

Brazilian Diplomacy before and during the Early Phase of Japanese Immigration (1897–1942)

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This chapter aims at demonstrating that the analysis of the diplomatic documentation preserved under the auspices of the Historical Archive of Itamaraty enables us to formulate hypotheses concerning official Brazilian imagery of Japan and the Japanese people between 1897 and 1942. The period under consideration here began with the establishment of the Legation of Brazil in Tokyo and ended with the rupture of diplomatic relations between Brazil and Japan in the context of the Second World War.

The collection of documents, telegrams, and dispatches issued and received by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides us with resources to establish the movements of Brazilian diplomacy in order to influence the political “chess game” in which the issue of the Japanese immigration to Brazil was one major part. Such movements took place not only at the moments of critical impact on the subject, as in the situation regarding the anti-Japanese amendments presented during the Constitution Act 1934, but also during times when “normality” prevailed in the relations between the two nations.

I have opted not to make a deep study on the Constitution Act 1934 or the role of Itamaraty in the debates over this act, as there are already a number of academic papers that have explored this issue.¹ However, I will point out that *it has not been only in the situation of constitutional revision* that our diplomacy was decisive.

First of all, it is important to note that, although the imagery of Japan had already been present even before June 18, 1908, when the 781 pioneers aboard the *Kasato-maru* arrived in Santos, the effective beginning of the Japanese immigration would evidence and consolidate the images and stereotypes around those foreigners. What did those images consist of?

From the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Brazilians gleaned information on Japan primarily through the filter of travel literature produced by Europeans who visited the Rising Sun Empire after Japanese ports reopened to trade with the West following the signing of a treaty with the United States in 1854. References to the mysterious land of cherry trees, geishas, and samurais fostered the phenomenon called *japonisme*. The Japanese archipelago emerged as an exotic and preserved territory incomparable to the Western world.

A fever for Japan was spread, therefore, by travelers’ reports or, again, through the activity of collectors attracted by prints, lacquerware, sculptures, porcelain, screen paintings, and other typically Japanese objects. In addition to the original side of the empire, other circumstances contributed to the making of a national imagery of Japan: its isolation, which had provided Japanese political, cultural and racial homogeneity, made Japan seem unique, and there was widespread admiration for the rapid Japanese modernization as well as the military victories over China (1895)

and especially over Russia (1905).²

Effectively, the Brazilian elite had the Japanese case as a model for the republican regime recently established. It was, however, a contradictory and ambiguous model, especially when the hypothesis of Japanese workforce for coffee farming was put forth. Such ambiguity was exactly due to the racial theories that held sway in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, which obtained wide acceptance among Brazil's intelligentsia. Those who held political power were favorable to the progressive whitening of the population, through the encouragement of the European immigration. The "purification" of the Brazilian race was taken as a *sine qua non* condition for Brazil's attaining recognition as one of the modern and developed nations.

Thus, the definition of ethnic groups which could contribute to the national culture was considered essential by our elite for the role Brazil would assume before the so-called civilized world. The "thinking of the nation" in terms of race was originated in the formation of the Brazilian republic, ruled by liberal institutions, imported from the U.S.A. and Europe, and the maintenance of oligarchic values and the power in the hands of the agricultural elite, as demonstrated in studies by Elias Tomé Saliba³ and Roberto Schwarz.⁴

Hence the hypothesis of importing Japanese workforce assumed the insertion of Mongol blood in a melting-pot which had already been considered compromised by "inferior" races—the Negro and indigenous. After the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the exclusion of the Negro in the free work system, the coffee oligarchy began to encourage European immigration, particularly by Italian settlers. Nevertheless, the instability verified during the permanence of those workers on the farms and the uprisings caused by exploitation and mistreatment, motivated our elite to look for alternatives such as the Japanese, who were seen as more gentle and sensible.

In this new context, the Brazilian government intended to establish treaties with China and Japan, particularly the latter, target of political admiration as a consequence of its dynamic progress within a few decades. The first step was the negotiation of a treaty of friendship and trade between the respective countries in 1892. However, as Japan demanded to sign an equal treaty, it was postponed until November 5, 1895, when it was celebrated in Paris as the *Treaty of Trade and Shipping* between Brazil and Japan.

Itamaraty requested the Resident Minister in Paris, Gabriel de Toledo Piza, to delete mention that the Brazilian consuls in Japan would be nominated due to the trading convenience. Then the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made it known at that moment that it was interested in discussing the immigration issue with Japan.⁵ Afterwards, in August, 1897, the Japanese Legation in Rio de Janeiro was established, and one month later the Brazilian Legation opened in Tokyo. Brazil's first official envoy to Japan was Henrique Carlos Ribeiro Lisboa.

Although the historical literature demonstrates that there was no strong interest in sending Japanese subjects to Brazil until the U.S.A. imposed restrictions on immigration by Japanese nationals in 1907, the diplomatic documentation kept in the Historical Archive of Itamaraty (RJ) attests that there was official Brazilian resistance to the Japanese even before that.⁶

We can perceive through the analysis of the correspondence exchanged between Itamaraty and the diplomatic representation in Tokyo that, in addition to the racial issue, they were afraid that

those immigrants would trigger political and economic disorder in the country of destination. Those who were against the Japanese immigration referred to the North-American example, stating that the Japanese based in California had caused disagreements because they were satisfied with lower wages than whites demanded, and moreover Japanese migrants were suspected of infiltrating North American society in order to prepare the Japanese military invasion. In short, if Japan was admired as a nation in some respects, it was not as an immigrant supplier.

In the first years of Brazil-Japan relations, the role of Itamaraty in this context may be instanced through the role of two Brazilian diplomats, who were particularly against the Japanese and whose language lacked the usual diplomatic tone: Manoel de Oliveira Lima, Chargé d'affaires of the Legation from June 22, 1901 to May 10, 1903, and Luis Guimarães, Chargé d'affaires from 1906 to 1909.

Oliveira Lima, in his correspondence with Itamaraty, was concerned to warn against the inconvenience of allowing Japanese to come to Brazil. He alleged political and racial reasons. During his term in Tokyo, he supported his arguments against the Japanese by sending Japanese newspaper articles reporting the problems that Japanese immigrants went through in the countries where they were received, predicting that the same would happen in our country. We cite, as an example, the official communication dated July 26, 1907, in which he sent an article published in the *Japan Mail* newspaper in English published in Yokohama, reporting the distress that the Japanese suffered in New Caledonia. Such a report was evidence, according to the diplomat, of the reasons why the government of Tokyo was led to encourage their subjects' departure and supervise their status abroad, demanding the same consideration given to immigrants from the "refined" countries of Europe and America. In short, the excessive susceptibility of the Japanese government recommended the countries which needed workforce, such as Brazil, to ponder more deeply.⁷

The warnings from the Brazilian Legation in Japan grew more alarmed when diplomats there received the information that the government of São Paulo had signed a contract with the trader Marcial Sanz, which provided for 600 Japanese families coming to Brazil. Francisco de Paula Rodrigues Alves, at that time President of São Paulo, requested Itamaraty to assign its Chargé d'affaires in Japan the task of facilitating Elorz' negotiations with the Japanese authorities. Oliveira Lima, in an official communication of September 15, 1901, characterized this immigration as "undesirable." He cited as reasons, in addition to the incorporation of an inferior race to the national organism, customs, morals, and psychology which were distant from the Aryan race, as well as the technical insufficiency of the Japanese farmhand with regard to working in large farmland.

His criticisms fell primarily upon the "Japanese race," which he believed to be the bearer of inherent and untouched characteristics that belied the image of civilization that the Rising Sun Empire had promoted in implementing its economical development. In his opinion, the Japanese as well as the Chinese did not assimilate into the nations which received them; they just intended to accumulate some capital so as to return to "their mountains" as soon as possible. The difficulties they would have in adapting to Brazil would certainly cause them to provoke conflicts such as those verified in New Caledonia.⁸

The acquiescence of Itamaraty to Oliveira Lima's statement can be verified in the note reg-

istered on the first page of the official communication: a copy of this document was sent to the government of São Paulo on November 16, 1901. However, Oliveira Lima evaluated that Elorz's businesses were not successful, as he himself requested, through the Legation in Tokyo, to change the terms of the contract, so as to substitute Chinese for Japanese. The diplomat evaluated this change as positive, since he considered the *Chins* "more hardworking and accommodating" than the Japanese.⁹

In a highly pugnacious position, Luis Guimarães condemned, through a document addressed to Carlos Botelho, Secretary of Agriculture of São Paulo, the attempt to import Japanese workers to Brazil, through a contract signed between Ryu Mizuno (Mizuno Ryū 水野龍 1859–1951) and the government of São Paulo.¹⁰ His term in charge of the diplomatic representation in Japan was marked by continuation of the intolerance with regard to Japanese immigration that had been expressed by Manoel de Oliveira Lima. From October 1906 to June 1908, Luis Gumarães, through reserved official communications, stated his contrary opinion to the project of São Paulo. Not only did Guimarães express his disagreement, but on several occasions he also requested Itamaraty to intervene in avoiding its realization.

Guimarães' thought incorporated many negative notions of the Japanese, such as that they did not assimilate to the customs of their new country, but instead tried to impose their own; Japan was a power to which one needed to render accounts; Japanese settlers complained daily, disturbing the governments that received them; the Japanese people considered themselves the most powerful and perfect on earth, which could represent a political danger to the future;¹¹ the Japanese would dislodge the national and foreign worker by accepting any pittance. He prophesied a future war between the U.S.A. and Japan for control of San Francisco, Hawaii, and the Philippines. In short, the importation of Japanese would be a "real calamity,"¹² as if we had "an enemy at home."¹³

In addition to the social-political issues, Luis Guimarães adduced some eugenic arguments: the Mongol blood and the ugliness of the Japanese race would compromise the formation of the Brazilian race. The cross of a heterogeneous race with an inferior one would result in "degeneration, degradation, hybridism"¹⁴ and in a contact with a "disdainful, aggressive and tricky people," who were demanding a proportional reaction from their country to the humiliations they suffered on the west coast of America.

Guimarães' intervention to the "discreet opposition" of the Brazilian diplomacy regarding the plans of São Paulo, resulted in an exchange of correspondence among Itamaraty, the Legation of Brazil in Tokyo, and Carlos Botelho. Botelho sent Guimarães a dispatch on April 25, 1908, enclosing the contract signed with the Imperial Company of Emigration. Through this document, Botelho informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that São Paulo did not intend to implement the Japanese settlement, but the workforce training before the embarrassment offered by the European nations to the departure of their nationals.¹⁵

However, Guimarães took note solely of the fact that only Brazil accepted the Japanese while the other countries refused them. He warned, "Sooner or later the Japanese will cause great disagreements in our country. The Japanese, Sir Minister, remains Japanese for all their life; they are born spies, our enemies in their blood, conceited to death and sowers of all kind of confusion."¹⁶

The opposition of Itamaraty, attested by the copies of official communications Guimarães sent to the government of São Paulo and to the Ministry of Agriculture, was not enough to frustrate the beginning of the Japanese immigration movement to Brazil. It did mean that immigration began in an atmosphere of debates and polemic.

Thus, it can be stated that the stance of Itamaraty was directly associated with the racial and political issues in which the protagonist was the Rising Sun Empire. Accordingly, from the first decade of the twentieth century to the beginning of 1942, when the diplomatic relations between these countries were broken off, our chancellery thoroughly observed the Japanese imperialist actions in Asia.

The aspects of major interest, which can be inferred from the official communications sent by Brazilian diplomats in Tokyo through the end of the 1920s, referred to the conflicts verified between the Japanese immigrants in California and the white workers. The Brazilian representatives followed frequent reports on the reactions of public opinion and the government of Japan against the intentions of the California state legislature to debate proposals of laws that would have excluded Japanese children from public schools or prevented Japanese citizens from acquiring California real estate. Gustavo de Vianna Kelsch, who had replaced Manoel Carlos Gonçalves Pereira, Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Minister in Tokyo, in charge of the Legation, speculated on April 1913, that the Japanese dissatisfaction could lead to an armed conflict between the U.S.A. and Japan.¹⁷

However, in spite of the concerns raised by the supposed “Japanese infiltration,” The Rising Sun Empire was a power of weight and even Kelsch, under the order of Itamaraty, would negotiate an arbitration treaty with Japan in the same year, 1913. In an official communication sent to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Francisco Régis de Oliveira, Kelsch wrote that according to the instructions received he would “ably” consult the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Gaimushō*) about that issue, observing the possibility that the current Japanese government could have a different opinion on the issue from that of the previous government in 1911.¹⁸

Due to the fact that the Japanese government did not show interest in establishing that treaty with Brazil, Kelsch did not succeed. He observed that the Brazilian government had been making all the concessions to the Japanese, facing at times “serious oppositions.” He instanced some examples of what he regarded as “Japanese unwillingness”: “If we request the boarding of some of our Navy officials on ships of the Japanese squadron, they refuse it. If we want to establish an honorary Consulate in Pará, they refuse it. If we propose signing an arbitration treaty, they postpone it indefinitely.”¹⁹ He suggested retaliating against such attitudes by moving the Legation to Peking and refusing any future concession to the Japanese immigration. As for this last matter, he stated that he shared the same opinion as all his antecedents, who were also against this immigration movement.

Effectively, it has been verified that the sample of documents cited do not reflect an isolated attitude of some diplomats, but had the approval of Itamaraty, which consented to the anti-Japanese concepts expressed by their representatives’ dispatches from Japan. Confidential dispatches reaffirmed that the Japanese immigration was not convenient to Brazil, alleging that the Japanese did not assimilate to “anywhere they go to and to the inhabitants of the country.”²⁰

We emphasize that signs of persistence can be identified in those manifestations, as they repeat the same points on different occasions. Even more important, the judgments issued by the Brazilian Chancellery were not restricted to that, but served as a means to persuade the states which received the Japanese immigrants to change their immigration policy. This situation may be instanced in the reply of Itamaraty to a request by Epaminondas Leite Chermont. Chermont had taken charge as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of Brazil in Japan on September 21, 1915.

In a reserved communication of December 12, 1916, Chermont remarked that the Japanese press served the Japanese government as a means of propaganda to stimulate the Japanese emigration to Brazil, concerning which he had always had reservations. He stated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should put together all the official communications the Legation had sent on the Japanese immigration since 1901 in order to resend them to the government of São Paulo, so as to avoid repeating “what had been said and repeated by this Legation many times.” He said further that had no other intention but “to defend the future interests of Brazil which were really threatened.”²¹

In reply, Gregório Pecegueiro, General Director of Itamaraty, informed the representative in Tokyo that Minister Lauro Muller had already requested to review all the official communications on the issue, and all of them contained unfavorable information on the Japanese emigration and showed the inconveniences regarding the declared intention of preventing the entry of Japanese. He added that Minas Gerais and São Paulo had signed contracts with the Japanese and had notified the Ministry of Agriculture of this.²²

After São Paulo had cut the subsidy for Japanese immigration, in 1922, and the North-American Congress promulgated the *Law of National Origin*, in 1924, barring future Japanese immigration to the U.S.A., Japan resumed sending its subjects to Brazil. Reacting to the new picture of Japanese immigration, the Brazilian representation in Japan, elevated to Embassy level, followed the issue, which had been the main shared interest between the two nations since the beginning of bilateral relations.

The suspicions of the Brazilian intelligentsia, mirrored in our diplomacy, that the Japanese immigration had political purposes arose from the fact that the departure of poor Japanese from their native country began for capitalist reasons. The late development of the Japanese capitalism began in the context of competition among Western countries to create settlements abroad and, for that reason, assumed imperialist characteristics of increasing economic power through territorial expansion.²³ Such situation was concerning the land acquisition by Japanese companies in Brazil, where colonization companies were installed such as those administered by the Society of Colonization in Brazil (Yūgen Sekinin Burajiru Takushoku – BRATAC) and Kaigai Kōgyō Kabushiki Kaisha (KKKK).

A new stage of the Japanese immigration to Brazil had started, but our diplomacy did not change its viewpoint. The content of the official communications sent by the Brazilian Embassy attests that the anti-Japanese sentiments remained based on the same (questionable) allegations: the Japanese assimilation problem, their racial inferiority, and the political danger represented by the immigrants located at strategic points of the national territory. Thus, the official documentation expresses the inquietudes of the Brazilian elite with regard to the acquisition of pieces of land to

implement agricultural settlements in Brazil, such as the donation of ten billion acres of land by the government of Pará and the establishment of settlement in the Amazon region in 1929. Again, the concept of “Japanese infiltration” was on the agenda.

The diplomats were concerned and followed these movements, on different occasions interpreting them not simply as Japanese immigration, but as imperialist expansion motivated by the overpopulation and scarcity of natural resources. The decade of the 1930s brought, in addition to a significant increase of Japanese immigration, a heightening of our authorities’ attention to the Japanese military campaign in Asia. The Manchurian Incident of 1931 and the establishment of a figurehead state, Manchukuo, in the region on February 18, 1932, are facts frequently registered in the documentation of the Historical Archive of Itamaraty, until affairs in northeast Asia were supplanted from the news by the repercussions of the anti-Japanese amendments presented at the National Constituent Assembly in 1933.

In the face of political developments in Brazil—the ascension of Getúlio Vargas through the Revolution of 1930, the nationalist and xenophobic aspect of his government, the amendments presented by the anti-Japanese element in the National Constituent Assembly—Itamaraty shifted the stance it had adopted until that moment. Given the concrete possibility of diplomatic conflicts between Brazil and Japan, a negotiation between the ministries of foreign affairs of both countries and political forces of the Assembly began, with the objective of preventing the approval of directly discriminatory amendments.

However, the crisis at that time did not represent a change in the course of the Brazilian diplomacy. The official communications sent by the Brazilian representation in the following years reflected the situation that would lead to the Second World War and the rupture of diplomatic relations between Brazil and Japan, on January 29, 1942. The information sent to Itamaraty outlined the Japanese imperialist actions and speculated that the loyalty of Japanese subjects might be converted to the loyalty to the Axis, thereby endangering the national security of our country.

The research on the diplomatic documentation provides us important components to evaluate that period, which concluded in a break of relations between the respective countries that lasted until 1952. The tension felt in the final moments before the rupture may be verified in a precise internal report of which occurred on February 2, 1942, date on which the ambassadors F. de Castello-Branco Clark would communicate the cessation of diplomatic relations. The Japanese army and police had surrounded and occupied the Embassy. The ambassador reported in a memorandum that from that moment all of the embassy employees, including him, were held incommunicado. The psychological shock caused by the attitude of the Japanese government, classified as “abrupt, severe and inellegant,” might actually have caused the death of the wife of the embassy First Secretary, Nabuco de Abreu.²⁴ That occupation would last more than two months, and it concluded a critical phase in the history of the diplomatic relations between Brazil and Japan.

It was a phase in which the importation of Japanese immigrants to a land of completely different culture and customs, gave rise to feelings of strangeness and distrust on both sides. It was not possible in this brief chapter to cover details of the course of the official Brazilian anti-Japanese attitude, but we were able to pinpoint some important aspects. Nevertheless, the present good re-

lations between Brazil and Japan—an undeniable reality—were built on a basis full of conflicts, xenophobia, and racism. And the most important point of this essay is that Itamaraty effectively helped to create and reinforce a stigmatized image of the Japanese immigrant, considered as the *other*, who should be avoided, by means of a “discreet opposition” to the Japanese intentions of sending their population surplus to the racial democracy paradise.

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NOTES

1 I cite Valdemar Carneiro Leão Neto's book, *A Crise da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil (1930–1934): Contornos Diplomáticos* (1989), Flávio Venâncio Luizetto's master's dissertation, "Os Constituintes em Face da Imigração," defended at FFLCH-USP in 1975, and my book *O Perigo Amarelo: Imagens do Mito, Realidade do Preconceito* (2008).

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16 The orthography of quotations at that time has been updated here.

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