The Bolivan Connection: U.S. Bases and Okinawan Emigration
by Kozy K. Amemiya

In February 1996, Chalmers Johnson, president of the Japan Policy Research Institute, spoke in San Diego about the U.S. military bases in Okinawa. He had just returned from Okinawa, where he had given a lecture at the invitation of Governor Ota. Listening to Dr. Johnson, Thomas Royden remembered what he had heard at the U.S. Embassy in La Paz, Bolivia, about twenty-five years earlier: that a large number of Okinawans had been flown in by the American military and had been dumped in the jungle. Royden had been studying the spontaneous colonization of indigenous people from the Altiplano into the lowlands of Bolivia. “Don’t go there,” he remembered having been told. “Those Okinawans are very angry and constantly drinking and fighting. It’s a dangerous place.” Was there a link, he now wondered, between those Okinawans in the Bolivian jungle and the construction of the U.S. bases in Okinawa?

A few weeks later I stumbled onto a book that confirmed the link Royden had asked about. The book was primarily about the immigrant community in Bolivia from mainland Japan called the Colonia San Juan Yapacani, but it contained a few pages that referred to another settlement of Okinawans in Bolivia. It also noted that the Okinawan emigration to Bolivia was planned in order to deal with the farmers displaced by the construction of the U.S. military bases. Now Royden (my husband) was sorry he had heeded the U.S. Embassy’s advice and hadn’t gone to the Okinawan settlement, although he knew exactly where it was located. Instead, he had visited the other Japanese settlement, Colonia San Juan Yapacani. So he suggested that we now visit the Okinawan settlement, he to see it with his own eyes, and I to investigate how the Okinawans ended up there.

I grew up in postwar Japan, enjoying the rapid improvement in living standards, without hearing much about Okinawa. Even when I was a student and began looking at Japan’s growing economic strength with critical eyes, I was indifferent to the price Okinawans were forced to pay for Japan’s prosperity. Okinawa was simply too exotic for me to consider as a part of domestic Japanese issues and not exotic enough to attract my attention as a part of larger Asian issues. Thus when the Okinawan problem finally entered my consciousness, I felt that as a mainland Japanese (hondo no Nihonjin) I had to do something to help right the wrong that Okinawans had endured. The investigation of the link between the Okinawan emigration to Bolivia and the construction of the U.S. military bases in Okinawa provided me with the opportunity to do just that. This is how the JPRI project about Okinawans in the jungle of Bolivia began. In addition to visiting Okinawa
and Bolivia to interview scholars and the immigrants themselves, we have also gathered, and continue to gather, as much data as possible in the United States.

Very early in our research I came across several references to the emigration to Bolivia in the context of the construction of the U.S. military bases. For example, Oshiro Tatsuhiro, the winner of the 1967 Akutagawa Prize for *Cocktail Party*, wrote a novella about Okinawan emigrants to Bolivia called *Nanbei-zakura* (South American Cherry Blossoms). The protagonist of this novella remarks about the initial stage of the emigration, “Americans confiscated land in Okinawa and moved all the landowners to Bolivia.” 2 One of the most notorious cases of land confiscation by the U.S. military, using bayonets and bulldozers, took place in 1955 at Isahama, which is today in Ginowan city, the location of Futenma Marine Corps Air Station. The book that describes this incident reports that thirty-two families lost their homes and farmlands and were removed to a highland area about ten miles away. Their new land was not suited for agriculture. The book concludes this episode with the statement that most of those farmers, unable to make a living in their new locale, emigrated to Bolivia two years later. 3 In Okinawa, the relationship between the land appropriation by the U.S. military and the emigration to Bolivia appears to be common knowledge. No one in Okinawa I spoke to denied our conjecture about the link between the two, and Governor Ota explicitly confirmed it. The only reservation voiced by some, who echoed our suspicion, was the difficulty of finding solid documentary proof.

In Bolivia I interviewed Okinawans mostly from the first three groups who came there in 1954 and 1955. I also distributed questionnaires among all the Okinawan residents in Colonia Okinawa and Santa Cruz and made a survey regarding their motives for emigration and their current opinions about the U.S. bases in Okinawa. I also interviewed several people who had emigrated in the fourth group, in 1957, and a few in later groups who emigrated in the early 1960s. In all, I interviewed 36 men (26 in Colonia Okinawa and 10 in Santa Cruz) and 14 women (11 in Colonia and 3 in Santa Cruz). I distributed my questionnaire to all Okinawan households in Colonia and Santa Cruz, but the majority of the 112 responses (66 from men and 46 from women) came from the early settlers.

Among my interviewees, several had indeed had their farmland occupied by the U.S. military. The majority, however, had come from areas that were not taken for the construction of the U.S. bases. It also turned out that the farmers and their families from Isahama had emigrated to Brazil, not Bolivia.

Why, then, have Okinawans come to regard the emigration to Bolivia as so closely related to the land seizures by the U.S. military? Was it a mere coincidence that Bolivian emigration was vigorously promoted with financial support by the U.S. at a time when the U.S. military had constructed the bases and was about to expand them even more? To investigate the issue of Bolivian immigration and American involvement in it, we are concerned with two sets of questions: (a) how did the plan come about, and (b) who were those immigrants and what has happened to them?
How the Plan Came About

The emigration program sent about 3,200 Okinawans to Bolivia between 1954 and 1964. As of 1995, about 800 remaining immigrants and their offspring live in the settlement called Colonia Okinawa and a few hundred in Santa Cruz. The original plan was much more ambitious, intending to send 12,000 immigrants in 10 years. It seems the idea of encouraging more Okinawan emigration to Bolivia may have come from a few prewar settlers there, who had heard of the horrendous devastation of their homeland by the war and wanted to help their compatriots. In 1948 they set up a group to send aid of all kinds to Okinawa and soon started planning to receive more immigrants. By 1950, they were looking for an appropriate site and had found a place in the Department [State] of Santa Cruz, where they began negotiating to purchase 2,500 hectares. Meanwhile, in Okinawa in the same year, the U.S. Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR) was set up to implement American policies and programs. The Okinawan settlers’ efforts in Bolivia caught the attention of some officers, who commissioned James L. Tigner at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, to explore the possibilities of shipping Okinawan emigrants to Latin America.

Tigner spent ten months in 1951-52 travelling from Mexico to Peru to Brazil and Bolivia. He took note of the eagerness of the early Okinawan settlers in Bolivia to help their compatriots. The Bolivian government was also receptive to receiving Okinawan immigrants. Its new president, Victor Paz Estenssoro of the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), was intent on carrying out a social revolution to transform Bolivia, with financial aid from the U.S., and to achieve self-sufficiency in food supply. He was particularly interested in turning the state of Santa Cruz into the granary of Bolivia. The United States was also interested in supporting social reforms in Bolivia in order to keep communism at bay.

Tigner reported to USCAR in September 1952 with a strong recommendation that the eastern region of Bolivia be chosen as the site for Okinawan settlement. He urged USCAR to set up a budget of US$160,000 for transporting an initial 400 immigrants. Tigner’s recommendation was influential with the U.S. military and also helped create a fervor among Okinawans who had been promoting overseas emigration. However, more than a year passed without further serious study of the site, and yet the emigration plan continued to roll on. Meanwhile, in Bolivia, the early Okinawan settlers had secured the 2,500 hectares they had previously located and registered them as the Uruma settlement. They also negotiated with the Bolivian government to release 10,000 hectares of government-owned land adjacent to the Uruma settlement.

In Okinawa there were many who enthusiastically embraced the Bolivia emigration plan. The Ryukyu Government, which was created in 1952 by the United States to perform administrative and legislative functions under the supervision of USCAR, headed by the U.S. High Commissioner, passed legislation in November 1953 providing loans to emigrants. Shortly after that, two delegates—one from the Overseas Association of Okinawa and the other from the Ryukyu Government—were sent to Latin America to
“survey the land.” Their trip, however, served merely to acknowledge what had already been decided informally--i.e., to settle Okinawan emigrants at the Uruma site.

As soon as the survey team had returned to Okinawa, the plan was announced and applicants were solicited through bulletins placed in public offices and newspapers. Each family was promised 50 hectares of free land in an area of rich soil, with no known diseases, and the prospect of railroad access in the near future. Housing was supposedly awaiting the settlers. As a result of this emigration fervor promoted by the Ryukyu Government, four hundred finalists were selected within a month out of some 4,000 applicants, all of them attracted by the prospect of instantly owning 50 hectares of land. Of the 400 accepted, 80 were single men. After a week-long lecture series about emigration in general, the emigrants set out for Bolivia in 1954 with great fanfare.

Both Tigner and the Okinawan migration enthusiasts repeatedly emphasized the need for emigration as a solution to Okinawa’s overpopulation and its shrinking arable land base. Indeed, acute postwar food shortages were experienced by all Okinawans, men and women, young and old. All the migrants I interviewed said they were eating mostly yams and very little rice. (They told me that yams were the staple and rice a luxury item in Okinawa. The U.S. food aid provided to Okinawans for several years after the war was standard American food, such as canned meat and pork-and-beans, but immigrants claim it did not ease the shortage of their staple food.) Many postwar Okinawans eased their hunger pangs by eating cycads, a primitive Okinawan plant containing both starch and a poison that requires a lot of work to remove. People ate it only when they were desperate for food. Mr. C in Colonia Okinawa recalls that for this reason if you got caught stealing a cycad in order to eat it, you were forgiven.

Okinawa’s overpopulation and its shrinking arable land were not entirely a product of nature. Both Tigner and the Okinawan emigration enthusiasts mention only in passing that the appropriation of arable land by the U.S. military exacerbated the problems. Also, whereas in mainland Japan, the Eugenic Protection Law was passed in 1948 for the purpose of virtually legalizing abortion in the midst of the heightened concern about postwar overpopulation (with subsequent revisions in 1949 and 1952, abortion became available on request), the legislature of the Ryukyu Government passed a similar law in 1956 only to have it vetoed by the U.S. High Commissioner.

Two common themes emerge from my interviews with Okinawan male immigrants: (a) nearly all of them were employed at one time or another by the U.S. military bases, doing work called “military labor” (gun sagyo), and (b) they developed a strong sense of humiliation and resentment as a result of that experience. The vigorous construction of U.S. military bases began in 1950, turning the whole of Okinawa into one massive fort. The “military labor” demanded by the “construction boom” attracted a large portion of the workforce because it paid higher wages than other jobs. For example, a construction worker of the time earned twice as much as a school principal. Yet, Okinawans were paid considerably less than other workers. Mr. C, who taught at a high school before he took a job at a military base, was lured by a wage three times higher but he recalled the pay structure. “Americans were at the top of the pay scale, of course. Next were Filipinos, then
the Japanese from the mainland. We Okinawans were placed at the bottom, yet we did the hardest work.”

Their resentment seems also to have been triggered by their working conditions. Many of them remember with bitterness that “Americans had us work like slaves.” It was less the hard work than the attitude of the American bosses that they resented. Mr. N remembers, “We worked hard, but the Americans always complained about our work.” Mr. L puts it more directly: “I just didn’t like being bossed around by young GIs.” Meanwhile Americans of the time were quite oblivious of such resentments as they watched the Pulitzer prize-winning stage-play (adapted from an earlier novel) and then the immensely popular film (1956) *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, which infantilizes the Okinawans and portrays them as charming, anxious-to-please natives.

Okinawans acknowledge that the Americans as individuals treated them much better than they had expected. “Still, it was unpleasant to live under the U.S. military occupation,” summarizes Mr. D about his life in postwar Okinawa. Mr. B is more specific. “The Americans may have been nice as individuals, but politically they would immediately label us as ‘reds’ if we participated in demonstrations.”

The situation worsened as the construction boom faded. Many men began to be fired or laid-off, and there were not enough jobs for new graduates from the senior and junior high schools. Mr. P, who worked as a land surveyor at Kadena Air Base, was so incensed when he learned that many of his coworkers were going to be fired that he quit his job. “I was so angry, all I wanted at the time was to get out of Okinawa and just go anywhere.” That was when he learned about the emigration plan to Bolivia. Mr. P was typical of the men who applied. Likewise, Mr. N described his state of mind at the time he learned about the plan: “I just couldn’t stand the foreign occupation anymore.” Echoing Mr. P’s and Mr. N’s sentiments, Mr. V and Mr. L told me that they had actually wanted to go to Japan but could not get visas. All of these men jumped at the opportunity to leave Okinawa for Bolivia. They had no choice of destination. To them emigration to Bolivia simply promised them a way out of stifling Okinawa, where they had no bright prospect for their future, and a way to become an instant landowner of fifty hectares.

It was by no means a coincidence that the emigration to Bolivia was announced at that particular time. Given the labor unrest, the emigration plan was designed to “preserve the political stability” of Okinawa, as Tigner himself put it. The Americans were concerned that discontent would lead to communism:

The Okinawan people are traditionally farmers and ownership of land is one of their most cherished desires in life. Okinawa, with its rising population and decreasing areas of available land, will offer progressively less future for the farming population. Restiveness and dissatisfaction will inevitably accompany the waning prospects of land ownership and fading hopes for an adequate livelihood, particularly among the youth of Okinawa. Since Communists appeal to the youth of a nation, and with apparent success in many areas of the Communist-dominated world, the youth of Okinawa represents a potentially vulnerable element of the population. The prospects of obtaining large tracts of free land in a distant
community as afforded by an emigration program will give fresh hope to the youth and in this way serve to cope with their discontent and susceptibility to the Communists’ false promises of reward.6

The early 1950s were indeed a volatile period in which anti-U.S.-occupation sentiment was spreading. With discontent building up among Okinawans, particularly the young and vigorous, emigration functioned as a safety valve. And it worked, I thought as I listened to Mr. C, still angry when he described how his family’s farm had been posted with sign by the U.S. military reading ‘NATIVES OFF-LIMIT.’ Before leaving Okinawa, Mr. C had become an avid supporter of Senaga Kamejiro and, although not a member of the Okinawa People’s Party, would go to the political rallies and applaud Senaga’s speeches. (Senaga Kamejiro was chairman of the Okinawa People’s Party and was elected mayor of Naha in 1956. The U.S. High Commissioner was so threatened by this he removed Senaga from office the following year.) What would Mr. C have done had he stayed in Okinawa? And what would have happened in Okinawa if he and men like him had not been given an opportunity to get out?

I see a parallel function in San Juan Yapacani--another Japanese colony located about 100 miles due west of Colonia Okinawa. Its immigrants came from all over Japan, but mostly from northern Kyushu. Immigration there started in 1957, when the violent labor disputes over the closing of the coal mines still raged. This topic also needs to be further explored.

The Immigrants and Their New Lives

The Okinawan emigrants were divided into two groups for logistical reasons. The first group arrived in Bolivia in August of 1954. The second group arrived a month later. All but a few were shocked at and disappointed by the place they were going to make their home. It was covered with thick jungle, there were no adequate roads to the Uruma settlement from the railroad or anywhere else, and no bridge over the Rio Grande for access to Santa Cruz. The housing was not completed and, worst of all, there was no potable water nearby. Even the toughest men, who claim to have been so well prepared that they were neither shocked nor disappointed when they first arrived, remember the hardship of getting fresh water. They had to walk for miles to a pond to collect brackish water that was shared with wild animals. They even drank rainwater that collected in the furrows of wheel tracks. They dug a well by hand that was about eight meters deep, but the water was so salty it immediately caused diarrhea and burned the vegetables in their gardens.

The worst was yet to come. A mysterious disease spread, taking 15 lives and sending eighty-some others to their sickbeds between October 1954 and April 1955. The disease, its cause never determined, came to be called the “Uruma disease.” So isolated from any outside help, barely connected with the nearest town of Santa Cruz by bad roads made worse with the onset of the rainy season, the immigrants felt abandoned. Medical help from Santa Cruz or the Ryukyu Government or the Americans was less than adequate. In March 1955, a group of physicians--three North Americans and two Bolivians--did arrive in the Uruma Settlement, but they were more interested in learning about the disease than
in treating the sick. As soon as they took blood samples from the ill, they hurried back to Santa Cruz without offering any treatment. Mr. S remembers that the sick whose blood samples were taken were not only left untreated but were deliberately denied treatment because the doctors wanted to observe and compare them with those who had been previously treated. Some of the former got worse. “You would have been better off not seeing those doctors,” Mr. S says. His whole family except for his mother fell ill and one of his younger brothers died in December of 1954. “It devastated my parents,” he remembers.

Many of the Okinawans started to wonder aloud whether the emigration to Bolivia was a government policy to dump them in the jungle. “I have never been rid of that suspicion,” says Mr. E. Mr. C is more blunt: “I believe it was indeed a ‘thinning policy’ (mabiki seisaku). (Mabiki refers to the thinning of young plants or fruits so that the remaining ones will grow big and healthy. It is also used to refer to infanticide for the purpose of reducing the number of mouths to feed.) Other immigrants told me they were so preoccupied at the time with simply surviving they could not afford to reflect on such things. Only later, when they started reading what others in Okinawa wrote about postwar Okinawan history did they begin to think, “Ah, yes, the Bolivia immigration policy intended to dump us in the jungle.” Thus their perspective may be, to some extent, shaped by the reflection and reexamination that have been taking place in Okinawa during the last ten years or so.

To make matters worse, in February 1955, the Uruma settlement was attacked first by a terrible flood and then by a horde of rats, which spread disease even further. It turned out that the settlement site was actually located in the floodplain of the Rio Grande. The immigrants’ spirits sank still further. “Every day people were fighting. Every day I heard men talking of nothing but escape,” Mr. H said of the atmosphere in the settlement at that time.

Misfortunes struck harder at some than others. Mr. T lost his wife to the “Uruma disease” and was left to care for his four young children. “I don’t want to remember those days,” he said to me. Yet he clearly remembers the ages of his children when his wife died and tells me so without being asked: they were 1, 4, 6, and 9. The hardest part was looking after the infant, he added. Today he runs a small motorcycle parts and hardware shop that is attached to his living room, on whose wall pictures of his wife and of himself when young are hanging side by side. These are copies of their passport photos, he says. He never remarried.

Mrs. R’s husband became the fifteenth victim of the “Uruma disease.” She was heavily pregnant when she left Okinawa and had given birth to her fourth son on board ship. Caring for her infant as well as her other young children with water hard to get, food scarce, flooding that spoiled their bedding and belongings, and rats and mosquitoes by the hundreds was bad enough. Now she was left alone. What did she do? “I wished we could return to Okinawa, but I had no money. No one had that kind of money in those days. People helped me, though, in any way they could.” Three years later she went to Santa Cruz with her youngest child and worked as a live-in maid for a Japanese family, leaving her older children in others’ care. She lost one son to drowning. (In fact, more tragedies
struck the immigrant families on the uncharted rivers and bad roads than would probably have been the case had they remained in Okinawa. Of the 14 women I spoke to, three had lost sons to drowning, one to a traffic accident, and still another had a severely disabled son due to another traffic accident.) In spite of all the tragedies in her life, Mrs. R remained incredibly cheerful. “It was my destiny and couldn’t be helped (unmei dakara shikataga nai). How else could I take it, she said with a ready smile.

The remaining immigrants decided to move from the Uruma settlement site and found an alternative site by themselves, to which they moved in August 1955. They did not, however, remain at the second site. It was too small and they had problems acquiring the land. About a year later they moved again to the current site, which became their permanent home, Colonia Okinawa. The further immigration, which had been placed on hold, resumed in 1957. However, this was not the end of the Okinawan immigrants’ hardships due to unreliable rainfall, periodic floods (the one in 1968 was particularly devastating), unstable rice crops and prices, and so on. In the late 1960s there was a steady exodus of immigrants.

In 1967, the Japanese government assumed responsibility for Colonia Okinawa from the Americans, who held residual authority as the occupiers of Okinawa. Hence since 1968, Colonia Okinawa has received Japanese government aid through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), just as another Japanese community of immigrants, San Juan Yapacani, has. In the early 1970s, on the advice of JICA, Colonia Okinawa began growing cotton on a large scale, using huge, expensive machinery bought with loans. It turned out to be a disaster, due to bad weather, poor harvests, crop diseases, and bad world prices. More immigrants left for Brazil and Argentina, and a few to Peru, where they had relatives, or else they returned to Okinawa or Japan.

Why, then, have some remained? Many of them explain it as a consequence of their own decision to come to Bolivia. It was their choice, they say. Some of the first arrivals boast of their “sense of mission” (shimeikan). For others going back to Okinawa was out of the question simply because they could not face the people at home as a failure. “How could I?” asked Mr. C. “Having been selected in the very first group of emigrants, the village office hosted a grand farewell party for me.” A feisty woman, Mrs. Z, says, “It would have been too humiliating to go back without a success.”

Have those men and women with the strong will to either satisfy their ‘sense of mission’ or save face ever despaired? I asked Mr. C this while he drove me in his pickup on the bumpy, dusty road through Colonia Okinawa, along the wheat field he has given to one of his three sons. “Many times,” he answered, glancing at the golden wheat his son will harvest in a few days with a huge combine harvester. Mr. C has given each of his sons a couple of hundred hectares of farmland along with the attendant big machinery, and he still has a large parcel left for himself and his wife. A man of eloquence but no frills, he is straightforward and wastes no time on pompous claims of a ‘sense of mission.’ Did he think about moving elsewhere? “Yes.” When he could see no bright future, he sent his younger brother to Argentina to explore the possibility of moving the whole family there, as many others had done. His brother managed to set up a flower business and invited Mr.
C and his family to join him. “But my wife wanted to go back to Japan. We couldn’t agree on which country to move to. So we ended up staying here.”

Many others did not have that kind of choice. They were strapped by heavy debts and simply had no money to buy plane or even train tickets to leave Bolivia, nor relatives in another country to help them move. So they stayed on, clinging to whatever little they had, and as a consequence saved face vis-a-vis people at home.

Their situation took a turn for the better in the early 1980s, when they began to grow soy beans. The cotton growing had ended in disaster, but it forced the Okinawan immigrants to mechanize, which was essential to success in soy bean production. Acquisition of land at low prices was relatively easy then since there were many available parcels owned by fellow settlers who had left or were leaving. Now those who have remained can say with no doubt in their minds that they are glad they emigrated to Bolivia.

**Ties to Okinawa**

What do these immigrants to Bolivia think of the current situation in Okinawa? Do they care about it at all? Most of them have made at least a trip or two back to Okinawa in the last twenty years. These homecoming trips started in the latter half of the 1970s, around the time when Okinawa hosted the Ocean Expo, which attracted a large amount of capital from the Japanese mainland. If the immigrants could not afford the fare themselves, someone in the family—usually sons and/or daughters who had gone to Japan to earn money—helped pay for the expenses. Most were surprised at the prosperity they saw in Okinawa. As Mr. Y put it, “I never dreamed Okinawa would develop that much.” At the same time, many could not help but notice the impact of the U.S. military on the daily lives of Okinawans.

In addition, older immigrants listen to the NHK news daily on short wave and are fully informed of the political situation in Okinawa. They are sympathetic to their compatriots’ demand, led by Governor Ota, to reduce the number and the impact of U.S. bases in Okinawa. While I was in Bolivia, the Japanese Supreme Court was about to decide whether Governor Ota had the right to refuse to sign the land leases for the U.S. bases on behalf of the landowners. The Colonia leaders often talked about it. No one expected Governor Ota to win; therefore, no one was surprised or overtly upset about the verdict in favor of the Japanese Government. “It’s okay to lose,” said Mr. C, who had his land taken for Kadena Air Base. “He [Governor Ota] stood up to make our case and fought courageously. That itself is remarkable.”

I do not know how immigrants reacted to the result of the prefectural plebiscite on September 8, since I left Bolivia before then. I asked in the survey, “If you were living in Okinawa now, how would you vote in the referendum: ‘in favor’ or ‘against’ the reduction of the U.S. bases, or ‘don’t know?’ (The actual plebiscite asked voters only whether they were ‘in favor’ or ‘against,’ and did not provide the possibility of ‘don’t know.’) The results of my survey were similar to those in Okinawa itself. The majority (73 out of 112, or 65.2%) were in favor, 10 respondents (8.9%) were against, 24 (21.5%) didn’t know, and 5 (4.5%) did not answer the question. Among those who are in favor of base reduction,
there is a wide range of opinions as to the role of the U.S. military in East Asia. A few think the presence of the U.S. military in Okinawa is utterly useless in protecting the security of either Okinawa or Japan, but most want to see the burden of having the U.S. bases spread out and shared by all of Japan. “After all, we lost the same war, didn’t we?” says Mr. L. “So the mainland (hondo) should share the burden instead of making Okinawa bear all of it.” The heavy presence of the U.S. military makes them feel that Okinawa is still under military occupation, and “Fifty years is too long under occupation.”

Removed from their homeland, the immigrants (at least the first generation) seem to have retained certain old ways and ideas, which their compatriots in Okinawa no longer hold. The most pointed example is their attitude toward the national flag, the Rising Sun (Hinomaru). Since the Rising Sun flag was banned from any public place while they were still in Okinawa, the national flag is for the immigrants a symbol of their national unity against the American occupation. When they saw a Japanese ship with the Rising Sun displayed while they were in route to Bolivia they were overcome with emotion--they felt natsukashii (nostalgia for what they had lost). For Okinawans the 1972 reversion of Okinawa to Japan has changed what the Rising Sun flag symbolizes. But since the Bolivian immigrants left Okinawa before then, the symbolic meaning of the national flag has remained as if in a time capsule.

Their experiences with the Japanese government are also different from those of the Okinawans at home. The immigrants see the Japanese government as a benefactor of aid grants, which they appreciate since they received so little from the U.S. and Ryukyu governments. The new, modern Viru Viru airport, built with Japanese money and completed only in recent years is an example of such largesse. The Bolivian immigrants believe they owe part of their current prosperity to Japanese aid.

I was invited to four parties, big and small, during my two-week stay in Bolivia. Men would consume large quantities of alcohol, although increasingly the older men would pour themselves Coca Cola under orders from their doctors. At one of those parties I sat next to Mr. P, the host and also one of the leaders of the community. He was in a gleeful mood.

“We’ve come a long way,” he kept muttering as he poured Coca Cola into my glass, to which I responded by pouring more beer into his glass. “We used to fight at parties like this with lots to drink. Even at a wedding there were fist-fights. We were just boiling inside with anger and frustration and needed an outlet. Now that everyone’s content, we don’t fight any more. Yes, we’ve come a long way, and I’m very happy.”

This does not mean that the Okinawan community in Bolivia is trouble-free. Bolivia has just joined Mercosur, which could bring farm products duty-free from Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina--a worrisome prospect for Bolivian agriculture. There have also been land disputes of many kinds, including Bolivians filing spurious claims to land that the Okinawans have made productive. Among the Okinawan immigrants themselves there is a growing tension between the Colonia and Santa Cruz residents over education and other issues. There is also conflict over whether the Okinawans should accept native Bolivians
not just as their employees but also as neighbors and friends in their communities. These are serious issues. Nonetheless, for the first time in their lives, the Okinawan immigrants have control over their lives. They are now responsible for and have the means to decide their own destiny. Indeed, they have come a long way. As I poured beer into Mr. P’s empty glass, and we toasted, over and over, the good life the Okinawans had at long last achieved I was pleased for them but also sad that this success was gained at the price of exile. What of those who have moved to Brazil, Argentina, and Peru? What has happened to them? How are they doing now and what do they think of the current situation in Okinawa? Our research continues.


4. The 25th Anniversary of Colonia Okinawa lists 3,218 immigrants, among whom several were born on the way to Bolivia. *Uruma kara no tabidachi: Koronia Okinawa nyushoku 40-shunen kinenshi* (La historia de los 40 anos de la Colonia Okinawa) (The 40-Year History of Colonia Okinawa) lists 806 names of residents, excluding Bolivians, in Colonia as of February 1995.


7. Aniya Susumu, “A 40-Year History of Colonia Okinawa” in *Uruma kara no tabidachi* (The Departure from Uruma), pp. 84-85. This is a somewhat condensed version of a longer, handwritten manuscript. Mr. Aniya is one of the original immigrants, who was selected primarily because of his ability to record events. He has published a series of articles on the history of Colonia Okinawa in *Informativo Nikkei*, October 1995 through October 1996. I am currently in the process of transcribing his longer, handwritten manuscript about the history of Colonia Okinawa.