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The Changing Character of Ethnic Organizations of the Okinawan-Brazilian Community: Analysis of the Data from the 6th Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival

Gustavo MEIRELESES

I. Introduction

Immigrants, in the process of adaptation into a new society, often find themselves searching for protections against actions that might be perceived as threatening and grasping for opportunities to promote and preserve the cohesion and continuity of their community and ethnic identity (Sardinha, 2007). During this process, immigrants unite, create networks and organize themselves, leading to the creation of collective organizations, also known as associations. Ethnic organizations in receiving countries have multiplied as a result of rapid international migration, globalization and the rise of new transportation and communication technologies which have aided long-distance and cross-border flows (Zhou & Lee, 2013). Such organizations connect migrants not only to their homeland, but also play a role in the process of community building in host societies. According to Sardinha (2007), these associations can be defined as organizations formed by individuals who consciously define themselves as members of an ethno-cultural group. Their roles might include the social, recreational, political, cultural, religious, professional, as well as other spheres.

Regarding the factors that stimulate the formation of such ethnic organizations, Breton (1964) highlights three main points: cultural differences with the native population, the level of resources among the members of the immigrant group and the pattern of migration. Other researchers also point out the importance of the environment in the host society. According to Schrover and Vermeulen (2005) the elements that affect the formation of ethnic organizations are: the migration process, the opportunity structure in the host society and the characteristics of the migrant community.

In terms of the functions of these organizations, Rex (1973) mentions the following: 1) overcoming social isolation, 2) helping individuals to solve personal and material problems, 3) combining to defend the groups interests in conflict and bargaining with the wider society and 4) maintaining and developing shared patterns of meaning. Albuquerque et al. (2000) divide these aims in two groups: 1) conservation, cultural affirmation and the consolidation of the feeling of belonging based on an
identity affiliation and 2) objectives of a material order, the majority of which involve aspects of the desire to integrate into the host-society's social order and primarily deal with immigrants' civic participation and rights.

While it is common for ethnic associations to be founded out of a desire to preserve the identity and culture of their members, inevitably these associations end up playing a major role in their settlement processes, either through pathways of assimilations or segregation. In the present paper, we first analyze the historical development of Okinawan ethnic organizations in Brazil. After understanding the particularities of this process, we turn to data from the 6th Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival in order to shed light into the current state of these organizations and challenges for the future.

II. Ethnic Institutions of the Okinawan-Brazilians

Japanese immigration to Brazil began with the arrival of the “Kasato-maru” ship to the port of Santos in 1908. Boarding the ship were 799 migrants, out of which 355 (44.4%) were originally from Okinawa. This high percentage of migrants from the province continued in the following years, with 2,138 people out of 3,883 (55.1%) in 1917 and 2,204 out of 5,956 (37.0%) in 1918.

During the pre-war period, according to Ishikawa, the main local push factors that led to the migration of large numbers of Okinawans were: economic factors related to overpopulation, the collapse of the communal system restrictions and the re-distribution of communal land, the presence of pioneers that advocated for migration, the existence of social institutions and the desire to avoid military recruitment. In the fifty years after the establishment of the Okinawa Prefecture, its population doubled. Even though this increase was not out of pace with other prefectures, the difference lies in the fact that production did not accompany the increase in population. The two-crops a year system adopted in Okinawa would often not reach the production levels of the one-crop a year system applied in other prefectures. Also, the improvement in transportation allowed for the import of not only food, but also clothes and other everyday items, changing the lifestyles of the residents. Such factors contributed to the desire to look for better opportunities in other parts of Japan and also abroad.

The second factor mentioned by Ishikawa is that of the re-distributional system of communal land. During the period between 1899 and 1903 the system of communal land was abolished under the “Revolution of the Land System”. According to the new system, communal land would be re-distributed in order to create a system of private ownership of land. In the old system, those who had the will to migrate often were not permitted to due to the restrictions created by the communal lifestyle. Private ownership was accompanied by the freedom of movement and residence, and it also opened the possibility of gathering funds through the sale of land. The next factor refers to the existence of pioneers that pushed for conditions that allowed for the migration of Okinawans. These pioneers were influenced by free civil rights ideas and include Kyuzo Toyama (considered the father of Okinawan immigration) and Kozo Oshiro, both originally from Kin Town.
When referring to the social institutions that helped foster immigration, Ishikawa is mainly directing attention to the role played by Monchu (門中). Even though this organization is said to have been influenced by Chinese Confucianism, it is a system originally developed in Okinawa. It basically refers to the “patriarchal system of familial solidarity according to which the spirits of ancestors are collectively celebrated”. It is said that many villages in the province were created based on the gathering of several familial communities centered on the Monchu system. According to Ishikawa, this strong familial bond existent in Okinawan society is directly connected to the creation of ethnic institutions in host societies around the world.

The last factor presented by the author is the desire to escape military recruitment. There was a wide belief that once someone was recruited and sent to the war zone, they would not return home. In other words, being recruited to fight was considered a death sentence. Therefore Okinawans, and especially those of advanced age, chose to go abroad in order to avoid recruitment.

As we move to the post-war period, the American occupation and its consequences (uncertainties about the future, the construction of bases, forced requisition of land) are pointed out as the main push factors. In the meantime, during the second half of the 19th century, Brazil faced a strong demand for labor. Slavery was abolished in 1888 and the pressing lack of workforce, especially in the coffee fields, led many European, as well as Japanese migrants, to the South-American country. It was in this context that Okinawans migrated and settled in Brazil.

The aforementioned high concentration of migrants originally from Okinawa led to their organization and a perception by the Japanese Consulate in São Paulo that people from Okinawa were coordinating strikes and were inclined to cause disturbance in the host society. This led to a de facto prohibition of Okinawan migration to Brazil based on the belief held by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, according to which “not only were there differences in the customs amongst mainland Japanese and Okinawans, but the later were also more prone to receive bad reviews by the locals”.

The first national ethnic association of migrants originating from Okinawa was founded in 1926 under the name “Kyuuyou Kyoukai” or “Kyuuyou Association”. This organization was created with the purpose of solving the matter of the provision that prohibited Okinawans from migrating to Brazil. This issue was solved in 1936, but as the Second World War began and Japan was considered an enemy nation, all Japanese associations in Brazil were dismantled. Once the war was over, the “Zai-haku Okinawa Kyuuen Renmei” (Brazilian Alliance for the Relief of Okinawa) was created in 1947 as part of the efforts to gather funds to contribute to relief efforts in post-war Okinawa. The creation of such alliance helped reestablish the bonds between the Okinawans in Brazil and the Kenjikai was founded with its headquarters located in the city of São Paulo. It is still very active nowadays, with activities ranging from performance of Okinawan traditional dance and music to the caring of the first migrants from the “Kasato-maru”.

Before the Second World War, most Japanese migrants to Brazil intended to save money in the country and return to Asia after a certain period of time. Nevertheless, after the war, many of those migrants decided to stay in the South-American country. As a consequence of this decision, many moved to bigger cities, especially São Paulo, in search of better opportunities for social and
economic ascension\textsuperscript{8}). Since most jobs in factories were occupied by migrants from Europe, their strategy involved developing family owned business, mainly in the laundry industry and in the sale of farm produce. The situation was not different for those who originated from Okinawa. The destruction that resulted from the Battle of Okinawa and the subsequent American occupation contributed to the decision of settling in Brazil and creating new strategies to succeed in the host society.

In his study of the establishment and development of an Okinawan Ethnic community in Brazil, Mori\textsuperscript{9} highlights the economic changes such community went through. The highest concentration of Okinawan migrants in the city of São Paulo can be found in the Vila Carrão region. The process of occupation of this region started right after the Second World War when a family originally from Oroku (Okinawa) moved to the area and opened a laundry shop. In the following years, more people from Oroku moved into the region. This flow of migrants was intensified in 1949 when the region’s street market was established. In 1956, 27 families constituted the Zai-haku Okinawa Kyoukai Vila Carrão Shibu (Brazilian Association of Okinawa, Vila Carrão Branch). This process can be described as a chain migration, involving networks of families and people with the same homeland.

According to Mori, in 1970 there were around 12,000 people working at the street markets in São Paulo, out of which roughly 4,000 were Japanese (descendants included). That represents the second biggest foreign group in this segment, after the Portuguese. The reasons for this high concentration of Okinawan migrants in this specific sector can be traced to: 1) the lack of financial resources to invest; 2) the language barrier; 3) the absence of formal education or certification; 4) previous experience in farming or sales in street markets shared by pre-war migrants; and 5) the participation of Okinawans in the São Paulo City Central Market, where most of the products sold at the street markets came from\textsuperscript{10}.

In time, the experience acquired working at the street market led many of the Okinawan migrants to move into different sectors, namely the sewing sector, as well as the food and miscellaneous goods retail sector. The former was possible due to one family’s experience in the area and their will to share that knowledge with other Okinawan migrants. The later was triggered by the population growth in the Vila Carrão area and the subsequent diversification of economic activities. Up until the 1950s, most of the migration to Vila Carrão was of migrants from other regions of São Paulo. However, during the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s, many migrants relocated there from Bolivia. Since many of them had sold their property and possessions before moving to Brazil, they had the necessary resources to start their own business. Those resources, allied with a strong network created during their stay in Bolivia, allowed for the development of business that comprehended all steps in the sewing industry, from the production to the sale of products.

After the Second Oil Shock in 1979, inflation in Brazil was unprecedented, reaching three digit figures, and economic growth rates started to venture in the negative field\textsuperscript{11}). That led the 1980s to be known as the “Lost Decade”. This period of hyperinflation, greatly impacted business owners in the country. So as to endure this troubled period, many Okinawan business owners
created ethnic associations whose members were in the same trade. Their goals were to try to bring costs down and exchange information. For example, in 1982, 28 supermarkets owners originally from Oroku created an association in order to better manage their resources and create an edge over the competition. This example was followed by other sectors, such as sewing, cosmetics, food and hardware. These associations often worked not only in terms of deciding management strategies, but also in pressuring local authorities.

It was also during the 1980s that, under an authoritarian government which was eager to restrain any free speech, staggering economic growth and public security worries, many Brazilians opted to leave the country in search of better opportunities. During the 1970s, the repressive authoritarian regime brought about a wave of political exiles. As for the 1980s, the main concern was the economy. According to a Report by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Emigration, during the years of 1985 and 1987 around 1.25 million people (corresponding close to 1% of the population) fled the country. Under such circumstances, and with the 1989 reform of the Japanese Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, many Japanese migrants and their descendants also opted to leave Brazil. This led to the development of companies that would cater the needs of those wanting to work in Japan, as well as associations that would guide and share know-how with those who returned from Japan and intended to invest their savings in Brazil.

The narrative presented above highlights the development and changes of the Okinawan community in São Paulo, and more specifically in the Vila Carrão region. Even though this represents the highest concentration of Okinawan migrants in Brazil, there are ethnic associations all over the country. One of the most recent additions to the Kenjikai network is the Curitiba branch. It was established in 2006 and it illustrates how the Okinawan traditions and the peculiarities of this community helped the development of ethnic associations.

According to Kumihara, the first gatherings of Okinawans in the region date back to 1957, in the form of Shinbokukai, or informal social gatherings. In such gatherings, the practice of Tanomoshi was common. This is a variety of rotating savings and credit association and it is also known by the names Moai or Yurei. In her interviews with members of the Okinawan community in Curitiba, Kumihara was able to identify differences in their development when compared to those living in São Paulo. While in the later it is common to see associations that were formed by people who migrated together and maintained those bonds, in the former we often see informal social gatherings. The author interprets this as an indication that many Okinawans migrated to Curitiba individually, not necessarily in groups. While most of them first arrived in Brazil in groups, for different reasons they relocated themselves inside the country individually.

Also based on her interviews and research into the registry of Okinawan Kenjikais, Kumihara was able to identify that there was a Branch in Curitiba at least until the 1980s. According to the official website created by the Brazilian Okinawa Kenjikai for the Centenary of Immigration celebrations, “the Curitiba Branch was active until about the middle of the 1970s, when the aging of first generation migrants led to its dissolution”. Nevertheless, even though a formal
Branch did not exist, the community was still active. During the 1990s, the Tanomoshi meetings continued to be held monthly in private residences, as well as other gatherings such as year-end and new year’s parties. Therefore, even though during the period between the 1980s until 2006 there was no formal Branch registered at the Headquarters of the Okinawa Kenjikai in São Paulo, gatherings centered on Tanomoshi continued to take place. The Curitiba Branch was officially reopened in 2006, but many members still refer to the monthly meetings as Tanomoshi.

III. Data from the 6th Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival

Since the 1980s, the subject of Okinawans living abroad was widely reported by the local media in Okinawa. This heightened interest in the Okinawan Diaspora led to the creation of “The Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival”. The first edition of the event was in 1990, and it has been held every five years since then. According to Kinjo\(^4\), three important events contributed to the reconstruction of the image of “uchinanchu” amongst those who live in the province: the attention given by the press to the Okinawan Diaspora during the 80s; the consequent political response (namely the The Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival); and the change in the 1989 reform of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act allowing Japanese descendants to live and work in Japan. Through these three events, it was possible to visualize the life course of the uchinanchu via the history of migration.

The latest edition of The Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival was held from the 27th to the 30th of October, 2016. The number of participants from abroad was nearly 7,400, setting a new record for the event. In total, it is believed that around 430,000 people participated in various activities in that period.

During the Festival, a survey was conducted through a collaboration between the University of the Ryukyus and the Okinawa Prefecture government. The survey was conducted in four languages (Japanese, English, Portuguese and Spanish) and there were three different versions focusing on the origin of the participant (from abroad, from other provinces, from Okinawa). In the end, there were 1,093 valid responses to the survey. In this section, we analyze some of these responses of participants, especially from Brazil, in order to better understand the relationship between the different generations of Okinawans and the ethnic associations in their countries.

Table 1 shows the country of residence of foreign participants, both those who answered the survey, as well as those who did not. The data related to the total number of participants of the festival was provided by the Okinawa Prefecture government\(^7\). Most of the survey respondents live in the United States of America (53.8%), followed by Brazil (10.8%) and other South American countries.

Next, we shall analyze the data of the Brazilian respondents. In terms of their age profile (Figure 1), most of them were in their 60s (22.5%), followed by those in their 30s and 70s (17.5%). The big majority is originally (Figure 2) from the state of São Paulo (70%), followed by Mato Grosso do Sul (17%). The remaining participants were from Minas Gerais, Parana and Rio de Janeiro. These numbers are consistent with the regions of high concentration of Okinawans in Brazil.
When we look at their membership in the local Kenjinkais (Figure 3), it is possible to notice that most of the respondents (60%) were affiliated to these associations. When divided by age (Figure 4), there are not significant differences in the level of membership, although those in their 60s and 70s were more prone to be members. In terms of participation in the activities of the Kenjikai, most of the respondents stated they sometimes participate (41.66%), followed by those who answered that they participate in almost all activities (37.5%). We should note that since much of the information regarding the Festival is transmitted to the community through the Kenjinkai, it is not unusual that the most respondents participate in these activities.

In terms of language proficiency (Figure 5, 6), younger generations show a lower level of proficiency, with most respondents answering that they cannot speak neither the Okinawan
dialect (83.33%) nor Japanese (75.00%). Those numbers were much smaller for those in their 40s and 50s (55.55% and 33.33%), and also for those in their 60s and 70s (25% for both languages).

In order to better understand the role of Kenjinkais and the means by which information about Okinawa is distributed, respondents were asked how they obtain information about the province and how often they do so. The results according to age are described in Figure 7. In line with the results, the internet is the main vehicle through which information is obtained. While
social media is the second most popular means of obtaining information amongst those in their 20s and 30s, the Kenjikai is the choice for those in their 40s and 50s. Lastly, for those in their 60s and 70s, relatives in Okinawa are the second major supply of information. There is a clear tendency for the younger generations to rely on the internet and social media. In contrast, older generations rely on more on relatives and mass media than younger ones.

As it was pointed out in the case of the development of the Okinawan community in Curitiba, the practice of tanomoshi was an important factor in the building and maintaining connections, even when the Kenjinkai was not officially active. When asked about the practice of tanomoshi, we observe a clear generational difference (Figure 8). While most of those in their 40s and older still practice it with some regularity, the great majority of the respondents in their 20s and 30s do not practice it at all.
IV. Conclusions

Based on the findings from the survey administered during the Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival and previous research regarding the Okinawan community in Brazil, we can draw some conclusions regarding the current state and the future of their ethnic organizations. First, it is important to note that the participants of the Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival are a very selective group. Since they have to travel to Japan by their own means, they are relatively motivated and have financial conditions to do so. They also have access to information regarding the event, much of which is filtered through the Kenjinkai. Bearing that in mind, we can better analyze the data available.

There is a clear difference in terms of generation regarding the aspects of maintaining the Okinawan culture and creating new connections to the province. In terms of language proficiency (both in Uchinaguchi and Japanese) and of maintaining traditions in daily life, younger generations have shown little interest. They have also searched for the internet and social media to obtain information about Okinawa, and have relied less on the Kenjinkai. In her study of the community in Curitiba, Kumihara highlights the concern of some members regarding the participation of young people in Kenjikai activities. According to testimonials, even though some cultural practices such as playing Okinawa Drums have attracted younger followers, that has not led to higher participation in other Kenjinkai activities. Some might participate in events such as tanomoshi when the rehearsals are held close by, but most of the regular members are still from older generations. There are also those who complain that even those students that make use of the Okinawa Prefecture Exchange Program have not joined Kenjikai activities after returning to Brazil. One of the reasons why the Curitiba Branch was reopened in 2006 was a desire to stimulate young people to participate in programs sponsored by the Okinawa Prefecture, and then contribute to activities after returning to Brazil. Nevertheless, such virtuous cycle has not materialized.

In contrast with the situation in Curitiba, Yamashiro (2010) indicates that the Kinjo Village Association has obtained some success by using exchange programs. The participation of young students in the exchange program of this village has also attracted those who did not show interest in Village Association activities before. One relevant point raised by Yamashiro is the fact that Kenjikai Branches in Brazil are geographically restricted, that is to say that you usually become a member of the Branch of your region. However, most village associations do not possess many branches, which might limit their activities, but unites them in their common origin.

Even though these two examples present different results for the exchange programs, they seem to indicate that the solution to the generational change lies in the exchange between the Okinawan-Brazilian youth and those in the Japanese province. In order to cope with these changes, although many Kenjikais in North America and Hawaii have opened their activities to “outsiders”, those in South America seem to be lagging behind in this process (Noiri, 2009). In her observations of the Japanese-Brazilian community (not restricted to Okinawan) in Marilia (São Paulo), Nakazawa (2018) has also observed efforts to include those who do not possess Japanese ancestry in the activities of the community. By creating a group of people that have an interest in Japanese culture, they have been able to maintain many of their activities. In the case of the
respondents to our survey, all of them stated to have roots in Okinawa, which might confirm the
tendency to not open activities to those who do not possess ancestry, but could also indicate the
high motivation and resources necessary to participate in the event.

The classical approach to how immigrants interact with the host society is that of assimilation
theories. One key concept used in this case has been referred to as ethnic enclaves, which are “urban
clusters of immigrants from the same sending country” (Zhou & Lee, 2013). The ethnic enclaves
are seen as a step in the direction of assimilation, where immigrants can meet their survival needs
and ease resettlement problems. According to these theories, enclaves will eventually decline and
disappear as immigrants assimilate to the host society and fewer immigrants arrive to support
ethnic associations.

In contrast to the unilinear assimilationist paradigm that dominated classical migration
theory, a new concept of transnational migration took form especially during the 1990s. This
concept highlights the fact that in their daily lives migrants “depend on multiple and constant
interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in
relationship to more than one nation-state” (Schiller, Basch & Blanc, 1995). Portes, Escobar &
Radfort (2007) also assert that most transnational activities are not conducted on an individual
basis, but through organizations. Therefore, it is important to consider the activities of ethnic
organizations in terms of the settling process of immigrants. In the case of Brazil, where younger
generations have adapted and assimilated to the host society, the continuity of ethnic organizations
will depend on these transnational connections. That is the reason why events such as the
Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival and exchange programs between youngsters in Brazil and Japan
might provide the necessary tools to prevent the disintegration of Okinawan ethnic organizations.

Notes
1) This research was conducted with the aid of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports,
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Principal Investigator: Junzo Kato, and Grants in aid for Young Scientists (B), Issue Number:
16K17296, Principal Investigator: Naoka Maemura
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5) 山城千秋 (2008) 『ブラジルにおける沖縄移民社会の形成と文化伝承の構図』熊本大
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沖縄系ブラジル人エスニック組織の変遷
——「第6回ウチナーンチュ大会」のデータを手がかりに——

グスターボ・メイレレス

キーワード：世界のウチナーンチュ大会、沖縄系ブラジル人、エスニック組織、沖縄

移住者は、ホスト社会に適応する際、エスニック・アイデンティティの保存とコミュニティの維持を促進し、脅威と思われる行動に対して防衛を図る。その過程において、共同体を代表する団体の設立につながる移住者の団結とネットワーク形成が見られる。文化とアイデンティティの維持がエスニック組織の主な役割とされているが、こういった団体はメンバーの定住過程にも大きな影響を与えている。エスニック組織というのは、文化・エスニック・アイデンティティの意識を共有する構成員によって設立されるものである（Sardinha, 2007）。そして、エスニック組織の活動は社会、レジャー、政治、文化、宗教、就労といった、様々な分野に広がる。本稿では、まずブラジルにおける冲縄系エスニック組織の発展過程を分析した。その過程を理解した上で、第6回ウチナーンチュ大会のデータに基づいてそのエスニック組織の実態と将来の展望を検証した。

沖縄文化の維持と沖縄県とのつながりに関して、世代的な相違が見られた。若い世代は、日常生活において文化や言語力（うちなーぐちと日本語）の維持に消極的である。さらに、沖縄に関する情報源として、エスニック組織（県人会）よりも、インターネットやソーシャルメディアが多く挙げられた。多くの組織が沖縄県との交流プログラムを通じて若い世代の参加を促そうとしてきたが、その効果はまだ確かなわけではない。本稿で取り上げる事例を見ても、交流プログラムの効果に関する疑問は残るが、世代交代によって生じる問題の対策として、ブラジルと沖縄に住む若い世代の交流が鍵となる可能性を示唆する。

ブラジルの場合は、世代交代が進み、若い世代がブラジル社会に同化する傾向が強く、エスニック組織の維持継続はトランスナショナルなつながりにかかっている。ウチナーンチュ大会や日伯の若い世代の交流プログラムのような施策はブラジルにおける沖縄系エスニック組織の継続を促進する可能性を秘めている。

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