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Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Josephine Baker: A Chanteuse and a Fighter

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4jq1f16w>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 2(1)

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Publication Date

2010-03-30

DOI

10.5070/T821006983

Peer reviewed

Josephine Baker: A Chanteuse and a Fighter

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Introduction: The Adoption of an Occupation Baby

Over half a century ago, in 1954, an African-American known as ‘The Amber Queen’ visited Japan. She was Josephine Baker (1906–1975), the dancer and singer who had leaped to fame in Paris in the 1920s. The newspaper Asahi Shinbun described the feverish welcome she received on her first visit to the country:

“The amber-skinned singer Josephine Baker arrived from Paris on an Air France flight into Tokyo Haneda Airport at 9.40pm on the 13th. She has come to give fundraising performances for the abandoned mixed-race children of the Elizabeth Sanders Home in Oiso in Kanagawa Prefecture. The airport was thronged with many fans, including young women and black American soldiers, who had flocked in spite of the fine rain. Dressed in a black suit and a blue overcoat, Mrs Baker was greeted in the lobby by the director of the Sanders Home, Mrs Miki Sawada, the First Secretary of the French Embassy Monsieur Travis and the Daiei Studio actress Noboru Kiritachi among others. When two children from the Sanders Home, seven-year-olds Toshikazu Sato and Misao Kageyama, presented her with a bouquet, she gave the half-black boy and girl affectionate kisses on the cheeks. When she greeted all who had gathered, her voice was unexpectedly youthful for a 47 year old: ‘This is my first visit to Japan. Nothing could make me happier.’ She then headed for the Imperial Hotel with her pianist Milos Bartek and two others.” (14th April 1954)

As the article states, the purpose of Josephine’s visit to Japan was to give charity performances in support of abandoned mixed-race children. She had been invited by her friend Miki Sawada, the director of the Sanders Home, who was caring for the children known as ‘Occupation Babies’. The proceeds from Josephine’s performances around Japan would fund the construction of a boys’ dormitory at the Elizabeth Sanders Home, Baker Hall, and it still stands today although its use has changed. Josephine’s name and her words are carved at the bottom of a pillar on one of the corners of the building.

However, Josephine had a more important personal reason for her visit: she was going to adopt a child from the Home. Indeed, upon her arrival at the airport she asked Miki: “Where is my child?” and she was keen to meet the boy whom it was already agreed she would adopt. So Miki changed their plan, which was for Josephine to meet the child, Akio Yamamoto, three days later at the Elizabeth Sanders Home in Oiso, and instead took him to the Imperial Hotel the very next day. In the evening edition of Asahi Shinbun on the 14th, there is a photograph of a smiling Josephine holding Akio alongside an article headlined: “The First Meeting with Little Akio”.

Josephine subsequently visited the Elizabeth Sanders Home and adopted one more boy on the spur of the moment. Thus, the first two of Josephine’s 12 adopted children from different parts of the world and different cultural, religious and racial backgrounds, who would become known as The Rainbow Tribe, were from Japan. The youngsters would spend their childhoods at Josephine’s chateau, Les Milandes, in the Dordogne region of southwest France.

Miki Sawada and Josephine Baker

The Princess from Big Business and the Black Girl from the Slums

At the Elizabeth Sanders Home in Oiso, The long dark tunnel is still there. It is a strange frontier territory between the Home and the outside world.

At one time, some mothers just abandoned their babies at the entrance of this tunnel. Others told their children: “Walk to the other end of the tunnel, a nice lady will be there,” as they let go of their infant’s hand. Those mothers then hurried away. The abandoned children had a skin tone that was either a little darker or a little lighter than that of ordinary Japanese children. This happened in countless cases around the 1950s, at the tunnel that was the entrance to the Elizabeth Sanders Home in Oiso.

This home for infants was founded in February 1948. The institution, which became well known as a home for mixed-race children, was a major project started by Miki Sawada. This eldest daughter of the Iwasaki family of the former Mitsubishi conglomerate, who had a privileged upbringing and who married the diplomat Renzo Sawada to become Miki Sawada, was moved by the problem of mixed-race children in the wake of the War and decided to provide for such abandoned youngsters herself.

At its inception, Miki could not have imagined that the Home would turn into such a large-scale project with such longevity; but well over 1000 children subsequently

arrived at and left this nest. Even today, the Home, a little altered, at any one time is home to almost 100 children whose birth parents have not been able to take care of them. Although the Home is no longer caring for 'Occupation Babies', the humanitarian spirit that forms the basis of its nurturing philosophy has not changed. One of the most powerful connections Miki formed was with the internationally famous African American performer Josephine Baker. Baker, who visited Japan for the first time in 1954, adopted two boys, Akio Yamamoto and Teruya Kimura, from among the mixed-race children known as 'Occupation Babies'.

The friendship between Miki Sawada and Josephine Baker dates back to the 1930s, when the two first met in Paris. It continued throughout their lives, until Josephine's sudden death in 1975. There were no common elements between the social circumstances of Miki, who grew up like a princess in the Iwasaki mansion, and those of Josephine, who was born in the slums of St Louis, a large city in Missouri; who became a dancer in her early teens without having received sufficient education; and whose journey to success started with barnstorming. Nevertheless, what each woman recognised in the other was a common instinctive sentiment that transcended their races, religions and social positions, as well as the geographical distance between them. They possessed an intrinsic strength that easily overcame, dissolved and rendered insignificant the social conditions and mutually alien cultural circumstances that separated them. The special nature that they shared in common was what led them to tackle, and to make great strides in, social projects that were beyond the abilities of ordinary people.

The social work that Miki and Josephine undertook was the difficult task of bringing up abandoned children. Miki cared for the abandoned mixed-race children of American soldiers and Japanese women in a postwar Japan that was impoverished and under occupation. Josephine, on the other hand, having experienced the deep-rooted racism of her native St Louis and the United States in general, dreamed of a society without racism and determined to adopt children of various origins and raise them together from a very young age. She believed that the children's early environment and education would create a new kind of human being, as it were, who would not be conscious of racism or skin color.

Wishing that one day the world would be without discrimination, Josephine dubbed her chateau in the Dordogne in southwest France "the Capital of the World", and there she started to build a new 'family of humanity', made up of the 12 children she adopted from various countries. This new family was called The Rainbow Tribe.

Miki and Josephine had different objectives in their plans and different means of achieving them. The fact that they nevertheless trusted each other and supported one another when they hit difficulties was based on the fact that, even if their methods were different, they shared common ground on a fundamental level in terms of their ideals and how they chose to live their lives.

The Meeting in Paris

Miki Sawada first met Josephine Baker in Paris. Miki had moved to the city in 1932 with her husband Renzo, who was posted as a counsellor of the Japanese embassy. According to the book *This is Your Mother* by Sumi Kozakai (1988), Miki and Josephine met at a party at the home of a Russian émigré. In his essay “The Amber Dancer,” Renzo Sawada describes in detail how the two women went on to become good friends.¹ According to this essay the Sawadas were often invited to stay at Josephine’s residence in Le Vésinet near Paris where they spent weekends of luxury.

It was in this period that Josephine’s popularity continued to rise, even as that of the chanson singer and dancer Mistinguette (1875-1956), who had been overwhelmingly popular until Josephine’s arrival, faded. Renzo Sawada’s essay refers with admiration to Josephine’s progress from dancer to a singer, revealing her “outstanding skills” by starring in the Offenbach operetta ‘La Créole’ in 1934. We learn too that “the eagerness with which she studied French was extremely touching and she showed extraordinary progress.” Sawada also mentions how Josephine would fill an open-top car with “a few hundred small baskets” containing sweets, fruit and toys, and visit the local orphanage on a regular basis. When Miki heard about Josephine’s visits, she asked if she could accompany her.

Miki described her own memories of that period in her book *Black Skin and a White Heart – the Road to the Sanders Home* (1963, 2001):

“It was also around that time that I became close to Josephine Baker. There was no other first-rate actress who was as modest as she was. And there was no other actress whom workers at every level in the theatre held so dearly and was so attached to. From the curtain man to the lighting designer, she was always tapping on their shoulders and inquiring after their families. If anyone said their child was ill, she would give away without hesitation the flowers, fruit, chocolate and anything else that was sent to her dressing room. Once a show was over, without fail she would pile up a mountain of baskets containing sweets in her open-top car and visit the children of the slums. I went with her on several occasions. She was adored by the poor people as if she was their saviour... I ended up being seduced by the Josephine of those times. And if I asked her to do something for a Japanese she would take good care of them. I know that, without saying a word, she bought and sent tickets for a ship from Marseilles to Japan, to help some Japanese people who wanted to return to Japan but were unable to do so. She sent food to a female Japanese painter who lived in an attic on the Left Bank, and took care of her behind

¹ Renzo Sawada, *Essays – As I Feel It*, p44–46

the scenes in various ways, until after I had left for New York. Through her introductions, I was able to meet many famous French artists.”²

There was an antecedent to Miki asking Josephine Baker to visit the slums with her: Miki had lived in London before Paris and had visited an orphanage there, Dr Bernardo’s Home. Like Josephine, Miki must have been spurred by a flash of inspiration, or an instinctive humanitarianism, or a kind of revelation. Ever after, Dr Bernardo’s deeds and life-philosophy continued to dwell somewhere in Sawada’s mind.

After Paris, Miki moved to New York with her husband. Josephine and she met there too in 1935, when Josephine returned to the States for the first time in ten years and performed a homecoming concert.

In 1930s New York, black people were discriminated against as a matter of course. Most hotels and restaurants were exclusively for whites and did not allow black people entry. Even though she was already rich and famous, Josephine was refused accommodation in a hotel and was made to feel humiliated. She was at a loss, when Miki came to the rescue, suggesting that she stay at a studio she had rented.

Josephine’s Anticipation of Her Visit to Japan

Josephine Baker visited Japan for the first time in the spring of 1954. Let us refer to the biography *Joséphine*, written by her and Jo Bouillon and published after her death, for a description of the time around her visit:

Although it was her first visit to Japan, Josephine recounted that “thanks to a remarkable woman, Miki Sawada”, she “felt [she] knew Japan.”³ Through Miki, Josephine had become acquainted with Japanese people living in Paris, New York and London, and they had “given [her] insight into their astonishing civilization.”⁴

Josephine had also been a model for Tsuguharu Fujita [the Japanese-born artist who became a well-known French painter under the name “Leonard Foujita”] in Paris in the 1920s. Josephine referred to Fujita as her “painter friend” and she particularly liked his name, which she was told meant ‘Inheritor of Peace’.

One of Josephine’s aims in visiting Japan was to adopt a child. She wondered with excitement whether the baby would have a graceful name like ‘Tsuguharu’. If this name is written phonetically in French the spelling is alarmingly long: ‘Tsougouharu’. The combination of letters looks strange, and it is very difficult for French or

² Miki Sawada, *Black Skin and a White Heart: The Road to the Sanders Home*, p103–104

³ Baker & Bouillon, p192

⁴ Baker & Bouillon, p192

American people to pronounce. Josephine was nevertheless keen on 'Tsuguharu', probably because she associated Fujita's own allure with this mysterious name. Josephine harboured a powerful longing for Japan just through this sort of personal contact she had with Japanese people. With her deep affection for Japan and her anticipation of her first adopted child growing, Josephine was already excited before she set off for Japan.

The 'Occupation Babies' Who Became 'The Rainbow Tribe'

Akio and Teruya

As she related in her autobiography, once arrived in Japan, Josephine visited the Elizabeth Sanders Home, wondering with excitement which child would become hers; she related that she would have liked to take them all home had it been possible. Out of the many children she saw, one boy followed her around and clambered onto her lap wanting to be held. It was Akio... This description of the meeting in the biography *Joséphine* sounds fateful, but as mentioned earlier, it had in fact been decided in advance that she would adopt Akio.

Miki Sawada told Josephine the boy was Korean, and added all the other information she had on the child. Akio had been left under an umbrella to keep him out of the rain. His date of birth, 7th July 1952, was written on a note fastened to his clothing. He had a small red bag hanging around his neck (perhaps it was a lucky charm) and on it were written the words: "I shall not take life" (a Buddhist precept). No name had been left, so he was named Akio, meaning 'Autumn Boy', as he had been left outside the Home in autumn.⁵

It is not in fact clear whether Akio's mother was a Korean resident in Japan, nowadays widely referred to as 'zainichi', or a Japanese. In the resources at Josephine Baker's memorial museum at Les Milandes it is stated that the mother was Korean. In addition, most of the research papers and biographies published in the West refer to the boy as half-Korean, and according to one account he was born of an American soldier and a Korean woman in Seoul during the Korean War. However, Akio himself asserts that his mother was Japanese.⁶

In the series of articles in the *Asahi Shinbun* at the time carrying headlines about Josephine adopting abandoned Japanese children, there is no reference anywhere to Akio's mother being Korean. The article on 18th February 1954 gives more detailed information on Akio and his mother:

⁵ Baker & Bouillon, p194

⁶ Yoshiki Inomata, *Black Venus*, p114

“Little Akio was an abandoned child. In the afternoon of the 9th of September last year, a woman aged around 27 or 28, whose surname was Yamamoto, was sheltering from the rain under the eaves of tobacconist Mrs Masako Ueda, at 1201 Namamugi, Tsurumi Ward, Yokohama City. The woman left her baby at this address saying that she would fetch an umbrella, and did not return. The following day the head of Tsurumi Ward created a family register for the baby, named him and took him to a home for infants in Kawasaki. He was temporarily transferred to a home in Tsurumi but was then returned to Kawasaki. (From the registration record at the Central Children’s Advisory Bureau.)”

Another article, dated 14th April, gives this information about Akio:

“Last year Mrs Baker approached Mrs Miki Sawada (51), the director of the Elizabeth Sanders Home in Oiso, Kanagawa Prefecture, asking to adopt a Japanese orphan, so Mrs Sawada chose Little Akio from the Kawasaki infants’ home and took him to the Elizabeth Sanders Home.”

As we can see, the accounts in the Asahi Shinbun articles are considerably different from that given in Baker and Bouillon’s biography, *Joséphine*. If it is true that Miki said the boy was Korean, it is plausible that his mother was a Korean national resident in Japan. For Josephine the differences between Japan and Korea were probably immaterial. Both are small east-Asian countries, and what was important for Josephine was to adopt a child from Asia, as opposed to a specific country. It may be that she therefore did not listen properly to Miki’s explanation of the boy’s origins. It was true that Akio was abandoned on a rainy day in autumn and that his name derived from the season when he was found.

According to the records of the Elizabeth Sanders Home, Akio’s birth date was 7th July 1952, and he entered the Home when he was one-and-a-half years old, on 13th January 1954. This corresponds to the time when Miki, following a request from Josephine, brought Akio to the Home from Kawasaki, as described in the newspaper article. We do not know, of course, whether the dates of birth in the Home’s records are accurate. This is because, while some mothers left their child’s date of birth when they were abandoned, many walked away without leaving any information at all.

As Josephine headed for the gates to leave with Akio in her arms, she spotted another boy sitting under a large tree nearby. “I studied the baby’s serious face. There was something extremely touching about him...” (Baker & Bouillon, p195) With that, Josephine decided to adopt him as well. Teruya (later renamed Janot) was born on 15th July 1953 and he was taken into the Elizabeth Sanders Home when he was just over three months old, on 27th October. No newspaper article on Teruya could be found, and it was unclear which kanji (Chinese characters) were used to write his name. However, his name is given in kanji in a handwritten document produced by the chief priest of the Tokyo Grand Shrine, Toshinaga Bojo, who

conducted the Shinto ceremony. Where the names were to be read out in the ceremony, there are four blank circles drawn vertically for each child's name, separated by a comma. In the margin of the document the names of the two children are written: "Akio Yamamoto (one year and ten months), Teruya Kimura (nine months)". Next to the kanji '清治' the pronunciation, 'Teruya', is indicated.

In the records it is stated that Akio and Teruya left the Home on the same date, 5th May 1954, and the reason given is: "adopted by a foreigner". Josephine's name is not written anywhere. However, among the records held at the Home, there is a photograph of Josephine, wearing a plain suit, next to Miki. Each woman is sitting on a simple chair and holding a baby. There are two men in suits, who were serving as witnesses, sitting to the side. On the basis of the photograph, the child on Josephine's lap must be Teruya and the one Miki is holding must be Akio. The simple chairs look like the kind used at Shinto shrines – the photograph is of a Shinto ceremony that was carried out for the adoption of the two boys.

Who was it that wished to have a Shinto adoption ceremony? It is hard to imagine that Miki, who was the director of a children's home partly supported by the Protestant Church and a devout Christian, particularly insisted on a Shinto ceremony. It was probably the wish of Josephine, who had come to favour all things Japanese.

The Shinto Ritual Prayer

The ritual prayer by the chief priest of the Tokyo Grand Shrine, Toshinaga Bojo, criticised racist societies and asserted that all children born into this world should equally feel the "joy of living".

Even today, many years later, the reader of such a document, realizing the circumstances of the children at the Home who had been denied the fundamental emotion of 'joy of living' from birth, must feel a deep pain in the heart. How must Josephine have felt as she listened to the priest's prayer? As far as one can tell from the photograph, she sat quietly, brimming with a peaceful tenderness.

Chief priest Bojo's prayer begins with the words: "Before the great god Amaterasu, the guardian of peace, who worships the most high and noble Great Light, I, chief priest of the Tokyo Grand Shrine, Toshinaga Bojo, humbly and respectfully declare. . . ." Although it is long, the entire prayer is quoted here:

"Those born into this world should all equally experience the joy of living without being subjected to the slightest discrimination, and it is most regrettable that racial discrimination still continues in this world. Feeling this very deeply, the world-famous singer Josephine Baker, who for many years has suffered in her heart from racial discrimination, and dedicated her efforts to eradicating it, has come to Japan and performed charitable concerts for mixed-race children across the country, displaying

her outstanding artistry and impressing us profoundly. On 12th April Mrs Baker visited the Elizabeth Sanders Home run by Mrs Miki Sawada. She extended her warm hand of love to the children of fate left behind by the War and presented them with many tokens of this love. She also chose two children, named Akio Yamamoto and Teruya Kimura, from among the infants and adopted them as her own. She will return to France with them and will nurture them into strong and righteous human beings. This deed by Mrs Baker stems from the noble philanthropy she has developed through her life experiences, and it expresses her pure, shining and sincere heart, which prays for world peace and dedicatedly calls for the defence of human rights; as such, her deed inspires irrepressible emotion in the hearts of others. On this auspicious day, Mrs Baker, the two children, Mrs Miki Sawada, who has overseen the adoptions, and Mr Wataru Narahashi present themselves before the Sun Goddess to recount the course of events and to pray for their happiness in the future. I reverently ask the Sun Goddess to hear and understand them with tranquillity. I reverently ask the Sun Goddess to grant her boundless good fortune upon the new 'mother and children'; I ask that even after these children have travelled to their mother's country the Sun Goddess may protect and bless them day and night so they may not suffer in their bodies or in their hearts. I ask that they become good people who do not act against the heart of their mother. I ask that the Sun Goddess also bestow her broad and abundant divine guidance upon the mother, who stakes her life to attain the high ideals that she continues to seek from the people of the world. I pray that the people of the world accept the Shinto way as the true way, bring their hearts and strengths together, and work hard prudently in order to realise world peace. I ask the Sun Goddess to protect them and bring them happiness."

Of course Josephine would not have understood a single word of what priest Bojo said. However, from Josephine's respectful expression as she attended the ceremony with a child on her lap, we sense her sincere and innocent nature that accepted an alien culture straightforwardly and in a natural manner. This was also a quality demonstrated by Miki, who did not insist on a ceremony of her own religion.

Rather than making judgements based on reason, Josephine felt in her heart that one should be tolerant towards all faiths. She accepted both Catholicism and Judaism and she was not prejudiced against Islam. She worked hard to educate all the children she went on to adopt about their ancestral religions. Whether this ultimately succeeded is another matter.

A Decision Made on a Whim

Once she had adopted her children, Josephine took them home to meet their new father. Josephine had long ago told the man who would become her husband, Jo Bouillon, about her dream to build The Rainbow Tribe and a farm open to visitors at Les Milandes. Jo understood that to marry Josephine was to marry that dream, and he was mentally prepared to some degree.

The two married in the chapel at Les Milandes on 3rd June 1947, which was also Josephine's 41st birthday. Josephine had spent over four years in North Africa during the Second World War, and there she had suffered a major illness and undergone two operations, from which she was recovering. There is a theory that this resulted in her being unable to have children, while another story is that after her marriage she suffered several miscarriages. Josephine herself spoke of neither of these scenarios. What is certain is that when she married Jo she was already middle-aged and at the stage of giving up the idea of having her own children. The only way of realising her dream of creating a household full of children was to adopt. Moreover, adoption was the only means of turning her dream of having a family of three or four children of different skin tones into a reality.

Jo was in agreement with Josephine over the idea of adopting. However, he had not been made aware of the way in which the children would be chosen. According to the biography *Joséphine*, Josephine attended an anti-racism rally held in Paris on 28th December 1953. It was organised by LICRA, which will be referred to later, and it was through this organisation that Josephine would travel to Japan. After the rally Josephine returned to Les Milandes, and while preparing for her trip to Japan she asked her husband: "Jo, is it all right with you if I bring the first of the Bouillon children back with me?" Jo writes: "And that's how I learned that my first son would be Oriental."⁷

Jo, who assumed that he would have just one adopted child, could not have imagined that Josephine would return with two sons, Akio and Teruya; it was entirely on a whim that she brought both of them home. Jo must have undoubtedly been astonished when Josephine arrived at Les Milandes with Akio and Teruya in her arms. When Jo asked which was theirs, Josephine simply said: "Both". Jo later wrote: "After nine years together, I was beginning to know my wife. Still, her astonishing courage... never ceased to amaze me."⁸

That said, the good-hearted Jo understood that the existence of 'Occupation Babies', born of American soldiers and local women, was an American problem as well as a Japanese one. Josephine had sensed that in Japanese society, children of mixed parentage were strictly and cruelly discriminated against, and she thus wished to bring both boys home at any cost; and Jo sympathised with this sentiment. It must be said as well that Josephine's "astonishing courage" was frequently criticised as 'thoughtlessness' by those around her. Certainly, to consider matters thoroughly and to plan life with great care was not something Josephine excelled at.

⁷ Baker & Bouillon, p190-191

⁸ Baker & Bouillon, p195

The Amber Queen's Performances in Japan

The Tour Schedule

Josephine Baker did not visit Japan solely in order to adopt children: rather, she was invited by Miki Sawada to give fundraising performances in aid of the mixed-race children. According to the schedule of Josephine Baker's visit to Japan that is kept at the Elizabeth Sanders Home, Josephine's party of four left Paris aboard an Air France flight on 11th April 1954 and arrived at Haneda Airport at 8.30pm on the 13th. (Priest Bojo's script for the ritual prayer states that Josephine visited the Home on the 12th, but this is inaccurate). The date of Akio and Teruya's departure from the Home is given as 5th May, which was also the date Josephine left Japan. During that period, where did she perform? This was her schedule:

19th April – Nagasaki (Mitsubishi Hall)
20th April – Sasebo (Municipal Meeting Hall)
21st April – Fukuoka (Electric Hall)
22nd April – Nagoya (State Theatre)
23rd April – Hiroshima (Toyo-za Theatre)
25th – 29th April – Tokyo (Imperial Theatre)
1st May – Kyoto (Yae Hall)
2nd – 3rd May – Osaka (Takarazuka Grand Theatre)

Thus, from her departure from Paris on 11th April until 5th May, Josephine stayed in Japan for over three weeks. During that time she managed to perform on 13 dates. Moving between venues could not have been easy in that pre-bullet-train era, when there were also few internal flights. It was quite a gruelling schedule, which sometimes included travel by sleeper train.

In addition to her concerts, Josephine's primary objective during her tour was to make public speeches. She had been asked by the French branch of the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA) to give lectures in order to establish a similar organisation in Japan.⁹ LICRA, founded in 1928, was initially organized to fight anti-Semitism in Europe. However, it gradually came to tackle various other forms of discrimination and developed movements that challenged Apartheid in South Africa, discrimination against black people in the United States and that against the indigenous people of the Amazon, among others. Josephine told her Japanese audience: "I believe I have a mission on earth: aiding people to join together in friendship and understand each other before it's too late."¹⁰

⁹ Baker & Bouillon, p193

¹⁰ Baker & Bouillon, p193

Even before she joined the French Resistance in the 1940s, Josephine was already preparing the ground for her campaign to end discrimination and prejudice. According to Katya Montaignac's *Chez Joséphine Baker au château des Milandes* (2002), Josephine became a supporter of LICRA in 1938. However, we can surmise that she already knew of the existence of this organisation in the early 1930s. In 1933 Josephine was invited to the inauguration ceremony of the Commune libre de la fol' Butte as a guest of honour. Her connection with this communist organisation must have been superficial, yet there is a photograph of her at the ceremony next to the Italian 'count' Giuseppe Abatino, known as Pepito, who was her partner and producer,¹¹ proving that she had contact with an idealistic organisation even if it was a loose association. Moreover, it is illogical to think that Josephine did not know of the existence of LICRA, which protested against racism and anti-Semitism, given that she lived in Paris where the Communist Party's activities and anti-Semitic movements were thriving, and she married a Jew, Jean Lion, in 1937. She would presumably have known about, and read, the official LICRA publication, 'Le droit de vivre' ('The Right to Live').

Josephine Much in Demand

Out of the 13 performances Josephine gave across Japan, it was her twice-daily shows from 25th to 29th April (matinee and evening performances, except on the 25th when there was only the evening show) at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo that were billed as fundraising events in aid of mixed-race children. These concerts were organised by the Elizabeth Sanders Home and supported by the Mainichi Newspaper Social Projects Team. The following greeting from Miki Sawada was printed in the concert programme. It clearly conveys not only the friendship between her and Josephine but also their personalities and their respective aims.

"How delightful it is for me to be welcoming my friend of over 20 years, Josephine Baker, to Japan, the land of the cherry blossom. There were obstacles to realising this visit for some years; we heard rumours of a visit to Japan, which then had to be cancelled, on a number of occasions. But finally the time has come, and I am happy to be welcoming this person with a heart like a flower in Japan's season of flowers, the most beautiful time of the year.

"My friend Josephine Baker has experienced all manner of hardships because of the color of her skin; and her art has been further polished and strengthened because of this. I have the utmost respect for her single-minded hard work and her courage, which does not flinch in the face of difficulty.

"Twenty years ago, Josephine Baker was an uncannily beautiful flower blooming on the glorious stage and the queen of dulcet chansons. However, the Josephine of

¹¹ Brian Hammond, *Josephine Baker: Theatrical Biography* by Patrick O'Connor, p125

today is a humanitarian fighter who possesses a depth of life experience and who has stood up and sacrificed everything for the weak. Now she possesses something that touches our hearts on a much deeper level as an active member of society.

“Josephine has come to sing in Japan especially for the mixed-race children who are innocent young victims of the War, and who must shoulder the responsibility of their irresponsible parents. She has declined any payment for her performances and wishes for all proceeds to go to the children.

“Those of you who come into contact with her will certainly be able to feel something much deeper alongside her sweet singing voice.

“I would like to wish Josephine success from the bottom of my heart for the major mission she is about to undertake. I ask you all not to hold back in your praise for my friend Josephine; I ask you to welcome with open arms this queen of the chanson and humanitarian fighter who stands at the vanguard of the crusaders who stake their lives for black people.”

A message from Josephine Baker was also printed:

“I have at long last come to Japan. Seeing its serene landscape and kind people, I am astonished by this country, which is even more beautiful than I had dreamed. Please lend me your cheers as I stand on stage to put my heart and soul into my performance for the happiness of the unfortunate children born in this country. I am grateful for your welcome, my wonderful audience.”

Let us study what kind of songs Josephine performed on this tour.

The programme contains an explanation by the music critic Eiryō Ashihara, who speculates that “there will probably be many songs that we know.” Other surviving publicity material includes a song list and a photograph of Josephine wearing a luxurious garment, captioned: “The Singing, Dancing Amber Queen! In a Sumptuous Paris Gown!!”

The songs she performed were divided into three kinds: ‘The Chansons of Paris’, ‘American Jazz Songs’ and ‘The Rumba, Mambo and Samba of Central and South America’. It appears that she picked the songs for each concert on the day, out of the dozens of titles that were already popular among a wide audience, such as ‘La Petite Tonkinoise’, ‘Les Mots d’Amour’, Édith Piaf’s ‘La Vie en Rose’ and Josephine’s signature song ‘J’ai Deux Amours,’ alongside unspecified popular American numbers.

The Japanese people showed a great interest in the world-famous Josephine and everybody wanted to meet her. Among the documents from Josephine’s visit still filed at the Elizabeth Sanders Home is a letter which the Paris Society sent to Miki

Sawada. The Paris Society was a social organisation for those who had formerly been connected to the Japanese embassy in Paris. A note written on the letterhead of the Tokyo Headquarters of the United Nations Association of Japan, Incorporated Foundation, in the Maruzen Building, is a keen entreaty for Josephine to drop by at the Society:

“Could you please arrange for Mrs Baker to drop by at the Paris Society, even if it is just for two or three minutes, on the night of the 14th. I would be grateful if you could somehow arrange this so that our meeting on the 15th will be a very lively one. We are told it would make the newspapers, and all we need is for her to have just dropped by. (29th March 1955)” The letter ends with the name of the individual who sent it.

Josephine was very much in demand wherever she went in Japan. When she visited the Elizabeth Sanders Home for the adoption, dozens of media reporters descended on Oiso in pursuit of her.

The connection between Josephine Baker and Miki Sawada remained strong. The first boys’ dormitory that was built at the Elizabeth Sanders Home in 1955 was called Baker’s House. When Miki learned of the marital crisis between Josephine and her husband Jo Bouillon, who had supported Josephine and given his love and devotion to The Rainbow Tribe, she sent gentle words urging Josephine not to separate, advising her that since they had a large chateau they could live in separate rooms and they would not have to see each other. This was a comment typical of her.¹² She signed her letter with the words: “Your friend and sister Miki”.

Chansons and Yoshiko Ishii

There is one other important figure that stands out in any discussion of the relationship between Japan and Josephine Baker. She was a Japanese singer, Yoshiko Ishii, whose encounter with Josephine in the United States was a turning point in her life. Ishii, who went to America to study music in 1950, by sheer chance attended Josephine’s concerts at the Golden Gate Theater in San Francisco, where she was studying. The meeting with Josephine in San Francisco had led Ishii into the world of chansons. Ishii subsequently went on to introduce and popularise chansons in Japan with great vigour, so it would not be too much to say that Josephine not only changed the life of one person but also changed Japan’s musical landscape.

According to her autobiography, *I Am Me* (1997), Ishii had been a fan of Josephine since before the War and often listened to her records. However, the emotion and inspiration she felt when she heard Josephine’s voice live for the first time must have been indescribably powerful. There were two performances each day, in the

¹² Josephine Baker & Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, p212

afternoon and the evening, and Ishii visited the theatre daily from the first date and attended both concerts every day. She was moved by the sight of Josephine on stage and wrote:

“Wearing a white dress and a white-feathered hat, Josephine sang Jazz, Latin and chanson numbers. She also spoke to the audience and danced. Seeing how her performance drew in the audience’s hearts more and more, I understood that this was what was truly meant by an ‘entertainer’, and I never tired of watching her.”¹³

The theatre’s manager noticed the oriental girl who visited every day, and this led to the first meeting between her and Josephine. The manager had apparently spent time in Japan while serving in the occupation forces, and had fallen for the allure of the much renowned geisha and singer, Ichimaru. So when he learned that Ishii was Japanese he felt affectionate towards her and showed her kindness, taking her to Josephine’s dressing room. A photograph that was taken at this meeting frequently appears in Ishii’s various autobiographies.

In the dressing room at the Golden Gate Theater, Josephine urged Ishii to go to Paris if she wanted to study chansons. As a result, Ishii, who had intended to return to Japan after her studies in America, changed her plans and headed for Europe. She only intended to make a very brief visit to Paris, but once there, thanks both to her passion for singing and hard work, and also to some good luck, it was not long before she made her debut as a chanssonnière. For the following two or three years she made Paris her base and flourished as a singer around Europe.

Over two years after their first meeting in San Francisco, Ishii and Josephine met once again, when the two sang on the same stage at a music festival in Nice. Josephine did not remember their meeting in San Francisco, but she seemed happy as she told Ishii: “I’ve been invited by my benefactor, Madame Sawada, to go to Japan in April.”

Ishii subsequently became a music agent and invited Josephine to perform in Japan on a number of occasions. In 1972 Josephine unexpectedly visited Japan for just two or three days. Her Rainbow Tribe children, Akio and Janot (Teruya), were approaching adulthood, and she wished for them to study in their motherland.¹⁴ It was her educational policy to have each of the Rainbow Tribe children learn their own country’s language and culture. On that 1972 trip, Miki received a telegram notifying her of Josephine’s visit but was unable to meet her at Haneda Airport, so Ishii went in her place.

¹³ Yoshiko Ishii, *Goodbye, My Twentieth Century*, p209

¹⁴ Yoshiko Ishii, *San Francisco of My Memories, Paris of My Memories*, p236–44

The following year, in 1973, Josephine's two sons went to Japan with Ishii as their guarantor. Akio took up studies at Sophia University, and Janot (Teruya) took a job working for a horticultural company. The following year, Josephine once again went to Japan, and on 14th July appeared at the Paris Festival, held at the open-air concert hall in Hibiya. With this performance she managed to raise part of Akio's tuition fees, which Ishii had been covering. The plan was for the two young men to stay in Japan for two years, but they must have encountered problems with the language and the Japanese customs must have seemed alien to them: in the end, their stay only lasted a year, and they returned to France with Josephine after the Paris Festival.¹⁵ Josephine would die suddenly a few months later, in April 1975; the Paris Festival performance turned out to be her last in Japan.

The year 2006 was the 100th anniversary of Josephine Baker's birth. On 3rd June – Josephine's birthday – a statue of her created by the sculptor Chouski was unveiled in the park below Les Milandes where The Rainbow Tribe had lived. The statue stands hugging a boy who could well be Akio and her face has a peaceful expression; it is a representation of the ultimate dream Josephine had pursued. The pedestal is carved with the footprints of 12 children.

In Europe and America, there is much interest in Josephine as a dancer and a singer. Many research papers and biographies on Josephine have been published in the fields of dance, music and film, and in relation to 1920s Parisian culture. However, Josephine had another important face: the face of an activist who challenged racism; of a fighter, a humanitarian and an idealist.

Josephine, who grew up in St Louis in the South as a 'black American', experienced American racial discrimination from the time she was a child. In 1925 she travelled to Paris, and later married a Frenchman and obtained French nationality. Until her sudden death in Paris in 1975 aged 68 years and 10 months, Josephine returned to America on tour several times, and each time she experienced racism firsthand. She was both hurt and infuriated by this cruel, miserable and irremediable situation and she began to dream of a world without racism. This led her to form her idea of The Rainbow Tribe.

These days, the concept of multiculturalism, which values all cultural backgrounds equally, is at least advocated in words. However, in Josephine's era the notion of an ideal family called The Rainbow Tribe consisting of children of various skin tones was little short of fantastic. It was Josephine's firm belief that, if children of diverse skin colours lived together from a very young age, they would grow into adults without prejudices.

¹⁵ Yoshiko Ishii, *San Francisco of My Memories, Paris of My Memories*, p243

In Paris in 1925, Josephine performed the *danse sauvage* almost naked. The audience was intoxicated by the surge of nature's force in the dance. The power that Josephine charged into her movements shocked and seduced those who witnessed it. I am of the opinion that there is an instinctive link, at source-level, between that dance and Josephine's humanitarian stance.