

Okinawa Migrants to Hawaii

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INTRODUCTION

Hawaii has the oldest and largest Okinawan community outside of Okinawa itself. In 1900 the first group of 26 Okinawan immigrants arrived in Hawaii. In 1980, Okinawan immigrants and their descendents numbered approximately 40,000.¹ In all official census statistics, the Okinawans are recorded as Japanese, making demographic analysis of the growth of the Okinawan population in Hawaii a difficult undertaking. Both the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Health Statistics of the Territory in past enumerations counted the Okinawan as Japanese.

The Japanese community in Hawaii, however, distinguished between the Okinawans and the *Naichi* (Mainland) Japanese from the four main islands of Japan proper. The Okinawans themselves used the term *Uchinanchu* to identify themselves as a distinct ethnic group apart from the *Naichi* Japanese. Sociologist George Yamamoto writes: "It can be suggested that the two subgroups among the Japanese in Hawaii may be regarded as two distinct ethnic groups rather than mere economic or prestige subdivisions of the same ethnic group."²

This report discusses briefly the social history of Okinawa immigration to Hawaii, the hardship experiences of the early immigrants, and the discrimination of Okinawans by the *Naichi* Japanese in Hawaii. The report concludes by noting the vast improvement of the socio-economic position of the Okinawans in Hawaii since World War II.

IMMIGRATION BEGINS

Kyuzo Toyama was known as the "Father of Okinawan overseas emigration."³ Toyama (1868-1910), a school teacher of Kin Village in

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Okinawa, learned about the emigration program to Hawaii while studying in Tokyo from 1896 to 1898. In 1885, the government of Japan and Hawaii had agreed to the export of Japanese laborers to sugar plantations on the basis of a three-year contract. In 1899 Toyama formed a group of 30 men, aged 21 to 35, as the first contract labor immigrants to Hawaii from Okinawa. These men sailed from Naha aboard the SS *Satsuma-maru* on December 5, 1899. They docked in Osaka and went to Yokohama by train, arriving there on December 15. There three men were rejected because of poor health. The remaining group then sailed from Yokohama on December 30 on a British steamer, SS *City of China*, and arrived in Honolulu on January 8, 1900. One man was detained by the Honolulu Quarantine Station and later sent home. Twenty-six men entered Hawaii as the first Okinawan immigrants.

The second labor group from Okinawa was composed of 40 young farmers accompanied by Toyama; they arrived in Honolulu on April 6, 1903. The records indicate that in 1904, 206 Okinawa men migrated to Hawaii; in 1905, 1,200 men; 1906, 4,500; and in 1907, 2,500. Thus, during this period the Okinawa immigrants totaled approximately 8,500, constituting about one-fifth of the total Japanese immigrants of 44,000.⁴

By the Gentlemen's Agreement between Japan and the United States in 1907, the Japanese Government voluntarily curtailed the migration of laborers to the United States including Hawaii, restricting the issuance of passports only to family members of Japanese already in Hawaii and the United States. The period from 1907 until 1924, when the Immigrant Act excluded aliens ineligible for citizenship, saw the movement of persons who came to join the early male immigrants. These were primarily wives, including many "picture brides," and children, parents and other close relatives. Picture brides exchanged photographs with their potential husbands, and these brides were legally married before leaving Okinawa by registering the marriage with the village office. Most picture brides met their husbands for the first time after their arrival in Hawaii. This was called the *Yobiyose* Period (The Summoning of Wives and Family). From 1908, an average of 400 to 600 persons annually migrated to Hawaii from Okinawa until the passage of the U.S. Immigrant Act in July 1924.

The majority of Okinawans in Hawaii came from the southern tip of the principal island of Okinawa. They migrated mainly from Naha and the surrounding districts of Oroku, Tomigusuku, Kanagusuku, Itoman, Takamine, Gushichan, Kochinda, Tamagusuku, Chinen, Haebaru, Nishihara, and Shuri. Many reasons existed for leaving Okinawa.⁵ The islands of Ryukyu possessed only scant natural resources. Typhoons

continuously destroyed crops. With increasing population, people faced the problem of inadequate food. Continuous out-migration was seen as a solution. Before men started to migrate to Hawaii, young males had proceeded to Formosa, being recruited as policemen. Later, more migrated abroad to be deferred from military conscription. The economic depression in Japan made the prospects in Hawaii more attractive. The similarity of climate of Okinawa and Hawaii was an added attraction.

EARLY HARDSHIPS

The early Okinawan immigrants experienced many difficulties and hardships in Hawaii. The first group arriving in 1900 was sent to Ewa Plantation. Life on the plantation proved extremely harsh. Kinji Chinzen, a member of the first immigrant group, recalled:

The life on Ewa Plantation was very hard; getting up at 4 a.m., breakfast at 5, starting to work at 6, and working all day under the blazing sun. We worked like horses, moving mechanically under the whipping hands of the luna. . . . There was no such thing as human sentiment.⁶

Baishiro Tamashiro who left Okinawa in 1906 and worked on Lihue Plantation stated: "It sure was hard work. We had no time to rest. We worked like machines. For 200 of us workers, there were seven or eight *lunas* and above them was a field boss on a horse. We were watched constantly."⁷ And Seichin Nagayama, who came in 1907 to work at Makaweli, Kauai, wrote:

It was tiring! I wrote to my family in Okinawa about Hawaii. I said it was very different from what you'd think of in Okinawa, and if you came you'd see the difference. Work was ten hours a day. Those in Okinawa didn't know how hard it was. While in Okinawa I didn't think I'd have to suffer so much. . . . We got up at four o'clock and ate, got our *bento* (box lunches) and at five o'clock we caught the train. When we got up in the morning, a company policeman would come to the camp and say 'Hana-hana, hana-hana' (Work-work, work-work). On the days I wanted to rest, I would hide. If the policeman found you, he would say 'Hurry up and go to work. Even if you're late go!'⁸

Other life histories of the early Okinawan immigrants attest to the harshness of plantation life.^{9,10} The hardest to endure, as recalled by many immigrants, was the stern, often brutal supervision of the *luna* or overseer who always had a rope in his hand, usually striking it in the air, ready to use for whipping anyone who seemed slow or lazy. To the new immigrants, such supervision was a humiliating experience—a drastic contrast to the village life in Okinawa where, no matter how poor, there was always mutual help and warm neighborliness. Kinji Chinzen reported:

Because of the perpetual fear of this unbearable whipping, some workers committed suicide by hanging or jumping in front of the on-coming train. Fortunately we Okinawans had been trained through ages to endure hardships caused by terrible typhoons. So no one among us committed suicide. . . . There was no one who wasn't whipped. . . .¹¹

Some of the men blamed Toyama for their misery and stated they would kill him if they ever saw him again.¹² One aged immigrant, relating his plantation days, told of an incident when he was mistakenly whipped.¹³ He became so angered that he attacked the *luna* utilizing *karate*, the Okinawa art of defense. He was able to knock the big fellow down, and all the other Okinawans cheered him on, with some even yelling to kill the *luna*. In his anger he was ready to comply, but thankfully, he recalled, another *luna* rushed in to arbitrate the fight.

DISCRIMINATION FROM OTHER JAPANESE

Added to their work hardships was the discrimination and indignities by the *Naichi* Japanese who had arrived 15 years earlier. The earlier immigrants, mostly from the Hiroshima and Yamaguchi Prefectures in the Chugoku area of southwest Japan, had already established their own social organization in a close-knit community. The Okinawans made up about 14 percent of all Japanese immigrants (See Table I). The *Naichi* Japanese viewed them as strange and inferior.¹⁴ The terms *Okinawan* and *Naichi* developed in the course of this social conflict.

TABLE I¹⁵
JAPANESE IMMIGRANT (ISSEI) POPULATION IN HAWAII
BY PREFECTURE, 1924 AND 1960

Prefecture	1924		1960	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Hiroshima	30,534	26.2%	4,715	24.1%
Yamaguchi	25,874	22.2	3,918	20.0
Kumamoto	19,551	16.8	2,655	13.6
Okinawa	16,536	14.2	2,873	14.7
Others	24,120	20.6	5,399	27.6
TOTAL	116,615	100.0%	19,560	100.0%

Physically, the *Naichi* Japanese saw Okinawans as being hairy, having curly or wavy hair and large round eyes, and being shorter in stature and darker in complexion in comparison with themselves.¹⁶ The Okinawans spoke in a very different local dialect which immediately isolated them from the other Japanese. When the first group arrived in Hawaii, they

experienced an unexpected difficulty at the Immigration Office. The Okinawan speech had to be translated into Japanese which in turn was interpreted into English.

Culturally, many practices of the Okinawans were considered crude and backward. One interesting custom among the older Okinawans was the tattooing of the woman's hands as soon as she married. A blue block of designs about one square inch in size was tattooed on the woman's hands and arms. The *Naichi* Japanese considered this a primitive custom.

Historically, Ryukyu's early commercial and cultural ties were with China. Later, Okinawans were simultaneously vassals of the Chinese in Peking and dependents of the Satsuma clan of Kyushu. Because of the historical association with the Chinese, Okinawans were pig raisers and ate pork. While laboring on the Hawaii plantations, many Okinawan families established a side business of raising a few pigs. Pig raising was viewed by the *Naichi* people as low in social status. Collecting garbage slop to feed the hogs was smelly and dirty work. In schools, the *Naichi* children teased the Okinawan children with a rhyme, *Okinawa ken ken, buta kau kau*—*buta* is pig in Japanese and *kau kau* is to eat in Hawaiian.¹⁷ The Okinawa students retorted back *Naichi Naichi, chi ga nai*, a pun on words, meaning the *Naichi* has no blood.

Also it should be noted that sweet potato, not rice, imported from China in 1609, was the major diet of the people of Okinawa.¹⁸ Many of the immigrants from Okinawa are said never to have seen white rice until they arrived in Hawaii.

Discrimination was usually covert and indirect, but it came out clearly into the open when the possibility of intermarriage occurred. Until the post-war period, much resentment arose when it appeared that intermarriage between individuals of the two groups might take place.¹⁹

ADJUSTMENT AND MOBILITY

Experiencing the harsh work conditions, Kinji Chinzen, Tohachi Nakama and others in the first group of Okinawa immigrants planned to write to the Governor of Okinawa to cancel their contracts and return home. This became unnecessary, however, as the annexation of Hawaii to the United States in 1898 made all labor contracts illegal. These men left Ewa Plantation as soon as they were free and scattered and sought work elsewhere. All but one from the first immigrant group eventually returned to Okinawa.

Back in Okinawa, the families and relatives were worried because little news was received from the first migrant group. Toyama was

recruiting the second group of immigrants. As the men in the first group gradually returned to Okinawa, they all described the hardship they experienced in Hawaii. But they also began to buy agricultural land and build tile-roofed houses, a rare sight in rural Okinawa. One man had been able to save 80 dollars. This represented a huge sum of money where a farm laborer earned ten cents or less a day. The news of their wealth accumulated in Hawaii spread quickly and revived interest in emigration to Hawaii. Since contract labor had been abolished, the second group from Okinawa proceeded as free immigrants. They worked on Honokaa Plantation on the island of Hawaii, moved later to Hilo, and then to Ewa Plantation on Oahu. Toyama supported the men continuously, and every Saturday night these men met in Honouliuli near Ewa to hear his talks and sermons which stressed thrift and cooperation.

After working five or six years on the plantation, the more ambitious of the early Okinawa immigrants began seeking opportunities for independent business. Even while still on the plantation, many Okinawans started a side business such as raising pigs and chickens, or selling eggs. Some started a *tofu* shop or a *poi* factory as a family enterprise. Such businesses were operated primarily by the wives with the assistance of the older children. Small businesses such as bakeries, general stores, barbershops, and auto repair shops were established and prospered in Hilo, Waipahu, Wahiawa, and Honolulu.

Fertility for Okinawan women appeared to be the highest among the Japanese in Hawaii. In a survey of 1,169 ever-married Japanese women age 35 years and over in Hawaii, 1963-1965, the Isseis born in Okinawa had the largest mean number of children, 5.85, while women born in Japan proper had 4.62 per woman. In contrast, the native-born Nisei women averaged 3.18 children. Also 52 percent of the Okinawa-born women were married before age 20 as compared to 32 percent for those born in Japan.²⁰

The immigrant parents were strongly motivated to educate their children. The young people received college education and occupational training for improving economic status. Many of the children of the immigrants are now in professional and administrative positions or in technical or skilled work. No Hawaiian-born Okinawan works today as a rural field laborer.

CURRENT STATUS

Today most Okinawa immigrants in Hawaii are prosperous as owners of leading restaurants, dairy farms, bakeries, and flower farms. A notable characteristic of the Okinawans in Hawaii has been their ability to

organize and work in groups with a strong sense of social solidarity. The network of family ties as well as place of origin in Okinawa have played important roles in the successful development of many business enterprises. Second generation Okinawans have been highly successful in such fields as dentistry, insurance, and real estate, and have made important contributions to Hawaii as political, financial, and cultural leaders of the community.

In 1924 there were approximately 16,500 persons in Hawaii from Okinawa. In 1960, the Okinawan population in Hawaii, which included the first generation and their Hawaii-born children and grandchildren, was estimated at 30,000. About 90 percent of the Okinawans reside in Oahu. 3,123 persons of Okinawa ancestry were living in the five neighbor islands in 1961:

TABLE II²¹

	<i>First Generation</i>	<i>Hawaii-Born</i>	<i>Total</i>
Oahu	2,046	26,061	28,107
Kauai	280	1,320	1,600
Hawaii	350	650	1,000
Maui	140	245	385
Molokai	29	42	71
Lanai	28	39	67
TOTAL	2,873	28,357	31,230

Before World War II, the Okinawans had formed social clubs based on the localities in Okinawa from which they had originated, usually the village. These clubs were numerous and small in membership. They provided mutual aid among members in time of death and other personal crisis. During the war all such Okinawan groups, together with other Japanese organizations, were dissolved. After the fall of Okinawa in 1945, Okinawans in Hawaii again formed local groups to assist in the relief efforts to send clothing, medicine, and food to Okinawa.²² These post-war organizations are named for their present residence in Hawaii, such as the Okinawa Association of Kauai or the Okinawa Club of Hilo. The two primary functions observed annually by these Okinawa organizations are the New Year party and the summer picnic gathering.

With prosperity came confidence, and the Okinawa community showed renewed interest in their culture and history. There has been a growth of native music clubs of *shamisen* played by the men and the *koto* played by women. Native Okinawa dance studios have become popular on Oahu. These activities point to their pride and appreciation of

Okinawa culture. The Okinawans have worked diligently to attain the status of a thriving group, at a social and economic level equal to others of the Japanese community. The best social indicator of the dramatic change has been the gradual disappearance of the use of the terms *Naichi* and *Okinawan* from the local scene. Professor Mitsugu Sakihara, prominent scholar on Okinawa history and culture, summarized the situation as follows:

After many years of hardship and struggle, Okinawans in Hawaii have been able to establish themselves in many fields of endeavor and achieve a measure of success they could be proud of. This success has given them full acceptance, not only in the Japanese community, but also in the larger community of Hawaii and the United States.²³

NOTES

- ¹ Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, United Okinawan Association of Hawaii, *Uchinanchu: A History of Okinawans in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Ethnic Studies Program, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1981), p. xix (hereafter ESOHP, *Uchinanchu*).
- ² George K. Yamamoto, "Some patterns of mate selection among Naichi and Okinawans on Oahu," *Social Process in Hawaii*, 21 (1957), 42.
- ³ "Hawaii imin to Toyama Kyuzo" [Hawaii immigration and Kyuzo Toyama], *Hawaii Hochi*, 22 May 1965.
- ⁴ Seiei Wakukawa, *Jidai no senkusha Toyama Kyuzo—Okinawa gendai shi no issetsu* [Toyama, Kyuzo, a pioneer in a new era—a chapter in the modern history of Okinawa] (Honolulu: n.p., 1953), pp. 176–178.
- ⁵ Yukiko Kimura, "Social-historical background of the Okinawans in Hawaii," *Romanzo Adams Social Research Laboratory Report No. 36*, December 1962.
- ⁶ *Hawaii Times*, 1 January 1959.
- ⁷ ESOHP, *Uchinanchu*, p. 360.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 469.
- ⁹ Mitsugu Sakihara, *Gajimaru no tsudo* [Under a banyan tree], *Stories of the Okinawan Immigrants to Hawaii*. (Honolulu: Hawaii Hochi Company, 1980).
- ¹⁰ Taro Higa, ed., *Imin wa ikiru* [The immigrants live] (Tokyo: Nichibeji Jiho-sha, 1974), pp. 327–344.
- ¹¹ *Hawaii Times*, 1 January 1959.
- ¹² Seiei Wakukawa, "Okinawa imin raifu tenmatsu" [Circumstances of Okinawa immigration to Hawaii], *Hawaii Times*, 18–22 May 1965.
- ¹³ Jikai Yamasato, "Hawaii no Okinawa imin shi" [A history of Okinawa immigration to Hawaii], *Hawaii Hochi*, 22 May 1965.
- ¹⁴ Bernhard Hormann, "A note on Hawaii's minorities within minorities," *Social Process in Hawaii*, 18 (1954), 47–56.
- ¹⁵ Hawaii Nihonjin imin shi kanko iin henshu (Publication Committee on History of Japanese Migration to Hawaii, editor), *Hawaii Nihonjin imin shi* [History of Japanese Immigration to Hawaii] (Honolulu, 1960), pp. 314–315.
- ¹⁶ Henry Toyama and Kiyoshi Ikeda, "The Okinawan-Naichi relationship," *Social Process in Hawaii*, 14 (1950), 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–56.

¹⁸ Irene B. Taeuber, “The population of the Ryukyu Islands,” *Population Index*, 21 (1955), 233–263.

¹⁹ Yamamoto, “Mate selection among Naichi and Okinawans,” p. 42.

²⁰ Y. Scott Matsumoto, Chai Bin Park, and Bella Z. Bell, *Fertility Differentials of Japanese Women in Japan, Hawaii and California*, Working papers of the East-West Population Institute, no. 14. (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1971).

²¹ Based on Kimura, “Social-historical background.”

²² Seiyei Wakukawa, “Hawaii no Okinawajin shakai” [Okinawa community in Hawaii], *Hawaii Times*, 2 October 1965.

²³ ESOHP, *Uchinanchu*, p. xxiv.