

History of Japanese Cubans (on the Isle of Youth)

—From Country Assistance Evaluation of Cuba —

The Isle of Youth (Isla de la Juventud in Spanish) is an island located approximately 100 km south of the main Island of Cuba, a trip of about 30 minutes by air, and with a population of about 80,000. The island thrived mainly on production of sugar cane in the early 20th century and is now producing rice as well as fruits and vegetables. In view of its rich natural environment, which is said to have inspired Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson to write his novel *Treasure Island*, along with beautiful dive spots that are famous internationally, there have been growing expectations for expansion of its tourism business. Of the 1,000 Japanese Cubans living in Cuba, about 300 dwell on the island. The evaluation team visited the island as part of its field survey to explore the history of Japanese Cubans and review the implementation status of Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects.



Meeting with Nikkei people of the Isle of Youth

Immigration of Japanese people to Cuba began in 1908, with the first settler, Masaru Miyagi, from Okinawa Prefecture. There was an influx of Japanese immigrants from Japan and from the continents of North and South America during the period from 1919 to the mid-1930s, reaching its peak in around 1926. Immigration of Japanese people did not occur for about five decades from 1936 to 1998. Immigrants and their descendants (“Nikkei” people) celebrated their 100th anniversary in 2008. Five generations of Nikkei people are now living on the Isle of Youth, including Mr. Michiro Shimazu, a first-generation settler who is 105 years old (the oldest settler living in Cuba). They are originally from nine prefectures, namely Okinawa, Kagoshima, Kumamoto, Fukuoka, Hiroshima, Nagano, Niigata, Fukushima and Miyagi.

Over their long history of more than 100 years, Nikkei people faced a number of difficulties. During World War II, they were regarded as enemy nationals, and about 350 men were confined in a concentration camp on the island from 1941 to 1946. The lives of their families were equally difficult and insecure. This concentration camp was later turned into the National Memorial Museum, Presidio Modelo. Presently, the museum is open to the public and shows visitors various exhibitions, including how Nikkei people held in the camp were treated during the war time.

After going through these hardships, Nikkei people have become members of Cuban society. They have also been working to pass on Japanese traditions and culture from generation to generation. As one effort, the Japanese Cuban Society of the Isle of Youth is undertaking activities to promote communication among Nikkei people, including hosting a traditional Obon Festival every summer.

As the aging of Nikkei people and generational shifts proceeded, however, many generations now have no direct knowledge of Japan. During an interview, they expressed their expectations for more cooperation and assistance from Japan in this field, with many voicing their desire to receive Japanese language teaching volunteers to study Japanese, to set up a place to gather, such as Japanese Cuban Society Center, and to create occasions to communicate with Japanese people and other Nikkei people in neighboring countries. The administrative authorities of the special municipality of the island, being eager to reinforce their relationship with Nikkei people, also conveyed the intention to provide assistance if the said society center were to be built on the island.

Note: To date, a total of nine Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects have been provided to the island, including “Project for Improving Productivity of Farmland of the Camilo Cienfuegos Loan Service Cooperative Association in the Special Municipality of the Isle of Youth.” During the field survey, the evaluation team visited facilities related to the “Project for Promotion of Rice Production in the Isle of Youth” and “Project for Portable Water Supply System Improvement on the Isle of Youth.”



Pump station installed for “Project for Portable Water Supply System Improvement on the Isle of Youth”