

## CONCEIVING OF SELF: A CASE STUDY OF THE BRAZILIAN-JAPANESE

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How the individual relates to society has been a central focus in cultural and personality studies within anthropology. The Brazilian-Japanese migration to Japan constitutes a unique situation in which to study societal influences on individuals. Before leaving Brazil, the Brazilian-Japanese predominately consider themselves to be Japanese, but once in Japan the culture in which the Brazilian-Japanese claim to share heritage with refuses to fully accept the Brazilian-Japanese's concept of self. By attempting to understand the way in which the Brazilian-Japanese cope with this challenge, the application of George Herbert Mead's theory of self which focuses on the interaction of individuals with the group in self formation, offers insights into how the Brazilian-Japanese "become" Brazilian.

### **Mead's Theory of Self**

The self originates and is based in the social and can only be experienced indirectly rather than directly (Mead 1956: 215, 242). People indirectly encounter themselves through their interactions with others by being exposed to the orientation of the social group in which they are involved (Mead 1956: 215). The main prerequisite is that individuals must "first become objects to [them]selves just as other individuals are objects to [them] or in their experiences," and this is accomplished by adopting "the attitudes of other individuals toward [ego] within a social environment and behavior in which both [ego] and they are involved" (Mead 1956: 215). In other words, no one experiences the self in the "pure" present as it unfolds, and a better understanding of this concept is gained through Mead's "I" and "me" analysis. The "me" represents the structured set of attitudes gained from past contact with and present feedback from the other while the "I" constitutes the chosen response (Mead 1956: 242-243). Although the "I" remains unpredictable, Mead proposes that the "me" acts as a "censor [that] determines the sort of expression which can take place, sets the stage, and gives the cues" (Mead 1956: 244, 252). Thus, people continually accrue knowledge about how others reacted to past behaviors, and this serves as a reference for future decisions. "The 'I' of this moment is present in the 'me' of the next moment" (Mead 1956: 242). If people are only aware of the "I" as it appears in the "me" than they never completely realize who they are (Mead 1956: 242).

Therefore, a social background is needed in order to realize how a person has developed, and various backgrounds draw out different aspects of the self and limit the degree in which the self is present in communication (Mead 1956: 219). Communication makes it possible for people to become objects to themselves and involves not just language but the use of other symbols as well (Mead 1956: 215, 216). Likewise, the discourse influences both the other and the individual whereby *the [individuals] do respond to that which they address to another and where that response of their own becomes a part of their conduct, where they not only hear themselves but respond to themselves, talk and reply to themselves as truly as the other person replies to them; that [...] individuals become objects to themselves* (Mead 1956: 216).

In a more external and observable way, the behavior and reactions of the other influences what the individual will say while each previous scene is simultaneously cognized and cataloged for future use. However, Mead points out that often times the effect of the individuals' actions on the other differs from that of the individuals' reactions to the same initial stimuli (1956: 224). The explanation involves the fact that each participant has a different set of experiences in which to reference and the particular social situation further guides the responses (Mead 1956: 246).

For Mead, the process of self-development involves two stages. In the first stage, as previously mentioned, individuals construct their selves by organizing the attitudes of the other individuals (Mead 1956: 235). The second stage appears to be more abstract than the first. Not only are the others' orientations cognized, but these accumulated and structured experiences with the other individuals are used to form a more abstract perception of the attitudes of the groups to which both the individuals and the others belong. According to Mead, individuals obtain complete selves after stage two (Mead 1956: 232). Whether this complete self continues to change is unclear, but the view of a self that is constantly being modified seems appropriate since individuals will continue to encounter new situations, especially if they are introduced to new cultures. The modification mentioned implies that between the various segments of the self, new connections will be created; old ones will be broken; and others will be strengthened, such as will be proposed among the Brazilian-Japanese.

In addition, Mead points out that every self is unique and explains that certain common attitudes are needed in order for a community to exist (Mead 1956: 240). While culture is not mentioned, the implication appears to be that it could be substituted for attitudes. Furthermore, individuals bring their own particular histories to the situation (Mead 1956:247). Although they may be part of a group, their organized selves "reflect [...] a different aspect or perspective of this whole social behavior pattern from that which is reflected in the organized structure of any other

individual self within that process” (Mead 1956: 248). Contrary to the Western concept of self, Mead states that there are no strict boundaries between selves because each is overlapping and contributing to other selves’ formations (1956: 241).

### **Background of the Japanese in Brazil**

The immigration of Japanese to Brazil began in 1908 (Smith 1979: 53). The Japanese government promoted the emigration in hopes that it would help alleviate the economic stress felt by such factors as increasing population and unemployment (Smith 1979: 54). While the Japanese culture held a negative view of long-term emigration, Brazilian culture typically approved of immigration (Tsuda 1998: 323,326). The climax of the immigration was reached between 1926 and 1935 when some seventy-percent of the approximately 190,000 Japanese immigrants from 1908-1942 arrived in Brazil (Smith 1979: 53,54). A desire for more personal freedom prompted some 60,000 Japanese to migrate to Brazil after WWII (Smith 1979: 54, 65). During the 1960s, other factors such as investment opportunities, technological testing, missionary work, and personal reasons influenced more Japanese to leave Japan for Brazil, but the rate of immigration had slowed considerably (Reichl 1995: 180). Today, the majority of Brazilian-Japanese reside in São Paulo. They currently comprise the largest group of *nikkeijin*, Japanese born and living outside Japan (Tsuda 1999: 146). As in the present case concerning the Brazilian-Japanese who immigrate to Japan, the Japanese originally planned to stay only temporarily in Brazil, but WWII forced them to accept a more permanent move (Smith 1979: 57).

The *Côlonia*, the Japanese community in Brazil, discouraged association with non-Japanese thereby reinforcing the Japanese identity. Since the Japanese filled the middle-class void that existed within the Brazilian social structure, marriage and other types of interactions between Brazilians and Japanese were further repressed since such activities required crossing class boundaries (Reichl 1995: 35, 45). In addition, the pre-WWII immigrants remained extremely loyal to the Japanese emperor and consequently fostered a deep sense of pride and connection with their homeland, which was propelled by Japan’s international power as a major player in the Axis (Reichl 1995: 39). The concept that the Japanese become more Japanese as they become more isolated from Japan has been associated with the ideology of the *Côlonia* (Reichl 1995: 52). Initially this appears quite contradictory until a person realizes that a foreign background highlights the unique qualities of Japanese culture that otherwise would have blended in (Tsuda 1999: 152). Knowledge of these details enables the Brazilian-Japanese to resist acculturation since they have a better idea of what Japanese is to them, or rather what Japanese is to the *Côlonia* since it is with this group that they primarily interact. Thus, this appears to follow Mead’s theory that the attitudes of the group influence the attitudes of the

individual.

Post WWII saw a lessening of the *Côlonia*'s power, and Japan's success in the global market provided a renewed sense of pride and attachment to Japan (Reichl 1995: 36). Nevertheless, an important distinction among the Brazilian-Japanese developed between the old immigrants (pre WWII) and the new immigrants (post WWII). Linguistically, the old immigrants are referred to as *kyū-imin* while the new are called *shin-imin* (Smith 1979: 55). Within these two designations, specific terms also exist to differentiate generations. The immigrants themselves are *issei*; their children or the second generation are *nisei*; the third generation, *sansei*; and the fourth generation *yonsei* (Smith 1979: 55). The *kyū-imin* consider the *shin-imin* to be "unJapanese" in behavior, dress, ideology, and manner of speech, as is evident from the following statement by a teenage *nisei*: "Hakujin kusai kara... [because they smell of whites/because they are like white men]" (Smith 1979: 56). Thus, in terms of the "me", the *kyū-imin* and the *shin-imin* have contradicting perceptions of what constitutes Japaneseness. These conflicting positions combined with other factors like job competition may account for division between the *kyū-imin* and the *shin-imin*. Such clashes in perceptions of Japaneseness foreshadow the reception the Brazilian-Japanese will receive when they return to Japan.

Today, the Brazilian-Japanese are in various stages of acculturation. Some remain more isolated while others are quite assimilated and have adopted many of the attitudes of the Brazilian society in which they live. This is especially true of the younger generation. Although hundreds of Japanese language schools, *ni-chigo-gakkō*, were built in southern Brazil, most *nisei* and *sansei* only attend for a short time and are unable to speak fluent or, more often, any Japanese (Smith 1979: 66). *Nisei* clubs for teens and those in their early twenties have opened membership to Brazilians (Smith 1979: 67). After the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan visited a packed stadium of 60,000 Brazilian-Japanese in 1967, Robert Smith spoke with one family about their reactions (1979: 68). The grandfather was moved to tears, but his grandson whispered that he had "rather have gone to Holiday on Ice" (Smith 1979: 68). The acculturation process may be likened to Mead's second level in the development of self where "the social attitudes of the generalized other [...] are included as elements in the structure or constitution of the self" (Mead 1956: 235).

A Brazilian-Japanese's sense of self, either Brazilian or Japanese, also fluctuates depending on the social situation. When Brazilian-Japanese apply for a job at a *nikkei* firm, they are likely to express their Japaneseness through proper Japanese behavior and use of the language when possible (Reichl 1995: 54). However, when applying to a Brazilian firm, the same Brazilian-Japanese would

be more inclined to speak Portuguese and exhibit other signs of nationalism (Reichl 1995: 54). Thus, by reflecting the attitudes, or in this case the ethnicity, of the other party in their communication, the Brazilian-Japanese are able to become objects to themselves. Furthermore, the Brazilian-Japanese will signify their association with Brazil by voting in elections and will demonstrate their connection to Japan by attending and donating to *nikkei* fundraisers (Reichl 1995: 54). Such alternations reinforce a concept of self as both Japanese and Brazilian.

The assumption is made that the Brazilian-Japanese attempt not only to strike a balance between their Japaneseness and Brazilianness but tend also to express more of their Japaneseness than their Brazilianness while in Brazil. The Brazilians, in turn, respect the Japanese and acknowledge their Japaneseness. Thus, combined with a heritage that emphasizes ties with Japan, the Brazilian-Japanese become more and more accustomed to thinking of themselves as Japanese. This interpretation of self is almost considered a given even though many possess no proficiency in Japanese and associate more and more with Brazilians. As Mead illustrated, the self is constructed in a social setting, and this setting involves constant interaction with Brazilians. The fact that many of the Brazilian-Japanese (*nisei* and *sansei*) operate smoothly among the Brazilians implicitly demonstrates that they have adopted some of their host-country's ways. The realization of their Brazilian "I" in the "me" remains overshadowed until another social background challenges and redirects this view. By dining at Japanese restaurants, taking lessons in traditional Japanese arts, and attending the Japanese culture fairs at São Paulo, the Brazilians are validating the Brazilian-Japanese's concept of self and thereby reinforcing the Brazilian-Japanese's stronger connection with Japan (Reichl 1995: 45). Accordingly, such proceedings resemble the discourse loop laid out by Mead.

### **Brazilian-Japanese in Japan**

The need of unskilled workers in Japan combined with Brazil's sudden economic downturn prompted many Brazilian-Japanese to immigrate to Japan in the 1980s (Tsuda 1999: 146). The unskilled labor sector in Japan offers the Brazilian-Japanese the opportunity to earn five to ten times more than they could earn working in middle-class jobs in Brazil (Tsuda 1999: 146). The Japanese refer to these immigrants as *dekasegi* (guest workers) (Tsuda 1998: 318). Although most planned to stay only long enough to earn extra savings, many have brought their families and have begun to resettle (Tsuda 1998: 319). Most *dekasegi* are *nisei* and *sansei* and speak only a little Japanese (Tsuda 1999: 146). While the *dekasegi* are accustomed to being a minority, they occupied a higher social position in Brazil which, combined with the Brazilians' acceptance, promoted their con-

nection to Japan and presupposed them to the assumption that they would be accepted by their new host country (Tsuda 1999: 147, 149). However, the Japanese view the migrants as impoverished, uneducated failures who could neither survive in Japan nor in Brazil (Tsuda 1999: 159). In addition, the Japanese expected the Brazilian-Japanese to be more culturally similar to the Japanese and were disappointed by the contrast (Tsuda 1999: 160).

The Japanese conceive of Japanese ethnicity based largely on descent but also in terms of culture thereby creating a close connection between the two (Tsuda 1998: 322, 331). In addition, Japanese education and socialization stereotype undeveloped countries as filthy and unadvanced, and such views transfer over to the *dekasegi* (Tsuda 1998: 344). Consequently, Japanese society refuses to accept the Brazilian-Japanese as truly Japanese and sees them as threatening the homogeneity of Japanese heritage despite the fact that the Brazilian-Japanese are true descendents (Tsuda 1998: 342, 344). According to one Japanese, 'We feel culturally superior to the nikkeijin because we have real Japanese culture while they have only contaminated Japanese culture' (Tsuda 1998: 342). Furthermore, the Japanese maintain a higher opinion of Japanese-Americans than they do of Brazilian-Japanese since Brazil is viewed more as an undeveloped country (Tsuda 1998: 345). Conversely, non-Japanese spouses and their children feel less pressure to conform since the Japanese are more understanding and accepting of them because they do not appear Japanese (Smith 1979: 66; Tsuda 2000: 60). However, the Japanese inhabitants of Oizumi-town and other cities with a large concentration of Brazilian-Japanese migrants have developed increased tolerance for the Brazilian-Japanese's cultural differences (Tsuda 2000: 59).

The Japanese consider interaction and loyalty as necessities for socialization (Merry 1988: 106; Tsuda 1995: 335). Through this process, the new participants learn what is expected along with the importance of uniformity, especially within the work setting (White 1998: 111). This occurrence is strikingly similar to Mead's concept of self being shaped from the give and take of the social exchange. Yet, the *dekasegi* tend to transfer from factory to factory depending on which one is offering the best pay (Tsuda 1998: 335). As a result, the Japanese consider them to be "individualist" and "selfish" (Tsuda 1998: 334). The following is a quote of one Japanese woman's opinion on the place of self-giving: *Nihanjin wa ne jibun otaietsu ni shinai no, ne. (The Japanese do not treat themselves as important, they spend time doing things for the sake of maintaining good social relationships, regardless of their inner feelings)* (Kondo 1986: 81).

Individualism, per se, is not inherently wrong, but lack of participation is not socially acceptable (White 1998: 107). Rather than a clash between concepts of self, Takeyuki Tsuda implies that the Japanese misunderstand the root of the

Brazilian-Japanese behavior (1998: 334). In addition, assimilation into the Japanese society requires that the potential members involved purge themselves of all that is foreign (White 1988: 106). To reject something, a person must first have some knowledge of what it is in order to proceed in discarding it.

Combined with homesickness, the Brazilian-Japanese realize, when confronted with this process, just how much they are Brazilian. Furthermore, the homology of the Japanese society in comparison with the Brazilian provides a background better suited for the awareness of variations (Reichl 1995: 53). In such a situation, the Brazilian-Japanese attempt at first to display their Japaneseness, but unknowingly their Brazilianness shines through to varying degrees and is immediately perceived by the Japanese as completely counter to the notion of what defines Japanese. In turn, the signals given by the Japanese's reactions reflect to the Brazilian-Japanese the degree of their Brazilianness, which had formerly remained unapparent. Dorinne Kondo, a third generation Japanese-American who did fieldwork in Japan, vividly describes an experience which is probably not too uncommon for many Brazilian-Japanese: *someone somewhere would greet one of my linguistic mistakes with an astonished 'Eh?' I became all too familiar with the series of expressions flickering over these faces: bewilderment, incredulity, embarrassment, even anger, at having to deal with this odd person who looked Japanese, therefore, human, but who must be retarded, deranged, or God forbid-Chinese or Korean* (1986: 76).

The Brazilian-Japanese have two responses to choose from, either resolve to continue in their struggles for Japanese recognition or embrace their newly realized Brazilianness. While the Japanese provide much opposition to the Brazilian-Japanese's claim of Japaneseness, the Japanese may also, as Kondo pointed out, try to deconstruct the Brazilian self and build a Japanese self through coaching in proper Japanese ways and rewarding such actions with phrases like: "You're more Japanese than the Japanese" (Kondo 1986: 79). However, Kondo's situation differs from most Brazilian-Japanese's in that she was from an industrialized country and received aid from informants. Furthermore, Dr. Nakagawa, a psychiatrist, stated in references to the Brazilian-Japanese that "those in Japan who say, 'I am different, I am not Japanese' tend not to have psychological difficulties" (Tsuda 2000: 60). Thus, many Brazilian-Japanese follow the path of the second choice. As one Brazilian-Japanese migrant stated, 'We came to Japan in search of money but found our Brazilianness instead' (Tsuda 2000: 56).

The social interaction of the Brazilian-Japanese with the Japanese not only highlights the Brazilianness of these *dekasegi* but also demonstrates that the views the Brazilian-Japanese formed of the Japanese people reflect in general the Brazilian's perceptions and stereotypes of the Japanese. Therefore, the following

statements illustrate, as was noted by Mead, that expectations are based on the “me” of the past experiences which are influenced by the society the person interacts with. One informant stated that the Japanese are “cold and don’t have human warmth” while others point out that the Japanese are work-alcoholics and lack creativity (Tsuda 1999: 153, 154). In addition, Japan’s treatment of their elders did not meet the stereotyped expectations of the Brazilian-Japanese (Tsuda 1999: 154). Furthermore, most Brazilian-Japanese are disappointed that all of Japan is not as technologically developed as previously thought and readjust their views about the degree to which Brazil is advanced (Tsuda 1999: 156). Conception of a progressive Japan had contributed to the Brazilian-Japanese’s pride in their Japanese heritage and, more importantly, was reason for the Brazil’s acceptance and support of the Japaneseness in the Brazilian-Japanese (Tsuda 1999: 156). Thus, this also serves as evidence of assuming Brazilian attitudes.

By focussing on certain aspects of the Japanese culture, the Brazilian-Japanese developed an incomplete and inaccurate picture of the Japanese, and the realization of this resulted in a renewed awareness and appreciation of Brazil’s influence on their self (Maeyama 1982 as cited in Tsuda 1999: 168). Since the Brazilian-Japanese are accustomed to the Brazilian sense of self and do not interact enough with the Japanese to fully comprehend the Japanese sense of self, the Brazilian-Japanese criticisms of the Japanese possibly stem from a misunderstanding of the Japanese dual self. Briefly, the Japanese conceive of a self divided into *omote* or the “external self” with *tatemoe* (socially accepted actions), and *ura*, or the inner self with *honne* (personal views and feelings of the person) (Tsuda 1998: 350). While such divisions are stated by Tsuda to be cross-cultural, what is unique about the Japanese division is the strength of its partitioning (1998: 350, 351).

### **Communication**

According to Mead, “in the conversation of gestures what we say calls out a certain response in another and that in turn changes our own actions, so that we shift from what we started to do because of the reply the other makes” (1956: 217, 218). This marks the start of communication (Mead 1956: 216). In the case of the Brazilian-Japanese, as have been previously stated, their “Japanese face” suggests to those Japanese, who are unaccustomed to dealing with Brazilian-Japanese, that these individuals should speak proper Japanese. Therefore, the Japanese are surprised to find that they speak Portuguese instead (Tsuda 1999: 148). Likewise, when Brazilian-Japanese adopt the practice of loudly speaking Portuguese every time they enter a store or public facility, they engage in conveying their Brazilianness to all present so that Japanese ways will not be expected from them (Tsuda 2000: 62, 63). They are also communicating with themselves

(Mead 1956: 216). By continually responding in this preemptive manner, the Brazilian-Japanese are reinforcing their own perception of themselves as Brazilians; thereby “following up [their] own address to other persons by an understanding of what [they] are saying, and using that understanding in the direction of [their] continued speech” (Mead 1956: 217). Other outward signs include openly embracing one another in public and dressing in distinct “Brazilian” fashion (Tsuda 2000: 61, 62). For Mead, the social situation specifies how much of the self is revealed in communication (1956: 219). Thus, the Brazilian-Japanese rarely, if ever, wear Bermuda pants and T-shirts with pictures of the Brazilian flag and other patriotic paraphernalia in Brazil, but they often wear this tourist-style garb in Japan for the expressed purpose of differentiating themselves from the Japanese (Tsuda 2000: 61,62). The Brazilian-Japanese also write their names in katakana, an alphabet reserved for foreign words (Tsuda 2000: 63). One Brazilian-Japanese man stated that he grew a goatee after he arrived in Japan because Japanese men are clean-shaven (Tsuda 2000: 63). In general, Tsuda reports that this “reversed nationalism” is not uncommon among immigrants (1999).

While in Brazil, the Brazilian-Japanese rarely participated in the samba, a Brazilian festival or parade, and some held a negative image of it, but in Japan, the Brazilian-Japanese fervently participate in the samba (Tsuda 1999: 151). It serves as yet another symbol for reinforcing the Brazilianness of the Brazilian-Japanese in Japan. Since the Brazilian-Japanese lack experience and knowledge on this topic, the samba is largely improvised and consists of flamboyant costumes and wild, chaotic dances (Tsuda 2000: 65, 66). The Japanese fascination with the samba supports the Brazilian-Japanese connection with their Brazilian self much like the Brazilians interests in Japanese practices strengthened the Brazilian-Japanese’s concept of self as Japanese. One interesting question arises concerning why the Brazilian-Japanese do not simple research the samba before organizing and staging this event. Research precludes inadequate knowledge on the subject and challenges the Brazilian-Japanese’s notions of their Brazilianness in the same manner that the Japanese context threatened the Japaneseness of the Brazilian-Japanese. Interestingly, the Japanese enthusiasm for the samba has lead them to thoroughly research this Brazilian practice; consequently, they perform much more culturally authentic sambas (Tsuda 2000: 67). Initial research of English sources found no reference to whether this occurrence was considered a challenge to the Brazilianness of the Brazilian-Japanese in Japan.

## **Conclusion**

George Herbert Mead’s concept of self contributes to a better understanding of the transition the Brazilian-Japanese experience in ethnicity. The Brazilian-Japanese have adopted to each culture based on their own perceptions. For some

Brazilian-Japanese, their conception of Japanese ways was distorted, and in Japan the same statement can be said about their ideas of Brazilianness. However, the Brazilian-Japanese will and have always been both Brazilian and Japanese. While their lifetime endeavors will continue to influence how they edit their future and past experiences, their particular social environment serves as a spotlight for the compatible aspect of self. Again, in the words of one Brazilian-Japanese migrant, "We came to Japan in search of money, but found our Brazilianness instead" (Tsuda 2000:56).

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