Immigrants are locally perceived as having a distinctive culture. Their native language, habits, food, facial expressions when talking or laughing, and physical appearance are obviously different from those of the majority. Perception of these differences is what categorizes them as foreign immigrants, and as a minority. Second or third generation immigrants who fail to fit into the dominant categories face the situation of ‘living in two cultures’: where they do not clearly belong to either the category of their parents’ culture or to the predominant local culture. Although the children of immigrants generally identify themselves with the values of the host country, citizenship does not imply acceptance into the mainstream of society. In published memoirs, children of Japanese immigrants to Colombia have left testimony to their suffering when they attended school. For instance, when they began their schooling in a big city, they were approached during the break by other children who wanted to hear them talk in Japanese, and who asked all sorts of questions with the mischievous intention of mocking them later on. In the rural school near the agricultural colony, on one occasion a boy ate his lunch up a tree because he could no longer stand the curiosity of the teacher, who always wanted to taste his home-cooked food.

That the immigrants and their offspring are looked upon differently by the locals and categorized as foreigners is something they resent. Their reaction in most cases, however, has been a positive one, leading them to reinforce their own values and present external manifestations of their
distinctiveness. It is not always the case that negative feelings regarding discrimination produce in the individual or in the ethnic group a desire to show their identification with their own culture. But the case of the Japanese and their offspring in Colombia exemplifies a situation where upward social and economic mobility has left immigrant families with the space and financial means to import and re-create elements that are characteristic of their native culture.

How and what the immigrants select as symbols of ethnic identity depends on internal and external factors. Such symbols are subject to individual preference, to knowledge of what is ‘typically Japanese’ and also to what can be afforded. Moreover, how a house is decorated depends on what is available to display. Immigrants of the first generation, for example, who did not return to Japan for a visit, or their offspring, who have never been there, may have little or nothing ‘Japanese’ that could be exhibited. On the other hand, there are individuals who travel to and from between Japan and Colombia, bringing back objects and ideas to their country of residence, some of whom have brought back gifts for all to enjoy such as set of croquet. There are also people who have been to Japan to master gardening or flower arrangement. Those who have not travelled to Japan have in most cases benefited from presents brought by travellers. Little by little, their lives have become surrounded by Japanese objects. This has helped to reinforce a sense of belonging.

A visitor to one of these immigrants’ houses immediately feels the presence of Japanese objects, perhaps even a garden at the back, which give a peculiarly Japanese atmosphere to the place. This does not mean, however, that any uniformity exists in what people have for display, because such things ultimately depend on personal taste and also on economic possibilities. Regardless of socio-economic differences, most of their houses contain some of the following: Japanese objects brought from
Japan or made in Colombia by the Japanese immigrant community such as Japanese crockery and chopsticks, paintings, dolls, fans, folding screens and swords; gardens designed in the Japanese style; and Buddhist and Shinto altars to commemorate the departed members of the family. Some people wear western-type Japanese clothes, which are not kimonos or traditional style clothing, but a compromise for the sake of convenience. The first generation of immigrants normally communicate in Japanese with their spouses and parents-in-law, have books and magazines published in Japan on the bookshelves, listen to Japanese music, watch videotapes recorded in Japan, and frequently follow the news and sports events broadcast from Japan. Many of them have vegetable gardens at the back of the house planted with Japanese seeds, some for ornamentation but most for food. In their spare time, they play Japanese card games and croquet. It is evident that the issei have created an atmosphere and paraphernalia of objects to be left to the nisei and future generations that will remind them constantly of their forefathers’ land.

Since the introduction of the Tenri-kyo Church in the southwest of Colombia in 1972, its founders and members have promoted the enjoyment of art and events characteristic of Japanese culture. A church was built on the outskirts of Cali city and a monthly service established on Sundays. Attendance does not imply membership of Tenri or any kind of religious obligation. Former members of a failed banana plantation programme on the Pacific Coast, who were all members of Tenri-kyo, have helped to organize the church and to keep interest alive. Although the number of believers is small, a good number of the immigrants attend the service with their families, apparently more for social reasons and the opportunity to enjoy meeting others than out of any religious conviction. In spite of their lack of commitment to this organization – or to any other religious organization – the immigrants and their families have been motivated to learn more about
Japan since Tenri established a church in Cali. Under the leadership of the founders, the immigrants and their descendants started to learn, among others things, martial arts, origami, traditional doll making, painting, calligraphy, flower arranging and the art of bonsai. Mrs. Ota, the founder’s wife, was a tireless lady who shared her artistic skills unconditionally. She taught people how to produce original art using simple materials. Her presence can be seen in the objects that still decorate their houses. It is quite possible that most of the objects they learned to make were unknown to the issei before they immigrated. Whether or not Ota was conscious of what she was doing, she undoubtedly helped to fill a vacuum in their lives, dispelling the feeling of emptiness the immigrant has to endure when he or she is relocated in a strange place, where everything that is encountered is unfamiliar.

Nevertheless, the most enthusiastic participants in this recreational movement, or perhaps ‘invention’ of ‘own culture’ have not only been the first generation immigrants, but also those who emigrated as children, or were born in Colombia. To emigrate, as Handlin points out, is an ‘arduous transplantation’. The experience of leaving behind the cemetery where parents and other relatives are buried, the broken homes, separation from a familiar life and well-known surroundings, becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong ‘are the aspects of alienation,’ to borrow his expression. All the changes to which immigrants are exposed in living among strangers, looking for new meaning in their lives and working out new relationships often occur under hostile and severe circumstances.\textsuperscript{1) } The uneasy feeling of living in two cultures experienced by the nisei is, in a way, a consequence of their parents being uprooted. This is not to suggest that the immigrant is living in the past, or has to be tied to it. It is undeniable, however, that human beings cannot easily part with their own past. Families, social relations and environment left behind are missed, and are
irretrievable. On the other hand, objects that express ideas and represent symbols of ethnic identity may function as aids to the individuals to recreate their own world without conflicting with the reality that surrounds their present lives.

In this connection, the ornamental gardens that adorn the houses of some of immigrants deserve special mention. They are of interest in this work as they represent symbols of group identity. Although they cannot be seen from the outside, as they must be placed at the back of the house to be private and enclosed, as Japanese gardens are, they clearly show a difference in terms of design and use of plants from the gardens of their neighbours. These gardens have been planned mainly by specialists of the second generation that have spent time in Japan learning the art of gardening. In some cases, landscape architects have also worked in designing gardens and selecting the plants. Gardens in the Japanese style do not exist at the homes of the descendants who live on the Atlantic Coast; they are found mainly in the south of Colombia.

Japanese gardens evoke nature. They are the microcosmic creation of the natural scenery of the countryside that can be reconstructed in the style of landscape paintings. There are three distinct types of Japanese gardens: water gardens, dry gardens and tea-gardens. The last type has not been introduced in Colombia. A Japanese garden includes visual elements to give the garden its particular character such as lanterns, gravel and rocks. But it is not the ornaments that typify a garden, ‘for one cannot create a Japanese garden merely by placing a stone lantern in the garden,’ as Eliovson has ironically remarked. What makes a Japanese garden different from a western garden is its atmosphere, along with privacy, balanced asymmetry, a proportionate space and scale in its elements, and foliage and plants that offer tranquillity and relaxation. They are not for strolling in, except those specially designed to occupy large spaces, but for
viewing. They are, Eliovson says, places one can appreciate looking at from a room, at the same time as listening to the sound of a small waterfall, or the swish in the pond of a carp’s tail stimulating the imagination of the spectator.4)

To reproduce a Japanese garden in a tropical climate requires a lot of substitution and care in choosing the materials. First, the plants that are so peculiar to a Japanese garden do not grow well in a climate without seasonal variations. Secondly, the four different seasons in Japan bring a different character to the garden in each cycle, an atmosphere that cannot be harmonized in a climate characterized by dry and rainy seasons. And finally, the spatial proportions and intervals that create a mood in a Japanese garden are hard to maintain in Colombia because the foliage becomes overgrown in a very short period of time.

The Japanese garden tradition includes flowering and fruit trees, typical of each month of the year. Although most were brought from China and Korea during different periods, some plants are native to Japan. Each month of the year, although the variation in latitude may change the blooming period, is typified by a tree or flower that has its own meaning. Pine characterizes January, plum is February, peach and pear are March, cherry is April, tree-peony, azalea and wisteria are May, iris is June, morning-glory is July, lotus is August, the seven grasses of autumn are September, chrysanthemum is October, maple is November, and camellia is December. Trees and flowers are in the garden not just because they are favourite plants, but also because they have a meaning. For instance, pine, being strong and evergreen during the winter, is the symbol of longevity; cherry, the national and favourite flower of Japan is the symbol of perfection; morning-glory is the symbol of affection; and lotus is the symbol of life as all its parts can be eaten.5) To transplant a Japanese garden to a tropical climate, and be forced to use different plants for the
recreation of visual effects and contrast, really means it ceasing to be a
Japanese garden. By comparison, dry gardens can be reproduced more
faithfully.

Since the trees and plants in the south of Colombia are different from
plants in Japan, the immigrants’ attempts to germinate imported seeds have
met with poor results. Pine trees have grown very slowly, and plum trees
have not produced fruits. Flowers like camellias bloomed only once and
then died. As a consequence, they have been replaced with perennial local
plants, after experiments with Japanese seeds failed. Luckily, in the tropics
there is a wide range of plants to substitute for the traditional plants that
cannot adapt to a climate without changing seasons. This is a great
advantage because people have a great many possibilities, which they can
adjust to their individual taste. However, in a Japanese garden it cannot be
denied that replacing the original plants means losing their significance. In
a sense, the gardens created in a Japanese style in Colombia have become
simply ornamental items, lacking a deeper significance.

A Japanese garden, if space allows, has a pond or a small stream. A
favourite fish in a garden is the carp, signifying strength and perseverance.
Carp are used for decoration in a great variety of colourful paper versions
on 5 May, Boys’ Day. People who have managed to transport carp from
Japan have bred them very successfully. The immigrants have thus enjoyed
the opportunity to obtain carp of different varieties for their gardens. Their
ponds are adorned with golden, grey and white carp mottled with black,
blue or red. Some people have shown a preference for mixing carp with
certain species of local fish. One of these is bailarina, a graceful white fish
that makes the garden more attractive.

Occasionally, Colombians who live in the area have asked the Japanese
or their descendants to design gardens for their houses in a Japanese style.
A superficial comparison of the gardens shows that they are similar. But an
observer who gets close notices the difference. Frequent requests from the Colombians are for order and symmetry. They wish to choose pebbles which are evenly shaped and to get them painted; they want flowers to be planted such as roses that would never be found in a Japanese garden, and eventually a fountain to be installed. In this respect, a Japanese garden that is ‘distinguishable by its function, garden elements and plant materials’\(^6\) does not exist as such. More important, however, is the meaning of this difference. The presence of particular plants, and the Colombians’ preference for symmetry and for the elements to look tidy and clean in their ‘Japanese gardens’ illustrate different values and attitudes between the two ethnic groups. The difference in the landscape aesthetics of their gardens can be interpreted not only as a measure of socio-economic status,\(^7\) but also as a symbol of group identity.\(^8\)

Finally, I would like to mention how a Japanese gardener perceived the gardens of the Japanese and their descendants living in Colombia. One day, I decided to show the gardener of the residence in Tokyo where I live some pictures to observe his reaction. At first, he was puzzled over the appearance of the gardens because although they looked Japanese in style, he could not identify any of the plants. But the use of lanterns, connecting bridges and stones, and the dragon-shape visual effect in one of them, did not pass unnoticed. He was very curious to know where I had taken the pictures. After I explained their origin, I asked if he would consider these gardens to be Japanese. Politely, he did not reply negatively but he would not admit they were Japanese either. Instead, he pointed at the proportions and mix of the foliage, and the striking combinations of flowers, so similar to the azaleas in a Japanese garden in late spring. He observed, however, that hanging potted plants, common in a Colombian garden, would be unthinkable in a traditional Japanese garden. It seems likely that the Japanese gardener grasped the unconscious mentality of the owners of
these gardens at a glance. It is commonly believed that gardens serve as an extension to interior space. The gardens the immigrants and their offspring have created are not only a symbol of their group identity, but also show their individuality, an extension of how they live in a modern culturally differentiated society.9)

NOTES

2) A study of 150 front yards in Hawaii, in the houses of three neighbourhoods of similar socio-economic background, reveals the way the three major ethnic groups living there (Caucasians, Chinese and Japanese) arrange their gardens, including the different selection of plants. For the author of the study, plant communities in residential gardens can be interpreted as an autograph of ‘taste, ideals, and [as] a symbol of an ethnic or socio-economic group.’ See T. Ikagawa, ‘Residential gardens in urban Honolulu, Hawai‘i: Neighborhood, ethnicity, and ornamental plants’, PhD thesis, 1994, p. 7.
5) Ibid., pp. 86-8.
6) Ikagawa, ‘Residential gardens in urban Honolulu’, p. 43.
8) Ikagawa, pp. 7, 132.