



Migration, Cultural Identity, Resilience and Compassion

A Documentary on Japanese-Brazilians That Covers All This and More

by **Amanda Gillis-Furutaka** (Kyoto Sangyo University, Japan)

A Documentary about Japanese-Brazilians

A special screening of the documentary “A Grandpa from Brazil” (ブラジルから来たおじいちゃん) was hosted by Osaka JALT and SIETAR on February 12th, 2012. This drew a large audience and was followed by a talk with the director, Nanako Kurihara, who provided background information and answered questions from the audience. Even those who already knew about Japanese immigration to Brazil and the situation of Japanese-Brazilians who have returned to work in Japan learned new facts and understood the issues it raises at a deeper level. I am equally certain that teachers in the audience appreciated what a wonderful teaching material this documentary provides for students from elementary through to university level, in both Japanese and international schools. There are two main reasons for this.

Value as a Teaching Resource

Firstly, the documentary is very moving, but is far from sentimental. Instead, through the eyes and words of 92-year-old Ken’ichi Konno, viewers are shown why so many Japanese young men like him felt compelled to emigrate to Brazil in the 1920s-1930s, the hardships they encountered, and the difficulties that their descendents now face when they return to Japan, try to make a living and have their children educated here.

The second reason why this documentary is such an effective teaching tool is that Ken’ichi Konno is an old friend of Nanako Kurihara and this personal connection allowed her to film intimate scenes of daily life. These highlight issues such as lack of compensation for migrant workers’ injuries at the workplace and inadequate support for their children in the Japanese education system. The friendship between filmmaker and protagonist also allows the film to explore the ambivalence Mr. Konno feels towards his cultural identity. For people who have spent a long time living in another culture, and for children born to parents of different cultures, this documentary is an excellent way to explore such complex feelings and to ask fundamental questions about cultural identity.

The Q&A session was highly informative since aspects of Mr. Konno’s life in Brazil that had been touched on in the film could be explained in greater detail. We were stunned to learn that this unassuming elderly gentleman had built up a

thriving agricultural business from scratch, suffered bankruptcy when the Brazilian economy stagnated in 1967, but then built up a new business, which his children have now taken over.

Nanako Kurihara explained how difficult life was for Japanese Brazilians during World War II, when the Brazilian government prevented the printing of books or newspapers in Japanese and the gathering of people of Japanese descent. The Japanese Brazilian community was so isolated and lacking in information that there was great confusion in August 1945 over whether Japan had actually surrendered or not. So strong was the belief that Japan had prevailed that violence broke out and people were killed for saying that the Brazilian and world media were reporting the truth.

To Obtain a Copy

If you have a chance to purchase the DVD “A Grandpa from Brazil” for your school library, I highly recommend it. It’s subtitled in English with Japanese and Portuguese conversation. If you can invite Nanako Kurihara to talk to your students, school or JALT chapter when you show the film, this will enhance the educational experience enormously. The website and study guide provide a lot of useful background information. Finally, if you’d like to help Nanako Kurihara work on the study guide that’s being developed to accompany the film’s use in class, take a look at her bilingual (Japanese-English) website and contact her.

This is Nanako Kurihara’s second documentary. Her first, “Ripples of Change” (レッキング・フォー・フミコ), deals with the women’s liberation movement in the 1970’s, the influence it had on contemporary Japanese society, and women’s rights in both Japan and on a global level. This DVD can also be purchased through her website.

Amanda Gillis-Furutaka

Kyoto Sangyo University, Japan

E-mail: <gillisfurutaka.amanda@gmail.com>



To contact **Nanako Kurihara**, find out more about her two films, purchase them and access the free study guide, go to <<http://nanakokurihara.com/>>



SIETAR To learn about SIETAR, check out <www.sietar-japan.org>