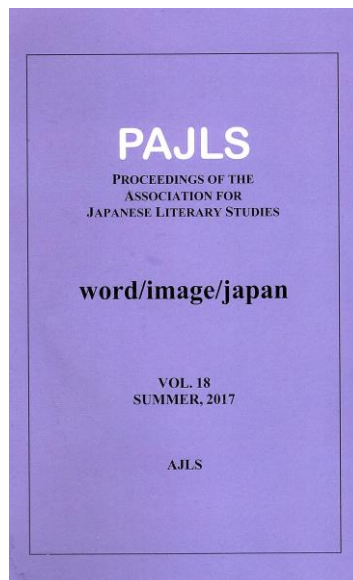


“Brief History of the Kōtakusei – Japanese Immigrants in the State of Amazonas, Brazil”

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**BRIEF HISTORY OF THE KŌTAKUSEI - JAPANESE
IMMIGRANTS IN THE STATE OF AMAZONAS, BRAZIL**

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Japanese immigration in Amazonas, the largest Brazilian state (with an area of over a million and a half square kilometers), is usually associated with the presence of Japanese companies that are part of the Industrial Centre in Manaus Free Trade Zone, such as Sony, Honda, Yamaha, Toyota, Fuji, and others. However, Japanese contribution to the economy of the state – reflecting on the country's economy as well - has a longer history, dating back to the 30s, with the arrival of the so-called kōtakusei.

According to the information obtained from the Amazon Kōtaku Association, Japanese immigration to the state occurred in four phases: the first phase, beginning in 1929, in the city of Maués, with the main goal of planting guarana; the second phase, beginning in 1931, in the city of Parintins, with the arrival of the kōtakusei, whose work involved both agricultural production and research and whose main contribution was the acclimation of jute in Brazil; the third phase, in 1954, almost ten years after the end of World War II, in the city of Manacapuru, and the fourth phase, in 1958, in the area by the road Manaus-Itacoatiara, both for horticultural products. Some even consider there is a fifth phase, from 1967 to the beginning of the Industrial Centre of Manaus, but there are also those who argue that they are different processes - understanding that this fifth phase is not a case of immigration itself, since the employees of Japanese companies of the Industrial Pole do not always bring their families and normally stay for only two and a half to three years.

This paper will focus on the second phase, seeking to trace a brief history of the kōtakusei in the city of Parintins, Amazonas. Parintins was important for Brazilian economy in the 30s when jute was acclimatized - after a series of failed attempts - and helped heal the deficit after the fall of Amazonian rubber. During that period, the country exported a lot of coffee but had to import jute bags for it, which prevented making the price more

competitive in the international market. The cultivation of jute is considered the first agricultural enterprise itself in the northern region (Nogueira 170), followed by black pepper, in the state of Pará (coincidentally made possible by Japanese immigrants).

Defining the kōtakusei

The word *kōtakusei* is not common and usually requests a brief explanation. Yoshihiro Kumamoto (43) gives the following definition of *kōtakusei*:

高等拓殖学校を卒業した「高拓生」は、上塚司を中心にアマゾナス州に設けた植入地ヴィラ・アマゾニアに渡り、アマゾニア産業研究所で訓練を受けつつ、周辺の開発研究を行った。

The *kōtakusei*, students who graduated from the Superior School of Emmigration, departed to Vila Amazônia, a new emmigration place, provided by Tsukasa Uetsuka, in the heart of Amazonas. While they put their knowledge into practice in Vila Amazônia Institute, they conducted research for the development of the surrounding area. (our translation)

From this definition, we can tell the following characteristics of the *kōtakusei*: their origin (graduates from the Superior School of Emmigration), their workplace (Vila Amazônia, in the state of Amazonas, Brazil) and their goals (put their knowledge into practice as well as carry out research). The mentioned School was idealized by Japanese deputy Tsukasa Uetsuka, who always believed in emmigration to Amazonas as an excellent opportunity, profitable for both Japan and Brazil.

Having delimited the group of immigrants to study, it is necessary to explain how they differed from immigrants in other phases or other regions of the country. The *kōtakusei* intended to stay in Amazonas, unlike the immigrants who came to the south and southeast of Brazil, whose interest was basically earning money in order to return to Japan. Through the work of Japanese deputy Tsukasa Uetsuka, creator and mentor of the project, the

young *kōtakusei* spent about one year training in a school (Kōtō Takushoku Gakkō) organized specifically for this purpose, learned basics of Portuguese language and studied about Brazil. It is possible to highlight the profile of these students with the following characteristics: 1) their families had some financial condition, i.e., they were not poor, possibly classified as middle-class; 2) first-born sons were not accepted (as the eldest son, in Japanese culture, is the heir); 3) they made an oath never to return to Japan – the contents and the circumstances of this oath are yet unclear; 4) already in Brazil, they did not make any effort to teach Japanese language to their children – since their intention was to settle permanently in Amazonas.

They went to a country that was very different, in many respects, from their homeland. They were initially welcomed, because Japanese work in the agricultural sector in other Brazilian regions had already proved to be a good alternative, given the results in coffee plantations in the southeast. Both states, Amazonas and Pará, were willing to give land to those who could work and produce (Souza 120). Furthermore, it was part of Efigenio Salles' (governor of Amazonas from 1926 to 1929) strategy to populate Amazonas. At the time, one hundred and eighty-five million acres of forests and fields had a population density of about one inhabitant to four hectares (Nogueira 169). It seemed to be a good deal for Brazilian and Japanese entrepreneurs, and the act of cooperation was signed. Unfortunately, this cooperation was gradually stifled by the propaganda of “yellow peril”, already widespread in the rest of the country. There were also difficulties in trying to acclimatize jute, a slow process full of attempts and frustration (Homma 31-38). With World War II, Brazil severed relations with Japan. With the war comes the end of the school in Tokyo, the end of Vila Amazônia (where the *kōtakusei* had settled) and the Amazon Institute (Amazon Sangyō Kenkyūjo, which should be more appropriately translated as “Amazon Institute of Production and Research”). After the war, Japanese immigration to Amazonas continues in a different format reaching the cities of Manacapuru and Itacoatiara, closer to the capital Manaus.

Tsukasa Uetsuka had written an article for the graduation of the first class of *kōtakusei*, entitled “Opening of the Amazon and

mission of the Amazon Institute”. In this article, he indicates some purposes established for the project on immigration to Vila Amazônia. Many of the purposes mentioned were executed, including the construction of a hospital that served not only Japanese immigrants but also the residents of Parintins and even people who came from Belém – capital of Pará – and Manaus (Souza 130). The cited purposes, presented in topics, were written as follows: “Agriculture, forestry and fishing in the Amazon”, “Tests on agricultural products”, “School production administration”, “Hospital”, “Climate conditions measurement”, “Museum”, “Publication of monthly newsletters containing the research information on each seed”.

On monthly newsletters, it is possible to contemplate a rich source of information about the activities of the kōtakusei in Vila Amazônia and their perspectives about Brazil. The translation of these newsletters is crucial to better understand the dynamics of kōtakusei’s activities. Much of the information conveyed by these reports relate to nature (animals, fruits, climate, for example), but there is also information, albeit brief and sparse, about geography and national symbols, for example.

Facing opposition

Whenever the oath of no more returning to Japan and adopting Brazil as a new homeland is mentioned, it sounds odd. What were the real contents of this oath? By the present time in this research, the text of the oath itself is not known, but it is undoubtedly the focus of opponents to the Japanese presence in the Brazilian Amazon. These opponents believed that Japanese considered themselves superior and therefore all their actions were strategic in the sense of dominating other people. Early in our research, we sought to study the role of kōtakusei under the Realism in International Relations Theory, in which all actions are motivated by interests in terms of power and desire to dominate (based upon the philosophy of Hobbes and Machiavelli, for example). At present, we tend to observe this role played by Japanese immigrants in Amazonas under the Liberalism/Interdependentism, theories in which actions are motivated by cooperation to achieve common goals and conduct profitable enterprises. The first theory

is essentially political; the second, eminently economical. Both are just theories and, therefore, attempt to explain the observed facts in this unique period in Brazilian history using their own tools and concepts.

According to Antão Ikegami (2009), author of the book “A fibra e o sonho”, (in English, “The fiber and the dream”) and son of a kōtakusei, the idea of Tsukasa Uetsuka was “to transform the relationship between the Japanese and the Amazon in a venture of international success, making Brazil one of the world’s largest producers of jute fiber and derivatives” (57). Furthermore, the contribution of the Japanese in the city of Parintins was beyond agriculture, also reaching the urbanization of the city. José Camilo Ramos de Souza, born in Parintins, studied for many years the presence of kōtakusei, and testifies as follows (130):

Então, em Vila Amazônia, os nipônicos implantaram um hospital, sob a direção do Dr. Yoshio Toda, atendendo pacientes da vila e de Parintins, além de oriundos de Belém e Manaus; construíram uma escola de excelente qualidade para onde muitos alunos de Parintins se transferiram para estudar; construíram um templo para as reuniões; construíram, ainda, olarias, serrarias, armazéns e casas para os trabalhadores da companhia. Em Vila Amazônia, eles implantaram um sistema de esgoto (tipo bueiro) para o escoamento da água pluvial. Com o crescimento da produção agrícola e da juta, o porto de Vila Amazônia tornou-se importante [...].

Back then, in Vila Amazônia, Japanese implanted a hospital, under the direction of Dr. Yoshio Toda, receiving patients from the vila and Parintins, and also from Belém and Manaus; they built a school of outstanding quality, to where many students from Parintins transferred; they built a temple for meetings; they also built potteries, sawmills, warehouses and houses for the company workers. In Vila Amazônia, they implanted a sewerage system (with manholes) to drain rainwater. With the growth of jute and agricultural production, Vila Amazônia’s port became important [...]. (our translation)

Almost all of the purposes cited by Tsukasa Uetsuka at the time of the first class graduation ceremony were reached. In some of the newsletters, the extreme care in the temperature record, for example, described in detail, with measurements in the air and

ground at different times of day, shows that agricultural production was not conducted without research. Today, the descendants of kōtakusei, members of the Amazon Kōtaku Association (Amazon Kōtakukai), plan on the construction of a new hakkōkaikan, which will be like a museum - the original purpose of Uetsuka mentioned in the graduation speech. Not all the goals were achieved mainly because of the circumstances of the impending war. The kōtaku project was disabled when, in September 1942, the Brazilian government expropriated Vila Amazônia. The kōtakusei living there were taken to the city of Tomé-Açu, in the state of Pará, where they remained until the end of the war. Vila Amazônia, considered as spoils of war, was auctioned in April 1946 and acquired for a low price by Joaquim Gonçalves Araújo, a wealthy Portuguese merchant.

One of the reasons that provoked antipathy towards Japanese immigrants, as well as its rapid economic rise in rural areas (due to their dedication to work, often employing all family members throughout the timely within seven days of the week), is the fact that the migration process was, from the beginning, supported and monitored by the Japanese government. This gave greater security to immigrants when they decided to come to Brazil, such a far away country; on the other hand, the Japanese government engaging in this endeavor raised suspicion among some Brazilians, who claimed there was a project of imperialist domination - which has never been proven.

One of the main opponents of Japanese settlers in Amazonas was deputy Antóvilva Mourão Rodrigues Vieira, who created a bill in 1936 requesting the revision of the contract between the State of Amazonas and the Japanese, then represented by Dr. Tsukasa Uetsuka. The Baron of Rio Branco himself, when acting as Foreign Minister (1902-1912), was contrary to the entry of Japanese immigrants in Brazil, even before the negotiation had started (Kawada 15).

Other politicians, like Felix Valois, Vivaldo Lima and Cunha Melo, defended the Japanese settlers. They were aware that not understanding their cultural differences would be the same as being driven by intolerance. They knew that the Japanese had a very strict upbringing since childhood, focused on improving through work and study, based on respect for rules and therefore

the laws - of their own country or another, wherever they are. Learning the Portuguese language is sometimes difficult for easterners; the older the person, the harder it gets. It is necessary to stress here that even Brazilians, especially those in the north and northeast regions, lived in a time of high illiteracy rate, especially when compared to today's standards. The settlers were in remote areas and had little contact with other Brazilians.

Only with great difficulty they succeeded in growing jute - and their achievement also resulted in the rapid economic recovery of Amazonas, weakened after the rubber market withered away. In a short time, Brazil occupied the seventh place in the production of jute in the world. The jute met not only the state's needs but also national needs: after all, Brazil was responsible for ninety percent of the world's coffee production, yet one hundred percent dependent on imported grain sacks for packing until then.

The process of jute acclimation in the Amazon, however, took longer than expected. After many failed attempts, in 1934, in the property of Mr. Ryota Oyama in Andirá, two of the jute trees, with a height of about four meters, almost without branches, grew up. In other previous attempts, with seeds brought from India, he could not have gotten a two meters high jute tree. One of these two jute trees died; the other one, however, brought new seeds, which were separated and delivered to Mr. Ryota and another settler, Mr. Yoshimasa.

Conclusion

After some time, in 1937, Mr. Ryota could reap six tons of fiber and Mr. Yoshimasa, four tons. The quality of the fiber was so good that the buyer (Jorge Martins Company, in Pará) did not believe that was a product from Amazonas, but from India. This new species of jute was named "Oyama type" by Dr. Tsukasa Uetsuka.

Tsukasa Uetsuka believed in Japanese emmigration to Brazil even after the expropriation of Vila Amazônia. When the war was over, his plan was to restart emmigration flux and continue the research and production project. In fact, Japanese emmigration to Amazonas continued from the 50s on, but neither in the format devised by Uetsuka nor to the city of Parintins (but Itacoatiara and

Manaus), or by graduates of an intensive preparatory course conducted in Japan. In Brazil, he even visited President Getúlio Vargas, intending to have his intervention in continuing the kōtakusei activities – yet he did not succeed in this.

In Japan, Uetsuka continued defending the idea of cooperation with Brazilian Amazon. For the present research, two articles written by him were found in the National Diet Library: 「ブラジルへ移民はできるか」 (“Is immigration to Brazil possible?”) and 「懸案のブラジル移民問題」 (“Pending questions about immigration to Brazil”), both of them published in 1952, in different journals (see bibliography). He strongly asserted that cooperation Japan-Brazil was not only possible but very profitable. In the last article mentioned, he writes that jute is the gold of the Amazon.

This research continues seeking for new information that may further clarify doubtful points. Hopefully, new sources will make it possible to better comprehend what there is about the kōtakusei’s oath, as well as their studies in the Amazon Institute and the contents in the monthly bulletins.

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