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Amazônia: The Contribution of the Japanese

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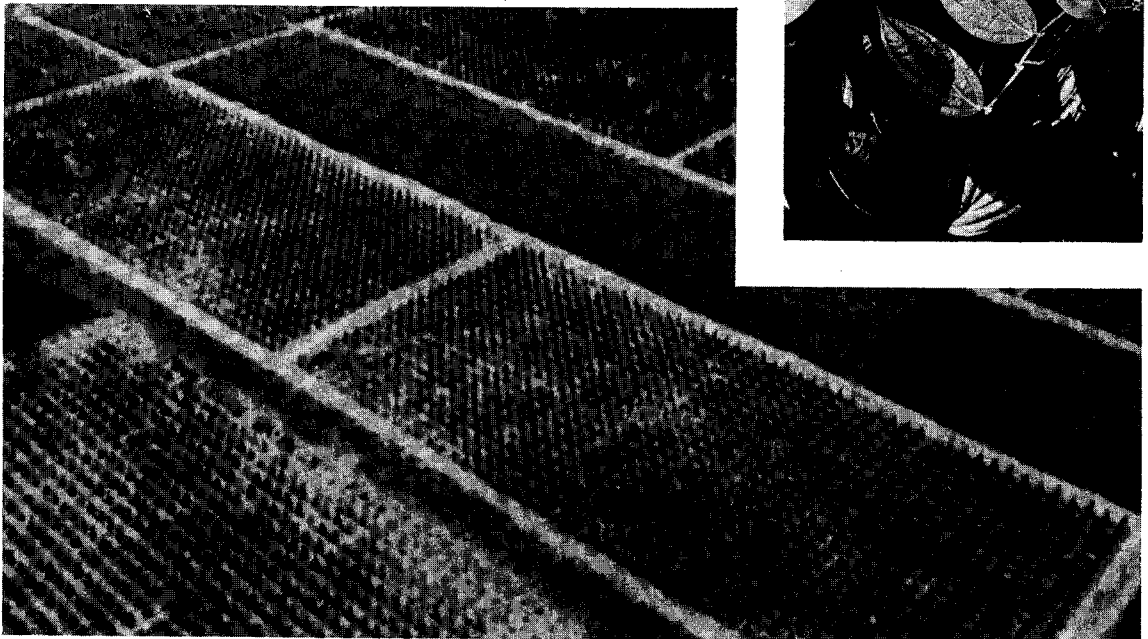
Dear Mr. Nolte:

"Here at Tomé-Açu it is only work---from 7:00 in the morning until 8:00 or 9:00 at night. Work and sleep---that's all that goes on in Tomé-Açu."

This was the lament of Moacyr---dapper young Brazilian in charge of ticket sales at the airport of the Japanese agricultural colony. I had just arrived by Cessna, a 45-minute flight southward from Belém.

Since the one flight per day comes in at 9:00 a.m. and returns to Belém at 9:20, and since there is no public lodging in Tomé-Açu, I stayed that night with Sr. and Sra. Oshikiri, he the president of the powerful cooperative that has made the colony a success. At 8:50 that evening I was tucked in under my mosquito net; at 9:00 Sr. Oshikiri went out in his pyjamas to cut the generator which provided the electricity for the household. The day had

PEPPER IN AMAZONIA



ended. The next morning, the family was up at 4:45; I joined them at 5:15 and was out in the fields with Sr. Oshikiri at 6:00 where workers were already picking the red berries from the pepper plants.

"Work and sleep---that's all that goes on in Tomé-Açu."

Had it not been so, there would be no Tomé-Açu, and Amazônia would not have black pepper which, along with jute, contributes 85% of the value of the region's commercial agriculture. This has been a colony flagellated by man and nature, a modern-day version of the story of Job.

Dateline: July 1929. The Imperial Hotel, Tokyo, Japan. Yamaji Muto, president of the colonization company KANEBO, offers an extravagant farewell dinner for 43 families about to embark for a new life in Amazônia. Hichiro Fukuhara, who had surveyed the area and helped choose the concession of 500,000 hectares, addresses the optimistic group, guaranteeing full success for the venture within five years. Euphoria reigns.

July 24, 1929. Kobe, Japan. The "Montevideu Maru", carrying 189 colonizers, sails via Hong Kong and South Africa, arriving in Rio on September 7. Since this is Brazil's independence day, there are great festivities, and the Japanese are first animated to think it is in their honor. They transfer ships and arrive in Belém nine days later. Another 16 hours by small river boat up the Rio Acará and they encounter the promise of "full success in five years"---an area of complete isolation, dense with virgin forest, ruled by insects, reptiles and animals---a tropical malaise for a temperate people---a Portuguese-speaking environment for an Oriental culture.

But, being Japanese, they set to work and cleared some land, enough to have vegetables on the Belém market by the next year---tomatoes, radishes and cabbages in a land of rice and beans. The produce rotted on the stands. The strangest innovation for the Brazilian housewife was the turnip, and until today, the Japanese is dubbed by its Portuguese name---"nabo"---a kind of negative kudo for marketing research.

Rice was first choice as the cash crop of the colony. But the cultivators soon found they had to sell their unprocessed product for a set price (8000 reis) and buy it back, milled, for over eleven times that amount (90,000 reis).

They analyzed their situation: a labor-intensive people in a tropical climate with difficult transport and a limited domestic market. Therefore, what was needed was a crop of little volume, high value and demand on the international market. The next choice was cacao, but it did not adapt to the local conditions. In 1933 Maki-nisuke Ussui arrived with 20 sprouts of black pepper---it neither succumbed nor flourished but seemed worthy of some attention.

Virgin forest still dominated the land. No lucrative crop had been found. The Japanese were still very much an alien culture in an alien land. And, in 1935 malaria struck, wiping out one-third of the families. In the first years of colonization about 400 families had arrived from Japan; by 1942, due to death and exodus, only 98 remained at Tomé-Açu.

In August 1942 a Brazilian merchant marine ship was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine, just out from Belém; Brazil declared war on the Axis the same month. In retaliation mobs stormed the streets of Belém, destroying the storage warehouse of the colony's cooperative and sacking the homes of Japanese families. Located amid wilderness some 150 miles from Belém, Tomé-Açu was turned into a retention camp not only for Japanese throughout Amazônia but also for German and Italian aliens. The colony's lands were expropriated, and it was placed under the supervision of a state agency; its inhabitants could neither leave the settlement nor market their crops. With the end of the war, only 40 families remained; they concluded that survival depended on three principles: autonomy, economic austerity and fortification of their cooperative.

BELOW. Sr. and Sra. Oshikiri in front of their home.

During these years, the pepper plants were attended, and by 1950 Tomé-Açu at last had a low-volume, high-value product with a market, first domestic and in 1956 international---these years brought the "boom of the black diamond". They also brought a new wave of immigrants from Japan---now numbering 350 families, including old-timers and newcomers.

In that he was among the original group to arrive in 1929, Sr. Oshikiri's case is not typical, but it does illustrate the rewards which came to those who persevered through the hardship years. He came alone, at 18, leaving all his family behind---"an adventure" is the reason he gives. Since he was single, he went to work at the agricultural experimental station rather than starting his own farm. The original grants were 25 hectares, but after these were expropriated, some of the farmers chose to leave, others to buy back from the Brazilian government. Sr. Oshikiri acquired 150 hectares which is dedicated largely to 20,000 pepper plants.



The Oshikiris have done well in the last two decades. Their two-story house of frame, stucco and red-tile roof is complemented by veranda and balconies. There is no lawn, but bright splashes of dahlias, marigolds and zinnias bedeck the entrance; the big window in the living room---open to the prevailing breeze---looks out over the well-groomed vegetable garden to the grove of rubber trees interspersed with tall Brazil nut trees and verdant banana and papaya trees. Alongside, a field of coffee bushes produces for the family's consumption. Through the window of my bedroom, shuttered during the day against the sun's heat, was a giant breadfruit tree.

Arriving for lunch at 11:00, I was greeted at the door by Sra. Oshikiri who provided me a pair of her small slippers for housewear. Each time I entered a home at Tomé-Açu, the shoes came off, sometimes substituted by soft ship-ship, sometimes not. There were several points of pride inside the house: an elaborate crystal chandelier, two bathrooms side by side, and within a glass shadow box a large, Japanese doll garbed in a flamboyant brocade kimona.

The pungent smell of the pepper, drying in the sun only 50 ft. away, permeated the house and its surroundings. Spread over large squares of canvas, the pepper is poured into sacks each evening and taken inside for the night. When I went to my balcony at 5:30 a.m., workers were already wheeling it out to the yard once more, dumping it into the center of the black-stained cloths and raking it out like a pie crust to lie in the day's heat. August is the dry season, and there is no risk of rain.

To reach the new land at the back end of Sr. Oshikiri's property, we first drove in his pick-up truck along a lane through fields where the pepper plants no longer matted the 8 ft. stakes which supported them, but dropped down with little foliage of brownish cast. These were the old plants which had produced about 15 years and which, furthermore, had been attacked by the foot and root rot (*Fusarium solani piperi*)---the plague of Tomé-Açu. The Japanese have combatted it for years, grafting and experimenting with different varieties; sprays would help, but they are too costly. Although the colony has slowed it, the fungus inevitably affects the plants, usually after about seven years and especially on soils of high acidity; once it is infected, the land cannot be replanted in pepper again. Sr. Oshikiri plans to plant peanuts and rice when the pepper is exhausted.

Further along, we passed through a strip of virgin forest not yet cleared because soil and terrain were not promising. However, Sr. Oshikiri expected he would have to use it within a few years if he continues to need new land for pepper.

At the back end the fields were a welter of pickers---women and men, children and adults. Families work as teams, pooling their pickings to be paid on the basis of volume. The field overseer was a young Japanese

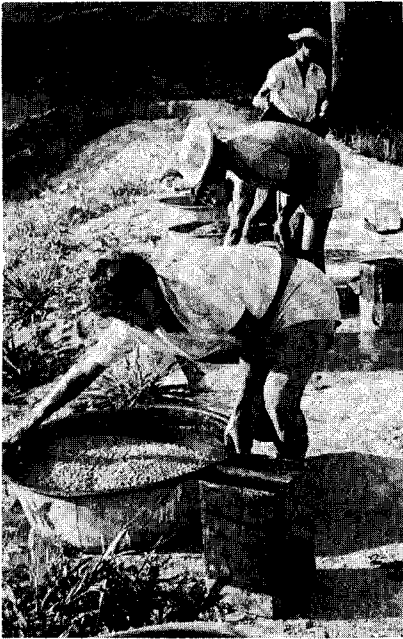


ABOVE, left and right. Members of a caboclo family picking peppers on the farm of Sr. Oshikiri.

LEFT. Raking the peppers to dry them in the sun at the colony Efigénia de Salles, near Manáus.

who pointed out the mature berries which varied in color among red, orange and green. The pickers were caboclos, transient Brazilians who are essential to this labor-intensive, seasonal crop.

Dehusked, the peppers are spread to dry if the end product is to be black pepper. If white pepper, the treatment is more laborious and time-consuming. First, the ripest peppers must be sorted out to be soaked in water for about a week. Sr. Oshikiri has dammed a small stream to form



a reservoir where the new peppers within jute sacks are submerged. With the outer hulls softened, the peppers are then dumped into tubs and tramped by foot. Finally, the now white pellets are spread to dry four or five days in the sun.

Sr. Oshikiri had, however, improved upon the primitive method, building eight concrete tanks each of which holds 3000 kilos. After eight days, a tank is opened, and the peppers flow into a mechanical dehusker. Although the original cost of the construction was considerable, it paid for itself within three years because it avoids the expenditure for the jute sacks which cost 30 cents each and rot within one season. From the original 3000 kilos of crude peppers, there is 1000 kilos yield. Sr. Oshikiri, being one of the quality producers, transforms 60% of his crop into white pepper.



Remuneration is, of course, the motivation for the extra processing. For instance, at the time I was in Tomé-Açu the U.S. and European offer for black pepper was \$485 per ton; for white pepper it was \$720. Argentina, Chile and Peru were paying \$610 and \$860. The colony produces 7000 tons---the largest shipments of black pepper going to the U.S. and Mexico, of white pepper to Argentina and Germany.

However, the producers fear another crisis may be upon them soon. Over the last three years the price of black pepper has fallen about \$100 per annum. At the current price, there is little profit due to the need and high cost of fertilizers. The prices quoted above were written on a blackboard at the headquarters of the cooperative; they were bracketed to a scribbled phrase "mercado fraco"---weak market. If the price continues to fall, ToméAçu will be plunged into depression.



Traditional and principal producer of pepper is India, followed by Indonesia, Sarawak and then Brazil---two-thirds of the latter's production coming from the one Japanese colony. India's average production is 35,000 tons, but Tomé-Açu has been told that yield and acreage have been expanded in that country to reach 50,000

tons in 1967, the extra supply pushing prices down. Since the methods of India are thought to be very primitive---"the plants grow as though wild, climbing up tree trunks"---the Japanese doubt that the increase could have been achieved so rapidly. Without rancor, Sr. Oshikiri surmised a "jôgo de comércio"---a market manipulation.

I visited the pepper farm of the Takahashi family. The two pretty, young daughters---Júlya and Neusa---showed me around and told me of their ambitions. But, they lamented that "O mercado está caindo demais"---the market is falling too much. Neusa, about 18 or 19, has a romantic longing to travel. She was charmed with my being from New York---"the most exciting city in the world" in her vision---and, amid these Amazonian tropics, she yearned to go to the mountains to ski. As it was, she went in to the town of Tomé-Açu (10,000 pop.) but once a week, driving two hours over dirt roads. The next neighbor was a mile away.

Neusa lived with her widowed mother, sister and younger brother. The father, in his early 40's, had been knifed to death in the field only two months before by a caboclo picker who had taken a sudden rage against the unarmed man. The three women and 15-year old son were carrying on, but I could not but conclude that Neusa would wait a long time for New York and skiing.

It is fertilizer that eats up the profits of pepper, but it is fertilizer that makes those profits possible. Without it, the yield would be but one kilo per plant; with heavy use of manures, grass fodder, palm fruits and commercial fertilizers, Tomé-Açu increases its average to four kilos. On the chemical fertilizers, cost per unit in Amazônia is about twice what it is in south Brazil due to shipping, freight costs, middlemen and taxes. When I commented optimistically that the new fertilizer plant in Santos should bring costs down, Sr. Oshikiri observed from experience that products imported from the U.S., Europe and Japan into Amazônia "are better and cost less than the same thing made domestically."

Buffeted by world and domestic market conditions before, the Japanese are using their experimental station to explore other crop potentials. Two young agronomists, one trained in the U.S. and one in Japan, have a series of tests running on such high-price cultivations as cloves, vanilla and other exotic plants yielding spices and medicinal oils. Always the prime considerations are minimum bulk, maximum price and international market; for instance, the current bid for cloves is twice that for pepper, almost \$1000 per ton.

Tomé-Açu is essentially an isolated experiment amid the Amazon jungle. Although initially it tried to cultivate crops which would feed into the local market, it did not succeed and now depends exclusively on one crop which meets a world demand. The mixed cooperative which has made possible the low-cost, efficient marketing is composed of 306 families, all Japanese or Nipo-Brazilian. It is open to all comers but no native Brazilian has chosen to break the barrier as yet---according to Sr. Oshikiri, because of suspicion and lack of understanding of cooperativism.

On the other hand, there are signs of integration. The Japanese farmers

employ transient laborers and local inhabitants---the huge município of Tomé-Açu, comparable to an over-sized county, has a population of 15,000 of which only 2,600 are Japanese; the município would not exist as a political unit if it were not for the pioneering efforts of the Japanese and to the one key commercial activity, the cultivation of pepper. All the leaders of the colony speak Portuguese. So does the younger generation who also sing "bossa nova" and tell Brazilian jokes. Western dress and manners have been adopted. The local city council is a mixture of Brazilian and Nipo-Brazilian---the mayor being the latter even though the Japanese are in the minority.

Almost 40 years have passed in order for Tomé-Açu to achieve its economic, social and political standing. I also visited another Japanese colony at a much earlier stage of development---called Colônia de Efigênio de Salles or, more commonly, "Kilômetro 42" because of its distance from Manaus on the road to Itacoatiara.

In 1958 the first Japanese arrived to settle on a land concession from the State of Amazonas which had been abandoned by the first colonizers from Northeast Brazil. Again they faced virgin forest, alien conditions and isolation, and again they attacked the problems straight on. Also, their first crops were failures---rubber and guaraná. The planting of rubber was imposed upon them by the Brazilian government, but after three years they abandoned the groves because they could not subsist until maturation. Guaraná did not produce well nor bring a good price. Eyeing the success of black pepper in the State of Pará, particularly Tomé-Açu, they turned to that crop and organized their cooperative. Over the decade four groups of immigrants settled---62 families totaling about 350 people.

I arrived at "Kilômetro 42" with Yasuo Takahash, director of the Manaus office of JAMIC---the semi-governmental organization of Japanese-American Migration and Colonization. When I first met him in his office, he was pushing the beads of his abacus to work out the monthly accounts; on the drive out to the colony, he told me something of his experiences and observations. He had been with JAMIC since it was created after World War II to cope with the millions of Japanese driven from their homes in Formosa, China, Manchuria, Korea, etc. Colonies had been established in Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Dominican Republic. In Brazil only ten months, he came from the Dominican Republic after three years' work there. He struck very strong contrasts between the two countries and their treatment of the Oriental colonizers. Whereas he praised Brazilians for their open-minded acceptance, he castigated the Dominicans with his Spanish vocabulary: "bravo", "listo", "engañó", "mentira"---in essence, rude, cheating, deceitful and dishonest. The indiscipline which reigned after Trujillo's assassination caused the whole colony of 600 Japanese to desist and return to Japan.

At "Kilômetro 42", Mr. Takahash served as my interpreter---his mixture of Spanish and Portuguese making it possible for him to put my Portuguese words into the Japanese that was essential to communicate with the colony's inhabitants. It is the second time in my South American experience that I spoke the language of the country and still needed an interpreter---the first with the Aymara Indians in Bolivia.



The Koba Family

Furthermore, I had to adjust quickly. At the first introduction, I put out my hand and sensed a delay in the response. I realized the local custom and from then on found myself bowing and grinning, bowing and grinning as I greeted or bid farewell to someone.

Shigeshi Koba and his family are among the more successful colonizers, coming nine years ago from Kagoshima Prefecture of Japan. Of their 20 hectares, two are devoted to guaraná, now somewhat neglected; 5000 pepper plants cover another several hectares and are the main source of income. The lower floor of their two-story house is without walls and with packed dirt floors; the front half stores farm machinery, a jeep and sacked pepper---the back half has a large kitchen including a gas stove, picnic table and running water. Sleeping quarters are on the loft-like second floor.



Sadaji Muroya and His Wife

Sadaji Muroya brought his family from Ishikawa Prefecture seven years ago. Four sons work with him on their 20 hectares; two daughters study in Manáus. Only one-story, their house too was open on all sides. The pepper plants closed in upon the --5000 of them--as did the chickens which number 1500. Unlike Tomé-Açu, aviculture is a major activity at "Kilómetro 42". The prime purpose is to procure the manure essential for the cash crop and, unlike the larger colony, this one can supply the local market without glutting it.

One of "Kilómetro 42's" problems is hyper-isolation. The new colony's economy has not yet attracted a complementary settlement of Brazilians; thus, language, dress and customs continue largely Japanese. Three Brazilian teachers commute each day by bus from Manáus, but to hold them the parents must supplement their government salaries. It is also difficult to obtain workmen, either during the harvest or for clearing forest or other chores.

Isolation is a dominant characteristic of Amazônia and describes the condition of most of the Japanese agricultural colonies, past and present. At the time of the 500,000 hectare concession at Tomé-Açu, another 500,000 hectares was granted for Japanese colonization. One of the smaller centers, with 10,000 hectares, was Vila Amazônia outside of Parintins on the Amazon River. This colony, located on a floodplain, turned immediately to jute and, as with pepper, struggled a few years to find a productive variety and technique. In 1937 the first harvest produced nine tons; in 1960---52,171 tons.

Like pepper, jute is a labor-intensive, highly-seasonal crop; one of its social advantages is that it fosters small- and medium-sized property-holdings. By today there are about 40,000 producers, concentrated largely in the State of Amazonas where it is the No. 1 export crop, contributing 34% of the the state's trade credits. The large majority of these producers are now caboclos, the natives having learned the cultivation from the colonizers, and many Japanese turning to other activities after the World War II expropriation.

Conditions accompanying the jute harvest are hardly suited for human well-being. The cutting is carried out by hand, using a sickle, while the plants are still submerged by the retreating flood. Once cut, the jute must be worked by men standing waist-deep in water, soaking and separating the fibers for a period of two to three weeks. The crude product is then transported to a factory in Manáus, Santarém or Belém where it goes through a number of processes---preparation, spinning, weaving and finishing---in order to arrive at the burlap sacks shipped around the world.

I visited a large jute factory in Manáus where I encountered a maze of strident machinery---softeners, teaser cards, drawers, cops, twistors, looms, calendars, folders, etc.---products of Belfast, Scotland. The interior of the plant, though well lit, had an atmosphere diffused by an omnipresent dust thrown off by the belabored fibers.

At the Fiação e Tecelagem da Juta, I was accompanied by the technical advisor, Antonio Ribeiro---a young Brazilian whose French father-in-law is one of the world's top consultants on jute processing. The factory consumes 275,000 tons per year and is undergoing an expansion to double its capacity. Even so, when I asked Sr. Ribeiro about the industry's impending crisis, he brought out a plastic bag, manufactured in São Paulo, which had all the appearance of a natural jute bag except for a higher sheen. Jabbing a pencil through the burlap, he broke the fibers; under the same mistreatment, the plastic continued whole.

"Plastic is so far more expensive. But we in the industry estimate we have only another five years before jute is eclipsed," concluded Sr. Ribeiro.

The two commercial crops introduced by the Japanese have come into their own only within the last two decades. Even so, their impact has been manifold. They are the major agricultural money-earners in Amazônia and have, therefore, not only brought employment for thousands but also contributed significantly to the public coffers. The Japanese have opened up new and difficult terrain on both terre-firme and floodplain. They have set an example of rational, modern cultivation and proved that, with knowledge and hard work, Amazônia can be made to produce a cash crop. Furthermore, they have contributed to the improvement of the region's health by introducing and cultivating many vegetables, now accepted by the native Brazilians. They have also proved that a people can survive and even thrive under the trying tropical conditions. Their numbers may be small, but they have made their mark in Amazônia.

Sincerely yours,



Frances M. Foland

Received in New York October 4, 1967.