brought the Okinawans from the interior of the State to the capital, from the 50s onwards: economic difficulties led to a search for higher living standards; fear of the consequences of the use of the poison ‘Rodiatox’, used to pulverize the cotton, and which had caused the death of several of the immigrants in the Araçatuba region; fear that their children might contract malaria; the hopes of a university education for their children and the threats they received from the *Shindo Renmei*.¹⁹ Many Japanese families came to São Paulo particularly in the 60s and 70s, and these gradually grouped themselves into communities, according to their tradition, providing mutual help. According to Kanashiro Yukihide²⁰, “many of these concentrations of Okinawan families gave rise to the subsections which exist today”. In these latter the young people were taught their customs and traditions and dances and cinema shows etc were organized.

After the Second World War there arose a movement which divided the Japanese community in São Paulo. On the one side were the *katigumi*, who maintained that Japan had in fact lost the war, who constituted the majority. And on the other the *makegumi*, the ‘proclaimers of victory’ who argued that Japan had not lost the war and that a Japanese ship would come to get them. Some of the ‘proclaimers of victory’ created an organization called *Shindo Renmei* in which former military men with academic training participated and which organized nuclei in various cities such as Bastos, Marília, Pompéia and Tupã in the State. The *Shindo Renmei* was responsible for the murder of several Japanese. Symbols of this sect were placed on the doors of the houses of those who maintained that Japan had lost the war. One of our informants recounted that the Japanese could not read Portuguese, that publication of the newspapers of the Japanese colonies had been prohibited by the federal government under Getúlio Vargas’s presidency and that, further, they used to listen to Tokyo radio which only reported Japanese victories, even after the end of the war, thus isolating the colonists still further.

Seian Hanashiro’s family was threatened because their sons returned from Japan after the war. They were accused of being traitors and had to leave Itariri and moved to São Paulo with the family in 1951. Seian Hanashiro’s son Jorge Seiken Hanashiro, who with three other brothers had been eye-witnesses of Japan’s defeat, explains that:

“ (...) exactly because there was this section of the *Shindo Renmei* that they could not stay. They even put a cross on the door of the house,

they said that my father had betrayed the homeland, because he was the first to believe that Japan had lost the war. There were many people who still believed that Japan was winning, was winning the war. So they thought that my father was betraying Japan, so they put a cross on the door of the house, even though we had only recently returned”.²¹

Once in the city of São Paulo, these immigrants set up small commercial establishments such as green grocery shops, bars and car-parts shops. They became the majority in the street markets, with their stalls of salad and other vegetables, but mainly they sold pasties.

The Cantareira market

Situated in the center of the city, the Cantareira market has a story marked by the presence of the Okinawans. In the late 50s they accounted for 80% of those who worked there. There was retail commerce in the upper part and wholesale in the lower part. Because of the floods, the wholesale commerce was transferred to the Centro de Entrepósito e Abastecimento S/A (CEASA). The Cantareira immigrants maintained – as some of them still maintain – their old stalls for the sale of fruit, salad vegetables, potatoes, onions and garlic.

They also ended up by living in houses in this part of the city, in the neighborhood of the central market, which became a point of reference for the Okinawans both in São Paulo as in the rest of Brazil. There were also lodging houses, which boarded fellow-countrymen who came to the capital, such as that of Nakandakare.

With the passing of the years there arose the tendency for people from the various towns and villages of Okinawa to settle in the same suburbs of the capital. According to Shinji Yonamine, one is practically able to redraw the map of Okinawa within the city of São Paulo, such is the group spirit among them.

Cultural and Social Life

Their customs and traditions are maintained both in the family and in the social sphere, as demonstrated by the existence of recreational and cultural associations both in the city of São Paulo itself, as well as in Brazil as a whole. The Okinawan community is today organized in 45 branches (*shibu*), 17 of them in the capital and 25 in the interior of the State of São Paulo, with 3 in other States. Some 4,000 families are associated with them. The *shibu* report to the Associação Okinawa Kenjin do Brasil in São Paulo.

The subsections maintain the following organizations: the *Fujinkai* (Ladies' Association), *Sunen kai* (Youth Association), *Seisonenkai* (Young People's and Veterans Association), *Sonenkai* (Veterans' Association), *minyō* (Okinawan folk music) and *koten* (Okinawan classical music) groups. The culture is preserved by the Associations: the older folk talk in their own language, sing, dance and play the *shamisen* (an instrument with three strings and a sounding box covered with snake skin) and the *taiko* (a percussion instrument or drum of various sizes and shapes) and even the *karaōque*. There they hold meetings, beneficent tea parties and have their encounters; they attend artistic performances, so that these spaces become places for their common life, for social encounter and leisure.

The Okinawan Kenjin Association of Brazil

The first association of Okinawan immigrants, the *Kyūyo Kyōkai* was organized when the colony began the movement for the government to permit the entry of Okinawans into Brazil which, because of the number of fugitives from the ranches, had been prohibited. Founded on 22nd. August, 1926, it fought for a decade to put an end to the restrictions imposed on Okinawans and to improve the image of these immigrants, who were discriminated against even by the Japanese themselves. It continued to exist until 1941, when it closed its doors, together with other foreign entities, during the Getúlio Vargas government. On 15th June 1947, due to the destruction of Okinawa by the Americans, and with the support of the Red Cross, the community organized the *Okinawa-Sai-Kai*, to help the population of the island by sending them basic foodstuffs. On 22nd February 1953, it was reorganized as the *Zaihaku-Okinawa-Kaigau Kyōkai do Brasil* (Association of Okinawans Resident Overseas), presided over by Seian Hanashiro, Kamekichi Morine and Kyangyu Izumugawa. The Okinawa government, to solve the problem of super-population, encouraged immigration and requested the support and union of the Okinawans in Brazil. This led to the organization of the Okinawa Association of Brazil.²²

The Okinawan Cultural Center of Brazil

The Okinawans in São Paulo wanted, initially, to build a house to shelter the immigrants who had arrived recently, after the Second World War. But the focus was changed and the Students' Hostel was built, with a view to housing the children of Okinawans who came to study in São Paulo, but who had nowhere to stay. Paulo Nakandakare, a state deputy and political leader, supported the purchase of the land. The foundation stone was laid on 17th June 1968, in the city of Diadema, near the State capital . During the building of the Center, misunderstandings arose between members of the Association and the Committee responsible for the construction,

which led to the separation of the Association from the Center, eventually donated to a private society on 24th July 1971. As the Center's objective was, apart from providing for mutual fraternization, social well being, it organized activities seeking to improve the participants' cultural level, to prepare young people to exercise leadership and to participate in exchange visits with Okinawa province. The Center was inaugurated on 15th November 1971 and has since been reintegrated into the Association.

A club, a historic museum of Okinawa and activities related to Okinawan culture such as shows, dances, musical activities and courses all have their place at the Center. An annual festival of Okinawan culture (*Kyodo Matsuri of Okinawa*) is held there; it includes folk dances (*Eissá*), typical food, the tea ceremony (*Buko Buko Chado*) and the kimono competition typical of Okinawa (*Miss Ryuso*).²³ The winner represents Brazil at the Naha Festival, held in Okinawa in the month of October.

The reconstruction of ethnic identity in the first and second generations

Of all the immigrants hailing from Japan, the Okinawan is the most open, spontaneous, happy and agreeable, unlike from those of other provinces (more reserved, of short, even monosyllabic, utterances and less extroverted). The Okinawans have their own cultural tradition, rooted in their religion, dances and music.

Music plays a fundamental role in the life of the Okinawan in São Paulo and this aspect has become a subject for study.²⁴ Values and customs have been handed down from parents to children by means of folk songs, such as the oral-tradition song *Thin sagu nu hana* (The flower of the kiss), which speaks of the importance of the family and of the values transmitted by parents.

The *sanshin* (or *shamisen*), a the three-stringed instrument with the sound box made of snake skin, came in the luggage of many of the immigrants from Okinawa, the poorest of this Japanese province. In the colonies, they met to sing and play the instrument at New Year celebrations, at weddings and at birthdays and farewells on the eve of journeys. It was by means of music – and also religion – that a link was established with the homeland.

Music continues to play an important part in the life of the Okinawans and their descendants, so contributing to the identity of this ethnic group. In the Association's calendar of events for the year 2001, there was no civic festival like Okinawa or Japan Day, or the Day of the Emperor, but rather a series of events related to dancing and music, as well as sporting competitions among the subgroups. Normally, the children do not speak the dialect of Okinawa, speaking Japanese

instead, but they do sing a variety of songs in Okinawan. In the city of São Paulo, there are a number of music groups scattered throughout the city, who play the *kotem* type of traditional classical music and the *minyō* of popular tradition. The majority of the descendants preserve the *minyō* tradition as, for example, the groups in Vila Carrão, Jabaquara and Casa Verde, whether in the associations of young people, adults or ladies (*Funjinkai*), or in the groups specially dedicated to this style.

The *Minyo* group of the Jabaquara branch is composed of 15 people, 13 of them *nissei* and 2 *sansei*.²⁵ Of this group, two are teachers (Tioiti Kochi and Paulo Oyakawa) who learned to play the *sanshin* from their grandfathers, from whom they inherited the instrument. All the *sanshin* of the members of this group belonged to their grandparents or parents and were made of snake skin, with the exception of the instruments of the *sansei* Rodrigo and Thiago Hanashiro, which were made of synthetic, imitation snake skin. The songs are sad and sentimental and take as their themes: love, morality, customs, honesty, the work and difficulties of the peasant, family unity, love for the homeland and education.

The ladies organize and still participate in the *Fujinkai* and they meet in the various *shibu*. In the mid-60s, these groups were organized by the women to give their support to their husbands, who were active in the association in which they themselves could not participate. They do social welfare work and meet weekly to sing and dance. In one of these meetings of the *Fujinkai*, in the headquarters, I noticed that their appearance changed considerably (smile, facial and corporal expression). I succeeded in getting a translation of the lyrics of *Ji daí no Nagare*²⁶ (Time that flies), a very popular song on Okinawa, whose words tell of the changes in the habits and customs that took place with the American presence on the island. These brought about a great transformation, with reflections in the culture, especially in the music of the island, according to the reports of some of their descendants.

Religion: ancestor worship

Religion is very important for this ethnic group. Of the 50 people who answered our questionnaire, the majority was Buddhist (25); Catholics numbered 12 and a small number (9) did not declare their religion. However, ancestor worship is still a very strong tradition, practised in the home, before the *totome* (*butsudan*), in a small shrine. Small wooden plaques, on which the names of all the forefathers are carved, are placed within the *totome*. For Shinji Yonamine, son of immigrants, the Okinawans have a spiritual family custom, overriding religious convictions and arising from a very deep-rooted Okinawan concept, this link, this relation with the family, in which the women play a very important role. The Okinawan's mother or

grandmother prays for the family, burns incense for them, prays to the ancestors and offers them sweets and tea, prays for everybody's health and tells them of the day's happenings. She changes the water on the *Butsudam*, the family altar, and replaces the flowers o, normally on the 1st and 15th days of every month. But, according to Shinji, the Okinawan does a little of everything: he says the Lord's Prayer, goes to Candomblé (Brazilian Voodoo) and spiritualist centers, to the Buddhist or Shinto temple, but at home he maintains the tradition.²⁷

Even though they may have denied it on the questionnaire and at the interview, some believe in a religious witch doctor cult, which exercised some influence in Shintoism, Buddhism and Taoism, both in Japan and China. This cult incorporates the figure of *Yuta*, a woman with a medium's powers, who is the means of contact with the other world. In the testimony of the descendant Hiroko Teruya, who exercises the role of *Yuta* in the community, it is evident that a certain religious syncretism has taken place in Brazil, because in the community's ritual one notes aspects of both Catholic ritual and Candomblé:

“When I was born, I am certain that I was received by Our Lady of Aparecida (...), but Our Lady of Aparecida spoke: “Bless the person whom you cure”. (...) I bless by using the candle, I have holy water too, I scatter holy water (...). Then the brandy came from Japan, the first crop from Okinawa; it comes from the potato and I offer it to the God of our forefathers. Now we have salt, at the side, which we have received from the Goddess, the Goddess Iemanjá; then this part came from the sea, so 85% of us need salt, isn't that true?(...)”²⁸

Ethnic consciousness and Japanese prejudice

The Okinawan descendant, José Roberto Miney, began to be interested in cooking and the Okinawan culture after reaching adulthood. In the memories of his childhood, there remains the image of his grandparents as strange and half ethereal, supernatural beings:

“(...) they lived in Paranaguá. I don't know if I entered into that atmosphere of reverence with regard to my grandparents because they lived a long way away and because everything about them was very different; even the smell of their house was different from the smell of my house, something remarkably Japanese. Then there was that smell of incense, of seaweed, something like that, which always called my attention. The impression that I had was that I was entering another dimension and was conversing with gods, because they were so

impressive and this was basically the relationship which I had with them; it was as if I were conversing with some supernatural being”.²⁹

The Japanese regard the Okinawans as belonging to a different world. One descendant reported to us that, formerly, the Japanese from other provinces would not agree to marry their daughters to Okinawans, and that the Japanese newspapers published very few articles about the Okinawans. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that led these latter to publish their own newspaper in 1998 – Utiná Press: Brasil Okinawa.

The way in which the consciousness surfaced that he was a descendant of Okinawans, and of the prejudice of the Japanese with regard to the Okinawans and their descendants, appears in the testimony of José Roberto Miney:

“My perception is not academic; I experienced it (...) when I lived in São Paulo and in other places where there was a strong Japanese community. The first thing that a person would say was: ‘Are you an Okinawan descendant?’- Then I would go to my mother and say, ‘Am I an Okinawan descendant? What does that mean?’ And she would say, ‘Because your grandparents are from Okinawa and everything’. Later, I began to understand a little better the connotation of difference, let’s say, that the Japanese discriminate. I think that they have a certain way of seeing things. I don’t know how it is today, but, originally, they discriminated against the descendants of whoever is from Okinawa. It’s something like the same relationship the Southeast of Brazil has with the Northeast. I think they say, ‘Ah, he’s from Okinawa!’ in the same way as the inhabitant of São Paulo State will say, ‘Ah, he comes from Bahia!’. You know how it is. Even in our biotype we’re different. Folk from Okinawa have more hair, they have beards, they have curlier hair, bigger eyes, they have a fold in the skin round the eyes, but the Japanese don’t”.

The *nissei* had more contact with the Okinawan culture through his parents, schools and rural recreational associations, but with the help of their families many Okinawans/*nissei* moved from the countryside to the cities. From the 60s, the *nissei* constituted a significant proportion of the university population of the city of São Paulo, when they began to have more contact with Brazilian culture, leading to some identity crises. Through her testimony, Olga Futema is the witness of a generation, underlining how the question of identity is posed to the young descendants who arrive at the university gates, and how it is constructed. For Olga³⁰, to discover that she was not so bi-polar (Brazil-Japan), and that, furthermore, she carried within her a third element, was, no doubt, sufficient cause for a crisis. There arose a questioning, a dilemma as to how she could integrate

three such different models: to be Brazilian, being born there; the impossibility of casting off her culture of origin; and possessing, further, a culture of reference – Japanese – recognized by Brazilian society. She had to reconcile all of this in addition to the behavioral changes in the world of the 60s, in Brazil and the world.

The Uchinanchu Spirit

The Okinawans created, in São Paulo, a veritable network of relationships. According to Jorge Seiken Hanashiro, this spirit of unity comes from Okinawa, created by the inhospitable nature of the island (of subtropical climate, with volcanic mountains in the north and reefs to the south), by the typhoons, which sweep across the island in the months of July, August and September. This strong group feeling of identity helped them overcome the difficulties they met in their new country and preserve the *Uchinanchu* culture.³¹

For the descendant Tatsuo Sakima, *Uchinanchu* is a state of mind. It is to be possessed by such a powerful ‘charge’ of the values of Okinawan culture that “when you meet up with another, you immediately identify yourself and begin to interact”.

This *Uchinanchu* spirit has been passed on to their descendants and, today, it is reinforced, on the world level, by the organization of annual meetings, promoted by the Okinawa government, with the participation of representatives from various countries.

Sources: oral testimony:

Shinji Yonamine, son of Okinawans, born in Araçatuba, São Paulo, on 17/7/1950.

Maria Hiroko Teruya, daughter of Okinawans, born in Lucélia, São Paulo, in 1946.

Jorge Seiken Hanashiro, son of Okinawans, born in Itariri, São Paulo, on 24/4/1931.

José Roberto Miney, son of Okinawans, born in Curitiba, on 18/4/1954.

Yoshiko Hanashiro, born in Nago, Okinawa province, Japan, on 15/4/1909.

Kame Futema, born in Okinawa, Japan, on 15/2/1922.

Olga Futema, daughter of Okinawans, born in São Paulo, on 27/4/1951.

Matsu Benoki, born in Okinawa, Japan, in 1920.

Shinko Akamine, born in Naha, Okinawa province, Japan, on 7/12/1935.

Yoshiko Kian, born in Okinawa, Japan, in 1928.

Seiko Arashiro, born in Okinawa, Japan, in 1915.

Sumi Arashiro, born in Okinawa, Japan, in 1915.

José Yamashiro, son of Okinawans, born in Santos, on 20/4/1913.

Tatsuo Sakima, son of Okinawans, born in Botucatu, in 1941.

Questionnaire completed by 50 Okinawan families.

Notes

¹ Okinawa forms part of an archipelago situated at the extreme south of continental Japan and composed of 160 islands, of which only 40 are inhabited. It became a Japanese province – Okinawa Ken – consisting of the islands of Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and others. Studies show that the Okinawan racial group is a mixture of peoples coming from Japan and the southeast of Asia, who occupied the islands about 12 thousand years ago.

² Sakurai, Célia. Imigração japonesa para o Brasil: um exemplo de imigração tutelada. In: *Fazer a América*. Boris Bausto (org.). São Paulo: EDUSP, 1999. p. 124.

³ List of ships arriving from Japan between 1908 and 1973. Museu da Imigração.

⁴ Miyagui, Shoei. *Okinawa: história, lendas, tradições*. São Paulo: Oliveira Mendes, 1998. p. 44.

⁵ Idem.

-
- ⁶ Yamashiro, José. *Trajetórias de duas vidas: uma história de imigração e integração*. São Paulo: Aliança Cultural Brasil-Japão/Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros, 1996. p. 31.
- ⁷ Uchiyama, Katsuo et alli. Emigração como política de Estado. In: *Uma epopéia moderna: 80 anos da imigração japonesa no Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Hucitec/Sociedade Brasileira de Cultura Japonesa, 1991. p. 144-145.
- ⁸ Yamashiro, José, *op. cit.* 1996. p. 27-28.
- ⁹ Yamashiro, José, *op. cit.* 1996. p. 28-29.
- ¹⁰ Imigração Okinawana no Brasil. São Paulo: Associação Okinawa Kenjin do Brasil. 2000. p. 208.
- ¹¹ Paiva, Odair da Cruz. *Intervenção governamental e reordenação fundiária: a ação da Secretaria da Agricultura no Litoral Sul e Vale do Ribeira de Iguape nas décadas de 1920 e 1940*. Dissertação (Mestrado em Ciências Sociais) – Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de Campinas, 1993. p. 171.
- ¹² Yamashiro, *op. cit.* 1996. p. 49.
- ¹³ Yamashiro, *op. cit.* 1996. 213.
- ¹⁴ Testimony of Jorge Seiken Hanashiro to the author on 31/8/1999, as director of the Brazil-Okinawa Cultural Center.
- ¹⁵ Report of his son José Yamashiro in the work *Trajetórias de duas vidas: uma história de imigração e integração*. p. 57 e 58.
- ¹⁶ Testimony already quoted.
- ¹⁷ Testimony of Shinko Akamine to the author on 27/8/1999.
- ¹⁸ Testimony to the author, on 24/8/1999.
- ¹⁹ On this subject see Moraes, Fernando. *Corações sujos*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000. The author, on the basis of historical sources, wrote a journalistic version of the history of the *Shindo Renmei*.
- ²⁰ O futuro da Associação Okinawa Kenjin do Brasil e seus setores. In: *Imigração okinawana no Brasil*, p. 128.
- ²¹ Testimony already quoted.
- ²² Testimony of Jorge Seiken Hanashiro already quoted.
- ²³ Due to the hot and humid tropical climate, the peasants of Okinawa used kimonos made from banana plant fibers (*bassajin*), because they are light and fresh. The nobles wore the *bingata*, made of colored silk and flower patterns.
- ²⁴ Satomi, Alice Luni. *As gotas de chuva no telhado: música de Ryukyu em São Paulo*. Dissertação (Mestrado em Música-Etnomusicologia) - Universidade Federal da Bahia, 1998.
- ²⁵ The Japanese community denominated *nikkei* included the *issei* (immigrant), *nissei* (son or daughter), *sansei* (grandchild), *yonsei* (greatgrandchild) and *gosei* (greatgreatgrandchild).
- ²⁶ From the era of Tōh to the Yamato era/ From the Yamato to the Americanized age / The change in Utiná is strange/ We used to go to Naha and return on foot. Today I go and come back seated!/ We don't even miss the past. We used to count our money/ 1 kuan, 2 kuans, but today?/ Even counting money's changed! Formerly, the old and young/ could be distinguished by the way they dressed/ Today? Father, son and

everyone/ seem all of one same age. The women used to take pride in their beautiful long hair/ today? It's all shorn off, flattened or permed/ to look most like a pigeon's nest! Today they use high heels and/ sway this way and that/ resembling turtles. They shorten their tight skirts and jeans turn-ups. They tie up their knees and with heir/ stuck-out bottoms they strut like peacocks. Seeing a young woman from behind/ but looking straight ahead/ 'turn your face', wrinkles of your 60 years. At heart, forever a 17/18 -year old/ But in the corners of your eyes, disguised wrinkles, undisguisable/ Ah, natural folds that grow on us! (*The Tōh era – ancient China; Yamato – ancient Japan; Naha (capital of the province of Okinawa); Utiná – Okinawa in the local dialect*). Translation by Paulo Yamashiro.

²⁷ Testimony of Shinji Yonamine to the author on 30/5/2001. Shinji is the director of the Associação Okinawa Kenjin do Brasil.

²⁸ Testimony to the author, in September 1999.

²⁹ Testimony to the author, on 30/9/1999.

³⁰ Testimony to the author, on 1/9/1999.

³¹ Uchinanchu means Okinawans in their dialect.