

Japanese Migrants in the Amazon: Their Dreams and Reality

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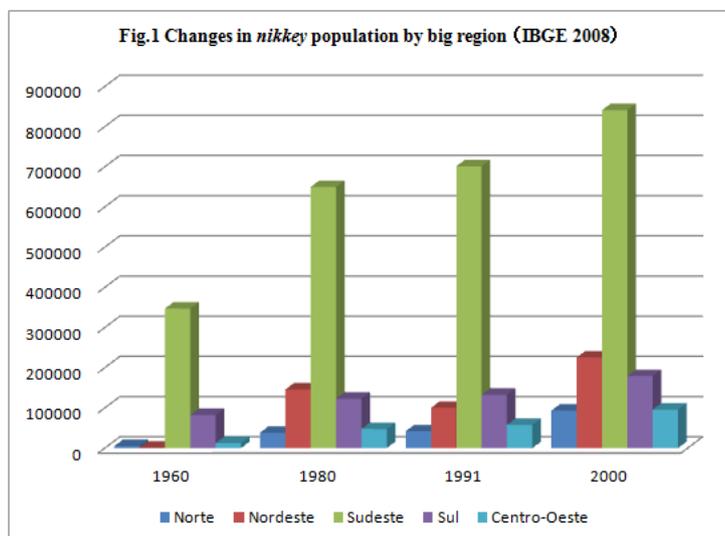
Main Works: (1) Maruyama, H. 2000. *Human aspects of desertification and poverty: Cultural ecology of Brazilian hinterland*. Tokyo: Kokon Syoin. (2) Maruyama, H. ed. 2010. *Centurial trajectory of Japanese immigrants in Brazil*. Tokyo: Akashi Syoten. (3) Maruyama, H. ed. 2011. *Pantanal: Richness and vulnerability of the world's largest wetland in the South America*. Otsu: Kaiseisha.

Abstract

There are very few studies on Japanese migrants in the Amazon. This reflects the fact that compared to São Paulo, where the first Japanese collective emigration to Brazil took place, emigration to the Amazon occurred about twenty years later and that the *nikkey* (Japanese migrants and their descendants) population there is very small (Fig.1, Norte corresponds to the Amazon). The *nikkey* population in the Amazon was 4,933 in 1960, just 1% of the total and was 93,514 in 2000, 6.7% of the total.

However, Japanese migrants in the Amazon have played an important role in the history of Japanese emigration to Brazil. The Japanese migrants in the Amazon successfully introduced organized farming to the Amazon, where the primitive hunter-gatherer economy and the slash-and-burn method of agriculture had been practiced. They also succeeded in cultivating crops such as pepper and jute, which were representative Brazilian crops. It is very important to closely examine the history and reality of Japanese emigration to the Amazon. The history of Japanese migrants in the Amazon can be divided into three periods according to their characteristics, i.e., the dawn period, the pre-war collective migration period, and the post-war collective migration period.

The dawn period, spanning from the beginning of the twentieth century until about 1925, was the period of “post-Peruvian” migrants generally called “*Peru-kudari*”. These were Japanese migrants attracted by the Amazon rubber boom from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth



century; they travelled from Peru over the Andes to gather in the basin of *Madre de Dios River* as rubber tappers (*seringueiros*). As the rubber rush subsided, they moved further downstream to the Brazilian Amazon and became the forerunners of the Japanese migrants there. They were drifters, without support from anyone, who reached the Amazon of their own volition. Wherever they landed, they made a living by selling the vegetables they cultivated. Because their

number was very small, Japanese migrant community was hardly formed, and they quickly assimilated into Brazilian society by marriage.

The pre-war collective migration period between 1925 and 1945 is a very important period in the history of Japanese emigration to the Amazon that merits special consideration. Emigration to the Amazon during this period happened because Brazil had requested Japan to rebuild the Amazonian economy, which had declined due to the rubber rush ending. Consequently, Japanese organizations of management were provided with vast extent of land at no charge based on the concession contract; the destination of collective migration was chosen based on pre-emigration surveys carried out by Japan, and preparations were made to receive the immigrants. The Japanese government and private companies also provided support for travelling to and building the migration sites. It was national policy of Japan to build collective migration sites on a large scale. Promoters of migration in this period included educational institutions and some would-be emigrants received pre-migration education. They were relatively wealthy immigrants.

However, the gap between the dreams that the migrants had before sailing and the reality they faced was beyond imagination. Moreover, because of the difficult life in the Amazon, an uncertain future, and endemic malaria, more than two-thirds of the immigrants moved to areas like São Paulo where many Japanese migrants had already settled. Successful cultivation of jute and pepper came about due to the continued investment of capital and technology from Japan and efforts made by a small number of remaining immigrants at the collective migration sites, where a large number of migrants were systematically sent. On the other hand, collective migration sites that faced shortages in capital and migrants disappeared soon because the migrants moved out.

Japanese emigration to Brazil, which ceased in 1942 due to World War II, resumed with the emigration to the Amazon after the normalization of Japan–Brazil relations in 1952, when the post-war collective migration period started. However, the emigration to the Amazon for jute production that was originally allowed by Brazil soon broke up. Japanese migrants who escaped the post-war confusion and poverty were sent to various migration sites in the Amazon that were prepared by the Brazilian government. Unlike the pre-war emigration, there were a number of issues regarding changes to the contract; it reached a point where would-be migrants refused to immigrate from the beginning. It was a very confusing time. As a result, like the pre-war immigrants, many immigrants left the migration sites quickly and more than 60 percent of immigrants left the Amazon to live in São Paulo and other areas.

As discussed, Japanese migrants came to the Amazon with a dream of how “the climate of Amazonia is not inappropriate for Japanese emigration and Japanese people can prosper in Amazonia. Rather, only the Japanese among all nations in the world can be pioneers of conquering nature in the Amazon.” The reality they faced in the Amazon was extremely tough. In the midst of the migrants dispersal, the substantial decline and collapse of the migration sites, Japanese migrants and their descendants who stayed in the Amazon, by choice or otherwise, quickly assimilated into Brazilian society through marriage and lost their Japanese language and culture. Many of them now live in cities and are engaged in non-agricultural occupations such as commerce. The blurring of their Japanese lineage and the thinning of the Japanese culture are the inevitable current of history in the Amazon. We are facing an exact moment to reconsider the basics of how to associate with *nikkey* to boost mutual understanding and relations of trust. On the day of the presentation, this will be accompanied by case studies of Japanese migrants and other detailed data.