



An introduction to the religious diversity among the Japanese-Brazilians in Tomé-Açu, Pará

Uma introdução à diversidade religiosa entre os nipo-brasileiros em Tomé-Açu, Pará

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Abstract: In this article I aim to give an insight into the religious diversity among the Japanese-Brazilians living in the municipality of Tomé-Açu, Pará. In order to achieve this objective, fieldwork was carried out in Tomé-Açu between September and October 2017. I interviewed fourteen people and visited religious organizations, cultural associations and museums. To establish the historical context I have, mostly, relied on the works of the scholars Alfredo K.O. Homma (2016), Philip Staniford (1973a, 1973b), Takashi Maeyama (1972, 1973), and Tomoo Handa (1987). I have compared my findings with studies carried out by scholars on other Japanese communities in Brazil. During and after my fieldwork, I have been in contact with Japanese-Brazilians who have identified themselves as Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, non-practicing Catholic, non-religious and Protestant. The article concludes that even though the Japanese-Brazilians attend a great variety of religious institutions, they only represent a minor part of the overall Japanese-Brazilian community in Tomé-Açu.

Keywords: Japanese immigrants. Tomé-Açu. Religion. Diversity.

Resumo: Este artigo oferece um panorama da diversidade religiosa entre os nipo-brasileiros do município de Tomé-Açu, Pará. Para tal, foi realizada uma pesquisa de campo em Tomé-Açu entre setembro e outubro de 2017. Entrevistei quatorze pessoas e visitei instituições religiosas, associações culturais e museus. A fim de estabelecer o contexto histórico, foram utilizados principalmente os trabalhos dos pesquisadores Alfredo K. O. Homma (2016), Philip Staniford (1973a, 1973b), Takashi Maeyama (1972, 1973) e Tomoo Handa (1987). Comparei as minhas análises com estudos feitos por acadêmicos em outras comunidades japonesas no Brasil. Durante e após meu trabalho de campo, mantive contato com nipo-brasileiros que se identificaram como budistas, católicos, cristãos, católicos não praticantes, não religiosos e protestantes. O artigo conclui que, embora os nipo-brasileiros frequentem uma grande variedade de instituições religiosas, eles representam apenas uma pequena parte da comunidade nipo-brasileira em Tomé-Açu.

Palavras-chave: Imigrantes japoneses. Tomé-Açu. Religião. Diversidade.

Introduction

Brazil is the country in the world that, outside of Japan, has the largest population of Japanese descendants. According to the Japanese foundation The Association of Nikkei & Japanese (2018), there were around 1,9 million Japanese and their descendants residing in Brazil in 2017. Estimates range from around 164,000 to 245,000 Japanese having immigrated to Brazil since the turn of the last century (Maeyama, 1973, p. 243; Homma, 2016, p. 10). Most of them came in the period before World War II.

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The Japanese population in the Amazon region within Brazil has, however, always been relatively small compared to the total Japanese population in Brazil. In 2000, it made up only 5,7% of the total with 93,514 people (Maruyama, 2013). According to the Japanese agronomist Masaaki Yamada (1999, p. 1), several researchers from Brazil, the United States and Europe have done research about Tomé-Açu, the largest and second oldest Japanese settlement in the Amazon, to learn about successful rural development. Most of the research on the Japanese and their descendants in Tomé-Açu has been centered around agriculture, and religion has usually only been mentioned in passing. The American anthropologist Philip Staniford (1973a, p. 21), for instance, who carried out his fieldwork in Tomé-Açu in the 1960s, briefly mentions, in his monograph on the political organization of Japanese immigrants, that organized religion did not form an important part of their life. At a more general level, the Japanese historian Tomoo Handa (1987, p. 725) stated that his greatest difficulty in writing his extensive book on the Japanese immigration history in Brazil was the religious aspect. It has been nine decades since the first organized Japanese immigrant group arrived in Tomé-Açu. Now it's the place that contains the third biggest Japanese colony in Brazil.

Tomé-Açu

Tomé-Açu is a municipality in the state of Pará located in the northern region of Brazil. It is a relatively thinly populated area located in a tropical rainforest climate. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) estimated that in 2020 the population would be 64 030 spread over an area of 5 145 361 km². The Legislative Assembly of Pará decided to upgrade Tomé-Açu to a municipality in 1959, and September 1 was elected as the official date for the establishment of the municipality. The municipality is located 230 km south of Belém, the capital of Pará, and it takes between three to four hours to get from Belém to Tomé-Açu by car. The municipality is called Terra da Pimenta, literally translated as the Black Pepper Land, since their economy has been largely based on black pepper, and they contributed greatly to the fact that Brazil, for a brief period in 1983, was the world's largest exporter of pepper (Margolis, 1991). The largest city in the municipality is Quatro Bocas where, according to Alberto Ke-iti Oppata, who was the president of the Associação Cultural de Tomé-Açu (ACTA) when I interviewed him on September 5 2017, there are 380 families of Japanese descent, totaling around 1,000 people.

The Japanese immigration to the Amazon region

On November 5, 1895, the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation was signed between Japan and Brazil in Paris. The treaty opened up for the possibility of formal deals on immigration between the two countries (Lesser, 2003, p. 5), and subsequently, on June 18, 1908, the first organized group of Japanese immigrants arrived at Santos, in the southeastern region of Brazil (Homma, 2016, p. 20). The introduction of Japanese immigrants into the Amazon region, even though it had been a topic addressed

between the Japanese government and the government of the state of Pará since around 1895 (Nagai, 2002, p. 11), would only occur approximately two decades later. The end of the Amazon Rubber Boom, which had caused a downgrading of agriculture and food production, led the Brazilian government to seek economic alternatives in the Amazon. Dionísio Ausier Bentes (1881–1949), then governor of Pará, had noticed the success that some of the Japanese immigrants had with farming in São Paulo, and decided to offer the Japanese economic group Kanegafuchi Bosseki Kabushiki Kaisha (Kanebo) 600,000 acres of land in Acará for Japanese immigration (Homma, 2016, pp. 32–34). The president of Kanebo at the time, Sanji Muto, founded the Japanese colonization company Nambei Takushoku Kabushiki Kaisha (Nantaku) on August 11, 1928, which was responsible for the Japanese colonization of the Amazon. Hachiro Fukuhara was elected as the company's first president. Nantaku hired Japanese immigrants, who attracted by the rubber boom had entered Brazil from Peru after the boom subsided, to help them with the preparation of the introduction of Japanese agricultural projects in the Amazon. It is believed that around 400 to 500 of these Japanese, known as Amazon River Descenders had entered Brazil by the late 1910s (Yamada, 1999, p. 132).

The Japanese government supervised the recruitment of the Japanese immigrants to the Amazon and only allowed households of farmers, whose members consisted of five to six people, aged between 15 and 60 years old, who were in good health and intended to reside permanently in Brazil (Staniford, 1973b, p. 347). On July 24, 1929, the first group of Japanese emigrants, organized by Nantaku, traveled from Kobe, Japan, with the Amazon as their destination. According to the Brazilian economist Alfredo Kingo Oyama Homma (2016, p. 24), they consisted of 43 families and eight single young men who together made up 189 people. On September 22, they arrived at Tomé-Açu, which, according to Homma (2016, p. 25), has been chosen as the official date for the Memorial Day of the Japanese immigration to the Amazon.

Between 1929 and 1938, a total of 252 households, from various parts of rural Japan, came to Tomé-Açu. However, because of illness, lack of subsequent funding and failure to discover a profitable permanent commercial culture, there were only 220 out of the 2155 Japanese immigrants left in Tomé-Açu in 1941 (Homma, 2016, p. 66). In the first four years of the immigration 51 people died from the tropical disease, malaria. The people who managed to save the money they obtained from selling surplus subsistence products, migrated to the suburbs of the city of Belém, or further south, to the State of São Paulo (Staniford, 1973b, p. 347). During World War II, however, the Brazilian federal government decided that all the immigrants belonging to the Axis powers who resided in northern Brazil were to gather in Tomé-Açu (Miyao, Yamashiro, 1992, p. 261).

In the time leading up to the war the immigrants were having to deal with restrictions as part of the assimilation policy of the Brazilian government towards foreigners. In 1936, the teaching of children under the age of 14 in a foreign language was banned and in the following year, all schools for foreign languages were closed down. In 1941, the publication of newspaper in these languages was also banned (Mori, 1992, pp. 573–574). During the war it was even stricter when the bank accounts of the immigrant were confiscated and they were not allowed to use the Japanese language in public (Shoji, Usarski, 2016, p. 282). The war, which had caused a lot of discomfort

to the Japanese immigrants in the Amazon, also ended up being the reason for their subsequent success. During the war, the pepper plantations in Malaysia, Indonesia and India, which were then the largest pepper producers, had been destroyed in favor of the production of necessary food for the Japanese troops (Homma, 2016, p. 145). The consequence was a drastic price increase on black pepper that would benefit the Japanese immigrants later. In 1933, Makinosuke Usui (1896–1993), a representative of Nantaku, had brought 20 stems of black pepper from Singapore when they made a stop there to cremate an elderly passenger who had died on board (Muto, 2010, pp. 163–164). Some of these remained in Tomé-Açu when Nantaku, in 1935, decided to withdraw itself from Tomé-Açu after a long period of great tensions with the remaining immigrants. The success of black pepper led to a period of prosperity for the Japanese colony that lasted from 1947 to 1968. As a result of that success, the agricultural cooperative *Cooperativa Agrícola Mista de Tomé-Açu (CAMTA)* was formalized on September 30, 1949, and a good part of the Brazilian workers came from the Tocantins River, and especially from the municipalities of Cametá, Baião and Mocajuba to work on the pepper plantations (Homma, 2016, p. 149). The boom of black pepper, which according to Homma (2016, p. 145) was called “the black diamond of the Amazon”, resulted in a new wave of Japanese immigrants to Tomé-Açu. Staniford (1973b, pp. 348–349) mentions that the Brazilian population in the mid-1960s was more than twice as many as the Japanese in Tomé-Açu. However, in the late 1960s, the plant disease *fusarium* caused pepper to practically be reduced to something that just was produced for its subsistence (Junior, Silva, 2010, p. 142).

The success of the black diamond had resulted in a significant increase in the Japanese population in the Amazon. From having been close to 120 families, consisting of about 500 people at the end of the war, they were now 2,300 families, with about 12,000 people, by the end of the 1970s. Immigration, on the other hand, had stagnated since 1965, with an average of only 30 people per year (Koyama, 1980, p. 21). Economic developments in Japan led to the end of emigration for economic reasons (Carvalho, 2003, p. 27). In the mid-1980s Japan experienced a shortage of labor, especially unskilled labor, in all industrial sectors. Meanwhile Brazil, which between 1964 and 1985 was under a military dictatorship, entered a long economic crisis from 1978 to 1982 (Yamada, 1999, p. 309). This led to a reverse immigration, known as the *dekassegui* phenomenon, from the Japanese term translated to working away from home, where more than 330,000 Japanese descendants moved to Japan to work (Homma, 2016, p. 10). That is almost 100,000 more than their ancestors who had emigrated to Brazil. According to the Han-Amazonia Nippaku Kyokai, there were, by 1992, about 2,015 *dekassegui* people from the Amazon in Japan, of which 350 came from Tomé-Açu (Yamada, 1999, pp. 312–313).

Religion among the Japanese in the pre-war time

The Japanese anthropologist Takashi Maeyama (1972, p. 152) states that although many Japanese came to Brazil before the war, there was “hardly any organized religious

activity among immigrants until around 1950, with the exception of Catholicism, the quasi-national religion in Brazil". Even though there were obstacles that prevented the development of institutional religion among the Japanese immigrants in the pre-war time, religion was mobilized through non-institutional channels like prayer groups, religious practices and representations present in cemeteries (André, 2011). According to the Buddhist monk Hajime Yamada, the last remaining immigrant of the first group that came to Tomé-Açu, there was so much work to be done in the early years of the immigration that they did not even have time to take Sunday off (Junior, Silva, 2010, p. 129). This seems to reflect the situation among the Japanese immigrants in the states of São Paulo and Paraná. The Buddhist monk Tomojiro Ibaragi, who was aboard the first Japanese migrant's ship to Brazil with the intention of spreading the Buddhist Honmon Butsuryū-shū lineage, also claimed that because of the long working hours there were no favorable circumstances for converting others (Nakamaki, 2003).

In an interview with Yamada, on October 5th 2017, he claimed that during this period there was no religion in the colony and that it was his father, Yoshiichi Yamada, because of his interest in Shin Buddhism and his experiences from Japan, who conducted funeral ceremonies for the deceased. Mário Hirofumi Kajiwara, the head minister of the main temple of Jōdo Shinshū Honpa Hongwanji in São Paulo, confirmed this when he, in an interview on December 16, 2018, translated a page about the history of the Buddhist temple in Tomé-Açu from a Japanese book that summarizes the Buddhist school Jōdo Shinshū Honpa Hongwanji's 60 years missionary work in Brazil. The Pure Land Buddhism has been the dominant Buddhist tradition in Brazil because the vast majority of the Japanese immigrants were born in rural areas, in regions where this tradition has traditionally been strong (Handa, 1987, p. 483). The book says that the story of the temple starts with the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants, and especially Yoshiichi Yamada, in 1929. Kajiwara says that Yoshiichi was not a monk, but as he had some knowledge about Buddhism and its practices and readings of texts, he most likely acted as a substitute monk (*bōzu gawari*). Burials and religious rituals were improvised during the first period of the Japanese immigration in Brazil, as there were no religious figures to conduct them, and one had to ask people who had some knowledge about how to do them (Shoji, Usarski, 2016, p. 280). These lay monks, in certain regions of the country, gained significant importance in meeting the spiritual needs of the immigrants who didn't have religious specialists that could mediate the universe of the living and the dead (André, Luiz, 2018, p. 805). Besides the heavy work load and the lack of religious specialists, another obstacle for the organized religious activity among the immigrants was the policies implemented towards such activity, by both countries' governments.

The Japanese government had prohibited missionaries, with the exception of Catholic priests, to travel to Brazil from 1918 until the end of World War II. The Japanese anthropologist Takashi Maeyama (1972, p. 162) argues that the reason for that policy to remain in effect for such a long time, without any protests, must have been in the fact that very few immigrants were interested in religious activities while residing in Brazil. In Brazil, especially from the 1930s, the immigrants were facing restrictions implemented by the Brazilian government as part of their nationalistic policy

(Mori, 1992, p. 573). According to the Brazilian religious studies scholar Antonio Genivaldo Cordeiro de Oliveira (2019, p. 31) there were arrangements between the Apostolic Nunciature to Brazil and the Japanese Embassy in Rio de Janeiro regarding immigration requirements. Oliveira refers to a letter, signed by the German Catholic priest Lourenço Hubbauer, where it says that the Japanese who are emigrating to Brazil should be informed in Japan that Brazil is a Catholic country and that they, therefore, shouldn't do anything that could offend the country's Catholics. It says further that the Japanese government, to avoid friction, shouldn't allow "Buddhist monks and preachers of Japanese sects" come to Brazil. The Brazilian sociologist Oliveira Vianna, who strongly opposed the Japanese immigration to Brazil, published an article in 1932 where he identified the Japanese as "sulfur: insoluble" (de Oliveira, 2019, p. 30). He based his article on a study by the American sociologist Bloom Wessel about the assimilation of the different ethnicities that immigrated to New London, where the Japanese were identified as "not able to assimilate", and religion was thought to be one of the major reasons for this apparent impossibility. For the sake of a better acceptance of the immigrants by the Brazilian society, the Japanese government didn't just suggest that they should convert to Catholicism, but they also partially financed this proselytizing work on the immigrants (André, 2011, p. 104). Among other things, a part of the financial support went to the maintenance of a priest named Yamanaka in Kobe, from the 1920s, to provide conditions for immigrants to have a first contact with Christianity before leaving to Brazil.

The Catholic Church itself was invested in the project of bringing Catholicism to the so-called Japanese "pagans" (André, 2011, p. 103). According to Handa (1987, p. 734) it was the previously mentioned Catholic priest Lourenço Hubbauer that, in 1919, initiated the preaching of Catholicism among the Japanese immigrants in Brazil. Four years later, in 1923, the 59-year-old Japanese Catholic priest, Domingos Nakamura, was sent to Brazil to provide religious assistance to the Catholic Japanese immigrants who had traveled there. The Catholic Japanese-Brazilian theologian Tetuo Fugita (2008, p. 78) claims that it was with his arrival that Catholic evangelism really started among the Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Brazil. Nakamura is regarded by many Japanese-Brazilians as the Apostle of the Japanese community in Brazil, and some even consider him as a saint (Shoji, 2008, p. 29). Whether any of these missionary initiatives, which started in São Paulo, reached Pará is unclear, but in an interview with the late Akira Nagai, author and native resident of Tomé-Açu, conducted on April 4, 2018, he says that Catholicism was introduced to the Japanese immigrants, and especially to the children, through the Brazilian teachers who were all Catholic. Nagai (2002, p. 12) says that his family came to Tomé-Açu in 1935, and he was born two years later. He started school when he was five years old and, in his own words, began to follow the "Christian religion" as he learned Portuguese. One of the days of the week at school was, according to him, devoted to religion. Nagai further states that since there was no church in Tomé-Açu, from time to time there were Catholic priests sent there from Belém, who would then perform sacraments such as weddings and baptisms.

Religion among the Japanese in the post-war time

The arrival of new immigrants after the war led to the emergence of a series of small Shinto shrines, *jinja*, in the states of Pará, the Amazon and Mato Grosso (Shoji, Usarski, 2016, pp. 282–283). A survey conducted in the 1950s on the religious situation among Japanese immigrants in the Amazon region showed, however, that 78,3% of the houses did not have a Shinto altar, and 7,9% of those who had altars didn't perform any kind of worship. 41,1% of the houses did not have Buddhist altars, and 6,8% of those who had did not carry out any Buddhist practices. It is also mentioned that the ancestral cult was practiced by nearly half of the households in the Amazon region (Mori, 1992, pp. 580–581). However, there is not necessarily any conflict in having different religions developed in the same residence among the Japanese-Brazilians. As the historian Richard Gonçalves André (2016, p. 466) mentions, there are cases where the Buddhist and Shintoist altars share the same space, and it is not impossible, according to him, that there was a convergence between these altars and Catholic objects at the same time, without it causing any negative impact on the practitioners. At funerals, flowers and candles were used along with Japanese incense and both the Catholic and the Buddhist rosary were placed in the coffin (Carvalho, 2003, p. 16). Handa (1987, p. 725) states that the religious life of the Japanese has traditionally included “ancestral cult” and “the cultivation of kami in society”. In the traditional family institution, known as *ie*, the ancestral cult has been a function attributed to the heir, usually the firstborn, and most of the Japanese immigrant were non-heirs leaving the religious obligations to their older brothers when they came to Brazil.

Handa (1987, p. 735) believes that religion only began to become successful among Japanese immigrants after the war, when the first second-generation immigrants (*nisei*) had grown into adults, and the first-generation immigrants (*issei*) saw themselves committed to staying in Brazil forever. Although, in the 1930s, the Japanese immigrants had been talking about settling permanently in Brazil, in the second half of the 1940s, after the Japanese defeat, this idea began to crystallize among the majority of them (Mori, 1992, p. 577). Maeyama (1973, p. 260) argues that this led to an important change in consciousness of the family in that those who decided to live permanently in Brazil began to identify themselves as the ancestor of the family. Thus, the ancestral cult and the traditional family institution could continue in Brazil, and they no longer depended on traveling to Japan to cultivate their ancestors. They followed the Japanese family system where the eldest son inherits the household property as well as the responsibilities of helping the family with the agriculture, while the younger siblings, with the economic success of black pepper, were sent to Belém to study at the Catholic universities. In an interview with Shota Tokuhashi on October 18, 2017, a native of Tomé-Açu, he said that he studied for six years at a Catholic school in Belém, belonging to the Catholic Order of Salesians, where they attended mass almost every day. The Japanese anthropologist Koichi Mori (1992, p. 577) believes that this division, which was specific to the 1950s, led the youngest siblings to develop a stronger connection to the Brazilian culture, and thus Catholicism. The elders, on the other hand, had a stronger connection with the Japanese culture and religions of Japanese origin.

The emergence of religious organizations in Tomé-Açu

In the 1950s, almost all Buddhist schools began their systematic work of proselytism in Brazil. Kajiwara says that the next step in the history of the Buddhist temple in Tomé-Açu was in May 1954, when the twenty-third Patriarch of Jôdo Shinshû Nishi Hongwanji came to Tomé-Açu. He was officially the first patriarch to visit Brazil. In connection with the visit a Buddhist ceremony (*oficio*) was held in memory of the deceased pioneers. According to Yamada, the patriarch asked the locals if they could set up a temple since he couldn't find anyone when he was there. Yamada says that his father invited his friends, and each of them contributed something, and they ended up building a barrack that served as a temporary temple. Kajiwara says that the visit from the patriarch led to the formation of a group of people who followed the teachings of this Buddhist school, and an association called Hôshakô was formed. An association he claims was aimed at repaying their gratitude to the Buddha. The first president of the association was Yoshiichi Yamada, and in 1971 he donated a tract of land for a temple to be built. Money was collected by the locals, and in 1982 the current temple (Photo 1) was inaugurated, which according to Kajiwara is also considered to be the official date for the founding of the temple.

Photo 1 – Templo Honpa Hongwanji de Tomé-Açu.



Source: ACTA.

In Tomé-Açu, religious organizations began to establish themselves in the 1960s. The economic progress that black pepper brought to Tomé-Açu laid the foundation for the Catholic church to be built. The Japanese immigrants saw themselves in need of bringing in more labor to meet the growing demand for black pepper. Therefore, Brazilians came from several areas in the State of Pará, but mainly from the municipality of Cametá, to work on the plantations. According to a reportage on the church's history, made by the Catholic Brazilian reporter Adailton Medeiros (2012) in the occasion of the inauguration of the renovation of the Church, a group of Catholics among these Brazilians began, in the early 1950s, to gather every Sunday to hold a mass in a shed. Medeiros says that the board of CAMTA noticed this and decided to donate an area for the construction of a Catholic church. In the early 1960s, the Japanese and their descendants, along with Brazilians, began the construction of the church. Hajime Yamada says, in the reportage, that the church was given the name São Francisco Xavier, because Francis Xavier was the first Catholic priest to have been to Japan.

Photo 2 – Igreja Matriz São Francisco Xavier in Quatro Bocas



Source: Author, 2017.

Staniford (1973a, p. 21), who was there when the construction of the church was happening, mentions that some of the Japanese who contributed to the construction pointed out that this symbolized their commitment to Brazilian life. Igreja Matriz São Francisco Xavier (Photo 2) is located in the center of the city of Quatro Bocas, in Tomé-Açu, and belongs to the Diocese of Abaetetuba.

In 1968 the first Protestant church in Tomé-Açu, Assembleia de Deus, was founded. Due to intensified activities in Brazil, the so-called Japanese New Religions¹ began to

¹ The term came into use among scholars in the 1950s, and the second half of the 19th century is considered the preferred starting point by many students of the so-called Japanese New Religions (Clarke, 1994, pp. 2–3).

present themselves as an alternative option for the Japanese immigrants and their descendants after the war (Shoji, Usarski, 2016, p. 282). Their focus was initially only on the Japanese-Brazilian community (Watanabe, 2008, p. 116). The Professor of Law, Tsuguo Koyama, expressed a concern for cultural assimilation among the Japanese immigrants in the Amazon in an article from 1980. He points out that the most positive factor in the preservation of the colony has been the religions that have provided opportunities for the Japanese to gather and communicate in Japanese. He particularly highlights the so-called Japanese New Religions, such as Seicho-no-Ie, Perfect Liberty, Soka Gakkai, and so on, which he claims had an extraordinary spread in the 1970s, coinciding with the colonial economic instability and crisis. Koyama (1980, p. 26) claims that these religions were so popular that over half of the Amazon's Japanese population belonged to them. In March 1974, the so-called Japanese New Religion Sukyo Mahikari was established in Brazil (Mori, 1992, p. 585). Ivone Takaki, the person who is responsible for Sukyo Mahikari in Tomé-Açu, told me, in an interview on April 11, 2018, that Mahikari was introduced there in 1970 through Machie Seki, a resident of Tomé-Açu who had attended a 3-day seminar in São Paulo. Their headquarters is located in a house in front of the Buddhist temple.

In the late 1980s, the Protestant church Igreja Cristã Evangélica da Amazônia (ICEA), which has a specific focus on the evangelization of Japanese-Brazilians, was inaugurated in Tomé-Açu. ICEA was founded in 1969 by Hitoshi and Kathleen Hisako Yamada. The Yamada couple are both Japanese-Americans, who at one point decided to become missionaries for Japanese residents in Brazil. According to Kathleen's biography (n.d.), the 27-year-old Japanese-Canadian missionary, Anne Uchida, arrived in Belém in 1964 to carry out missionary work among Japanese immigrants. Kathleen claims that Uchida was the one who started the missionary work among Japanese immigrants scattered around the state of Pará. On December 7, 1967, when Uchida had returned to Canada for one year, Hitoshi and Kathleen traveled to Belém. In 1969 their congregation had grown large enough to organize itself in a church, and ICEA (Amazon Fukuin Kirisuto Kyokai) was, according to Hitoshi's biography (2005), the first Japanese Protestant church established in the Amazon region. After ten years as a priest, Hitoshi left the priesthood to another priest, while he and Kathleen moved to Santa Izabel, about 40 km from Belém, to build a new church there. Hitoshi claims that, during their nine years in Santa Izabel, the children and the younger ones were more receptive to the gospel, while the adults were more reserved, and many of them participated in the so-called Japanese New Religion Seicho-no-Ie. In 1985 they bought a large property in Tomé-Açu, near the city center, and three years later they left the church in Santa Izabel to another married couple and moved to Quatro Bocas. There they started a Bible school and taught English. They also conducted camp school, picnics, excursions to bathing places, ceramics and cooking lessons. In 1999, after spending eleven years in Tomé-Açu, the couple retired and moved back to the United States. The missionary work was then handed over to another Japanese Protestant church, Igreja Evangélica Holiness do Brasil (Holiness), which also had their focus on the evangelization of the Japanese-Brazilians. In an interview with the Japanese Brazilian Protestant Cláudia Miyake, on April 10, 2018, she explained that Holiness, after five years, decided to send

the priest to another place, and the church remained without a priest. The place was then used as a Christian school for kindergarten students under Miyake's leadership.

In December 2016, the minister Milton J. S. Coelho took over the work with ICEA. He graduated as a minister from the school Palavra da Vida and worked for a year as an apprentice at ICEA before officially taking over the position as a minister at the church. Coelho has no Japanese roots, but he is married to a Japanese-Brazilian, with whom he has a son and a daughter. In an interview I had with him on September 29, 2017, he told me that their focus is on reviving the church to the way it was with the Yamada couple, and that it needs to be envisaged with the aim it originally had in Hitoshi's era, which was to reach Japanese-Brazilians. In a leaflet given to new members of the church it says that their mission, based on Matthew 20, p. 19-20, is "to bring non-Christians into a personal encounter with Christ and to convert them into true and rewarding followers", while their vision is "to reach primarily Japanese-Brazilians in the region".

The current situation for religion among the Japanese in Tomé-Açu

In connection with the celebration of the 90th anniversary of the Japanese immigration to Tomé-Açu and the Buddhist ritual Bon-Odori, a large *torii* – a portal marking the entrance to a shinto shrine – was set up at the entrance to the Cultural Association. In addition, the Buddhist monk Mário Hirofumi Kajiwara came all the way from São Paulo to conduct a Buddhist memorial service in the memory of the pioneers of Tomé-Açu. In an interview with the Brazilian TV channel SBT Tomé-Açu (2019a) Kajiwara remarks that this opportunity to not only celebrate 90 years of immigration, but also to be able to pay tribute to the deeds of their ancestors, makes it possible to take back the important values of Buddhism, the religiosity that their ancestors brought from Japan, which they now are increasingly losing. There is a general consensus among the people I interviewed, which only represent a few people's particular perspectives, that religion almost has no influence among the Japanese-Brazilian community today, except among some of the elders. This is something that, at least in terms of religious participation, can be witnessed by the elderly age group that, for instance, participate in the Buddhist temple (Photo 3), and the general lack of Japanese-Brazilians participating in other religious institutions. According to the religious studies scholar Frank Usarski (2002, p. 19), there is a generation conflict in the temples of Japanese Buddhist institutions, which are rooted in their ethnic environments. He points out that this became evident in the late 1950s, when the number of Buddhists among the Japanese immigrants were merely 44,5%, from having been over 98% in the time before the war. Whereas 70,6% of the immigrants born in Japan still felt committed to their traditional religion in 1958, only 29,9% of the second generation and 19% of the third felt the same. The Buddhist temple Honpa Hongwanji in Londrina is facing the same challenges as the one in Tomé-Açu with a small amount of the younger generations participating and, the first- and second-generation members progressively dying (André, Luiz, 2018, p. 806).

Photo 3 – Buddhist ceremony in the temple with a majority of elderly participants

Source: ACTA.

Kouji Suzuki, who officially took over the job as the monk of the Buddhist temple in 2013, told me, during an interview on October 18, 2017, that there are not as many Japanese-Brazilians as he would like that attend their gatherings. The Buddhist school present in Tomé-Açu, Jôdo Shinshû Honpa Hongwanji, is the second strongest Buddhist group, only behind Soka Gakkai, with 57 temples among the approximately 400 Buddhist institutions in Brazil (Shoji, Usarski, 2019, p. 228). Nonetheless, it is one of the least integrated Buddhist groups in the Brazilian society. In 2002, after existing for 50 years in Brazil, 98% of the members were of Japanese origin (Usarski, 2002, p. 16). It hasn't been able to transcend ethnic boundaries and attract a notable number of non-Japanese descendants. In general, Buddhist groups that offer meditative practices, in contrast to institutions belonging to the Pure Land Buddhism, have been able to attract Brazilians without Japanese descent (Usarski, 2002, p. 17). Kouji says that every first and third Saturday of the month, from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m., they have a meeting in the temple where they study dharma and sutra, but it is usually the elders who attend. He expresses a concern for the future as the younger generation doesn't seem to have much interest in Buddhism, but he emphasizes that they do not engage in active proselytization. He points out that it's mostly in funerals that the Japanese-Brazilians come to the temple. The religious studies scholars Rafael Shoji and Frank Usarski (2019, p. 231) mention that one of the major problems that ethnic temples

have been confronted with during the last decades is exactly the growing amount of deconversion among the younger generations of families with a Japanese immigration background.

Márcio Kato, who moved to Tomé-Açu in 2007 to work as a doctor, is by some considered to possibly be the next monk. Being only in his 40s he is seen upon as the person that can bring Buddhism through the next generations. In an interview conducted with him on October 10, 2017, he expresses the same concerns as Kouji about the lack of interest for Buddhism among the youth in Tomé-Açu. He thinks that if there doesn't come anyone to pass on what Buddhism is, then "the tendency is that it becomes a place without 'religious grounds'. As if it was a tradition, as it is with Bon-Odori, which one does without knowing what it is one does". Bon-Odori, he argues, happen because it has to happen every year, but no one knows its significance. Kato says he believes that, when it comes to Bon-Odori in Tomé-Açu, "it is practically about the dance, about the presentation of the dance to the audience. One doesn't explain the dance, it is a theatrical attraction that has a meaning that the people do not know". Kouji also claims that most of the Japanese-Brazilians, and Brazilians, who participate in Bon-Odori, most likely do not know its meaning. The historians Richard Gonçalves André and Leonardo Henrique Luiz (2018, p. 814) mention, in their article about the Bon-Odori ritual at the Honpa Honganji Temple in Londrina, that the participants apparently do not pay attention to the mortuary character that is present throughout the ceremony. Even though it is the most popular event of the temple, most of the participants, with a considerable presence of young descendants and non-descendants, do not return to the temple on other occasions and do not become followers of the Buddhist school. In Tomé-Açu it is the cultural association ACTA, and not the Buddhist temple, that has, since its foundations, been responsible for Bon-Odori (Aihara, 2008, p. 161). On July 20, 2019, the 16th edition of Bon-Odori in Tomé-Açu, took place outside ACTA's building. In a reportage by SBT (2019b) about the ritual, the reporter Oziene Barbalho claims that Bon-Odori in Tomé-Açu "is the dance that honors the spirit of the deceased, but which today has become a traditional summer dance, which has increasingly lost its religious significance, and has become a symbol of both entertainment and fellowship between people". In his study about the Japanese-Brazilians in Pereira Barreto, São Paulo, the Brazilian sociologist Marcelo Alario Ennes (2001) asserts that Bon-Odori represents a fundamental moment for the affirmation of the Japanese colony within the city. In the same way, even if the ritual might not have a religious significance for the participants in Tomé-Açu, it does, however, contribute to the maintenance and confirmation of the Japanese identity among the Japanese-Brazilians and the non-descendants there. The current president of ACTA, Silvio Shibata, says, in the reportage mentioned above that Bon-Odori, among other things, is a way for them to continue spreading their culture and bringing their roots back.

Kato claims that the elders of the Japanese-Brazilian community do not have the habit of passing on knowledge about religion to their children, which makes it difficult to transfer the teachings of Buddhism. Even though many have the Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) in their house, he says that every time a monk comes from outside, there is always a Japanese-Brazilian who asks "what can I do to preserve the *butsudan*, what

should I do with the rice I put there, when do I light the candle, when do I need to clean it?”. The Japanese-Brazilian physiotherapist, Tatyana Tokuhashi, told me, in an interview on October 18, 2017, that she only became curious about Buddhism after her grandfather died when she was 15 years old. In the funeral ceremony in the Buddhist temple, she had been told by the monks that he was very important to the Buddhist community. But during his lifetime, she was never present during the periods in which he performed his Buddhist rituals, so she had no memories of him as a person engaged in Buddhism. Besides the difficulty of transferring the religion through generations, both Kato and Kouji mention that the language is another problem. Since less and less of the newer generation can speak Japanese, and the ceremonies are still being performed in Japanese, there are fewer people who understand what is being said. This is an issue that one could already recognize in 1969 when the survey carried out by the Japanese Colony Census Commission showed a decline in the number of Japanese speakers, which was directly proportional to the decrease in the number of followers of Japanese religions and inversely proportional to the growth of Japanese-Brazilians following “Western” religions, in particular Catholicism (André, Luiz, 2018, pp. 806–807).

As for the Catholic Church, Japanese-Brazilian Catholic Lucyana Tokuhashi told me that when there are many Japanese-Brazilians at the mass on Sunday evening they add up to around ten to twelve people. When I attended the morning mass on Sunday, I only noticed three Japanese-Brazilians. According to Mauro Jun Matsuzaki, the secretary-general of ACTA, it is common for the Japanese-Brazilians, and Brazilians, to gather early on Sundays to play baseball, or golf, and eat food together. Minister Milton J. S. Coelho of the Protestant Church ICEA told me that he has organized the times for his church services according to when the Japanese-Brazilians have time. On Sundays, he has, therefore, chosen to conduct the worship services from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m., so that those who engage in activities also will have the opportunity to participate. Coelho says he has twelve people whom he disciplines, half of whom are Japanese-Brazilians. According to him, more than half of the participants in the worship service and Bible school are Japanese-Brazilians. Coelho says that some of them who participate today are the children of those who participated in the period when Yamada was a priest. He says he wants the church to be a place where Japanese-Brazilians can feel welcome, and they are planning to have Japanese lessons there. In the room where the services are held there is a bookshelf filled with books in Japanese. Among the books are the testament in Japanese, children’s book on the Bible in Japanese and a manga version of the Bible. In the biggest Protestant church in Tomé-Açu, Assembleia de Deus, with 28 temples and over 324 congregations, there are only four Japanese-Brazilian families who are members of the church, according to the pastor presidente of the main temple, Joazi Gomes dos Passos, whom I interviewed on September 19, 2017.

Final considerations

The objective of this article has been to throw light on the Japanese immigrants and their descendant’s religious participation in the Amazon region. I have compared my

findings with studies carried out by scholars on other Japanese communities in Brazil. This has, among other things, shown that the Buddhist temple in Tomé-Açu is facing the same challenges as the Honpa Honganji temple in Londrina with the decreasing number of participants among the younger generations. The temple in Londrina has tried to respond to this problem with the usage of Catholic and Japanese pop music in their Bon-Odori ritual (André, Luiz, 2018, p. 813), while Márcio Kato has, in November 2020, opened an Instagram account for the Buddhist temple in Tomé-Açu where he, so far, has published videos with explanations of Buddhist concepts and practices. The Japanese-Brazilians I have been in contact with, in Tomé-Açu, have identified themselves as Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, non-practicing Catholic, non-religious and Protestant. It is however not uncommon to observe multiple religious belonging among a lot of the Japanese-Brazilians in qualitative research (Shoji, 2017, p. 181). Even though the Japanese-Brazilians attend a great variety of religious institutions, they only represent a minor part of the overall Japanese-Brazilian community in Tomé-Açu. This does not, however, mean that Japanese-Brazilians in the Amazon region are indifferent towards religion. There is a need for more research on the religiosity of Japanese-Brazilians in Tomé-Açu, and a next step could be to look at non-institutional forms of religiosity among them. Because religion, as Richard Gonçalves André (2011, p. 109) so nicely puts it, “is not just an autonomous institutional apparatus, but a set of representations and practices built by thinking individuals who represent themselves and society through a series of cultural repertoires considered sacred in certain historical situations”.

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Recebido em: 30/03/2020

Aprovado em: 07/02/2021

Conflito de interesses: Não declarado pelo autor.

Este artigo foi avaliado e aceito por dois pareceristas diferentes.

Editor: Antonio Genivaldo C. de Oliveira