On August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Powers, thus concluding World War II. Given such a solid fact, it seems strange that a large number of Japanese refused to believe that Japan had been defeated even a decade after it had happened. These Japanese were not cut off from the outside world and lacking all access to information, like those few former Japanese soldiers left behind and hiding in the jungles of the Philippines and Guam. They had even seen the photograph of the signing of Japan’s surrender on the U.S.S. Missouri. Yet, nothing convinced them. They believed in Japan’s victory so doggedly they looked with suspicion at what was normally considered a piece of hard evidence of Japan’s defeat and interpreted it as an image fabricated by the United States. These believers in Japan’s victory were Japanese immigrants in Brazil, who came to be called the kachigumi (victory faction).

The kachigumi ideology held sway over a majority of the Japanese community in Brazil for several years after 1945. Not only did those who believed keep their faith in Japan’s invincibility; they also did not tolerate those who acknowledged Japan’s defeat, who were called makegumi (defeat faction). As far as the kachigumi people were concerned, the denial of Japan’s defeat indicated that one was a “true Japanese.” The makegumi were a bunch of traitors and “non-Japanese” (hikokumin). The kachigumi terrorized the makegumi, culminating in more than a dozen assassinations.

Why did some Japanese immigrants in Brazil (and also some in Peru) adopt such an extreme attitude and become fanatics while other immigrants in similar situations did not? German Brazilian immigrants, for example, initially doubted the defeat of their homeland, but it did not take them long to recognize it as a fact and resume a normal life. How did the kachigumi idea about the “Japanese” develop halfway around the world from Japan and remain alive for so long? In part, it was due to the geographical and social isolation of the Japanese immigrants. Other factors were the Imperial education the first generation of immigrants had received in Japan and the propaganda they were fed in Brazil by the Japanese government and retired veterans of the Japanese Imperial Army. These factors interacted with one another to shape the kachigumi mentality. If that were all, then the problem would be a peculiar phenomenon of prewar Japanese immigrants in Brazil. But there is also the issue of identity—the individual immigrant’s effort to become and remain a “true Japanese” in a situation in which that identity was automatically regarded with suspicion.
To explore the problems of “Japanese” identity with which the immigrants in Brazil grappled, I will compare the identity issue of the Okinawans, specifically, the Life Reform Movement (Seikatsu Kaizen Undo) in the 1930s and early 1940s. The Okinawans were at the periphery of Japan, although they were not considered an ethnic minority like the Koreans or Chinese living in Japan. The Okinawans, encouraged by the Life Reform Movement, tried to transform themselves from “peripheral Japanese” into “Japanese,” just as the immigrants in Brazil did via the kachigumi ideology. Both of these groups had to grapple with the socially constructed model of what a Japanese should be in the early 20th century, as they tried to reproduce this model within themselves in places either geographically or socially quite distant from Japan.

**Immigrating to Brazil**

The first group of immigrants from Japan, 791 in all, arrived in Santos, Brazil in 1908. Most were so-called “contract immigrants” (*keiyaku imin*), who had signed a contract to work on the coffee plantations. A small number of immigrants were so-called “free immigrants” (*jiyu imin*) or “called immigrants” (*yobiyose imin*), who were invited to Brazil by families or friends. By 1941, over 180,000 more had followed them, pushed out of Japan by the collapse of the agricultural economy and the failure of burgeoning modern industrial sectors to absorb all the excess labor from the rural regions, pulled by the expansion of the coffee plantations and an acute labor shortage in Brazil, and also lured by the immigration agents’ sweet promises of making a great deal of money in a few years by picking coffee beans. Three quarters of all the prewar immigrants to Brazil arrived between 1925 and 1935, when Japan was preparing for its military and territorial expansion in East Asia.

Most of those emigrating to Brazil, like those going to other countries, had no intention of spending the rest of their lives in their host country. They went to Brazil hoping to return home when they had made enough money to start over in Japan. In a 1938 survey of 12,000 immigrant households, 85 percent of all the respondents answered that they hoped to return home, only 10 percent responded they would remain in Brazil permanently, and the remaining 5 percent were not sure. Even those who intended to stay in the host country wanted to retain their Japanese nationality.

It did not take the new arrivals long to realize that the immigration agents had made false promises and that it would be impossible to achieve their original monetary goals while employed as plantation workers. Often, they were not paid the wages as agreed upon in the contract. Living and working conditions were far worse than they had expected, and they were forced to buy their food and other supplies at exorbitant prices at stores owned by plantation owners. In a harsher environment than they had imagined in Japan, they began to think of themselves as abandoned by the Japanese government (*kimin*, i.e., “thrown-away people”) rather than as immigrants (*imin*). Quite a few broke their contracts before they were completed, moving into the undeveloped lands of remote and isolated areas of the northwest, where they settled as independent farmers and set up self-
contained communities. Later arrivals joined them in the northwest, moving further and further out into the frontier, and repeating the resettlement process of the first groups. In these new settlements, the immigrants formed associations for protecting their common interests. The associations built and maintained schools, provided translators, gave directions and advice, shared information on the workings of Brazilian society, and helped the immigrants in dealing with the government offices of Brazil. As the immigrants began to settle down and their welfare needs lessened, the associations also became a pipeline between the immigrant community and the Japanese government. The Japanese government exploited these associations for nationalistic purposes and used the immigrants to disseminate propagandistic materials. These materials included textbooks, magazines, and films designed to perpetuate the spirit of Japan.

Japanese schools played a major role in instilling and reinforcing Japanese nationalism among the immigrants and their progeny. These schools, commonly called “Japanese Schools” (Nippon gakko), had direct ties with the Japanese government through the associations. In 1936 the Japanese Ministry of Education gave financial support to establish the Association of Japanese Education Dissemination in Brazil (Burajiru Nihonjin Kyoiku Fukyukai) through which it funneled guidance and instructions to the schools. These schools were not merely Japanese-language schools for the immigrants’ offspring; they were also centers of emperor worship, where all Japanese immigrants’ children were educated to become real “Japanese.” There, all imperial holidays were observed by both children and parents with ceremonies in which the photograph of the emperor and empress was displayed, the Imperial Rescript on Education was read, and other rituals of respect and obedience to the emperor were conducted. In 1938, there were 187 of such schools with about 10,000 students altogether in Brazil.

The Japanese schools symbolized the status of Japanese immigrants’ settlements as Japan’s virtual colonies. While each settlement was organized and run by the immigrant associations and there were regional leaders, no leaders for the entire immigrant community emerged out of the associations because the administrative structure encompassing the entire immigrant community was supplied by the Japanese government. At its pinnacle sat the Japanese Consulate General in Sao Paulo. The Ministry of Colonization Affairs (Takumusho) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported a semi-private Overseas Enterprise Company (Kaigai Takushoku Kabushikigaisha) that controlled immigration, and the Development Union of Brazil (Burajiru Takushoku Kumiai) as its local affiliate, to help the immigrants in economic activities.

The romanticization of Japan began as soon as the immigrants left Japan. An immigrant wrote his relatives in 1926 on the boat near Singapore on his way to Brazil: Every morning, I pray silently to the easterly sky. Not to God, nor to Buddha, but to Japan itself. The farther away I move from my homeland, the stronger my appreciation and respect with awe for the emperor’s country (kokoku) have become. In this immigrant’s mind, “Japan” was already becoming transformed from a place he knew by living there into an ideal image. Such an image of “Japan” paved the way for an image of what it meant to be “Japanese.”
In addition to their national identity, the immigrants (particularly those from mainland Japan) developed in Brazil a new consciousness of their ethnic identity—something they had never had at home. In Japan they had no experiences in their daily lives that made them conscious of their ethnicity. They had identities in their immediate and extended families, hamlets and villages. When they thought of themselves as Japanese, it was their national identity. In Brazil, they were exposed to other ethnic groups, against whom they defined themselves, and were defined by others, as Japanese. In the course of their movement into the hinterland and the reorganization of their community, the old units of families, villages and prefectures of origin in Japan also weakened. In this process, their shared experiences and a sense of common ethnicity became a unifying force beyond the boundaries of their former communities. Only the Okinawans succeeded in keeping their prefectural identity reasonably well intact. Still, the Okinawans, too, were regarded, and regarded themselves, as “Japanese” vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in Brazil. They referred to themselves as *kenjin* (literally, “prefectural person”) vis-à-vis the mainland Japanese, indicating they were a group from a distinct prefecture.

For Japanese immigrants in Brazil their ethnic identity became entwined with their national identity. Since they had no intention of staying in their host country permanently, but hoped to return to their original homes with a fortune as a banner of success, Japanese immigrants in South America in the prewar era remained Japanese subjects. Even as their hopes grew dimmer, they still dreamed of a return journey home. Ironically, now that immigration flows from Brazil to Japan, these “reimmigrant” Japanese Brazilians also hope to return home, namely to Brazil, after they have made money.

The Japanese government did not encourage the immigrants to return, but neither did it encourage them to cut their emotional and moral ties with Japan. Japanese government officials gave conflicting messages in their instructions to immigrants, prior to their departure for South America. The immigrants were lectured, usually at the port of embarkation, about working diligently and settling permanently in the host countries as law-abiding, loyal, model citizens. At the same time, they were also told “to retain their identity as Japanese and always to fulfill their obligation as subjects of Japan.” For the immigrants, the latter message resonated more loudly and was easier to follow, particularly given their imperial education in Japan. The other part of the instructions (to work diligently as law-abiding, model citizens of their new country) impressed the immigrants less, but it was not that difficult to follow, until the homeland and the host country set out on a collision course and loyalty to both became impossible.

**Between Two Nationalisms**

Japanese immigrants were first confronted with Brazilian political opposition to Japanese immigration in the 1930s. It was prompted by a surge in Japanese immigration, Japan’s invasion of China, and also the rise of Brazilian nationalism. Under such conditions, the immigrants reinforced their unity and identity as “Japanese.”

A large increase in Japanese immigration had begun in 1924, when the number of immigrants jumped from the previous year’s 895 to 2,673, as a result of the shut-down of
immigration into the United States. The number again more than doubled in 1925 to 6,330, and continued to climb. In 1933, immigrants from Japan numbered 24,494 and accounted for 53.2 percent of all immigrants entering Brazil in that year. Such large waves of Japanese immigrants, against the backdrop of Japan’s invasion of northeast China in 1931, stirred concern among Brazilians, who were stimulated by nationalism of their own, and evolved into an anti-Japanese campaign in 1933-34. The advocates of this campaign argued that the Japanese were not an ideal racial component for Brazil because their culture was too different and they tended to be clannish and self-contained and were unwilling to assimilate into Brazilian society. “The Japanese are insoluble like sulfur,” claimed Oliveira Vianna, Brazil’s leading social scientist, in 1932. “Insoluble like sulfur” came to be a frequently used phrase by anti-Japanese advocates. They were also suspicious about the Japanese being militaristic. The most radical among the anti-Japanese advocates, Congressman Xavier de Oliveira, called the Japanese immigration into Latin America an “immigration for conquest,” and argued that each immigrant was a soldier in disguise. “Brazil is a Manchuria in South America,” he declared. In such an atmosphere, a law to limit immigration was passed in 1934, with the Japanese as its specific target.

This law was never implemented, since Brazil was still in need of farm labor. But the number of Japanese immigrants to Brazil sharply declined anyway, as Japanese emigration headed more to Manchuria, China, and Korea. Instead of limiting the number of Japanese immigrants, the Immigration Law placed detailed controls over immigrants’ lives, and in 1938 and 1939 various Brazilian states passed and enforced a series of laws to keep the immigrants’ activities further in check. They were aimed at controlling immigrants’ organizations, prohibiting publications in languages other than Portuguese, and promoting the assimilation of foreign-born Brazilians.

Under such circumstances, the Japanese immigrants’ anxiety grew. At first, it was due to their isolation in Brazilian society resulting from the decline in new immigration from Japan, rather than the anti-Japanese campaign. At the same time, Japan’s expansion into China and Manchuria inspired hopes among the Brazilian immigrants that they might be needed on the new frontier in East Asia. In that case, they began to think, they would rather contribute to building the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere instead of lingering in Brazil. The more despairing they were in Brazil, the more attractive became the image of themselves working under the Rising Sun flag for the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere.

Their hopeful imaginings were put on abrupt hold, however, when the Pacific War broke out. Diplomatic relations between Brazil and Japan was severed in January, 1942, although Brazil did not declare war against Japan until June 1945, while it did so against Germany and Italy in August 1942. But the diplomatic break resulted in the pullout of Japanese officials from the Japanese Embassy and Consulate General. Japanese immigrants were left with no protection in the midst of tightening control over their activities. Their assets were frozen, their bank withdrawals were limited to a small amount each month, and the titles of their real properties were seized. All these things led to a number of bankruptcies and closures of factories, stores and farms, and a loss of many
jobs for Japanese. That was not all. The use of and education in the Japanese language were forbidden, Japanese schools were closed and organizations disbanded, listening to shortwave radio programs from Japan was prohibited, Japanese publications were forbidden and any sort of literature in Japanese was confiscated. Japanese newspapers, on which almost ninety-percent of the immigrants relied for information, were shut down.

The closure of the Japanese Embassy and Consulate General also left the immigrants with a large vacuum in the moral and social center of their community, in which “the old Japanese way” was honored and maintained. They had felt abandoned when they first encountered the harsh living and working conditions in Brazil. With the pullout of Japanese diplomats and representatives, they felt abandoned by the Japanese elite in a wilderness of enemies, victimized by the Brazilian government, and surrounded by hostile people. There were incidents that made them feel vulnerable and helpless. In early 1942, fifty Japanese immigrant families were driven from land in Sao Paulo that they were leasing and had developed into vegetable fields. American and British companies refused to sell the Japanese immigrants oil, machinery, automobiles and certain types of food. A retired sergeant from the Japanese Imperial Army was suspected of being a spy and tortured to death by the Brazilian police, and the investigation of his death was obstructed. Some farmers in a town three hundred kilometers from Sao Paulo had their homes searched by the police and not only were their radios and Japanese publications confiscated, but they were also robbed of their money. One such family protested and ended up with the husband and son shot to death. In another state, thirty Japanese and German families were raided and robbed and the women raped by ordinary Brazilians. Similar cases occurred in other areas as well. To make the immigrants feel even more powerless, about 350 Japanese families living in the heart of Sao Paulo and forming a Japanese commercial section, were evicted in September 1942, and told to get out within ten days. In July 1943, all the Japanese families along with Germans living in Santos and its vicinity, about 10,000 individuals in all, were ordered to leave.

Information on such incidents traveled fast among the immigrants by word of mouth, since they had no newspapers or radio programs of their own. Under such circumstances of increasing violence and repression, all the immigrants could do was to lie low. They clandestinely listened to news on shortwave radio and believed every glorious word the Imperial Headquarters (Daihon’ei) told them about how Japan was winning every battle. While victorious news from their homeland comforted them on the one hand, it also emphasized their sense of isolation.

What eased their anxiety was the hope of reemigration back to Asia as Japan expanded its control in China and Southeast Asia. The prerequisite for their dream to come true was, of course, Japan’s victory. In other words, for the immigrants, with their identity as Japanese, their background of imperial education, and their hopes of returning to Asia, there was no other course but to help their homeland win the war. Amid the emotional and social turmoil, arguments about so-called “enemy industries” began to circulate among the Japanese immigrants--namely, that production of certain export items would benefit the enemy, the United States, and therefore engaging in such an industry was an act of treason to Japan. These items were, oddly enough, peppermint and silk. Peppermint, it
was argued, was used as the coolant for airplane engines and silk was the material for parachutes. Such an argument was, of course, totally baseless. Peppermint had no industrial use, and Americans already had nylon with which to manufacture parachutes.

It is not clear exactly when and who started the “enemy industry” argument, under what circumstances, and how it spread. What is more important is that it persuaded a majority of Japanese immigrants to act accordingly. In late January 1944, when the “enemy industry” argument really began to take hold, farmers who were engaged in the production of these items were thrown into a terrible dilemma. By hard work, they had survived their initial hardships and managed to establish an economic foundation. To work hard was also to live up to their reputation, and therefore, to prove they were true Japanese. Now, it was argued that working hard could damage their own homeland. Still, some farmers were reluctant to comply since peppermint production and sericulture were bringing in a good income. They were accused of wanting Japan’s defeat. Pressure was applied on farmers who continued to produce peppermint and silk, with other Japanese calling them names, snubbing them or, finally, ostracizing them in the community. Soon, the accusations escalated into sanctions against the farmers, resulting in the burning of fields and silkworm houses.

There was also internal pressure on the entire immigrant community to think and act like “true Japanese” and adhere to the “old Japanese spirit.” There was no room for negotiation as to the definition of a “true Japanese.” To be “Japanese” meant to remain loyal to the Emperor and to have no doubt about Japan’s victory in the war. Around the time when the “enemy industry” argument was spreading, numerous nationalist secret societies and informal organizations sprang up in various parts of the immigrant community. Among them were Shindo Renmei (League of the Way of the Emperor’s Subjects), Aikoku Rengo Nipponjinkai (Japanese Association of the Patriotic League), Hakuryukai (White Dragon Society), and others. It was these nationalist groups, often led by former officers of the Japanese Imperial Army, that moved into the vacuum left by the Japanese government, and that provided the immigrant community with a sense of unity and affirmation of their identity. Their influence grew rapidly and became the core of the kachigumi (victory faction) in the postwar period.

Kachigumi

Japanese immigrants in Brazil were in the dark as to accurate information on the war, with no newspapers to read (most of them could not read Portuguese), and few radios at hand (most had been confiscated). Fabricated “news” of Japan’s winning battles escalated, ironically, as the major cities in Japan suffered air-raids and particularly after the battle in Okinawa ended with a disastrous loss for Japan. Such false information was circulated through word of mouth and mysterious leaflets. Pressure on Japanese immigrants to remain loyal subjects of the emperor created a frame of mind that caused the immigrants to “interpret” the news from Brazilian media (hence on the U.S. side) and to sift the “truth” out of it. Maeyama Takashi, one of Japan’s leading scholars of Brazilian Japanese, observes that the Japanese immigrants selectively accepted the information that suited their symbolic structure and rejected as false that which did not. In this process, the
falsehood was accepted as “news” and news was cast out as being “false,” involving each immigrant as a coauthor of the falsehood. The report on Japan’s surrender to the Allied Powers on radio and Brazilian newspapers of August 15, 1945, was thus “interpreted” as Americans manipulating the fact of Japan’s victory into Japan’s defeat. An avalanche of “news” followed that “confirmed Japan’s victory.” By August 17, however, news from Brazilian newspapers and radios convinced some Japanese of their homeland’s defeat. These Japanese made rational judgments of the information they received, but their judgment did not prevail over the emotional responses of other immigrants. Those who acknowledged Japan’s defeat came to be called the makegumi (defeat faction) or ninshikiha (acknowledging school). Diametrically opposed to them were kachigumi (victory faction) or kyokoha (hardheaded school).

Numerous kachigumi groups were formed, many of which were led by Shindo Renmei. They spread more false reports, allegedly from Japan, on the postwar situation after Japan’s victory. The source of such “reports” was often the shortwave radio of a member of Shindo Renmei. But the shortwave radio “had bad reception” and some people doubted the credibility of any news received by it. To such skeptics, Shindo Renmei retorted, “Only the true Japanese with Japanese spirit can hear the correct messages from Japan” or “You can hear it if you listen with Japanese spirit.” The aim of such arguments is clear: to purge any opposition by manipulating the shared identity based on the same value system. Soon, Shindo Renmei turned to exploiting the anxiety of the immigrants to reap financial gain. They solicited donations for their activities, sold fraudulent tickets for the return journey to Japan, and also sold fictitious real estate in the Philippines and Java as sites of reemigration. By telling immigrants what they wanted to hear, Shindo Renmei rapidly gained influence over them. In April 1946, Shindo Renmei was at its peak, with about 80 branches, claiming over a hundred thousand members. Its influence reportedly reached 90 percent of Japanese immigrants. It also carried out terrorist activities against their opposition, namely the makegumi, resulting in sixteen assassinations and ultimately leading to the arrest of Shindo Renmei leaders and the disbanding of the organization.

The dissolution of Shindo Renmei did not invalidate the kachigumi people’s faith in Japan, though their faith no longer included a belief in Japan’s victory. Most kachigumi people gradually accepted Japan’s defeat as fact, although it took many almost a decade to do so. It took some even longer to come to terms with the fact. Halfway around the world from home, scattered in the Brazilian hinterland, living and working among themselves with little communication with the world outside their self-contained communities, Japanese immigrants held onto any thin thread that made them feel connected with their homeland to which they hoped to return some day. Rumors, particularly those that were favorable to Japan, were easily believed under those conditions. Many immigrants continued to believe in the perpetuation of the Japanese spirit, and even though Shindo Renmei was disbanded, kachigumi followers observed rituals as the emperor’s subjects at home or within themselves.

The kachigumi followers were led to believe that they would receive free tickets home to Japan as long as they remained “true Japanese”—that is, as long as they adhered to and maintained the “Japanese spirit.” One case, almost too bizarre for words, is described by
Takagi Toshiro, who stumbled across the legacy of the *kachigumi* during his visit in Brazil in the 1960s and has written the most vivid account on this group. In the postscript of his book, *Kyoshin--Burajiru Nikkei-imin no soran* (Fanatics--Disturbances by Japanese-Brazilians), Takagi describes the November 1972 Japanese homecoming of the Hamahiga, Higa, and Maeda families, all *kachigumi* members. No sooner had they landed in Tokyo than the oldest, Hamahiga Ryoki, age 81, took his hat off, threw his arms up in the air, and exclaimed, “Long Live His Majesty! Long Live Japan!” (“Tennoheika banzai! Nippon banzai!”). It was his first return trip to Japan since he had left his home in Okinawa in 1920. He was so completely convinced of Japan’s victory in the war that everything he saw in Japan—the new prosperity, the emperor still living in the Imperial Palace, and so on—appeared to him as proof of Japan’s victory. He was accompanied by his wife, age 71, and their grandson, age 37. The other two families, Higa and Maeda, had eleven members in all, ranging in age from 13 to 65. At Yasukuni Shrine, they were overcome with emotions and wept.

These three families had lived close together in Brazil. Every morning, all the members would gather at the Higa family’s home and conduct a daily ceremony. They would stand in neat rows in front of the family altar shelf with a purple curtain, bow to the picture of the emperor and the empress on the altar, and sing *Kimigayo*, the Japanese national anthem. Then, Hamahiga’s grandson would recite the Imperial Rescript on Education, not knowing that it had been abolished in 1948. Takagi points out that public schools in Japan had conducted a similar ceremony since the Meiji era, but only on imperial holidays. The three families kept up this ceremony together every day for almost thirty years in Brazil. There were other family groups at the time that were conducting similar ceremonies every day. They believed that by doing so, they would prove themselves to be “true Japanese” and be rewarded with a free return journey home.

The Hamahiga and Higa families did get their airfare paid by the Japanese government, but not a reward for being loyal subjects of the Japanese empire. It was, instead, government aid to impoverished Japanese families overseas. Since such aid was not forthcoming to the Maeda family, they sold their land in order to raise money for the trip home. It is ironic that these families’ home, Okinawa, had been occupied by the United States, the victor of the Pacific War, until May 1972, and that only after Okinawa’s reversion to Japan could they return there. It is particularly ironic for the Maeda family, whose family house in Kin stands directly in front of the United States Marine Corps Base, Camp Hansen.

**Okinawans’ Life Reform Movement**

Okinawans have a culture of their own, distinct from that of the Japanese. Yet their national and ethnic identities as distinct from their identities as Japanese have been ambiguous. Since Okinawa lost its political independence and was incorporated into Japan in 1879, Japanese have considered Okinawans to be Japanese nationals. They have not been recognized as a separate people as Koreans and Chinese are. Yet, as a people they have never been fully accepted into the Japanese mainstream, but have been kept at the periphery—in terms not only of geography, but in politics, the economy and social life.
as well. I call them, therefore, “peripheral Japanese,” and their Life Reform Movement was an effort (at least as far as the involved Okinawans were concerned) to transform Okinawans from “peripheral Japanese” into mainstream “Japanese.”

The motive for promoting the Life Reform Movement evolved out of a concern about the many Okinawans leaving their homes for the mainland due to the breakdown of their economic base. Prewar rapid modernization devastated Japan’s rural economy and brought about a large-scale exodus of rural people as migrant workers to the urban, industrial regions. Okinawa was particularly hard hit. As of the mid-1920s, a large proportion (70-75 percent) of the households in Okinawa were engaged in agriculture, of which the majority were destitute farmers with less than 5 tan (1.225 acres) of land. The main items they produced were yams and sugar cane, which occupied three quarters of the arable land. The production output of Okinawan farmers in terms of yen was less than half the national average, both per household and per capita. Okinawa had become unable to feed itself and imported from the mainland (hondo) essential food, such as rice and soybeans, as well as fertilizers and hardware for farming.

The deficit became enormous and irreversible by the mid-1920s. Compounding the difficulty, Okinawa was burdened by taxation. During the ten-year period between 1919 and 1928, Okinawa paid the state 68,000,000 yen in various taxes and received from the state 23,000,000 yen. Upon such a fragile Okinawan economy descended the avalanche of the post-World-War-I recession, the financial crisis and finally the Great Depression. The rural regions were driven to near starvation, a condition commonly known as the “palm-tree hell” (sotetsu jigoku), during which people resorted to eating sago palms, which are quite poisonous without elaborate preparation. The Tokyo government provided Okinawa with no policy to absorb the excess rural labor force and feed the population. Thus, the excess population poured out of Okinawa as cheap labor to the mainland or overseas, and Okinawa became the number one emigration prefecture.

The migrant workers from Okinawa to the mainland were mostly young and unskilled, and concentrated in the Osaka area. Most of them lived and worked closely together when they first arrived. In their new environment where these ordinary Okinawans came into contact with other Japanese for the first time, they became conscious of themselves speaking a different language from others surrounding them. They began to be sensitive to their distinctiveness and their identity as Okinawans. The development of Okinawan ethnic identity parallels that of Japanese immigrants in Brazil discussed earlier. But unlike the immigrants in Brazil, Okinawans in mainland Japan shared the Japanese national identity with others surrounding them, while developing their ethnic identity. Also, while the ethnic and national identities merged into being “Japanese” for Japanese immigrants into Brazil, for Okinawans to become “Japanese” was to discard their ethnic identity and traits (including their language). There was pressure on the Okinawans to become “Japanese.” Now dependent on Japan for their economic and political survival, Okinawans themselves took up the task of assimilating into Japan.

Their effort manifested itself in the Life Reform Movement in the latter half of the 1930s through the 1940s. It was promoted by Governor Fuchigami (himself a mainland
Japanese) and targeted as objects of “reform” the Okinawan language, traditional dress, surnames, plays in Okinawan, female shamans called yuta, and other distinctively Okinawan cultural traits. This movement is generally understood as a campaign to translate the top-down assimilation policy into practice, just like the campaigns to wipe out the traditional culture in Korea and Taiwan and transform the peoples into Japanese imperial subjects (kominka undo). Both campaigns were a step toward the National Mobilization System. Indeed, Governor Fuchigami insisted that all local Okinawan characteristics should be wiped out in order to unify the entire nation.

However, the Life Reform Movement was enthusiastically supported and promoted in Okinawa and in Osaka by Okinawans themselves. Their enthusiasm resulted from the negative image of “Okinawans” vis-à-vis the “Japanese” that had emerged in the course of modernization. Tomiyama Ichiro argues that the two images were juxtaposed, respectively, as “non-hygienic” vs. “hygienic,” “affective” vs. “rational,” “lazy” vs. “diligent,” “backward” vs. “modern,” “disorderly” vs. “orderly,” and so on. The elements in this image of the “Japanese” are not cultural traits but markers of ideal workers in modern capitalist Japan and characteristics that were expected of or desired in modern Japanese society. The negative imagery of the “Okinawans” was also translated in the real world as the basis for discriminating against them.

By the 1920s, the stereotype of Okinawans was firmly fixed in the minds of many employers in Osaka— that they spoke the language in such a different form from standard Japanese that they could neither communicate well nor learn new job skills, and that they would change jobs frequently. It was true that Okinawan workers tended to move from one job to another, instead of staying in the same job. Tomiyama argues that it was their attempt to get out of the “Okinawan-style” low-wage labor market. Indeed, there were employers who sought out Okinawan workers because they worked hard for low wages, while others shut out Okinawans workers because they perceived the Okinawan dialect as a problem, as well as due to the lack of technical skills.

The promoters of the Life Reform Movement were well-intended insofar as they wanted to help Okinawans lift themselves from the bottom of Japanese society. They were deeply concerned about securing acceptance for the vast number of fellow Okinawans emigrating overseas or to the mainland to work or enter military service. Tomiyama refers to many of the advocates of this movement in Osaka as a “pseudo-elite.” They were able or had opportunities to climb the social ladder, in spite of their lack of secondary or higher education, by means of on-site training and hard work. They knew what it would take for Okinawans to gain upward mobility in Japanese society. They insisted that fellow Okinawans strive to reach the same level as other “Japanese” in terms of the language, habits and customs, hobbies, and so forth, so as not to appear inferior. Their goal was not just personal. They believed that their homeland, Okinawa, would be the ultimate beneficiary because the emigrants, either to the mainland or overseas, would bring Okinawa prosperity and thus modernize their homeland.

The primary target of “reform” in this movement was the language. When Okinawans spoke their language with one another among mainland Japanese, they were not
considered as merely speaking their home dialect, but looked at with suspicion as non-Japanese. The language they spoke thus became a litmus test of whether they were “true Japanese.” Okinawans were placed in the situation in which they needed to learn so-called standard Japanese (hyojungo). Their “need” matched the central government’s policy of using it to force the cultural assimilation of Okinawans.

The campaign to encourage the use of the standard Japanese began as soon as Okinawa was incorporated into Japan, and was pushed more vigorously in the 1930s as part of the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement (kokumin seishin sodoin undo) to promote loyalty of the “Japanese” to imperial Japan. While the movement was imposed upon them from Tokyo, Okinawans in leadership positions embraced it and promoted it with a vigor that had no parallel in any other prefectures. In fact, the movement evolved into the Okinawan Dialect Eradication Movement (Okinawago haizetsu undo). This was carried out to such an extent that the folk scholar Yanagi Soetsu publicly criticized it as excessive when he visited the island in 1940. Yanagi’s public criticism sparked a major debate in Okinawa, which spread as far as Tokyo.

The campaign to impose the use of standard Japanese has often been regarded as having been implemented only in Okinawa and nowhere else in the mainland. Yanagi himself thought so. Many others who studied the campaign and modern Okinawan history have failed to check whether similar campaigns were carried out elsewhere. This may be due to the intensity of the campaign in Okinawa or due to the uniqueness of the Okinawan language. However, according to author Shiba Ryotaro, the standardization campaign was not unique to Okinawa. Shiba notes that he personally knows of similar campaigns that took place at elementary schools in Kagoshima and Kochi Prefectures before and after World War II. He witnessed more than once in the fourth decade of Showa (1955-1965) elementary school children wearing tags on their chests that said, “Speak the common language (i.e., standard Japanese).” He further claims that there still was, at the time of his writing (1978), some kind of punishment at school for speaking in dialect.

Why then is the Okinawan experience regarded as different from others by Okinawans and mainland Japanese alike? It is because Okinawans faced a reality different from other mainland dialect speakers who acquired and spoke standard Japanese. Since “standard Japanese” was considered at the time “superior” to dialects, all dialect speakers were made to feel somewhat inferior or at least awkward--probably with the exception of Kyoto and, to a lesser degree, Osaka dialect speakers. Perhaps mainland dialect speakers took on different personae, as Okinawans did, when they spoke standard Japanese. Still, they were able to speak it without giving up the identity of who they were, and when they spoke their home dialect they did not have to worry about being suspected as non-Japanese.

It was a different story for Okinawans. Their dialect, with its sounds and vocabulary so different from any others, made the speaker suspect as a non-Japanese, or at best, it would give away the speaker’s identity as Okinawan. With the stereotype already established about the “Okinawan” as “non-hygienic,” “affective,” “lazy,” “backward,” and “disorderly,” Okinawan speakers were instantly suspected of not being good workers in the “hygienic,” “rational,” “diligent,” “modern,” “orderly” industrial Japan. In other
words, Okinawans had to erase their Okinawan-ness in order to become “Japanese.” This difference in the reality between mainland Japanese and Okinawans concerning the imposition of standard Japanese is important--particularly in understanding why the Okinawans initially reacted to the standardization campaign with such enthusiasm and why they later came to regard it as a peculiarly painful experience.

The Okinawans supported and promoted the standardization campaign to the fullest extent as a strategy of self-defense. No doubt their strategy also suited the government’s goal to wipe out Okinawan culture, but that was a secondary consideration. The Okinawans’ primary goal was to push all Okinawans forward to modernity by shedding their Okinawan-ness and becoming “Japanese,” since that seemed to be the only way for Okinawa to achieve prosperity. Forsaking their own language was a price they were willing to pay at the time.

However, no matter how hard they tried, the Okinawans were not fully accepted as “Japanese.” They were kept at the periphery and silently deepened their awareness of it. In 1945, their tie with Japan was abruptly severed as Okinawa was placed under occupation by the United States military. This parting from Japan did not encourage the Okinawans to seek their independence. Having become “Japanese,” albeit peripheral ones, the Okinawans did not have a symbol of their own with which to unify themselves and fight against the foreign occupation. Instead, the Okinawans pursued reversion to Japan as a way to free themselves from the American occupation, demanding equal treatment with mainland “Japanese.”

So powerful and firm was the value of being “Japanese” instilled in Okinawans, even postwar Okinawan immigrants, who often had more grievances about the Japanese government than prewar Okinawans, that they failed to shake off the value system that had been inculcated in them before the war. One of the leaders of Okinawan immigrants in Bolivia, who immigrated there in 1954, felt that his people were abandoned by the Japanese government after the war, and he was angry with the United States for occupying his island and driving him and his family from their family land. He had become a supporter of Senaga Kamejiro, leader of Okinawa People’s Party (Okinawa Jinminto) before he emigrated to Bolivia against the backdrop of land appropriations forced by the United States for the purpose of constructing military bases. Yet, he recalls that when he saw a Rising Sun on a Japanese ship in port somewhere on his way to South America, he was overcome with nostalgia mixed with joy and sadness. It was then forbidden by the United States to display the Rising Sun flag in public. This immigrant admits that he still pays due respect to the Rising Sun as he was taught before the war even though he is critical of the Japanese government’s treatment of Okinawa.

New identities after the “Japanese”

Even today, kachigumi behavior seems bizarre, just as it struck Brazilians at the time. The Okinawans’ Life Reform Movement, particularly its Okinawan Dialect Eradication Movement, seems excessive, as it did to some artists and intellectuals in Japan at the time. Yet, neither was deviant from the “Japanese,” or at least from what they believed
“Japanese” ought to be. For that matter, mainland Japanese themselves did not escape the forces pushing them to be “Japanese.” The basic framework of the ideal model of “Japanese” was forged by the Meiji state for modern nation-building. It was reinforced in the 1930s with a strong emphasis on loyalty to the emperor for the purpose of mobilizing the nation for Japan’s overseas expansion. A large body of literature in both Japanese and English is dedicated to analyzing how the state installed the machinery for producing “Japanese,” how organizations at every level of society contributed to maintaining and reinforcing this, and what price all ordinary people caught up in this process ultimately paid—the suppression of individualism, the loss of traditional communities and of particularism, and more.

However, the prices of becoming “Japanese” away from home seems to have been a particularly painful one that mainland Japanese who did not have to deal with the split of ethnic and national identities could not truly understand. For mainland citizens, conforming to the “Japanese” mold was a question of national imperatives. For those at the periphery or geographically removed from Japan, the issue of becoming “Japanese” involved both national and ethnic identities, touching each individual’s inner world about who he or she was.

For the Japanese immigrants in Brazil, national and ethnic identities merged into a moral model around which they tried to unify their community. They watched each other to see if they were “true Japanese,” which led to a moral, and literal, purge. In addition to experiencing inner turmoil, many individuals paid a high price in other ways. The first generation of immigrants, victims of discrimination in the country to which they had moved, reacted by adopting an ultraorthodox version of the Japanese stereotype. Ultimately forced to give that up, they came to terms with staying in Brazil permanently and resolved to “become ancestors of future Japanese-Brazilians.” The following generations are developing their identity as an ethnic minority in Brazilian society. Although some are now in Japan as reimmigrants to earn money, most want to return to Brazil.

For Okinawans, to become “Japanese” was to discard their ethnic identity and characteristics. Victims of discrimination within Japan, they reacted at first like the Japanese immigrants in Brazil by becoming ‘more royalist than the king.’ Then, separated from Japan and under American occupation, they awoke to their own distinct identity. Yet, they were not free from the legacy of being “Japanese,” and had to assert their Japanese identity in order to free themselves from foreign occupation. Since its reversion to Japan, Okinawa has received a cascade of big capital and commercialism from the mainland, along with rigid bureaucratic control by the central government designed to wipe out regional characteristics. Okinawans now have lost their own language. Its use in everyday life is forever gone and with the onslaught of mass media from the mainland, the standardization of the language has accelerated. Only in recent years is an effort being made to revive the Okinawan language in literature and the performing arts. Okinawans have been struggling to reestablish their identity and searching for a system of ideas with which to help determine their own destiny. They are reclaiming their ethnic identity as “Okinawans”—or “Ryukyuans” as some prefer—more strongly than ever.
All ordinary people caught up in Japan’s forced development from above suffered the loss of their individualism and particularism in the homogenization of creating the perfect citizen of the kokutai, Japan’s concept of a mystical national polity. But those outside the mainstream suffered more than those inside. In becoming “Japanese,” the immigrants in Brazil and the Okinawans, as both groups and individuals, paid enormous prices. Critical reflection on their experiences as “Japanese” has given rise to new identities. The Japanese immigrants in Brazil and everywhere else overseas are creating new hyphenated identities of their own. The Okinawans seem to be moving in recent years toward embracing their ethnic identity within Japan. The construction of such new identities will create a more diverse model of being Japanese than the monolithic model that was at one time imposed from above.

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