

CHAPTER 25

Japanese and Okinawan Cubans

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Abstract: This article considers the complex history of the Japanese and Okinawan migrants to Cuba, beginning with their secondary migration to Cuba, often as an attempt to circumvent restrictive racially exclusionary immigration laws in the United States. Though some of these immigrant families were able to succeed and build other businesses, the majority continued to work in agriculture-related industries until World War II, when the U.S.-supported Batista administration placed 341, mostly male, Japanese and Okinawans in the Presidio Modelo prison on the Isle of Youth. Despite the immense privation forced on both the prisoners and their families, many sought to rebuild their lives in their adopted homelands following the end of the war. As discontent with the government continued to grow in the 1950s, some Japanese and Okinawans actively supported the revolutionary movement, and following the Cuban Revolution, Japanese and Okinawan revolutionary work collectives played an important role in supporting agricultural development in Cuba. Today, though time and intermarriage have impacted the community, a number of groups have continued to work to reinvigorate a sense of heritage and identity amongst the younger generations.

Despite the fact that few people would associate Cuba with Japan, a small but significant Japanese and Okinawan¹ population has continued to make its home in Cuba through the 20th century, contributing to its multiracial and multicultural mix. Following upon earlier Chinese migratory waves, growing demand for laborers after the end of slavery combined with the

1. Though technically a part of Japan today, modern-day Okinawa Prefecture was formerly an independent state known as the Ryukyu Kingdom before Japan forcibly colonized it in 1879. This status lasted until 1945, at which time the Ryukyu Islands were administered separately by the United States. After 1972, administrative control over the Ryukyu Islands was ceded to Japan once again. It is the author's belief that by failing to make the distinction between Japanese and Okinawans, that academics may in fact be replicating the colonial oppression of the Okinawan people by reinforcing Japanese efforts at assimilating and subsuming the Okinawan people and identity.

sugar boom of the early 1910s and 1920s to spur the recruitment of Japanese and Okinawan workers to meet growing labor shortages in the islands. With the passage of restrictive immigration measures by the United States, Japanese immigration to North America was profoundly proscribed, so that in order to circumvent such regulations large numbers of early Japanese and Okinawan migrants came to Cuba through other Latin American countries, with many seeking to eventually migrate to the U.S. Small numbers of these migrants ended up staying and were scattered throughout Cuba, though a large presence settled in the *Isla de Pinos* (named the *Isla de la Juventud* or “Isle of Youth” after 1978). With the U.S. declaration of war with Japan following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, all Japanese and Okinawan male heads of household were incarcerated in Cuba, leaving their wives and families to fend for themselves for the duration of the war. Following their post-war release, many sought to rebuild their lives despite the loss of liberty and property that the war had precipitated. Not long after the war, however, the Cuban Revolution soon swept across the country starting in 1953, and with the victory of the revolutionary forces by January 1, 1959, some Japanese and Okinawans had distinguished themselves for their role in the revolution, and later, with their role in the formation of important revolutionary work collectives. Though outmarriage and loss of traditional culture have impacted the Japanese and Okinawan communities until today, a revival has occurred in recent years with the reclamation of a sense of a Japanese and/or Okinawan identity and sentiment. Through it all, the Japanese and Okinawan communities of Cuba continue to be a small but vibrant part of Cuban society with a unique sense of identity.

Though the first documented Japanese came to Cuba in July 1614 as part of an embassy bound for Europe headed by Hasekura Tsunenaga,² the date of September 9, 1898 has come to be regarded as marking the initia-

2. In contrast to common Japanese practice, Japanese names are listed in the western style of first name followed by the family name in order to accord with standards in the sources cited. Hasekura Tsunenaga was sent by his domainal lord Masamune Date on a seven year voyage that took him across the Pacific Ocean, through the Americas, and across the Atlantic Ocean to Spain and Rome, where he had the opportunity to meet with King Philip III and Pope Paul V. For reference, a statue dedicated to Hasekura Tsunenaga was built on April 25, 2001 by representatives from Sendai Ikuei Gakuen (Sendai Educational Academy) in Sendai prefecture (Tsunenaga's home prefecture) and is located near the entrance of the Bay of Havana on the Avenida del Puerto.

tion of Japanese immigration to Cuba, with the arrival of a passenger named Pablo Osuna, a Japanese who had arrived on a steamship named the *Olinda* (Álvarez and Guzmán 13). Mr. Osuna arrived to Cuba by way of México, and most likely had changed his name there or in another Spanish-speaking country en route. In his wake, a trickle of additional migrants followed, with the 1899 U.S. census revealing that there were eight Japanese in Cuba, and the 1907 census recording that seven of the 155,252 immigrants entering Cuba between the years 1902-1907 were of Japanese origin (Gardiner 52-53). Instability in Japan and Okinawa owing to the demands of rapid modernization and the 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese and 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese Wars undoubtedly contributed to the impetus to leave their homeland. Additionally, the signing of the Reciprocity Treaty of 1903 between Cuba and the U.S. following the 1895-1898 Cuban War of Independence “revived the ravaged sugar industry and enabled a seventeenfold expansion between 1900 and 1925” (Pérez-Stable 15), increasing demand for Japanese and Okinawan laborers. Okinawan migrants were the largest group to migrate to Cuba, owing to the similarities in climate and the existence of vibrant sugar industries in both islands, though other major sending prefectures included Hiroshima, Kumamoto, and Niigata, among others (Álvarez and Guzmán 32). According to a flyer circulated in conjunction with the 100th anniversary commemoration of Okinawan migration to Cuba, the first Okinawan migrant to Cuba was named Masaru Miyagi and arrived in 1907, and from 1920-1940, the peak number of Okinawan migrants was approximately 195 people (Iwai). Many of the Japanese and Okinawan migrants were motivated to leave their homes due to recruitment drives that urged migration as a means to deal with economic difficulties and overpopulation issues, and migrant remittances served as important financial means of aiding families in the homeland.

Through the years 1908-1919, numbers of Japanese immigrants were generally in the single or double digits, with a major spike after 1914 peaking in 1916, when 225 male and thirty-seven female migrants came to Cuba. In looking at these early numbers there are probably gaps in the number of migrants who actually did arrive, since their migrations through other Latin American countries most likely caused undercounting to occur, since entry logs may have coded them according to their country of passage instead of by ethnicity. The post-1914 spike in numbers can be

understood as a move by migrants to seek an alternative to the unstable situation in México brought on by the Mexican Revolution, or as a reflection of “the opening of the Panama Canal, [with] some of the immigrants entering Cuba from Perú” (Gardiner 53). Following this short surge, the next peak in migration occurred in the period 1924-1925, with peaks approaching almost 200 migrants per year, concurrent with the passage of the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924. This act, known as the National Origins Act, established quotas that effectively put an end to Japanese and Okinawan migration to the U.S., and many Japanese migrated to Cuba as a “back-door” route in order to circumvent immigration restrictions in an attempt to enter the U.S. As an example of this, in “1926, the Japanese population in Cuba increased only by forty-one, despite the fact that 118 Japanese had entered Cuba that year” (Gardiner 56), demonstrating that a large proportion of the population most likely continued straight through to the U.S. or other Latin American countries from Cuba without settling. The increase in migration, however, did not continue, most likely because “after 1925, when world sugar production exceeded demand and prices fell, crisis overcame the sugar industry” (Pérez-Stable 15), thus decreasing the need for more labor. Population statistics for the post-1925 period leading up to World War II are unclear, with some figures for the years 1925-1938 suggesting that the numbers of Japanese residents in Cuba averaged around roughly 600-800 during this period (Gardiner 58), and other estimates suggesting a peak between 1925-1930 of nearly 1,000 Japanese (Nash and Schaw 254).

At the same time, however, many Japanese and Okinawans did stay in Cuba permanently and set up livelihoods and families. Though a few worked as merchants, such industries were very small in comparison to those developed by other ethnic groups, and since “the majority came as farmers and day laborers” (Gardiner 55) this predominantly male workforce worked throughout the islands generally in agricultural industries. Others in the city of Havana eventually found work as gardeners, barbers, or domestic workers, with a small minority establishing “novelty stores, though “those who had more economic power were very few” (Ropp and Chávez de Ropp 131). There seems to be no mention of any traditional ethnic enclave formation in the big cities, owing perhaps to a general dispersal of the Japanese and Okinawans throughout the provinces of Cuba save for large groupings in the *Isla de Pinos* and in *Herradura* in the city

of *Consolación del Sur* in the province of *Pinar del Río*. Scholars Nash and Schaw have argued that the *Isla de Pinos* is unique to the rest of Cuba in that while it is “predominantly rural and agricultural, it has never had big money crops such as sugar or tobacco. Missing too was the large-scale, hierarchical form of social organization centering on the sugar mill and a landed aristocracy dependent upon the labors of a numerous peasantry” (254). There are some suggestions that this environment allowed for a more rapid acceptance of the Japanese and Okinawans by the “*Pineiros*” than in the rest of Cuba, where they were often mistaken for and stigmatized as Chinese, or “*chinos*.” For Japanese and Okinawan *Issei*³ throughout Cuba, they sought to work diligently and save enough money to eventually return to their homelands. As Jorge Uyema relates:

The Japanese and Okinawans came to Cuba in order to be able to earn money and return to Japan. But when they came to Cuba, they found that work wasn't very easy. It was extremely hard – they had to cut cane – though there were some people able to work and send money back to Japan. Because my father came from Okinawa and worked hard, he was able to send a little money to his brother so that he could finish his studies.

Among those unable to return to their homelands, those fortunate to have saved enough money were able to obtain the assistance of “*casamenteros*” or matchmakers, and send away for “picture brides” from Japan and Okinawa, or sometimes from other Latin American countries. Some, however, were unable to afford such expenses, and many married local Cuban women and raised families. A very small minority, unable to have children of their own, would adopt Cuban children, in order to continue on their name and lineage (Barceló 23), a practice common to Japan and Okinawa.

With the growth of Japanese imperialism in East Asia, and increasing economic contact with Latin American countries, rumors about the Japanese menace in Cuba became increasingly pronounced. In both World War I and following the controversies of the 1916 Cuban presidential elections, political opportunists often used false fears of Japanese spies “to play upon American distrust of the Japanese in order to precipitate yet

3. First generation migrants born in Japan or Okinawa.

another American intervention in Cuba” (Gardiner 55). 1929 proved to be a brief opening in the midst of such rumor-mongering, in that Japan and Cuba made an agreement to protect the rights of citizens in each other’s countries, and also to accord most favored nation status in matters of trade. At the same time, however, with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, Cuba increasingly adopted a position closer to the U.S., especially in terms of supporting the Chinese. Indeed, local Chinese anti-Japanese sentiment also proved particularly pronounced, as evidenced by an April 1932 attack on the Japanese embassy in Havana. Concurrent with this, Japanese trade following the 1929 agreement invariably tilted in favor of the Japanese, with Japanese exports far outweighing Cuban imports to Japan. Due to the range of these different political and economic factors, relations between the two countries increasingly became more tenuous and strained.

By the mid-1930s, organized labor had progressively come to power as a significant political force in Cuba and played a major role in the removal of President Gerardo Machado, seen by many as representing the interests of the elites and of foreign (mostly U.S.) capital. Following a military coup in 1933, the newly formed Gras-Guiteras government defied U.S. policy by negating the 1901 Platt Amendment, which had allowed for U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs up to that time. Dissatisfied with the radical reforms occurring under the Gras-Guiteras government, General Fulgencio Batista, backed by the U.S. administration, initiated a military coup to assume leadership of the country and to squelch the growing radicalization of the populace. Batista exercised increased control over the country while launching a number of reforms that culminated in the Constitution of 1940, under which he became the President of Cuba. With the entry of the U.S. in World War II following the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Batista quickly fell in line with his American allies and issued a Cuban declaration of war on December 9, 1941. In the immediate aftermath of Cuba’s entry into the war, Batista issued a series of presidential decrees which effectively limited the ability of the Japanese and Okinawan residents to operate in the country. These decrees limited the ability to move of Japanese and Okinawans who could reside near ports, forced them to register any changes in address, allowed for the seizure of property of detained or interned enemy aliens, restricted banking payments to enemy countries, halted withdrawals of funds by

enemy aliens, stopped the issuance of exit visas for enemy aliens from the country, disallowed postal orders to be payable to enemy aliens, and suspended firearms licenses issued to enemy aliens. The developments that precipitated the incarceration of the Japanese and Okinawan Cubans occurred on December 19, 1941, when “a resolution of the Cuban Department of the Interior published a list of the Japanese aliens resident in Cuba and ordered their detention and internment as well as providing for the custody of their property” (Gardiner 60). Unlike the case for Japanese and Okinawans from other Latin American countries during the war, those incarcerated were not turned over to the U.S. to be used as prisoner exchanges with Japan. Instead all males above eighteen years of age were taken first to the Castillo del Príncipe prison in Habana, and then were taken to *El Reclusorio Nacional para Varones de la Isla de Pinos*, or the Presidio Modelo. In total, 341 male Japanese and Okinawans were incarcerated in the Presidio during the war. Only three women were interned in the prison (Álvarez and Guzmán 151) and the majority of those incarcerated were *Issei*, with a few *Nisei*⁴ as well. Additional enemy aliens, including 114 Germans and thirteen Italians were also incarcerated, though these populations in Cuba were not subjected to the wholesale roundup that the Japanese and Okinawans had been subjected to.

The Presidio Modelo was known as a prison geared especially towards the incarceration of serious criminal offenders, where torture and other cruelties were not uncommon as a means of “reform.” Modeled after the Joliet, Illinois prison designed under the panopticon model theorized by Jeremy Bentham,⁵ the Presidio Modelo would serve to house the Japanese and Okinawans throughout the entirety of the war. Even after the surrender of Japan many were unable to obtain their release until March 1946. Conditions in the prisons were terrible, with cramped cells, insufficient medical attention, censorship of all communications, and inferior living standards. As Goro Naito, an *Issei* from Hiroshima Prefec-

4. Second generation Japanese or Okinawan Cubans, who had been born in Cuba.

5. For a discussion of the panopticon model, please refer to Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200. Incidentally, this is also the prison in which Fidel Castro and his revolutionary compatriots were incarcerated following the attacks on the Moncada Barracks and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes garrisons. Today the prison is a National Monument serving as an educational museum.

ture, described, the bed in which he slept was extremely small, and he would have to wrap his shoes in a towel in order to use it as a pillow. Naito also described other inmates who would be forced to sleep on the floor, which had no carpet, and who would try to fashion a futon to sleep on out of used sacks (Naito). These dire conditions soon took their toll on the inmates. In 1944, for example nine prisoners died, with two more perishing in 1945 (Álvarez and Guzmán 154). Though the prisoners had quickly organized themselves into an organization to represent issues to the authorities of the prison, such attempts to address prisoner needs often were met with few results. Through their own initiative the Japanese and Okinawans were forced to organize their own medical practice to administer to the health needs of the incarcerated. Beginning in 1943, the Spanish Embassy in Cuba, acting on behalf of the Japanese Consulate, was able to send a modest monthly stipend of three pesos for expenses while incarcerated (Álvarez and Guzmán 165). Many, however, did not know about this opportunity, and did not receive such monthly assistance. In contrast to the experience of the Japanese Americans in the U.S., those incarcerated in Cuba did not have the company of their families and suffered great privation.

In addition, the incarceration process had tremendous impacts on the families of the imprisoned as well. Many wives and children of the incarcerated lived in remote locations, far from the *Isla de Pinos* where the prison was located. Barely able to make ends meet, some were able to relocate to the island, though many others were unable to make such a difficult move on their own. The wives of the incarcerated were often isolated from other Japanese and Okinawans, and often depended for their aid on the few Cubans willing and able to offer them assistance. When visits could be made to the prison, they were allowed only once a month and in the beginning were only five minutes in duration. Later, these visits were increased in time to fifteen minutes, but most of the time the exorbitant expenditures of these visits proved to be cost-prohibitive, especially for those traveling from far-flung provinces, and many wives did not see their husbands for the entire five years of the incarceration process. Concurrently, wives of the incarcerated had to work additional jobs in order to cover the living expenses lost by the men, while also taking care of and raising the children. As *Nisei* Benita Eiko Iha Sashida (whose father had emigrated from Okinawa in 1924) relates:

The time that my father was interned in the Presidio I remember as a time of great sadness. His jail number was #223. I was very small, but I can't forget the cloud of sadness that fell over our home. Mom didn't laugh as she had before, and didn't sing to us in the afternoons with her sonorous and harmonious voice. Now I realize that she forced herself to keep us moving forward and to protect us from hardship, but even still, memories of my childhood told me that the time of our family's happiness had ended (Sashida, 23).

When the hurricane of 1944 destroyed their home and crops, Sashida's family had to start anew, without the help of their father, who was still incarcerated. These proved to be difficult times indeed and many of the wives on the *Isla de Pinos* were at least able to pool resources together to survive. As Álvarez and Guzmán relate:

In the *Isla de Pinos*, Kesano Harada, with other Japanese wives of the imprisoned, exchanged whatever products that they harvested for black sugar, the cheapest available, and also sold other products, while going in groups to fish at night. Whatever they caught served not only to nourish their children, but also to alleviate the hunger that plagued the families of the *Presidio* (Álvarez and Guzmán 158-159).

At least for those families on the *Isla*, some collective resources were available to them. Yet as Kaoru Miyazawa, who died at the age of 91 in 2007, stated, "the Japanese were like 'beggars' during the war" (Hirayama). Due to this fact, support from other Cubans proved essential towards supporting many of these families, so that as Francisco Miyasaka has stated "thanks to many of [the non-Japanese Cubans] we were able to survive and to have a decent life during that time" (Ropp and Chávez de Ropp 135). All told the incarceration process drastically overturned the modest lives of the Japanese and Okinawans before the war, severed family connections, altered traditional family roles, and caused a loss of traditional culture and customs that continues to affect Japanese and Okinawan Cuban families to this day.

In the aftermath of the war, many of those who had been incarcerated at the prison left to rejoin their spouses, went to other places to resettle, or stayed in the *Isla* to start anew. Many tended to move to the capitol or to the *Pinar del Río* region as well. There is little proof of a mass exodus back to Japan or Okinawa, most likely because of insufficient funds, and

insecurity related to the tenuous situation back home. Post-war remittances to Japan, and especially to Okinawa, proved particularly crucial to the rebuilding effort in the homeland owing to the fact that Okinawa was the site of the only battle on “Japanese” soil during the war, and was particularly devastated in the fighting that ensued. As Antonio Yohena related:

My father, and other Okinawan families, told me that after bettering their economic situation, he helped a lot with means that he had here in order to send to Okinawa - money, clothing, and other utensils - that the family here sent for Okinawa with the goal of helping better the difficult situation that Okinawa was in.

Okinawan infrastructure was entirely devastated during the war and local communities were often forcibly relocated due to the impacts not only of the war but also because of the post-war U.S. military base construction that occurred there. With the loss of much of the island’s industry and agricultural land during this time period, international remittances from places like Cuba were essential towards guaranteeing the survival of many families in the homeland.

In 1952, Cuba was among the many nations that signed a Treaty of Peace with Japan, and with the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Japan was eager to establish trading opportunities with Cuba. Trade with Cuba, especially in terms of the procurement of sugar from Cuba in exchange for the sale of Japanese textiles provided the main avenues of international commerce between the two countries. For Japan, the limitations in its trade with China due to the Chinese Civil War and in its trade with Korea due to the onset of the Korean War, combined with abiding resentments from these countries towards Japan shifted Japanese trade policy to emphasize trading relationships with Southeast Asia and with Latin America. In fact, up through to the 1970s, Japan maintained an imbalance of trade with Cuba. For example, “the twelve years of postwar Japanese-Cuban trade between 1947 and 1959, everyone of which had a balance adverse to Japan, represented an aggregate deficit of more than \$387,000,000” (Gardiner 65). Even after the Cuban Revolution and the recovery of Japan to its pre-war economic levels by the mid-1960s, this huge imbalance of trade continued to exist much to the benefit of Cuba. In July 1959, for example, Che Guevara and

a commercial delegation visited Japan in order to firm up trade relations with Japan following the revolution, since he considered sales of sugar to Japan as crucial towards financing the industrial and technological development that Cuba sought in order to wean itself off of sugar dependency. Indeed, Japan was second only to the U.S. in Cuban sugar imports prior to the revolution, and afterwards was third next to the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Additionally, following the U.S. imposed embargo on Cuba, initiated on February 7, 1962, Japan continued to circumvent the embargo to trade with Cuba. Such trade relationships proved particularly crucial for Cuba's economic well-being.

With the seizure of power by Batista prior to the June 1952 elections in which he was expected to lose, the Cuban Revolution can be considered to have started with Fidel Castro's July 26, 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks. The July 26th Movement sparked by this incident was outraged by Batista's military coup and sought to remove the dictator from office. The next six years saw attempts by the Batista dictatorship to regain control of the country, though the December 2, 1956 landing of the *Granma* in the Oriente soon saw the conflagration of armed conflict in the countryside. By January 1, 1959, Batista had fled the country, and the Cuban Revolution had commenced. Initiating a range of moderate reforms at first, including agrarian reforms and progressive tax policies to encourage Cuban investments, the newly formed government could not be considered that radical, though widespread support for the new regime was profound and ushered in a politics that widely appealed to the masses and the interests of the nation over the foreign interventionism that had held sway before. Some Japanese and Okinawans in Cuba also supported the removal of Batista and the goals of the revolution, undoubtedly remembering with resentment Batista's role in their wartime incarceration. As Miyasaka relates:

In these activities, the Nisei were fundamentally anti-government. I don't know if there were Issei. I know of one family who lived in the center of the country, whose Nisei members collaborated in this type of activity. One of them achieved the rank of Captain after the revolution" (Ropp and Chávez de Ropp 139).

Additional examples of Japanese participants in the revolution also existed. For example, Alberto Takahashi and Goro Enomoto were two

young *Nisei* who played a role in clandestine activities against the Batista dictatorship before joining the revolutionary forces under Commander Víctor Bordón Machado. As Álvarez and Guzmán relate:

Upon speaking with this guerrilla leader [Machado] about Takahashi and Enomoto, one being from the area of Yaguarama and the other being from Horquita, in the ancient province of Las Villas, the valor of the two stood out and this is how they came to form part of Column No. 8, the “*Ciro Redondo*,” under the leadership of Commander Ernesto Che Guevara, upon the joining of all the forces of the July 26th Movement that operated in Escambray. Today, these two Japanese Cubans feel a great pride in having fought next to Commander Guevara and his rebel forces in frequent combat and in the decisive battle for the strategic city of Santa Clara (143).

Other Japanese and Okinawan Cubans also served in the revolutionary forces and made significant contributions to the revolutionary effort. Others also benefited from the changes in agricultural practices that accompanied the revolution. According to one article about Miguel Miichiro Shimazu, a resident of the Isle of Youth who reached the age of 100 years old in 2007, “With the triumph of the revolution, Miichiro was a beneficiary of the Agricultural Reform Law, and received ownership of the land where he cultivated—as much as he could—melons, cucumbers, and other vegetables” (P.L.). In a sense, some could say that the agricultural changes that occurred following the revolution were avidly supported by the Japanese and Okinawan communities. For example, in 1961, following the growth of the National Association of Small Peasants (ANAP), the three agricultural collectives of the *Isla de Pinos* that had been the main agricultural organizations prior to the revolution were soon converted into cooperatives. “It was the Japanese of the first generation that were the first to integrate these collectives, and always had formed part of the vanguard” (Barceló 19), and these cooperatives were called the Jesús Menéndez Cooperative, the Camilo Cienfuegos Credit and Services Cooperative, and the Free Nicaragua Cooperative of Farm Production. Through these cooperatives the Japanese and Okinawan Cubans made significant contributions to the development not just of the nation but also to the revolutionary cause, demonstrating their willingness to contribute to their adopted homeland.

The Society of the Japanese Colony of the Isle of Youth (*La Sociedad de la Colonia Japonesa de la Isla de la Juventud*) has been particularly active following the end of the war, in bringing people together not just to form the abovementioned collectives, but also to provide a community space for the Japanese and Okinawan descendents in the island. In 1951, for example, the organization collected donations from local families in order to construct a burial vault for the Japanese collective in the Cemetery of Nueva Gerona. This has provided an important space for the families of the deceased, particularly with many of the original *Issei* having passed away. In 1980 the Society for the Japanese Colony of the Isle of Youth was officially recognized in the General Registry of Associations of the Cuban Ministry of Justice by Resolution 142-98 and is “the only one officially recognized in the country, with more than a half a century of existence, that has maintained itself as active and numerous, with a total of immigrants and descendents through the fifth generation of 198, and a general membership total of 119” (Barceló 17). This group has been crucial towards revitalizing traditional customs, and has held festivals such as the Obon festival (traditional Japanese Buddhist “Day of the Dead”), Hinamatsuri (Doll Festival), and Kodomo-no-Hi (Children’s Day). Other aspects of traditional Japanese culture, such as language classes and other traditional arts have also found their expression through the group.

In Havana, the Organizing Committee of the Cuban Japanese Society (Comité Gestor de la Sociedad Cubano Japonesa), has been active for many years in its attempts to develop a government recognized national all-Nikkei organization. This committee, currently headed by President Francisco Miyasaka, has proven crucial towards the development of local initiatives to preserve Japanese and Okinawan culture, and in 1964 they constructed the cemetery for the Japanese Society of Cuba, which currently exists in the Cemetery of Christopher Columbus near the Vedado district of Havana. This committee has also conducted a census of the Japanese and Okinawan descendents of Cuba from 1996 to 1997 as part of the process of obtaining official recognition from the government. As Francisco Miyasaka stated in regards to this census:

Today in Cuba, there are an estimated 1,300 persons of Japanese blood that got to the fifth generation. Some do not have Japanese names because they are the children of children of children, and in Cuba—as in many Spanish-speaking countries—children maintain the last name of

the father and of the mother. But at the same time, it is the mother's name that gets lost because the father's name always goes first, so after two generations, if the children continue to be female, they lose the last name (Ropp and Chávez de Ropp 132-133).

Thus, despite the fact that their census has been able to locate and register 1,300 people of Japanese and Okinawan descent in Cuba, such numbers may be undercounted due to the difficulty of finding people outside of the known family networks and who don't have easily traceable surnames. Despite the far-flung nature of the community in Cuba, Francisco Miyasaka and others have been influential in working towards the inculcation of a sense of Japanese identity amongst the youth. For example, in the spring of 2004, this author had the opportunity to observe a newly formed choral singing group composed of *Nisei* and *Sansei*⁶ that the Organizing Committee had formed, that practices singing traditional Japanese songs, and has performed at various venues throughout Cuba. Though all of the young participants may not know the full meaning of the songs that they sing, the group's presence has brought together young and old in a way that helps to re-inculcate a broader sense of community. Additionally, the work of people involved in the Organizing Committee, such as Goro Naito, has been essential towards the preservation of the history of the Japanese in Cuba. This work has even been recognized by the Cuban government, so that in 2004, shortly after reaching 96 years of age, Goro Naito was the recipient of the *Medalla de la Amistad* (Medal of Friendship) by the Cuban Counsel of the State. At the ceremony, Eva Seoane, Vice President of the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the People stated that this award was "a recognition of his joint work, honesty, and simple humility, demonstrated by his offering of help to the members of the Japanese community residing in our country" (Musa). All told both the group in the Isla and the one in Havana have worked together in providing a space for the preservation of culture and traditions amongst this diasporic community.

Additionally, exchanges between the local Okinawan community and their homeland in Okinawa have also increased in recent years, due to increased outreach from the Okinawan Prefectural Government to con-

6. Third generation descendents.

nect with members of the Okinawan diaspora that began in the late 1980s. Based on the census that Japanese and Okinawan groups conducted, local Okinawans have stated that there were approximately 215 people of Okinawan descent (Iwai) in Cuba in 2006 (suggesting that Okinawans represent approximately 17% of the total population of 1,300 Japanese in the islands). Sadly, no Okinawan *Issei* are currently alive today (Yohena). Antonio Yohena, in his capacity as Chairman of the Cuban Okinawan *kenjinkai*, has been able to maintain relations with the Governor of Okinawa Prefecture and also with the Cuba-Okinawa Association in Okinawa, and was even able to visit Okinawa in October 2006 in order to attend the Fourth Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival, a prefecture-sponsored gathering of Okinawan descendents from around the world that has occurred roughly every five years since 1990. These linkages between people in Okinawa and the Okinawan Cuban community were also significant in the recent centennial celebration of Okinawan migration to Cuba, an event which was attended by representatives from numerous far-flung places such as Okinawa, the United States, México, and Brazil. At this gathering, statements of solidarity with the Cuban people were expressed, as seen in the following statement by Masayuki Oshiro, representative of the Okinawan Prefectural Government:

In this difficult moment for Cuba, we express solidarity and admiration for the road that you are following and your fortitude in the face of the blockade and hostility of the United States, whose cruelty we know in our own body, in the island of Okinawa, which today is full of humiliating American military bases (Molina 1).

These sentiments, suggest that a common sense of resistance to U.S. hegemony is being articulated as a way of linking solidarity against the U.S. military bases in Okinawa with solidarity against the U.S.-led blockade and embargo on Cuba.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of activity in matters pertaining to Japanese and Okinawan culture, particularly amongst the younger generations. While postwar migration from Japan to Cuba has been practically negligible, especially when compared to the larger migratory flows that occurred to places like Brazil or Bolivia, such an interest has not come about because of an influx of new Japanese or Okinawan immigrants. Instead, it may be that the stigma of the incarceration experi-

ence has lessened over time. In addition, racial boundaries in Cuba have often been considered to be more accepting than in other countries such as the U.S., even for such a small minority group such as Asians compose in overall Cuban society. Furthermore, with the loss of trade with the U.S.S.R. following the collapse of communism Cuba has been forced to make major structural adjustments in order to cope with these changes. “Between 1989 and 1993, Cuba’s economy shrunk 35 to 50 percent; [and] already austere living standards plummeted” (Pérez-Stable 174), causing the Special Period of economic adjustment from 1992-1998. Part of the adjustment process has been the continued move away from previous agricultural and industrial sectors towards the growth sector of tourism. Japanese visitors to Cuba, while still small compared to tourists from other Latin American countries or Europe, nevertheless represent the bulwark of more recent Cuban economic development policy. These official encouragements may also have played a small role in encouraging the development of greater “multicultural” awareness (for lack of a better word) amongst the younger generation.

All told, the history of the Japanese and Okinawan Cubans has existed for over a hundred years now, with the celebration of the centennial of Japanese migration to Cuba in 1998 and the recent celebration of the centennial of Okinawan migration to Cuba in 2007. From their original roots as contract and migrant laborers, Japanese and Okinawans in the early decades of the 20th century often came to Cuba via other Latin American countries, with the pace of migration to Cuba coinciding either with political unrest in other Latin American countries or exemplifying attempts to find an alternative route to enter the U.S. following the imposition of restrictive immigration measures. Upon settling in Cuba most of these migrants took up work in agriculture with a few in small businesses. Though located throughout the provinces of Cuba, certain concentrations of migrants did coalesce, particularly in the *Isla de Pinos*, which maintained a very active organization for the migrants. The entrance of Cuba into World War II changed the situation for these migrants considerably when the Batista government classified all males over the age of eighteen as enemy aliens and placed 341 of them in the Presidio Modelo prison for the duration of the war. This incarceration process differed in dramatic ways from the fate of Japanese Americans in the U.S. and in Latin America in that their incarceration in prison was a more extreme process of pri-

vation and separation from their families. In addition, the impacts on the families of the incarcerated were profound, and wives often had to take up matters on behalf of their husbands in order to provide for their children. Following the war, many families focused on rebuilding, though the upheaval of the Cuban Revolution soon took people's lives in a different direction altogether. Quite a few Japanese and Okinawans contributed to the revolutionary movement, and helped to usher in the socialist experiment in Cuba. In addition, on the *Isla de Pinos*, Japanese and Okinawan collectives served as revolutionary examples of collectivization that contributed to the overall movement. To this day, the Japanese and Okinawan communities in Cuba continue to maintain community organization structures and a resurgence of cultural traditions and practices has grown, particularly in recent years. In many ways, the younger generations have been wrestling with the question of their identity as Cubans of Japanese and Okinawan descent, especially as the original *Issei*, who now number in the single digits, continue to pass away.

Fernando Ortiz, prominent Cuban intellectual of the early part of the 20th century argued that in Cuba, that each community, "torn from [their] native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation—in a word, of transculturation" (27) has contributed to the changing nature of Cuban society and in the process, has been changed by contact with the range of different cultural traditions and mores of the people met in the country. The Japanese and Okinawan communities are no exception, and have played a small but significant role in contributing towards the development of Cuban society and the interests of the nation. In the context of growing scholarly interest in the study of Asians throughout the Americas, the study of the history of the Japanese and Okinawans in Cuba has the potential of "not only connect[ing] the experiences of Asians throughout the Americas together; it also links the Americas to the global world" (Lee 237). Indeed, the history of the Japanese and Okinawan Cubans presents a fascinating and little known story full of linkages and details unique and important in the ever-changing global picture.

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