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Viva *matsuri*!

To commemorate 100 years of Japanese emigration to Brazil, and the countries' continuing close links, *taiko* drummers from both cultures will be powering a huge festival set for Sao Paulo on June 21

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STAFF WRITER

The beats and multilayered vibrations of hundreds of drums played by 1,200 sweating men and women will stir the bodies and souls of 30,000 people at the Sambodromo samba venue in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on June 21.

But it won't be Brazil's homegrown samba drums that the crowd will be dancing and clapping to — instead, it will be Japan's traditional taiko drums driving the *matsuri* ("festival" in Japanese) being staged to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first Japanese emigration to Brazil.

Back before 1908, the then Meiji government — facing unrest due to rapid socioeconomic change and rising rural poverty — had already supported migrations of mostly landless laborers to Hokkaido, Hawaii, Australia, the Philippines, North America, Mexico, Fiji and other South Pacific destinations. Then, after 790 of Japan's "surplus population" left for Peru in 1899, the focus shifted to Brazil. By 1941, when emigration there ceased with the outbreak of the Pacific War, some 190,000 Japanese, many benefiting from subsidized transportation introduced in 1935, had made Brazil their home.

Appropriately, as that first group of emigrants arrived at the port of Santos, 60 km south of Sao Paulo, on June 18, 1908, the biggest of many events celebrating the anniversary will be the festival set to be held in Sao Paulo on June 21.

There, most of the 1,200 taiko drummers will be young Japanese-Brazilians — some of the 1.6 million Brazilians of Japanese descent (around 1 percent of the population) now living in Latin America's biggest country — performing alongside a group of professional players from Japan.

Yoichi Watanabe, leader of the world-famous group named Amanojyaku, has visited Brazil every year since 2004 to teach his performance art to young people there. Since then, he has seen the number of taiko-playing organizations in the country rise from 23 to 59 today.

"It is a great honor to be conducting the concert and to have become one of the people playing the role of being a bridge between Japan and Brazil," said Watanabe — who co-composed "Kizuna (Bond)," the tune to be played at the concert, along with Daihachi Oguchi, taiko master of Suwa Daiko, a taiko school in Suwa, Nagano Prefecture.

And that tune will have particular resonance for many in the audience, as drummer Fernando Kuniyoshi, a third generation Japanese-Brazilian living in Londorina, a city west of Sao Paulo, explained.

"The meaning of 'Kizuna (Bond)' is very important," he said, "because the biggest Japanese community outside of Japan is in Brazil, and many Japanese-Brazilians are now also working, studying and having families in Japan."

At the Sambodromo event, 26 groups, each comprising 45 players, will perform on three kinds of taiko drums — *odaiko* (large barrel-shaped instruments with a powerful, low-pitched tone), *okedodaiko* (middle-size, midrange drums) and *shimedaiko* (small drums that produce sharp, high notes) — in the huge 550×16-meter venue.

Kuniyoshi, who has spent the last two years in Japan studying how to play and make taiko, said the first part of "Kizuna" consists of solemn beats and the second part, composed by Watanabe, demonstrates new techniques of taiko playing and is more powerful.

"I think the music made by the two masters is a great composition that brings traditional and modern beats together," he said in a telephone interview.

Commenting on the explosive physical energy and excitement he incorporated into this work, Watanabe — a master with more than 30 years' taiko experience — said: "I consciously created this to be an energetic tune so that it stirs the blood of people who play it and listen."

Since he established Amanojyaku, an ensemble with seven drummers, in 1986, Watanabe has progressively integrated funky beats with the proud heritage of traditional taiko. He has, too, taken Amanojyaku (which means "a mischievous fairylike imp") to more than 40 countries. After the group's first trip to Brazil in 2004, he took them back again the year after for teaching sessions in eight cities with young Japanese-Brazilians under the auspices of the Nippon Taiko Foundation, after it received a request from the taiko association in Brazil.

But when Watanabe first saw a taiko performance by the Japanese-Brazilians, he said he was surprised at the gap between what they thought of as Japanese drumming and genuine taiko.

"The performance was something like Samba and the costumes of the players were decorated with feathers," Watanabe recalled. So, before starting the first teaching session, the taiko master tried to get his students to understand taiko as a Japanese art form that expresses various scenes and mood-evoking feelings, such as the sound of rain or waves that taiko players have sometimes contributed to performances of kabuki.

Since 2005 Watanabe has conducted exams certified by the Nippon Taiko Foundation. 'Every student failed seven times on average. But when they passed, they were so happy that they cried,' he said.

Beat master: Yoichi Watanabe (above and top), who has led the taiko ensemble Amanojyaku for 22 years — and incorporated funky rhythms into the traditional and "spiritual" art form — displays his prowess at a Tokyo concert in 2006. NAOKAZU OIKAWA

Before 1908, the Meiji government — facing unrest due to rapid socio-economic change and rural poverty — had supported many migrations of mostly landless laborers. . . . Then the focus shifted to Brazil.

Implicit in this, Watanabe says he also told his students the four keys to playing taiko — as described by the four Chinese characters *shin*, *gi*, *tai* and *rei* — meaning "heart," "technique," "body" and "courtesy."

"When you play taiko, you use the wrists, the elbows, the legs and the knees. You need to practice for tens of thousands of times so that you can use your whole body to play the drum," he said.

To this end, each day Watanabe and his students spend 10 hours from 8 a.m. practicing taiko during the three-day teaching sessions he's held in the city.

Bruno Takao Murakami, a third-generation Japanese-Brazilian who learned from Watanabe, said his teaching brought obvious improvements.

"After his lessons, the students could play the drum with more clear sounds and the timing of the beats on the three types of drums also became consistent," said Murakami, a resident of Londorina who spoke in a telephone interview.

To level up the students' skills, since 2005 Watanabe has conducted qualifying examinations certified by the Nippon Taiko Foundation. The beginners-level exam involves both a written test and actual playing of taiko across 22 patterns of rhythms.

"Every student failed seven times on average. But when they passed, they were so happy that they cried," Watanabe said.

Although its history goes back more than 2,000 years, there is clearly plenty in taiko to fascinate 21st-century Japanese-Brazilians.

Fernando Kuniyoshi said he first saw a performance at a festival in Hiratsuka, Kanagawa Prefecture, when he came to Japan to work in a factory there 10 years ago. "It was wonderful," he said. "I heard the beat with not just my ears. I could feel it with all my body. I had never felt like that before."

Like Kuniyoshi, many Japanese-Brazilians have come to Japan to work since the immigration law was revised in 1990 to allow foreigners of Japanese descent to work in Japan to help plug labor shortages in some sectors, notably in the automaking industry. As of Dec. 31, 2006, in fact, some 313,000 Brazilian nationals were registered as living in Japan.

Both in Brazil and Japan, Murakami said that taiko helps Japanese-Brazilians discover their roots.

"When we are in Japan, we are called 'Brazilians.' Then when we are back in Brazil, we are called 'Japanese,' said the 24-year-old, who spent four years in Japan since age 12 as his father worked here. "But by playing taiko, I can be aware that my blood is Japanese though I live in Brazil," Murakami said.

His sentiments were echoed by Kuniyoshi, whose father Ryosei arrived at Santos as a 7-year-old in December 1936 with his parents from Okinawa Prefecture.

Now 79, Ryosei said in a telephone interview from Londorina that after arriving in the New World, his family grew cotton on rented land in the state of Sao Paulo. "But Japanese emigrants faced many hardships," he recalled, adding that his family — like many others

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On the pulse: Japanese taiko master Yoichi Watanabe, leader of the world-famous Amanojyaku group (left), leads Japanese-Brazilian learners in Brazil (above) in a rhythmic exploration of their ancestral roots. COURTESY OF AMANOJYAKU

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who labored on coffee plantations — was barely able to survive.

So, like many others in similar straits, in 1951 Ryosei moved to Londorina by himself. Eventually, he was able to get into a university in the city and then became a lawyer — a success story shared by many children of Japanese emigrants, he said, in a trend that earned them a high standing in their adopted homeland.

Now, his son Fernando says he is proud of being a Japanese-Brazilian.

"Here in Brazil, we have a lot of respect from other people. Because Japanese-Brazilians have worked harder and have been honest, we are honored in the society," he said.

But the downside to this is that most third- and fourth-generation Japanese-Brazilians cannot speak their ancestral language.

That was the case with Fernando — until he began studying Japanese after encountering taiko.

"Through learning taiko, my identity as a Japanese-Brazilian changed and I am more interested in Japanese culture," he said with a smile in his voice.

"Taiko plays the role of introducing Japanese culture to the young people. The drum makes a sound that goes straight to their hearts."

Soul beat: Yoichi Watanabe tells his Japanese-Brazilian students how they need "heart, technique, body and courtesy" to play *taiko*. AMANOJYAKU

Now, as he looks forward to playing in the Sambodromo in Sao Paulo on June 21, Fernando enthused, saying "We try to maintain Japanese culture here in Brazil and to let Japanese-Brazilians know more about Japan before going to the country.

"And I think the taiko performance will be like an explosion of Japanese culture here."

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