

When the dead call: Okinawan Ancestor Worship in Brazil

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the practice of ancestor worship performed by Okinawan descent in São Paulo, Brazil. This paper was based on an extensive ethnographic research in the city of São Paulo, in which the author conducted a series of interviews with religious experts such as the Yuta, as well as visiting other religious centers of great acceptance among the Okinawan descendants. With several descendants now in the seventh generation and 20,000 kilometers far away from Okinawa, we can observe through the practice of ancestor worship changes and transformations in the perceptions of family and kinship among these people, bringing serious issues to Social Anthropology. We could find new the ways in which religious hybridity affect the perception of these descendants of what the Okinawan traditions and Okinawan Spirituality are, on how they affect their daily life. The author intended to identify new forms of hybridism, not only religious, but also cultural, in this diasporic context. Such hybridisms seem to denote a great capacity for inventiveness and performance among the Okinawan descendants nowadays.

Keywords

Okinawa, Kinship, Shamanism, Religion, Japanese Brazilians, Religious Hybridity

1. Introduction

In this paper, I intend to cover an analysis of the Okinawan spiritual dimension when faced with kinship and the migratory phenomenon, i.e. the diasporic context of Okinawan descendants living in São Paulo and on how they face Okinawan traditions and religious hybridity. Dating from 1908 with the first Japanese immigrants arriving in Brazil, the immigrants from Okinawa, and subsequently, some of their descendants, are facing daily battles to maintain the pre-migration traditions and Okinawan religion, the ancestor worship and, later associated with the notion of spirituality. At first, how Okinawan descent reconcile traditions, family and religion, with many of them already considering themselves as detached from Okinawan culture? Secondly, this diasporic situation is important because it can show us the transformations over time and when confronted with different contexts such as the Brazilian society and its religious backgrounds.

Related to kinship, Okinawan spirituality is commonly confused as a set of Okinawan traditions, which for some has been “lost” or “abandoned” over the generations. The structural detachment, particularly when discussing kinship, becomes evident when Okinawan descendants fail to perform the ancestor worship, or when they do not assume the idea of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and other ancestors as fully active in the life of the living.

As a structural repair, such as observed in northern Japan by Ellen Schattschneider (Schattschneider 2001; 2003; 2004), ancestral spirits return to the lives of the living causing a series of misfortunes, with spiritual debts that cross generations. With the aid of religious experts, such as the *noro* and *yuta*, the messages from the ancestors and its interpretations come to the living relatives, demanding an approach or rapprochement with the Okinawan traditions, a spiritual dimension long neglected. This reflection on the notions of tradition itself is particularly interesting as it enables us to observe the inferences of the diasporic context in the formation and invention of new traditions (Yanagisako 2002), marked in this case by religious hybridity (Mori 2008; 2012).

We have younger Okinawans suffering all sorts of spiritual problems, on account of the supposed abandonment of the Okinawan traditions. Some of the most common dilemmas faced by these Okinawan descendants are problems within the family, or financial difficulties that persist among family members over generations, in addition to cases of health problems that afflict some individuals and which may originate in spiritual matters. Here we have at least two questions that deserve to be investigated, first a) to understand what the Okinawan descendants in Sao Paulo city calls by tradition, something that is continually reframed, invented and reinvented (Yanagisako 2002). Secondly, we have a unique chance to observe b) the modulations and changes in kinship when faced with religious-spiritual dimension.

In some occasions, I adopt the term "spirituality"¹ as a starting point of this analysis, for being a native expression commonly spoken by Okinawan descendants during my fieldwork,

¹ I recognize the complexity of the term, especially on its use in Social Anthropology, adopting here just because it was quite heard in the field. "Spirituality" and the syncretic practices associated generally implies contact with "spirits" of various levels, whereas the ancestor worship as practiced in Okinawa and its variations in Brazil generally turn to the plane of kinship. However, I have observed some cases in field research in which the uses and understandings of such notions are confused, opening a powerful field of analysis. This is possible due to the syncretic religious systems operating in Brazil, as observed by Bastide (2001), Brown and Bick (1987).

but also because of the complexity of this dimension of the Okinawan daily life, some of them frequently associated with the Shamanic practice of mediums as the *yuta*, or even in the participation of specific religious centers for these cases. As observed by Mori (2008; 2012) and André (2007; 2011), this diasporic context is permeated by various processes of religious syncretism and cultural hybridity, presenting a synthesis of various dimensions, whose boundaries between them are visibly blurred.

As Shinto and its hybrids in Japan and in the world (Yamakage 2006), it is virtually difficult to adopt the term "religion" in the present case, as a sealed box supported and recognizable by its dogmas. As pointed out by Hendry (2013) and Nakagawa (2008), it is technically problematic to adopt the category "Religion" as conceived in the West, for the Japanese case: in this case, the researcher must be sensitive to the hybrids and the plurality of practices found in Japan.

According to Robinson (1969), the spiritual practices in Okinawa is a mixture of native and external influences, in which different densities are difficult to be measured. It can be seen traces of the Shinto interference, Taoism, Confucianism and various Buddhist schools. In the Brazilian case, we need to consider not only the diasporic phenomenon that approximates Brazil, Okinawa (and Japan, if we consider all Japanese immigration to Brazil) (Lesser 2000; 2003; Mori 2003; Sakurai 1999), but also the complex Brazilian religious system because of the syncretism and hybridization processes (Bastide 2001; Brown & Bick 1987).

To conduct an analysis of the complex relationship between kinship, migration and religiosity, this research comprised an ethnographic research on several fronts, held in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Using the idea of a thick description (Geertz 1989) and aware of the discussions about ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988), I had as main objective to understand through the native categories the meaningful practices of the life experience of this group when confronted with varied perceptions of Family and kinship. I conducted several semi-structured interviews the years 2013, 2014 and 2016 not only with religious specialists like the *yuta*, but also attended religious spaces like the Love for Jesus Spiritist Center (popularly known as Little House, as will be discussed in this paper). As a counterpoint, I also accompanied several families of Okinawan descendants in the cities of São Paulo, Araraquara and Presidente Prudente.

2. Okinawa in facts

According to Beillevaire (2003), little attention is given to the Okinawan cosmology in the research academy. What we know about the Okinawa cosmology comes from the *Omoro*

Soshi, a compilation of poems and shamanic songs of Okinawa and Amami Islands (Drake 1990; 1996) and records made by visitors from China and Japan (Sered 1999). Established initially as the *Ryūkyū* Kingdom in 1429, Okinawa comprises 140 islands southwest of Japan, of which only 36 are inhabited (Turnbull 2009).

Situated between Japan and China, since its beginning the *Ryūkyū* Kingdom remained as an independent political entity, establishing political and economic ties in the area. It is interesting to note the development of Shuri language, and a system of values, kinship and a distinct religion system totally different from the Japanese.

This strategic position of *Ryūkyū* was a strong reason for the Japanese Satsuma Expedition in 1609, thus establishing an advanced post to contain possible Chinese or Korean invasions (Turnbull 2009). After more than two centuries paying tributes to feudal Japan, Okinawa was finally annexed to Japan in 1871 in the middle of the Meiji Era, forming an archipelago known until today as the Nansei-shotō (the Japanese Southwest Islands).

Despite a number of similarities between Japan and Okinawa, due to the spatial arrangements of the islands, they have gone through different historical processes, attracting the attention of scholars in the 1920s and 1930s, with the efforts of folklorists such as Yanagita Kunio, Orikuchi Shinobu and Yanagi Sōetsu. In these early efforts, Okinawa and *ryūkyūan* culture were categorized as an initial or primeval "civilizing stage", considered by some as the roots of Japanese culture.

On the differences between *Ryūkyū* and Japan, we can see the variances of the ancestor worship, cosmology and kinship systems in ways that affect the lives of their descendants living outside the archipelago. As pointed out by Kerr (2000), Mori (2003; 2012), Sered (1997; 1999) and Turnbull (2009), such particularities acts as the main engine to form distinct identity perceptions averse to a Japanese national identity, which can also be seen among Okinawan descendants in Brazil.

With the Japanese Immigration to Brazil starting in 1908, we observed the beginning of a powerful transnational phenomenon, with several Okinawan (and Japanese) immigrants arriving in Brazil and establishing the biggest concentration of Japanese descendants outside Japan (Silva 2012). Up to its seventh generation of descendants, we can consider the Okinawan migration to Brazil a diasporic phenomenon that maintains, updates and invents new ties and traditions between Brazil and Okinawa/Japan.

The growing number of community associations and its activities in São Paulo city is just an example of the attempt to maintain a pre-migratory culture, which is, according to Mori

(2003), a continuous process of "reinvention". First, I intend to introduce some aspects of the Okinawan kinship and how it's seen among the Okinawan descendants in Brazil.

3. Okinawan Kinship

Okinawan kinship² presents a diversity of practices and customs according to the spatial arrangement of the archipelago's islands. Such variations can be found in Okinawan cosmology, funerary customs and the ancestor worship (Smith 1974). These practices can be verified by the large amount of ethnographies focused on Okinawa, most of them available only in Japanese (Baksheev 2008). At the same time, similarities with the Japanese primogeniture system are notorious, indicating possible exchanges with Japan in ancient times, especially as observed in the burial customs (Noguchi 1966).

In this familial system, the emphasis is on primogeniture, thus the eldest male child inherits the name of the *munchū* and its duties, aiming to maintain the social position and political status that it has in the community. Hence, younger sons have less family pressure for marriage, and they are those who promote the expansion of *munchū* through the establishment of several branches of the family name.

According to the Okinawan cosmology (Baksheev 2008; Beillevaire 2003; Mabuchi 1980), the spatial arrangement of Okinawan houses (*yaa*) and its own internal arrangements (Beillevaire 2003; Mabuchi 1980; Tanaka 1977) are mainly marked by kinship relations, whose logic of the *munchū* transcends the past, present and future, defining the community as a perpetual entity (Tanaka 1977).

Okinawan kinship keeps a very specific relationship between *uya-faafuji* (ancestors and parents) and *Kwaa-maaga* (offspring). In this system, the ego is framed in a hierarchy, indicating perpetual obligations of duties and responsibilities to the *uya-faafuji*. At the same time, he/she must sustain the transmission of family traditions to the *Kwaa-maaga*. In this logic, the head of *munchū* has the obligation to take care of his family and to ensure the social relations of his *munchū* with others. At the same time, he must keep and strengthen the relations with his parents and his ancestors (Tanaka 1977).

² We can observe a great diversity of practices and arrangements of kinship in Okinawa, widely discussed with several ethnographies conducted in the archipelago, some of which I highlight the work of Baksheev (2008), Beillevaire (1982; 2003), Inoue (2007), Lebra (1966), Owehand (1985), Smith (1974), Noguchi (1966) and Tanaka (1977). My purpose here is just to outline some common points, some of which have been mentioned by my interlocutors in field research.

According to Tanaka (1977) and her study at the Inoha Village, Motobu, in this kinship system there is the importance of blood as substance that ensures unchangeable and non-transferable properties, so A is related to B, showing a symmetrical and bilateral relationship between father and mother (Tanaka 1977; Inoue 2007). On the other hand, semen acts as a second substance which defines the line of succession of agnatic descendants, and thus the arrangement and the perpetuation of the *munchū* over space and time. While blood can be diluted in the offspring (considering the father's blood combined with the mother's blood), semen acts as a fixed or unchanging substance that persists for several generations (Tanaka 1977).

Thus, a girl or woman ends up being the end of the line for the transmission of the *munchū*, even if she is the result of a perfect combination of the father's blood and the mother's blood, because she cannot transmit the semen. According to Noguchi (1966) and Tanaka (1977), this is reflected in the Okinawan funerary customs, because only after the death of her spouse that she can be reabsorbed into the patrilineal lineage of her husband. In the case of no male heirs, it is allowed to the family to adopt a relative of the father's lineage in order to guarantee the continuity of the *munchū* (Mori 2012).

Tanaka (1977) points out that in Inoha there is a cosmological explanation for the kinship ties. In this case, *inn* is a force that acts as a universal law. The *inn* justifies the filial love of *Kwaa-maaga* towards *uya-faafuji*, just like the Greek notion of Fate in Fortes (1959), something that should be understood and practiced by all members of the family, otherwise, those who are ignorant to such dictates are considered "non-human" (Tanaka 1977 : 37). Thereby, the most important motivation for the filial love is the recognition and maintenance of humanity (*chu*), hoping, when worshipping the *uya-faafuji* and other ancestors, 1) the Okinawan descendants can guarantee luck and protection; but also 2) these descendants do not lose their humanity (Tanaka 1977).

One way to understand the Okinawan kinship and especially in the ways it updates itself over time, is approaching to the notion of *société à maison* or House Society for Lévi-Strauss (1986, 1991, 1996). Lévi-Strauss (1986, 1991, 1996) had already perceived societies scattered around the globe that are not necessarily oriented in families, lineages or clans, and a new definition is needed to explain these societies where kinship forms are made in different ways, encompassing everyone in the idea of House.

The notion of House encompasses a moral person in which it is possible to observe the social relations on a daily basis, and yet, because they do not have a language of their own, they lend and subvert the available language of kinship (Lévi-Strauss 1986; 1991; 1996; Newell 1976; Silva 2012). Such a notion is very useful for us to understand the complexity

of this kinship system, and especially in the ways in which it is perceived in Brazil by the Okinawan descendants, as will be discussed throughout this paper.

4. Kinship and ancestor worship

Ancestor worship plays a key role in Japan (Newell 1976). Considering the Chinese influences on Asia since from the past, and the practice of honoring and remembering the dead (Baksheev 2008; Robinson 1969), we can find these practices in Japan as well, with regional variances that should be noted. In case of the Okinawan kinship system, all the living relatives are obliged to respect, protect and care for the spirits of deceased with offerings and prayers, which can be seen with the ritual care of memorial tablets, all placed in the family altar known as *butsudan* or *buchidan*. It is possible to verify the centrality of the family oratory within the Okinawan family, something that is also felt and observed among Okinawan descent living in Sao Paulo.

As the Okinawan kinship transcends or overflows time and space, the descendants of Okinawan around the world are bound by the same bonds of duties and obligations. The neglect or forgetfulness of ancestors ultimately results in some kind of spiritual sanction: they become “unhappy”, “cold ancestors” and dangerous, threatening the family with diseases and misfortunes of all sorts (Tanaka 1977). The possibility of spiritual retribution ends up being cause for fear among the living relatives.

Distended in space and time in a perpetual entity, Okinawan kinship crosses the seas and continents, transferring a number of duties and obligations to the new generations, noted in the statements of my interlocutors in Brazil. “In Okinawa everyone is a relative, everyone is related to someone” is a recurring expression, something that is transposed to all the generations of descendants and also a driving force when they want to differentiate themselves from the “Japanese³”.

Related to the Okinawan kinship, the ancestor worship is a complex ritual of honor and homage to supernatural entities (Tanaka, 1977). This practice is carried out at various times of the year, invariably centered on the family altar known as the *butsudan* or *buchidan*, a piece of furniture similar to a closet where are placed the memorial tablets with the name of the deceased (*ihai/ihē/ifee*), incense, photos of the deceased and offerings of all kinds.

³ It is interesting to see the Okinawan descendants resort to kinship to perceive the difference between Japanese (*naichi*) and Okinawan (*Uchinanchu*), which was heard in the field as the Japanese being a “cold people” versus an Okinawan “hot people”. Regarding these inflections, see SILVA, 2016.

The *butsudan* acts as a portal of ancestral spirits, being a sacred space inside the Okinawan houses.

The services themselves are divided into three types, the *kamigutu*, or offerings to the deities or *kami*, the *munchūgutu*, the offerings to the patrilineal descent group and *gwansugutu*, the latter exclusive to the issues of the closest ancestors.

The differences between the Japanese and Okinawan ancestor worship is the persistence of the ancestors over time. While in Japan the memorial tablets with the names of ancestors can be duplicated or incinerated as soon as the ancestor ceases to be remembered (after 50 years of death), in Okinawa such tablets cannot be duplicated, nor destroyed (Tanaka 1977). Thus, it is common to find among Okinawan descendants in Brazil memorial tablets and photographs of relatives they've never met in their family altar.

Arranged in a perpetual line in time and space, we see how the Okinawan kinship transcends Okinawa, with family members all around the world, in this case, with living and deceased relatives. It is interesting to observe the kinship transformations in different contexts, such as the case of the Japanese immigration to Brazil, which dates from 1908 with the arrival of the first ship with Japanese and Okinawan immigrants from Japan.

In Brazil we can see these transformations especially at the ancestor worship and how it is performed according to each family. We can see the *yuta*, an Okinawan shaman who acts not only in Okinawa but in Brazil as well, as an important catalyst character who affects in various ways the daily lives of the Okinawan descendants. Faced with a complex religious system, the ritual practice of the *yuta* and the understandings of the Okinawan traditions undergoes a series of reinventions, transformations and negotiations (Mori 2012), aiming to give account of the symbolic efficacy when confronted with the background and religious diversity of the Okinawan descendants.

The religious culture of Okinawa is strongly marked by gender, with the women officially and publicly leading the religious sphere (Sered 1997; 1999). As spiritual guardians, some Okinawan women hold a monopoly on the local rituals as the *yuta*. Women of Okinawa share the mundane roles of sisters and daughters in one instance, mothers and wives, but always considered as sacred beings.

Despite the many similarities with Japanese shamans⁴, either in some practices and the use of certain ritual objects and in some functions, the Okinawan shamans have different

⁴ Japan has a vast amount of shamanism practitioners in various parts of the archipelago, with profound similarities in queries, functions, rituals, music, utensils, etc. The most famous shamans are the *itako*, *gomiso* and *kamisama* in Honshu, *tsusu* among the Ainu of

characteristics, in particular for maintaining the use of a ritual repertoire that comes from China (Sered 2004). According to Takiguchi (1990), the Okinawan shamans occupy a liminal space within the Okinawan society, as can be seen between the *kankakariya* of Miyako, Okinawa:

"By definition the shaman is a liminal being. He is a mediator between this and the other world; his presence is betwixt and between the human and supernatural. In a trance, possessed by the divine force, he becomes the focus of fervent attention of the client and seance audience. Manifesting the power of the gods, the shaman indicates what is causing the extravagant behavior of a usually frugal and submissive housewife or ensures the success of the enterprise that an ambitious businessman has just undertaken. Incarnating the ancestor suffering from severe punishments in the afterworld, he moans with pain, asking for pacifying rituals (...). The role the people of Miyako assign to their shamans roughly corresponds to that of "folk therapist"-religious figures who find out causes of domestic and personal troubles and solicit divine support to solve them through ritual and divination."(Takiguchi 1990:1)

Sered (1999) shows that the Okinawan women occupy three specific functions, such as *noro/nuru*, highlighted originally by Shuri government when Okinawa was still *Ryūkyū*; the *kaminchu*, divine persons directly connected to the community; and the *yuta*, those who deal with divination and worldly affairs.

The *yuta* or the Okinawan shaman/medium, acts more directly on individual and on family level (Knecht 2009). They work on the mediation between individuals with the Okinawan cosmology and they can see things that ordinary people cannot see (Sered 1997; 1999). They can make predictions for the future, identify causes of misfortune, read the sacred books and guide how the deceased should be buried, making the connection between the world of the living with the world the dead (Sered 1999).

Hokkaido, the *noro/nuru*, *kaminchu* and *yuta* in Okinawa (Sasamori 2004). Usually, Japanese shamans are women, known by the broader term of *miko* (daughter of a divine being), *fujo* or just *fusha* (medium) (Kawamura 2003; Knecht 2004). According Knecht (2004), the Japanese scholars adopt the generic term *fujo* or *fusha* to practitioners of shamanism.

I'd like to propose that we can see the ancestor worship in the ways of a maussian gift economy (1950), in which we embed the living with a series of obligations to the dead, being the deceased obliged to repay the living with ancestral protection. Interrupting this chain of obligations between the living and the dead implies in a form of spiritual sanction, as said by Tanaka (1977). Seeing this issue within a structuralist perspective, what happens actually is a disruption or error of the structure itself and should be repaired as soon as possible by one of the two parties involved. It is no wonder that the *yuta* and their spiritual practice acquires centrality in these cases, because they are the people who offer the healing processes, also offering the ways to reattach the world of the living with the dead again.

Since the Okinawan kinship pervades spirituality and religion as well, the *yuta* have important roles in kinship transformations, especially in Brazil, as we'll see from now on.

5. Case study: Ana and her considerations on Spirituality

With several problems that pervades generations, I must point out a case of a family of Okinawan descendants in São Paulo city. This particular case shows a family who is still suffering with the loss of family members, in addition to financial and health problems that extends for almost a decade.

Descendant of Okinawan and already in the third generation by paternal and maternal grandparents, since her six-year-old Ana received the visit of spirits, especially one related to the family, the grandfather she never met in life. With diabetes from birth, Ana had a turbulent childhood combined with ghostly visions and recurring health problems, in which has always been taught as related to "spiritual problems".

Ana warned me since our first interview: "it is better not start studying the Okinawan spirituality, because it's too much trouble." Just like Jeanne Favret-Saada recalls (2010:11), Ana was trying to say or to ask me if "I was strong enough" to begin a research of this kind, showing the huge investment I would have to do to establish a relationship with my interlocutors in the field.

As a warning, Ana told me that when she was a small child, she woke up at dawn to drink water and walked barefoot to the kitchen. For some unknown reason, his mother woke up at the same time and followed her, when she starts screaming desperately to her daughter. Her mother was saying that Ana was dirtying all the kitchen floor with blood footprints. When washing her feet, Ana saw that there were no injuries at all that could explain the blood. Saying she had a "uncontrolled mediumship," Ana adds that the

lightbulbs in the rooms where she walks in starts to burn or blink, in addition to her diabetes which fluctuates dramatically, with no medical explanation.

A 28-years-old Ana has always moved by various religious institutions, seeking to fill a gap that she knew since her childhood as a "spiritual gap." Ana had been entrusted with the mission of keeping the religious tradition in the family, long lost and that could now cause endless problems. This mission had been given by a *yuta* in São Paulo:

Ana - usually the *yuta* are called (or consulted, in the cases of *yuta* that is not going to the house of the families) when the family realizes that it has strange things happening, usually when the family has financial problems or some of the children are facing strange things, just like not getting any job, or when he/she has car accidents or when someone says he or she is seeing a lot of ghosts and visions... or, in more extreme cases, when someone gets some serious disease. When the family realizes that things are going bad, they call a *yuta* to understand what's happening... since Okinawa has a huge spiritual tradition, (...) the family usually looks for the *yuta* trying to communicate with the family's ancestors, because most of the problems are directly related to the *butsudan*.

We can see that Okinawan spirituality or "tradition" is related to Okinawan kinship, through the figure and key role of the *butsudan*, the family altar. Ana told me that her mission had been given by some ancestor, in this case, her paternal grandfather.

Victor Hugo - When was the first time you heard of the *yuta*?

Ana - When I was 10, when I got diabetes.

Victor Hugo - How was it? Do you remember what she told you? What did you think on that occasion?

Ana – It was somehow strange, because no one in my family has diabetes, so I went to see a *yuta*, who guided me until I was 16 years old. She talked to my deceased grandfather and said that my diabetes was, in fact, a sign of a spiritual mission. I started to cry of fear, then he said that it was not to be afraid because I had seen him before. On that day, he told me that, as my father had no male heir, he passed me the responsibility to take care of the *butsudan* of my family. In fact, I met a *yuta* before I had 10 years old, because of my grandfather. I started seeing him when I was just six years old. My visions become stronger when I was 10 years old.

Victor Hugo – How your parents told you about the *yuta*?

Ana – They simply said, 'let's go somewhere, to speak to someone to check your diabetes'. Then they placed me in the same room with the shaman and she began to incorporate and I got scared, but I understood what was going on, because I saw many spirits, especially my grandfather. Then she incorporated my grandfather and said: 'How long ... you know me, right?'. At that time, I met several *yuta*! My parents took me to meet many spiritualists of all religions, desperate to cure my diabetes. They came to me and told me it was for good reasons, to get cured.

At first, Ana began to consult frequently with *yuta*, trying to understand the ancestor worship and the proper rituals to be done at the family altar. This strategy resulted in great frustration, because she said that "this is the biggest problem, each *yuta* tells you a different thing," something already observed by Lebra (1966) when discussing the complexity of Okinawan cosmology. Because it is based on oral transmission, there is no record of "correct" healing practices, giving room for inventiveness on an individual basis (Sered 1997; 1999). Such frustration by "not knowing what to follow" or "what to do" affected Ana's family.

Over time Ana started to attend Allan Kardec and Umbanda spiritual centers (Brazilian religion with afro-Brazilian roots), all focused to attend Okinawan descendants. We can see here the existence of a complex religious system that attends specifically to Okinawan families in Sao Paulo city, with different nuances of "purity". We can see a fusion of various religions and esoterisms with and among the *yuta* practices in Brazil (Mori 2012), focused to deal with Okinawan descendants who says disconnected from Okinawan traditions. In these cases, the traditional Okinawan shamanism is not enough to deal or to fix some of the spiritual problems of these Okinawan descendants.

Ana learned at an Umbanda center that their problems were being caused by the presence of a doomed samurai, unhappy with the spiritual journey of her family. This samurai would be the cause of sudden wave of her diabetes, and he could only be appeased with the offering of a katana, a samurai sword. Ana bought and offered a katana to the spirit, which became her protector, temporarily unravelling the oscillation of her diabetes.

Despite of not knowing if she was related to that samurai, she suspected to be some remote ancestor. Here we can merge or hypothesize a complex relationship between Disease/Okinawan Kinship/Umbanda. Because of spirituality, Ana "discovers" new relatives or, as in this case, reattach or create bonds with "lost" relatives.

Months later, Ana suffered several serious problems. To resolve the issues of her family's *butsudan*, and following the medium guidelines, Ana found out that she needed to add a

portion of the ashes of her paternal ancestors in her *butsudan*. To help Ana, her paternal cousin offered a portion of the ashes of his *butsudan*, because at the time he was decided to replace the Okinawan religion by the Allan Kardec's Spiritism.

Ana told me she knew by the medium that she should take the ashes with a special spoon, something that should be done with great care. At the time, some of the ashes fell to the ground and she quickly tried to recover with the spoon. Ana didn't tell anyone about what happened.

The next day, his cousin, committed to leave the Okinawan traditions, suffered a severe stomach bleeding, requiring urgent medical care. Ana recurred to the spiritual center to repair the spiritual problem at the *butsudan*, getting involved by a ritual that took a few weeks. Once restored the order on the altar, his cousin recovered almost miraculously and began to respect the ancestor worship again.

We can see here the power of the effectiveness of symbols (Lévi-Strauss 1976), in which spirituality is always orbiting the kinship system. According to Ana, she needs to practice and develop their spirituality, otherwise, she has health problems and other sorts of misfortune. Ana was forced to recognize and to respect the Okinawan spirituality at her childhood, to establish ties with a relative (or relatives) who never met in life (her grandfather and the samurai), showing complex relations and removing the boundaries and limits of ancestral kinship, always orbited by the spirituality.

As once told me Shinji Yonamine, seen in the Okinawan community as an expert in the traditions of Okinawa, it is impossible to dissociate kinship/Okinawan family from spirituality, because they are actually the same thing. No wonder that Ana's spiritual journey coincides invariably with kinship relations.

According Baksheev (2008), Beillevaire (2003), Suzuki (2000; 2013) and Noguchi (1966), this spiritual journey is extremely important to understand the Okinawan spirituality, because it mirrors and create multiple intersections between Okinawan cosmology and Okinawan kinship. According to Baksheev (2008), Beillevaire (2003) and Suzuki (2000, 2013), this may be accessed by the study *butsudan* and its internal logic of organization that reflects stages and life and death. At the *butsudan* we can understand the case of Ana's cousin on how kinship is strongly related to the spiritual practices, incurring in spiritual sanctions spoken by Tanaka (1977).

Ana attends to an Umbanda center that keeps some Okinawan descendants as members nowadays. She reaffirms the importance of the spiritual path as something that "improves" and makes her daily life better when facing the spiritual problems. She understands that

she is not free of new problems, what she thinks inherent to this "discovery process", as she says.

We can see that Anna learned throughout her life some of the Okinawan traditions, some Okinawan kinship precepts and she was adjusting her routine in part because of the problems pointed out by the *yuta*, psychics and other sensitives. However, Ana says she is now comfortable at the Umbanda center, showing that this trajectory or spiritual path is somewhat malleable and fruit of a performance capability by my interlocutor: she is hostage to the ancestor worship or Okinawan traditions, but she seeks to learn other ways of dealing with it in different ways from those practiced in Okinawa.

6. Dealing with *Butsudan* in Brazil

The "Little House", as it is called the Love for Jesus Spiritist Center by its participants, is located near a large concentration of Okinawan establishments in São Paulo city, with the participation of Kardecists, Okinawan *yuta* and mediums trained in Umbanda. This diversity attracts the participation not only of Okinawan descendants in the city, but also of non-descendants, acting as a prestigious spiritual center in that area.

Love for Jesus Spiritist Center was created in 1963 by a *yuta*, the deceased mother of the institution's current president, acting since then in Okinawan traditions, but also coping with several religious syncretism aimed at dealing with the spiritual problems of families of Okinawan descendants in São Paulo.

"At the time my mother founded the 'Little House', nobody wanted to be *yuta*, because it was a pejorative word. Today is... My grandparents did not welcome my mother as a *yuta*." Says the president of the institution.

With the participation and the help of various parishioners, "Little House"'s mediums use blurred definitions of mediumship, with no formal distinctions between Okinawan traditions, Alan Kardec's Spiritism or Umbanda in the sessions. Unless when asked directly about a "title", they designate the sensitive parishioner as a "passista", someone with the ability to "receive" messages. Both the president and her husband have psychic abilities and their youngest daughter was already showing signs that she could also access the supernatural.

The main room of the "Little House" is rectangular, with a main altar with Catholic imagery and the Holy Mother next to a photograph of a Japanese godfather dressed in the Meiji period costumes, besides one Okinawan Japanese figure side by side with a picture of the Japanese Goddess Amaterasu, with various flowers and offerings. On the walls, small

signs ask for silence, besides for the use of light-colored clothes and to not cross arms and legs, these signaling interference in the spiritual reception. According to a Kardecist medium, a non-Okinawan descendant, she says that crossing arms can interrupt "a current of energy that comes from space", something that is not found in Okinawan cosmology according to academic literature.

The mediums and *yuta* are dressed with white aprons and are seated around a central table, however, any medium or "passista" can receive a spirit. The other parishioners are seated in two groups of chairs, one for men and one for women. When asked about the hybrid imagery at the altar and about the reason for two groups of chairs for men and women, the president informs to be something inherited from the time of the founders, to avoid "dating". But we can verify, according to the Okinawan cosmology, the importance of the separation between Men/Women as something related to "purity", being the men "purer" in opposition to the women (Beillevaire 2003).

Held for four times a week, services are organized first with a short introduction explaining the importance of the ancestor worship, also with recurring problems regarding spirits of the newly deceased, always followed with the speech of the president and her husband.

One medium is Dona Tereza, Okinawan descendant who is considered a specialist of ancestor worship and Okinawan kinship. For some times she emphasized how to perform the ancestor worship, followed by the daily prayers, which according to the literature, does not extend to non-descendants. In these cases, she said that "it did not matter if you're an Okinawan descendant or not, because what matters is the family." Within this concept, the notion of "spirituality" dilutes other ones such as blood: here blood loses its power as an identity marker and some criteria to define what is kinship and what is not.

One day the services were held by Olinda. Very friendly, Olinda is considered by everyone as part of the family, despite not being an Okinawan descendant. As Ana told me once, who had attended the center in the past, "it does not matter the way to do develop the spirituality, as long as you do it," finally mining the question of boundaries between Japanese religions/Okinawan religions/Japanese Brazilians and blood in this case.

After an initial briefing, mediums gather around the main table, some lights are turned off and they begin to namely call descendants and non-descendants who are in poor health, money problems, and in the case of recently deceased, they always pray citing Our Lord and the Holy Mother to each name on the list.

After the prayers the mediums begin to receive spirits of the deceased, spirits that can be a) newly deceased who are lost or do not know in what spirit world he or she is or b)

evolved spirits that can be relatives of some participant in that day, reporting on the living problems, ways to solve, etc.

I witnessed a few times the incorporation of Japanese or Okinawan spirits, with the medium leaving the message in Japanese or *Uchinaguchi*, with no translation for the non-descendant parishioners. In different occasions, Mrs. Keiko, an Okinawan *yuta* receives messages and entities in the form of old songs, causing a stir among the present people. As I once heard in the field, such messages in the form of music are songs of an Okinawan past that some heard when they were children at home. After this step, they perform more prayers, ending with a final prayer to Our Lord and the Holy Mother.

After that the layout of the room is changed, where all mediums begin setting up a mass when all the parishioners will receive a “pass” or blessing words. At this moment, the participants must take off their glasses/sunglasses, watches and other accoutrements that can hurt the mediums. They organize two rows around the main table, now occupied with personal items and water bottles to receive blessings and positive energy. The blessing or “passe” itself is not the same for everyone: the prayers, blessings and gestures depends on the medium and his/her religious background, except for the use of salt (symbol of purification in Okinawa) and fluidic water, both distributed to everyone.

After the main services, the “Little House” is opened for a counseling session, which was forbidden to me to follow. As the president told me, this segment of the service is very personal and private, where families seek direct assistance of psychics or *yuta* to address issues that do not want to expose in public. Counseling sessions are held in different times and in different locations inside the “Little House”, always seeking the privacy of the participants, whose subjects are not revealed or discussed.

The weekly sessions are divided into one for the youth, one for the elder and two open to everyone, although with no major changes in the session structure, speeches and prayers. The session for the youth is always preceded by classes teaching how to develop the mediumship, in which the principles of ancestor worship and Kardecism are taught. When they reach certain degrees of psychic development, these young descendants may or may not be promoted to “passistas”, receiving a white apron.

In addition to the regular sessions, the “Little House” still holds monthly lectures with special guests, “experts” in ancestor worship from different institutions and associations. They also promote charity events as the annual bingo, always performed with the practice of *mochiyori*, with each present bringing a plate of food and some beverages.

All sessions always focus the ancestor worship because, according to the president, it is an unknown ritual practice to the younger generations. The lectures and classes stresses

two crucial points that deserve to be mentioned, the first being the importance that should be given to the figure of the "grandson" or "granddaughter".

Their perception of Okinawan family and Okinawan kinship is focused on the role of the "grandchildren", symbolized by the relationship of love and affection between Grandparents/Grandchildren, resembling the relationship of the *uya-faafuji* and *kwaamaaga* as previously discussed in this paper. "The *father* who has a son will be one day a *grandfather*, and his son will be one day a *father* and also a *grandfather* and so on," illustrating the Okinawan kinship as an endless staircase that no matter where is the ego, he/she is located in the hierarchy.

Another representation discussed by the "Little House" parishioners concerns a tree to explain the *Mutu-ya* or simply *Mutu*, the stem family house, in which we have the ego at the beginning of the line, then, following a retrospective movement, it results in a bond and protection of 126 people, considering the family bonds with all the ancestors in this family. Thus, each person carries family bonds with 126 people (living or dead) that can never be forgotten. This instance is not found by the academic literature when discussing the "traditional" Okinawan cosmology, probably being a hybrid rereading practiced in Brazil.

It's also possible to see several reinterpretations of what "Okinawan tradition" and Okinawan Kinship is, mediated by religion or spirituality: considering the effectiveness of symbols by Lévi-Strauss (1976), the *yuta* need to share their practice spaces with other practitioners, parishioners and with different religions to be "effective" when attending the Okinawan descendants in Sao Paulo city.

Here the definitions of kinship and Okinawan traditions are diluted, modulated and re-signified by the migratory context, allowing not only the hybridity of several religions (Okinawan shamanism, Spiritism, Umbanda, etc.) and ritual practices that involves the Okinawan ancestor worship, the proper use of the *butsudan* and the guidance of the Okinawan *yuta*, but also the incorporation of non-descendants in the services. I must say, again, far from dealing with the *yuta* as the only ones detaining the monopoly of Okinawan spirituality, we have in Sao Paulo a complex system of various religious institutions, all of them working together to fulfill these very specific demands from the Okinawan descent in capital.

7. Final considerations

We can observe a series of transformations not only in the sphere of Okinawan kinship, but also in ritual practices. Part of this process is the effect of this diasporic phenomenon

initiated with Japanese immigration to Brazil, in addition to its several descendants with the will to maintain the pre-migratory culture of their parents (Lesser 2000). In Brazil, these people, their traditions and culture are also transformed, now into very dynamic hybrid forms that simultaneously challenge and enrich the study of culture itself.

As Yanagisako (2002) perceives, as an important effect, the emergence of “new traditions” referring not only to kinship, but also to what is meant by culture. In the Brazilian case, we must also consider the powerful religious syncretism already existing in the country, affecting in unprecedented ways a “hybrid Okinawan tradition”. Mori (2003; 2008; 2012) has already introduced how these transformations are powerful not only in an Okinawan Identity discourse, but also in the shamanic practices in São Paulo.

These transformations show, in fact, the ingenuity and performance of these Okinawan descendants in Brazil, using a series of strategies and alternatives to deal with the "maintenance of traditions" in the country, what Mori (2008; 2012) understands as a creative reorganization of space and subjectivity, thus creating new identities and new ways to understand “tradition”.

Associated with the understandings of a complex kinship system such as the Okinawan kinship, we perceive the emergence of the performance like never before seen. Given the complexity of this kinship system, it is possible to understand, as I have already said on another occasion (Silva 2016), not only the variety of practices among the descendants of Okinawan in Brazil, but also the profusion of a great confusion about “what is right or wrong”, “what or how it should be done” in relation to rituals and the Okinawan traditions.

The cause or consequence of misfortune is, according to the *yuta*, the lack of respect or care with the ancestor worship, shedding light to serious questions about kinship and family to be considered by Social Anthropology. In many cases I could see several Okinawan descendants who feel "stuck", frustrated or forced to adopt and understand perceptions of Okinawan kinship, family bonds and relationship that they never met or learned in life, forcing them to reorganize family routines and the family daily life. We have here a dispute of legitimacy and authenticity, on the one side being a “culture from Okinawa” and, on the other hand, its new form, transformed by a succession of hybridisms.

Because of the Okinawan family system still operating, being constructed or reinvented by the *yuta* in Brazil, these families are indebted to think and to rethink their family bonds and more important, to build new ones, new family ties, new family arrangements that involves the inclusion of the dead. In this case, we can see how this transnational migratory flow between Brazil and Japan affects the family daily life, offering everyday dilemmas that challenge our own conceptions of what is family.

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