

Identities in Flux:

Social Media as Insight into Cultural Identity - A Case  
Study of Japanese-Brazilian migrants in Belém, Brazil

By

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## **Dedication Page**

To my family and fellow neurodivergent peers. Our abilities and disabilities need not stand in the way of our success.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my loving and supportive family and friends who celebrated my wins, encouraged me through my dark moments, and always helped me remember that now is only a moment.

To my Anthropology professors, thank you for helping me learn how to question the world and grow from my setbacks. Thank you for always encouraging me and for laying the proverbial path of success, critical thinking, and self-reliance for myself and others to walk on.

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**Abstract:**

This thesis examines cultural identity formation and preservation among Japanese-Brazilian immigrants (Nikkei) in the Amazonian city of Belém, Brazil. The thesis builds on studies documenting Nikkei migration, cultural maintenance, and changes occurring since the early 1900s in Brazil. The principal focus of this proposal is engagement with social media. Within this context, I focus on music and its role in cultural identity formation, preservation, and/or acculturation. The study combines online research (netnography) with offline qualitative and ethnographic methods. The research occurred during my five-month internship at the Museum Paraense Emílio Goeldi (or Goeldi Museum) in Belém, Brazil, as part of an MTSU Study Abroad semester program.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	1
Prepping, Living, and Surviving in the Field.....	2
Japanese Diaspora History.....	6
Integration – Acculturation.....	11
Current Japanese -Brazilian Culture.....	11
CHAPTER TWO: Methodologies and Results.....	14
Results.....	17
Ethnomusicology.....	24
CHAPTER THREE: The Interview.....	26
The Setting.....	27
The Transcript.....	28
CHAPTER FOUR: Discussion and Conclusion.....	50
Discussion.....	50
Conclusion.....	57
IRB Exemption Email.....	59
APPENDIX A.....	60
REFERENCES.....	62

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Several aspects of my life led me to this field of research. I have always had a deep-rooted passion for music; it was an integral part of my life in and out of school. I was heavily involved in band from 6th grade through 12th grade. I mainly played the French horn but enjoyed playing many brass and percussion instruments. I was in the marching band for all four years of high school, where I played the mellophone. I was also involved in choir during my high school years.

A second aspect of my background was a fascination with movie soundtracks. Music can shape storytelling through a simple fundamental signature change at a critical moment, drastically affecting the mood and emotional connection to the movie. I began recognizing this power when I was introduced to Studio Ghibli, a Japanese film company. I was seven years old when my mom rented “Princess Mononoke.” This animated film is set in a fantasy world where animals can be Gods, and humans are both the antagonists and the protagonists. The score in this film featured Taiko drums, wooden flutes, and a variety of other beautiful Japanese instruments. The way art and music blend to create complex emotions in the viewer's mind captivated me and has been something I have been enamored with ever since.

I knew I wanted to learn more about Japanese culture when I got to college. I began taking Japanese language courses. When it came time for me to select a topic for my Honors undergraduate thesis, I knew it would involve some aspect of this topic. All the pieces began to fall into place when I learned about my department’s semester program in Belém, Brazil. As it happens, Brazil has one of the largest Japanese populations outside

mainland Japan. I became intrigued and fascinated by the fact that so many people of Japanese descent were in Brazil. How did they identify themselves culturally, and what could this mean for the already blended cultural scene of Brazil? From there, I began to wonder about their music and how the traditional sounds of Brazilian samba and reggae music would have influenced conventional Japanese music. Questions such as: “What kind of music did the Japanese Brazilian people often listen to? How had generational differences affected this? What impact has social media had on their music experience?” flooded my mind. From this, the following project and research were created.

This thesis examines cultural identity formation and preservation among Japanese-Brazilian immigrants (Nikkei) in the Amazonian city of Belém, Brazil. Through ethnographic engagement and online study of social media, I focus on music and its role in cultural identity formation, preservation, and/or acculturation. My hypothesis is that a culturally significant and specific identity is formed within the Japanese-Brazilian population in Belém that will be present online.

### ***Prepping, Living, and Surviving in the Field***

Several things went into my preparation for this hypothesis. First, I looked for Japanese establishments within the city of Belém online so that I could visit and practice participant observation. Many of these establishments were restaurants or grocery stores; however, one of them, the Nipo-Amazonian Cultural Center, was highly significant and ended up being where I spent most of my time. As my time in Brazil passed, I finally



understood what had been preached repeatedly to me for the past year in my anthropology classes. “Fieldwork is chaos” rang clearly in my mind as I tried to connect with people from wildly different backgrounds with a significant language barrier. Luckily, many of the people I had the pleasure of getting to know during my fieldwork were extraordinarily kind and generous people.

I spent three months mentally preparing for the chaos of the fieldwork I was about to conduct. I had no plan and little time to adjust to moving to a new country for a few months to work with a group about which I knew next to nothing. I was excited at the prospect of conducting my research, but I was apprehensive about the “chaos” that might ensue during my time in the field. I had only been studying at MTSU for just over a year when I jetted to another country for five months to try and attempt my version of the ambiguous and overwhelming idea of fieldwork. I knew very little about what anthropology looked like in practice. It also did not help that the ethnographic field school, which would have taught me methods to prepare for this experience, began only after I had completed my fieldwork.

One of the most challenging parts of this research process was learning Portuguese. While music has always come naturally to me, language learning has not. I can hear and imitate easily, but learning the rules and structure of the language felt like it was nearly impossible. From a basic understanding of Latin roots, I could make out some words when they were written, but making sense of the spoken words was a significant challenge. The main reason for this was the time restraint I was working under.

Nevertheless, starting on the first day of winter break in 2022, my future roommates in Brazil and I began daily Portuguese crash course lessons. At first, this was easy as I have some background in Spanish and French, but that quickly changed as the lessons continued.

I became increasingly lost as lessons in sentence structure, noun placement, or verb tense continued. Of the three in my cohort, I was the only one who would be conducting ethnographic research. This meant that I would be alone as I went into the field to pursue my research topic and, as all ethnographic studies end up being, trying to make sense of the chaos that inevitably occurs.

Chaos is a crucial term for ethnography. It does not matter how beautiful one's project proposal is, how much research one has done beforehand, or if one thinks one planned every part perfectly; chaos will inevitably occur at some point in the process. I found this to be the case several times. Luckily, in my case, chaos was not synonymous with danger, and many of the chaotic events I experienced became some of the more fruitful research opportunities. Jumping into ethnographic research headfirst was a wild and somewhat anxiety-inducing endeavor. To extrapolate on an earlier point, not knowing the language of the interlocutors that I am trying to learn about is stressful, overwhelming, and anxiety-inducing. After finding my research site, there were many times over the five months of my time in Belém when I did not want to leave the house because of the sheer amount of anxiety and panic that I felt. One of the hardest lessons I had to learn was the art of focusing and staying calm in nerve-wracking situations where I didn't even speak the language. Thankfully, the people I was learning from and working with were some of the most welcoming people I've ever met.

One of the blessings of my research was working with the people at the Nipo Amazonian Japanese Cultural Center in Belém, Brazil. As I quickly learned, they were some of the kindest, most patient, caring individuals I've ever known. Despite the language barriers and my seemingly total ignorance of both Brazilian and Japanese culture, they

welcomed me into the center and the classes that they offered. They made the bulk of my first research experience significantly more enjoyable.

Another part of the my study was muddling through the copious amounts of research that had been done on Japanese migrant groups in Brazil. Almost all that I found was written from a business perspective. My goal was not to try to sell anything to the Japanese Brazilian population, so these were only somewhat useful to me. It was, however, fascinating to note how much research had been done in the name of capitalism but how much has yet to be done in anthropology and cultural studies. It felt like an exciting example of how money can follow research and what role capitalism plays in the research world. This later became an ethical question for me as I thought about why I was researching what I was and what I wanted my research to be used for. As I have seen from working with previous ethnic groups, there is always a possibility that the research we do as anthropologists can be used to exploit the group with which we work. Ethnographic study rarely happens with the wealthiest, most influential people. Instead, it tends to happen with groups from lower-income areas who have less financial or political say over who comes and goes in their corner of the world.

As my literature review continued, I noticed some discrepancies in terminology among scholars who had written about the topic of the Japanese diasporas in Brazil. The plurality of the word “diasporas” is essential to note as there have been somewhere between two and five significant diasporas of Japanese people immigrating to Brazil (White, 2003). The first wave is generally indicated as starting shortly after the abolition of slavery in Brazil in the late 1880s (Dahng, 2008). This diaspora started because of a labor shortage in Brazil (Bustamante, 2020). At the same time the emperor of Japan encouraged an

expansion of Japanese cultural influence in as many countries as possible (Shoji, 2018). As there had already been some Japanese influence in the Americas during the various gold rushes, it made sense to send people to places where there was both a need for labor and an opportunity for Japanese influence (Bustamente, 2010).

### *Japanese Diaspora History*

Diasporas and transnational movements have occurred since globalization started. Several push-pull factors often come into play when considering why a group of people leave their homes and start a new chapter of their life in another country (Axel, 2004). In the case of the Japanese people in the late 1800s, there was a substantial push from the Japanese government to expand their empire and look for a solution to overcrowding (Nishida, 2017). The timing of this push from the Meiji government coincided with the abolition of slavery in the late 1880s in Brazil (Shoji, 2018). While the liberation of formerly enslaved people was a monumental steppingstone in Brazil, it did lead to a labor shortage.

At the time, Brazil was changing its significant exports. While Japanese migration to other parts of South and Central America had started in the late 1890s, “the first organized movement to Brazil in 1908 [was] to provide a workforce for the coffee plantations near São Paulo” (White, 2003 quotes need a page number). This first organized movement of Japanese people to Brazil is widely regarded as the first of the three Japanese diasporas to Brazil (Shoji, 2018). The second movement happened within the next decade, and the third movement occurred after World War II (One Hundred Years, 2014; Nishida, 2017).

Historically, the word "diaspora" has meant a group of individuals forced to live abroad who do not integrate and see themselves more as travelers than as permanent residents (Bustamente, 2010). Today, academics use a broader definition of the term to describe communities with a strong collective ethnonational identity connected to a foreign state (Kingsberg, 2013). There are two schools of thought when considering the role of culture within a diaspora: assimilation-as-gain and assimilation-as-loss (Kingsberg, 2013). However, acculturation is a bit of both as becoming an expat is a dance of give and take, a balancing act of deciding what aspects of one's original culture to keep and what aspects of their new culture to accept and practice (Kingsburg, 2013). Language tends to be one of the biggest hurdles, but the most vital part of becoming a part of a new culture.

In anthropology, the term diaspora has been used frequently to define myriad ethnic groups and their movement to other countries. White, a prominent researcher on the subject of the Japanese movement to Brazil, defines the term diaspora with five criteria that show that this term is appropriate for this study.

- "(1) a diaspora population must exist in at least two destinations after dispersal.
- (2) The diasporic population must be self-aware of their own identity. Such self-awareness deploys a notion of ethnicity, which typically privileges the place of origin as a basis for constructing identity.
- (3) The diaspora must exist as a dispersion over at least two generations through the transmission of heritage. This distinguishes a diaspora from a transmigration situation involving relatively short-term circulation.
- (4) There must be some relationship between the diasporic population and an actual or imagined homeland...The actual extent of contact may be very variable. At one end of the scale are purely imagined relationships in which a collective myth is developed but little else, while at the other are frequently operationalized and multiple network connections under which a diaspora becomes part of a transnational community. Transnationalism and diaspora may overlap, but they are separate phenomena.
- (5) There should be interaction between diaspora populations in different destinations. This is crucial in distinguishing a diaspora from a series of

emigrant communities in separate bilateral relations with the place of origin." (White, 2009)

In the 1890s, Brazil and Japan began to discuss the idea of Japan sending *dekasegi*, or seasonal workers, to Brazil to help on farms since they were suffering from a labor shortage (One Hundred Years, 2014; Nishida, 2017; Kingsberg, 2013). Brazil saw this as a business opportunity to sell its overproduced coffee beans to Japan; however, this proposition did not entirely come to fruition until 1908 when Ryo Mizuno officially initiated Japanese immigration in Brazil (Japanese History in Brazil, 2023). The first Japanese immigrants to Brazil in 1908 totaled around 781 individuals (Nishida, 2017). Over the next two years, Ryo Mizuno would work with wealthy Brazilian businessmen to bring over another 906 immigrants by 1910 (Nishida, 2017; Lorenz, 2007). The two groups sparked decades of Japanese immigration, totaling 200,000 and 3.4 million by 1960 (Bustamante, 2010).

The first few waves of immigrants did not widely accept the idea of staying permanently in Brazil. Many Japanese immigrants who came to Brazil saw it merely as an opportunity to make money and return to Japan (Kingsberg, 2013, Soares 2021). Many had the option of returning taken away from them after they could not repay their debts when their labor contracts expired (One Hundred Years, 2014; Nishida, 2017). For this reason, many Japanese people have settled in and are now living in the Brazilian countryside outside of São Paulo (Nishida, 2017; Kingsberg, 2013). They tried to manage the duality of being good Brazilian citizens while maintaining their Japanese heritage, always intending to return to their homeland (Nishida, 2017; Masterson, 2006). They taught the children the traditional Japanese language, dances, sports, and writing (Kingsberg, 2013).

This was not an issue for many Brazilians as the Japanese were seen as clean and quiet people willing to live in the poor conditions provided to them (Demmers, 2002). After the 1930s, Japan instead encouraged permanent settlement in Brazil to alleviate some of the rural overcrowding of the Japanese countryside (White 2009, 313; Soares, 2021).

At first, many Brazilians accepted the Japanese immigrants because they were clean and organized (Japanese History in Brazil, 2023). They also fit into a larger plan by the Brazilian elite to phenotypically “whiten” the nation with overt racist connotations. The following quote from a display at the Japanese History Museum in São Paulo summarizes the experience:

"At the turn of the century, nevertheless, because of poor working conditions and ill-treatment (reminiscences of the slavery period) on farms, emigration to Brazil began to be hampered by European countries. Then, the Japanese, along with the Chinese, were remembered. Formerly scorned for not serving the "Bleaching" [whitening] intended by the Brazilian elite, it had become a feasible alternative defended by the São Paulo bourgeoisie. "Bleaching" affirmed that Brazil's backwardness was since its population was the outcome of an inferior race, an unhappy mixture of white people with blacks (Africans) and, to a lesser extent, yellow individuals (Indians). At the time, racial theories affirming the superiority of white people (Social Darwinism) were in vogue." (Japanese History in Brazil, 2023)

The label “clean and organized” used to classify the Japanese was in part indicative of cultural traits. However, it was also reflective of the immigrants’ goal to work hard to make a substantial amount of money on farms in Brazil and then return to Japan with healthy earnings (Nishida, 2017; Kingsberg, 2013). For most Japanese immigrants, the plan was always for them to return to their native country (Nishida, 2017). This, however, only became a reality for some. The reality was following the end of their 5-year labor contracts, many were deeply in debt to the farm and unable to repay (Nishida, 2017). For

this reason, they stayed and continued to work for the very the farms that had gotten them into debt in the first place (Kingsberg, 2013).

Despite lacking comfort and commonplace amenities, many Japanese immigrants lived quietly and worked diligently at their jobs (Japanese History in Brazil, 2023). They did not want to cause trouble in Brazil, as many of them still dreamed of returning to their homeland of Japan (Demmers, 2002). For this reason, they often taught their children to speak Japanese and how to read and write in Japanese (Japanese History in Brazil, 2023). This continued until the Brazilian government outlawed this practice for anyone under 14. This was done as a way for the government to exert power and have the Japanese immigrants conform to the increasingly aggressive Brazilian government assimilationist policies (Nishida, 2017).

So far, most of the discussion in this thesis has focused on Japanese immigration in the south of Brazil. The connection to the North and the Amazon, and the topic of this work, was through the settlement of the town Tomé-Açu, today a four-hour drive from Belém. In 1929 a group of 189 Japanese migrants arrived in the community and began producing agricultural crops (One Hundred Years of Japanese Emigration to Brazil 2014). They were most successful in producing black pepper. Infamously, Tomé Açu was also used as a concentration camp to imprison Japanese migrants during World War II, as also happened in the United States. From the colony in Tomé Açu, Japanese and Japanese Brazilians began to set up communities in the city of Belém.

### ***Integration - Acculturation***



Gaining acceptance in another country can be exceedingly tricky, even when the people are as welcoming as they can be in Brazil. Feeling out of place, lost, alone, scared, and homesick are just a few things that are common for expats, which all can be exacerbated while living within a community of others in the same situation (Demmers, 2002).

In addition, there is the risk of not belonging back home. The identity of Japanese personhood is very exclusive and specific (Demmers, 2002). While someone may be of Japanese descent, they may not be considered Japanese unless they were born and raised in Japan (Demmers, 2002). This issue is discussed heavily in the literature surrounding this topic.

As Miriam Kingsberg describes it in her book *Becoming Brazilian to Be Japanese: Emigrant Assimilation, Cultural Anthropology, and National Identity*, “In the age of the modern nation-state, gaining the qualities for inclusion in one polity necessitates relinquishing some of the characteristics that confer acceptance in another” (Kingsburg, 2013, 67). This quotation can give insights into the cultural aspects of a diaspora. Relinquishing parts of one’s native culture and adapting new forms of culture in a new country can help with assimilation and finding a sense of belonging and home (Demmers, 2002).

### ***Current Japanese Brazilian Culture***

The discussion of the assimilation-as-gain or assimilation-as-loss idea in this context stems from identity formation concerning globalization. This question is difficult to answer, and changes based on the person's perspective (Kingsberg, 67). Scholars have long accepted the idea of assimilation-as-gain but have not considered the concept of assimilation-as-loss as much (Kingsberg, 68). One question is, where is the line between

this? What is being considered a loss and a gain in this situation? The exchange of culture



has been seen since globalization started hundreds of years ago. While the exchange of ideas is nothing new, the rate of this exchange of culture has drastically increased since the invention of the Internet and, more specifically, for this group since the end of World War II (Everett, 2009). World War II and its aftermath significantly impacted Japanese culture and foreign relations. In the wake of the devastation seen in Japan from the bombs the United States dropped came a

change in attitude and perspective from the Japanese (Nishida, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Returning to the subject of music, I identified spaces of contemporary use of music to mark Japanese culture in Brazil. The Japanese-Brazilian population in Belém uses music within their cultural spaces, specifically at social spaces and events such as festivals, classes, and restaurants. Festivals are a big part of Japanese culture within Belém. Some booths at the outside portion of festivals sell Japanese-Brazilian fusion food, Brazilian ice cream, trinkets from popular anime TV shows and movies, plants, and baked goods. The inside portion of the festival features demonstrations from the local karate school and

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<sup>1</sup> Associação Pan Amazônia Nipo Brasileira [@nipobelem.apanb]. (2023, May 18) “@feira.nipo no Festival da @anb\_eljb Venha se encantar com uma programação cheia de atividades culturais, como karaokê, shuuji (caligrafia japonesa), origami...(video). Instagram.

children's choir (which sang in Japanese and Portuguese) and the classes offered within the Center, such as Kendo, Taiko, Bon Odori, and traditional calligraphy.<sup>2</sup>

These festivals are a place for the center and those who participate in the classes to showcase a part of their identity.

They are also a way for people interested in the Japanese culture of Belém to learn more and interact with aspects of the culture firsthand.

There was a cultural festival almost every two weeks. These events were often advertised on social media sites like Instagram and Facebook.



The Instagram site run by the Nipo Amazonian Center (one of the leading Japanese Cultural Centers in Belém) was fascinating and informative about when and where the festivals would be held and what kind of vendors would be there.

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<sup>2</sup> Jardim dos Sentidos [@jardimdossentidoscidadenova]. (2023, April 1). “Neste domingo! FEIRA DA NIPO! Aguardamos sua visita (Photograph). Instagram.

## Chapter 2: Methodology and Results

I used the following approaches to answer the thesis hypothesis. These approaches are less in-depth than a traditional, full-scale anthropological project. Traditionally, a thorough anthropological study takes 12-18 months. Most of this time is spent building rapport, a challenging aspect of anthropological research. Here are the parts of ethnographic anthropology I tried to follow and adhere to during my six months in Brazil.

*Ethnography* - A traditional research method based on intensive, in-person participant observation techniques to study interactions, practices, beliefs, sentiments and other and experiences of a group of people. A recent subsection of ethnographic is netnography, which focuses on human online communication, textual communication, or multimedia communication such as video, audio, and pictures (Kozinets, 1998). Through netnography, I provide examples of platforms that highlight and engage Nikkei individuals from Belém. In my case, this approach was simultaneously conducted with rapport building and information interviews.

*Rapport building*—Once in Belém, I built rapport (trust and cooperation) by interacting with the Nikkei community. Among the options to build rapport, I observed Japanese restaurant/business owners, participated in Nikkei events open to the public, and tried to get involved in their community as much as possible. Establishing rapport helps ensure honest feedback during interviews as the community members build trust and share important information.

*Literature review* - I looked at which aspects of identity markers have already been studied by reviewing the ethnographic and historical literature on the Nikkei people of

Brazil, specifically Belém. I also reviewed the literature on migrants and identity formation/preservation in the broader media studies to help inform my study.

*Participant observation* - Once I found the culturally relevant areas to my study, I spent as much time as possible observing and participating in all (within reason) cultural practices. I attended and participated in any cultural festivals, celebrations, or events that I could. I then looked for similarities and differences between the different subgroups found among the Nikkei. This was based mainly on age and number of years/generation of immigrants (first-fifth).

*Informal interviews* - I conducted many informal interviews from which I took field notes and acquired social media accounts. The interviews were informal because they were exploratory, not following a specific list of questions or a script. Often, these interviews were conversations about someone's experiences online. Questions about internet followings and activities involving music and the Japanese population would usually be involved. The informal interviews follow the flow of actions and conversations in interactions. They provide a baseline of information upon which to structure formal interviews.

*Formal interviews* - One formal interview was conducted during my time in Brazil. It is typically performed following a list of open-ended questions or a script. The goal of these interviews is for the researcher to ask for elaboration on aspects of the community that they have yet to understand, such as kinship systems, specific parts of the language, or specific costumes (using two hands when eating, etc.). This step is generally done later in the research, as rapport is essential. Formal interviews are typically conducted in a home or a place of cultural significance so researchers can expand on meanings. Interviewees

can feel safe, comfortable, and open in their responses. My questions revolved around culture, music, generational differences, and Internet usage. Several times, I had to ask the same question in various ways to see how answers varied and what topics might arise. The interview was conducted at the Nipo-Center.

*Ethnomusicology* was originally focused on studying scales, intervals, and tonal systems (Merriam, 1960). The study of ethnomusicology, or musicology, can be traced back to the late 1880s (Post, 2011). Ethnomusicology is now more broadly focused on how cultures interact with, use, and create music (Myers, 1992; Kiwan, 2011). The original idea for my research stemmed from a curiosity about music. I wanted to better understand how people interacted with and made music. I also wanted to know how music creation impacted and influenced one's identity and the identity of a group.

## Results

### The Nipo-Amazonian Center<sup>3</sup>

One of the most challenging parts of my research was finding somewhere in Belém to meet and interact with people from the Japanese-Brazilian population. For the first few weeks of my time in Brazil, I spent almost every day trying to navigate the literature review portion of my research. It was through a friend that I finally found additional research pathways at the Nipo-Amazonian Center.

For the first several weeks, it seemed hard to find a reason to be in Brazil besides simply trying to figure out how to take field notes. I felt very out of place and uncomfortable standing on the sidelines of events, trying to speak what little Portuguese I knew to converse with anyone who would talk to the out-of-place wallflower. I also learned firsthand how uncomfortable people can get when you take notes during a conversation. However, as it turned out, I met a friend of a friend who brought me to a Taiko class. This was my ticket into the world I had been passively watching from the



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<sup>3</sup> Photo of the plaque outside of the Nipo-Amazonian Center. The text reads: Association of Pan-Amazonian Nipo-Brazilians; Nikkei Association of Belém; Association of Japanese-Brazilian Ladies of the Amazon; Club of the Elders of Pará; Pará association of Former Brazilian-Japan Scholarship Holders; Japanese Language Diffusion Center for the Northern Region of Brazil; Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the State of Pará. Photo credit: Liadan F. Jenkins



sidelines for weeks. This was the opening I needed to meet more people and begin an actual phase of participant observation.

This was the most exciting and yet challenging part of anthropology for me. I



remember the feeling of attending the first Taiko class in the Dojo of the Nipo Center. I remember how clammy my hands were and how nervous I

was. Not only did I not speak Japanese, and not only had my only interaction with Japanese culture up until this point has mainly been online, in books, or on a TV screen, but I also did not know hardly any Portuguese and was so very nervous that they would not be welcoming of outsiders. <sup>4</sup>



In addition to the weekly Taiko classes, the Nipo Center held festivals nearly every other weekend. These festivals consisted mainly of merchant booths selling Japanese-style foods beautifully mixed and meshed with the surrounding Brazilian culture. For example, the bento box booth was placed next to the ice cream booth, which was selling bacuri (a Brazilian fruit) ice cream. I found out about these festivals

<sup>4</sup> Screenshot of a video from @nipobelem.apanb on May 3rd, 2023.



through the Instagram page that the Nipo Center ran, and as soon as I found it, I knew this would be the best place to start the participant observation portion of my research.<sup>5</sup> Having

social anxiety as well as a profound difficulty learning Portuguese — despite the four months of daily crash course lessons from Dr. Pace and my several years of experience with Spanish — I felt like my brain actively rejected almost any new Portuguese word I tried to learn.

Thankfully, on our first weekend in Belém, Dr. Pace introduced us to a former student he had worked with several years ago. Bruno (a pseudonym) was teaching English at a school

in Belém. Without him, my research would have been significantly more difficult and overwhelming, and I would have missed many opportunities. His courage, support, kindness, and flare encouraged and inspired me to stay true to myself and not let my fears and anxieties hold me back from achieving my goals. I am truly honored for his friendship and the community he helped me find during one of the loneliest times of my life.



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<sup>5</sup> Two sides of a manue at the Nipo festival. These menus depict the blending of Brazilian culture and Japanese culture in that while some of the foods are reminiscent of traditional Japanese foods, they are often made with foods that are commonly found in Brazilian cuisine. Photo credit: Liadan F. Jenkins

During these events, there was a mixture of booths and items for sale. The events



were often held in two locations that alternated by week. A festival was usually held at the Nipo Center on the first and third Sunday of the month. These festivals were open to the public, and a range of people often took part in them, from people who identified as Japanese-Brazilian to people who were just interested in the cultural experience this center had. On days when a festival was being held, the cobblestone parking lot would be lined with booths selling an array of culturally relevant items such as

food, jewelry, and plants. Inside the Center, on the second floor, there was a large dojo that was open to the public. Various groups, such as the Bon Odori class, Kendo club, Taiko group, Karate club, a children's choir (who sang in both Japanese and Portuguese), a traditional Japanese calligraphy group, and the Koto club, would perform on the stage at the front of the dojo.<sup>6</sup>

In April 2023, we attended two festivals at the Nipo Center. I remember the jolt of excitement and anxiety as we took an Uber to the first one. Bruno and his partner picked

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<sup>6</sup> Poster outside the Nipo Amazonian Center informing visitors of available language classes. The text reads: Japanese Language School of Belém; Courses to dive into Japanese culture: Japanese Language, Origami, Shuji, Shigin; Japanese classes: Saturday - 9am to 12pm, Sunday\* - 2pm to 5pm, Tuesdays/Thursdays\* - 7pm to 9pm, Monday/Wednesday\* - 7pm to 9pm; Shuji: Tuesday - 2pm to 4pm; Shigin: Wednesday - 3pm to 4:30pm; \*through group training; Nikkei Association of Belém. Photo credit: Liadan F. Jenkins

me up from my apartment building. I was happy, and they were also excited, as Bruno's partner had wanted to attend these festivals for months. As I showed them the Instagram post, which listed the kinds of activities at the festival, we talked about which attraction we would want to make sure to visit.<sup>7</sup>

When we first got to the Nipo Center, there is a Japanese-style archway that adds to the ambiance of the experience.<sup>8</sup> On weekdays, one walks through the cobblestone parking lot and into the Nipo Center. When inside, a beautiful photo of Mount Fuji covers the rear wall, creating an inviting feeling and adding an ambiance to the building. Turning the corner, another hallway and a staircase are on the left. I would have to wait a few weeks to see what was down the hallway; however, since it was the first festival I had been to, I wanted to discover what was upstairs. As I ascended the stairs, I smelled more food than had been outside and



<sup>7</sup> Picture of the Gothic Lolita booth at the Nipo Festavle in April 2023. This booth is significant because it shows how aspects of Japanese culture transmit to transnational Japanese groups. Photo credit: Liadan F. Jenkins

<sup>8</sup> Screenshot from an Instagram highlight reel by @feiras\_nipo\_divulgacao on May 20th 2023, advertising the Gothic Lolita themed booth at the bi-weekly Sunday festival.

heard cheering. I was not alone on the stairs, but I was self-conscious and felt more lost



than ever. Though the space felt welcoming and relaxed, I felt I had not gotten permission to be there. I was an obvious outsider and had no idea what was going on.<sup>9</sup> I felt like an outsider like an adult toddler stumbling around a new place with new people and trying to navigate the chaos of my newfound environment.<sup>10</sup> I remember how strange

it felt for everything to feel so new. I have never been a fan of big, loud crowds, but this is

what I was called to be a part of for the sake of the research. I remember the smells of the new types of food, the sounds of Portuguese and faint music, and the excited sounds of people talking and laughing. I wanted to make sense of everything,



and I wanted to learn as much as I could. Every smell, interaction, and sight seemed new

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<sup>9</sup> View of the archway at the front of the Nipo Center. The Center itself can be seen behind the arch on the left side of the photo (white building). Photo credit: @feiras\_nipo\_divulgacao

<sup>10</sup> View from the seating area inside the Dojo of the Nipo Center. A local group was performing a short traditional Japanese play. Photo credit: Liadan F. Jenkins



and exciting. As two small children excitedly ran past me holding ice cream, I returned to reality and tried to focus on the reason I was there.<sup>11</sup>

I wanted to find out where the faint sound of music originated. We (Bruno, his boyfriend, and I) had yet to venture into the actual building of the Japanese center. As we ventured inside and up a stairway, we entered what I would come to know as the Dojo. As we entered the room, I felt more at ease. The room was huge and reminded me of my old



Karate studio. There was a stage at the front of the room where several people were performing a play. We found a seat at a table near the room's right wall. As I looked up, I noticed a second level of the room where chairs had been set up, but it was sparsely populated. The ground floor of the room had well over 100 people. Many groups were quietly talking and laughing or enjoying the play. The room was cool and comfortable, a nice change from the hot and humid day outside. I noticed several kids run past in a group, several of whom were not wearing shoes. They ran by,

giggling with excitement, and ran behind a door to the right of the stage. I would later learn that they were a part of the Taiko class. I was so intrigued and fascinated with all that was going on. This was the first time I felt like I was truly doing ethnographic fieldwork. I felt like a sponge, taking in every sight, sound, smell, and experience my brain could handle.

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<sup>11</sup> Screenshot from an Instagram highlight reel by @feiras\_nipo\_divulgacao on May 20th 2023, advertising the Japanese Cutlture: Karai themed booth at the bi-weekly Sunday festival.

The more I looked, the more I noticed that the age range of the room varied greatly, from young children to elderly adults. Some people were in normal street clothes, and some were in cosplay of popular anime characters. There was a screen set up just inside the entrance to the room where people were taking photos and videos. Later that night and the next day, I noticed that several of these people ended up on the Instagram page for the Nipo Center.

### Ethnomusicology

At the live events, there seemed to be a rather vague way the Japanese-Brazilians identified themselves, so finding people who identified this way took a lot of work. The



language barrier presented a huge difficulty because I did not really know what to say. I had a general short spiel that I was slowly improving, but how does one approach a perfect stranger and ask about their taste in music? From there, I had to walk the line of wondering if what I was doing had racist undertones. Thoughts like - ‘Am I thinking of the person as Japanese-Brazilian even if they do not identify this way? If so, would that be morally correct?’ - would race through my mind.<sup>12</sup> I wondered how much of this part of the research was biased. For these reasons, I did not yield as much

<sup>12</sup> Screenshot from an Instagram highlight reel by @feiras\_nipo\_divulgacao on May 20th 2023, advertising a restaurants booth at the bi-weekly Sunday festival.

data from in-person interactions as I had originally planned. However, from spending time in different cultural spaces, I did find that the Japanese-Brazilian population in Belém uses music within their cultural spaces, specifically at social spaces and events such as festivals, classes, and restaurants. I found that many types of music were present and were not defined by only Japanese or Brazilian music. There were a plethora of genres from several parts of the world. The four main languages in the music I heard were Portuguese, Spanish, English, Japanese, and Korean. I was at first shocked by how diverse the range of music was; that is, until I conducted the primary interview for this project, during which time I was humbled and given the opportunity to rethink some of my queries (mostly surrounding the idea of globalization and the usage of the internet).

### Chapter Three: The Interview

Interviews, both formal and informal, are an integral part of ethnographic work. Participant observation can leave one with many questions about the culture they are trying to understand. Informal interviews are an excellent way to find information about cultural practices and norms in a more relaxed setting. I conducted several informal interviews, many of which had general questions related to my research (see Appendix A). These questions solicited exciting and sometimes helpful responses. However, I found that they could be a problem when conducting fieldwork as many times, people have never considered them and have difficulty answering them. Specifically, in questions 3 and 4, their responses were often more “I do not know” or “Oh, I have never thought of that,” which gave me an exciting and unexpected data point.

However, I was able to conduct one formal interview with the director of programs at the Nipo-Brazilian Center. He was a kind, knowledgeable man with a very accomplished career in photojournalism, which took him all over Brazil and Japan. Many of his projects concerned the Japanese community in Brazil, and he was very excited to talk with me. Our interview ended up being over two hours long and was conducted in three languages. Thankfully, the Nipo Center provided a translator for me who spoke English, Portuguese, and Japanese. While this made it easier on me, this is often frowned upon in anthropology as many intricacies are lost when translation between languages occurs. However, since my entire project was relatively last minute and quick, I needed more time to learn Portuguese fluently, much less Japanese! Alas, a translator was required.



## *The Setting*

It was a hot, humid weekday. This was my first time at the center during weekday working hours. I was shocked to see how many people were there. Some were sitting on the front porch, drinking hot tea from an ornately patterned tea set. There was a mixture of emotions when I arrived. I recognized some teachers from the Bon Odori and Kendo classes there. They were very excited to see me and talk about my research<sup>13</sup>.

When I arrived, Diego (a pseudonym), the translator the center had brought in to help



with the interview, was waiting on the outside veranda. I walked up and realized how many Japanese people were there. Some people wore professional and casual dress, but nobody dressed casual, in T-shirts and slacks. I was dressed appropriately. I recorded the entire conversation and took notes for the first hour of the interview, for which I would later thank myself. We stayed very on topic for the first hour, until we relocated

to a quieter part of the building. I wanted to get to know him more and try to understand him so that I could connect. He was very willing to talk to me and very open about the questions I asked him. I need to improve on asking open-ended questions because there was much time that I would ask an impromptu question, and if it needed to be more open-ended, then it would be hard for Diego to ask or for him to answer.

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<sup>13</sup> Screenshot from an Instagram post by @nipobelem.apanb (formerly @nipo.belem\_apanb) on June 3rd 2023, advertising the Gothic Lolita themed booth at the bi-weekly Sunday festival.

The interview went very well. When I first went there, I met the translator at the front of the building. The Nipo - Center stands out from its surroundings. The entrance to the parking lot has a traditional Japanese archway. The parking lot is not paved, nor does it have regular bricks as the cobblestones. They are more intricate and unique. There are walls on either side of the parking lot (where the stands for the festivals are placed) and where people park for daily life and class. The walls are only about one story high. To the right, the wall runs the length of the plot of land on which the center sits. A picture on the wall depicts a Japanese cherry blossom with a town and Mt. Fuji in the background. To the left of the Nipo Center, there is another building, a Japanese restaurant. When one reaches the front of the Nipo building, one notices the stairs made of solid black granite. Despite the apparent years of wear and tear from the humidity, sun damage, and near-constant rain in Belém, they looked elegant. The entranceway is covered and features two sets of doors as well as a table that always has at least one man (never a woman, that I have seen). On the day of the meeting, one man sat there talking to Diego (the interpreter) and another man whom I had not met but who was Japanese.

### ***The Transcript***

For this section, I transcribed and translated what was said during this interview into English. This provides a rich record for the type of information I gathered. Portuguese, Japanese, and English were spoken.

Fumihito, the interviewee, was a jovial and kind man in his mid-70s. He was excited to be part of my research and was happy to help. He was very generous with his knowledge and wisdom and was delighted to share his experiences with me. He was an integral part

of my research, and I am indebted and so grateful to him, as well as the dozens of other people at the Nipo Center, who helped make my research possible, memorable, and meaningful.

Diego, the translator, had studied Japanese for over a decade. He had previously lived in Japan for five years while completing the JET program as a Brazilian exchange student. He worked as a translator in corporate Japan and a language teacher in schools and local government.

When I got to the Nipo center to conduct the interview, I noticed how many people were sitting outside the doors of the office area. There were three men and a woman, all over 55. They didn't seem to be doing much, just sitting outside, talking, and enjoying the weather. As we sat down to begin the interview, Mitsu, a kind and intelligent woman who seemed to oversee much of the Nipo center, offered us tea and told me (through the translator) that I chose the right person to interview because he was the person who knew about everything that went on within the Nipo community of Belém. I would later find out that he had a natural skill for keeping his finger on the community's pulse thanks to his 20-some-odd years of being in photojournalism. He had written several books and many papers on the north of Brazil.

The generational gaps within the center and community were discussed several times. She started by offering us coffee. We said now, and then Diego got water and offered some to me. We sat in the front room where the water jug and the fridge were. It is a good-sized room with blue walls and a blue tiled floor. Posters were next to the double doors leading to the center's front porch. Another door to the left of the double doors leads to the

“hallway” into the center. Across from the double doors is a smaller glass and aluminum door leading to the center's main office.

The first part of the interview took place in a small room with doors on three of the walls and a window on the fourth wall. We sat in plastic lawn chairs that were semi-sturdy. Throughout the interview, several people came and went through the room into different parts of the center and stopped to say hi. As we sat down to start the interview, the manager of one of the vents at the center offered us tea and began to tell me why I had made a good choice of interviewee. “He is the guy for everything that happens,” she said.

DIEGO: She didn't explain (to him) what you are doing precisely, just that you participated in the dance thing (Bon Odori Class)

There was a significant amount of joking in Portuguese and Japanese, mostly about age, with comments like “he knows everything because he's been around for 90 years” and such. In reality, he was only in his mid-70s.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so I've never done an interview before.

DIEGO: I'll translate it but not too long and be clear.

INTERVIEWER: I've never done an interview before, and thank you for sitting down with me to do this I really appreciate it.

Diego translated this to him; his response was to ask what I was studying in Belém. I understood this much Portuguese and so I responded with a mix of English and broken Portuguese.

INTERVIEWER: Cultura Japonesa em Belém. Specifically, social media and music.

He was pleasantly surprised with the tiny bit of Portuguese that I was able to use, and he understood my response in English. From there I continued to explain, “But I want to come back in two years to research all Japanese culture in Belém.”

This was translated to him, and the three of them (a woman, a man, and Diego) all began speaking about what I had done at the center thus far in terms of immersing myself in the culture. They spoke of the Taiko, Kendo, and Bon Odori classes that I had been attending and how I had shown interest in other activities that they offered at the center.

INTERVIEWER: When people talk about Japanese culture, what do they say about music?

DIEGO translated: He thinks it's different for the first, second, and third generations. He says that it is a very large subject, so he's asking if you could be a bit more specific. Do you want to know if there is passing music from generations or if they do karaoke and this kind of thing?

INTERVIEWER: More so, what is the influence of Japanese music here? Does it carry over from generation to generation? Do older generations listen more to Japanese music than other generations, or is it kind of everybody? Because generally, the older ones may

listen more and the younger ones may not because the music may not transcend the generations. They may develop more of a mixed identity.

DIEGO: Are you just looking at descendants?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

DIEGO translates: Yeah, like the guys who first came here, they needed to maintain the culture, so they would do all the Japanese things, including music and language. And like she came when she was 5 and she learned traditional music. [The “her” he was referring to was Mikasa the lady who ran the place.] In the past, they had a big influence on the Japanese and they would bring things from Japan like records so they could listen it was so important, and it was really attached to their hearts”

INTERVIEWER: And so now what do they see?

DIEGO translates: Nowadays they transmit quite naturally, like they hear the things their parents would listen to. They know karaoke, so even if they don't really know the language they still have some relation with music. As the Brazilians would sometimes do, they don't know the language but they can sing Japanese songs

INTERVIEWER: Because they've been around the music, they've picked up that part of the culture from their parents.

DIEGO: Yes, exactly.

INTERVIEWER: That makes sense.

DIEGO translates for Mikasa: She sings karaoke, but the songs she knows are from the 60s

INTERVIEWER: She lived in Tomé Açú?

DIEGO translated from Mikasa: She came to Tomé Açú when she was 5 years old and then came to Belém when she was 18. She doesn't know any of the new songs or any of the new Japanese things.

INTERVIEWER: They're talking a lot about Karaoke, are there other genres of music that they hear here or other specific kinds of music

DIEGO: Okay, I'll ask him that, but just so I know, karaoke is not a genre; you can sing anything you want to.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, right of course

*we all laugh*

INTERVIEWER: Okay so what genre of music do they usually sing here?

DIEGO translates: So the older people still listen to Inka, a traditional Japanese ... Very specific genera. Some young people will also sing it sometimes, but they have access to J-pop and other genres directed from Japan, and they have YouTube, and they have access to other information and other genres:

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned social media. So, they have access to social media, how do you see that mixing with their cultural identity here?

DIEGO: Do you want to know only about music or what specifically?

INTERVIEWER: Music and social media are my focus, but if he has anything else related to those that he would like to talk about, I'd love to hear that, too.

DIEGO translates: So, he says that music has other meanings like you know, it is a way for bringing people together and transmitting Japanese culture. You know, there are people who enter the culture through sports or language, and you have music that is one of the

routes to do that. That's what they do here as an association to transmit Japanese culture through music a lot of the time.

INTERVIEWER: So, the types of music that they have here, which generations often listen to them? For example, at the festival last weekend, there was Taiko, Kendo, and Karaoke. So, would he say that there are generational differences between people who play and listen to his kind of music?

DIEGO translates the response: So yeah, actually there are some differences. You know, when you see Kendo, it is an amazing workout and takes longer arms, so the older ones play this. Karaoke is an easier process to bring in outsiders because it's for younger people who don't speak and can learn the process. He was in a meeting today, and they were talking about different Koto that's not mainly Japanese.

INTERVIEWER: So, they're looking at integrating more people that are Brazilian, not just Brazilian Japanese?

DIEGO translates: Yeah, exactly that they are wanting to expand this for Brazilians. Like there was a time that this was only Japanese people and they didn't like Brazilian people, but they want to bring everybody together and they are making efforts to make it this way to make it more inclusive. So, one example is restaurants. In the past Japanese restaurants were for Japanese people, and maybe 90% of the people there were Japanese and 10% were Brazilian. But now that's changing - you have to change. The first generation of Japanese immigrants are almost all dead now so you have less and less Japanese people and more and more Brazilian people coming and that they are trying for example to understand and appreciate Japanese food. If they don't do that as a business then they cannot keep going on because Japanese people don't know anything.



INTERVIEWER: So, it's a relatively small population here then? How many people would he say? How many Japanese people are in Belém? I know that in São Paulo, lots of Japanese people.

Fumihito answered directly to Diego without needing translation of what I asked. Then Diego translated his response:

DIEGO: Yeah, he was about to say the same thing in São Paulo. It's very easy because they have a huge community. So, they just pass things naturally because there are so many. Even if they don't go all the way to make the effort to others, they are still sufficient, but here, they only have about 40,000 people.

INTERVIEWER: Only? Okay... that's a lot.

*Everyone laughs.*

INTERVIEWER: That's a good number.

DIEGO: In Japan, and then in São Paulo.

INTERVIEWER: It's like 400,000?

DIEGO: No, no, it's more like a million or so.

INTERVIEWER: Well São Paulo has 33 million people so that makes sense.

DIEGO: So, it's easy.

INTERVIEWER: And they still have an influx from Japan, people coming over from Japan. Do they still see that here a lot, or is it mostly like here where she was born in Tomé Açu, or no, wait, she was born in Japan?

DIEGO: Yes

INTERVIEWER: And then she moved to Tomé Açu when she was 5, so are they seeing people from Japan coming directly to Belém, or are they coming from São Paulo, Tomé Açu, or somewhere else?

DIEGO translated: So, there are a bunch of people like you know they use to make a... how do you say... pepper.

INTERVIEWER: Oh yeah, Tomé Açu used to be a pepper-farming city.

DIEGO translated: So yeah, there are things that they came from many different places like, you know, Brazil many places and the countryside, but like from Japan, they stopped coming from there a while ago, of course, they still have some, but they're done immigrating.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So, going back to an earlier thing, he said. When they're trying to set up these new things for people to do here, how do they go about advertising that? Do they do that on social media? do they use music to do that when they do that?

DIEGO translated: So they used in the past mail like it was the only way to do this. But now it is with the Internet and social media, through like Facebook and Instagram, in order to do that. And about music, they don't really like to use music for advertising, but they like it, if you know if you go to Instagram, there is an app to put some music there, so yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I noticed that they are typically Japanese—esk music, not too much Brazilian music, which, of course, makes sense because it's a Japanese center. So why would they use Brazilian music?

*All laugh*

INTERVIEWER: Are there specific types of Japanese music that are only found in Belém?

DIEGO: He has never heard of any new genres but in the past, they did have Japanese bands who played Japanese songs and stuff but that's about it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you notice any mixing of any Japanese and Brazilian styles of music?

Diego asked the question, but the response was a lot less enthusiastic. He answered penitently and slightly confused. In an attempt to clarify, I asked...

INTERVIEWER: Or have they stayed separate, but are kind of doing their own thing?

DIEGO: So not really, but like for example in São Paulo there was a guy who would for example use the rhythm of Samba and sing Japanese -Brazilian songs and here, for example, there is nothing like this. Maybe they use traditional instruments and play similar music like Brazilian music or like Samba music

INTERVIEWER: How's it called?

DIEGO: Like Brazilian music or like not from the not Asian

INTERVIEWER: Not Asian, *haha* okay

DIEGO: There are also dances it's called nihongo in Japanese traditional songs but in the rhythm of samba

INTERVIEWER: This is fantastic, thank you again. So what is his opinion on that? Is that something he sees as a good thing that the styles are mixing and changing a little bit to their own thing or is that not viewed in a positive light?

DIEGO translates: He really likes it. But any significant take on it, for example, the first generation, the older people, some of them would like it, some of them would not. So that depends, but it's harder with older generations.

INTERVIEWER: So younger generations really embrace it as a mixed identity kind of thing?

DIEGO: No, I don't think this is the thing he meant.

Then he asks the question: Yeah, everyone received it much easier, like it's a normal thing now.

INTERVIEWER: So, he kind of gave an answer to this, but I want to see what his view of this is. So, how is Japanese music presented here at the center? What are the different types? Just a list of them or...

DIRGO: What do you mean?

INTERVIEWER: We can move on, we'll come back to that later. So, when people perform here, how and where do they learn the instruments or the music. Is it mostly all from the center, is it passed down from their family? How does that work?

DIEGO translated: So basically, the things they present here are things that people learned here, and then they show. People who do this in their families or this kind of stuff, they usually don't show it to other people, they maintain it within themselves. Yeah, in the past they used to have this like a performance meeting so that everyone who came to do something would come from there and do a play

INTERVIEWER: Like an open call?

DIEGO: Yeah, but it's not happened as much in the last 50 years.

INTERVIEWER: Oh wow.

DIEGO: It was long ago.

INTERVIEWER: That's cool, an open call for that. So, okay, how important would he say that the use of social media is within the Japanese population here? Is it something that he sees that they use a lot and is part of their cultural identity, or is it would he say that they use it just as much as everyone else?

DIEGO translated: So basically, the older people don't really use it because you know they're old. The younger people they do use it, but you know as everybody, like to film the things that they're doing. So, I'd say more normal use of it.

INTERVIEWER: So older people don't use it because they aren't accustomed to it, or they don't understand how to use it, or is it a tangibility issue and they don't have access to it? What would you say? Because that can vary a lot depending on the culture, so...

DIEGO translated: So basically, like they are not used to using computers, and when you get to a certain age, you don't wanna try, so yeah, I think that's the best reason.

INTERVIEWER: What age would he say that is?

DIEGO translates: So the 70s up they don't really use it.

INTERVIEWER: What age does he think younger generations start using social media?

DIEGO translated: He doesn't think there is any difference between Japanese and Brazilian or anybody actually like no, it's everybody does this around the same age.

INTERVIEWER: So 10? 11? Because we have kids who do it at about six.

DIEGO: It depends on their household

Then he asks him: he thinks more of education because everybody has access to that and it's more of the parents that let you or don't let you use it because you can make your eyes bad or you're going not to do another thing and just stay on the internet.

INTERVIEWER: In what generations does he see a difference in the usage of different social media based on different age ranges? For example, does the older generation use Facebook, the younger generation uses Instagram, and everyone uses YouTube? or does everyone use Facebook and Instagram? What does he see with that?

DIEGO translates: He thinks that older people use social media when they need it to write something on Facebook, a lot of people use WhatsApp to communicate with people, and later they may watch something on YouTube. Younger people understand social media thing better, so they can use a bigger variety of things like TikTok, Instagram,

( Fumihito continues his response)

So basically, older people would be more like passive users, and younger people are more active, and they've mastered the different things and use all of it.

INTERVIEWER: So, they use TikTok too?

DIEGO: Yeah (he continues his response)

Yeah, they understand how to do the thing they dance, they take photos, this kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Do they do Brazilian dances or Japanese dances or a mix?

DIEGO: Just adapted to whatever they listen to, so it's different if they listen to Japanese.

INTERVIEWER: That's very true with globalization everyone listens to everything

(he continues his response).

DIEGO: The problem is that they don't have this all because you know, everybody are connected and Brazilians and Nikkes and stuff, they have access to music in English, which is a big thing everywhere.

INTERVIEWER: I've noticed that that's a big thing that they have English and Spanish and Portuguese and Japanese and Korean and K-pop, which is interesting, which is not surprising but interesting.

(Fumihito continues to respond)

DIEGO translates: So, he also works like on office things and when he does them he used to listen to music but never Japanese music because he understands it and he would think about it and it would bother or distract him, so he would listen to music in English or maybe instrumental so he wouldn't have any distractions

INTERVIEWER: So, where does he work? He works there now, or he used to?

Diego asks him in Japanese, and he starts to respond in Japanese, then in Portuguese.

FUMIHITO: "Research. I do research."

INTERVIEWER: What do you research?

DIEGO: How the food is transmitted here.

INTERVIEWER: Oh! Very cool! So what has he found with that?

DIEGO translates: So basically now when the Japanese first came here they brought a lot of things like food from their plants, this kind of stuff. With plants, sometimes you don't have the same thing you have in Japan, so you have to adapt and use local ingredients, and the flavor changes a bit so younger people wouldn't know the original plants, so while they can sometimes find the thing they make original recipes you know so that young people can, what's that called?

INTERVIEWER: Like authentic Japanese?

DIEGO: Yeah?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I'd say so.

DIEGO: Okay, let's go with that.

*All laugh*

DIEGO: So, this kind of thing he's been researching.

(he continues in Japanese)

DIEGO translates: It's like they have, like you know, eating raw fish like Brazilian people don't really eat raw fish like indigenous people eat raw fish, but the Japanese love it like they found out among the fish which one they can serve so that everyone will eat it.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting, muito legal!

*All Laugh*

How long has he been researching that?

DIEGO translating: So, he started in 2018 and stopped during the pandemic but is restarting now.

INTERVIEWER: This is kind of a generational question. Does he notice a push from older generations to bring more Japanese music into the Center or into social media sites so that they have more representation in general? Or are they kind of okay with whatever is happening now?

DIEGO: That's a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Right, is there a push coming from anywhere? If so, where? Is there a push from younger generations wanting more Brazilian music? Is there a push from older generations wanting more Japanese music? Or is there no push?



DIEGO translates: When you say to bring more music to what? To the performance? To what?

INTERVIEWER: Great question. Yes, to the performance of the festivals, to just be represented in general.

DIEGO translated: Well, when it comes to festivals, there is nothing like this because you know if you don't have Japanese music, there is no mood, you don't have a Japanese festival. But when it comes to karaoke, the older people, the first generation this age, they basically sing Inca - this Japanese genera - but younger people don't want to sing it anymore. So it is hard to have them in the same competitions. Sometimes you have them in different categories, but that's about it.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of music does he listen to?

Diego translates and asks him; they laugh about it, and then Mitsu comes in and offers us more tea.

DEIGO translates: He listens to J-pop, and he really likes American music as well. He doesn't really like traditional Japanese music (he says more). If this is going to take longer, there is a room that is free now.

INTERVIEWER: Sure, we can go there.

\*We all get up and go there\*

INTERVIEWER: I didn't realize how long this interview has been going on. Can you thank him for me?

DIEGO translated: He said that every time he is interviewed it takes at least 2 hours.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay! Usually, in our interviews, you try to make it as fast as possible because everyone feels busy to really sit down and talk. But I like this more because it is more personal. I get to know you and learn about your life, and it feels more personal. I like it.

DIEGO translates: When he interviews some people, usually they are older people, so they have time, and they are not very energetic, so they take their time. The only problem is that he doesn't get to ask what he wants because usually people want to tell their story, and he only gets to ask one question and then go back to their own story.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's a perfect segue. Does he have any questions for me?

DIEGO translates: He's asking if you're using this research for your master's or for your doctorate.

INTERVIEWER: Well, yes and no. I'm using this for my undergraduate research. You do have to publish a thesis, but it looks better for graduate school if you do, and I want grad school to pay for me to go because it is expensive.

DIEGO: He's curious about why you chose this subject and why you chose Japanese descent?

INTERVIEWER: So, there's a few reasons. Music runs in my family, we all play instruments, and we all sing, so that subject has always been interesting to me.

Diego translates this to Fumihito.

INTERVIEWER: Why Japanese culture? I've seen Japanese media, movies, and shows, and the language is really beautiful to me. My favorite part is always the music that they use in their soundtracks. When I was at the Taiko class a few weeks ago, I got really excited because I could recognize so many Japanese movies that I'd seen.

Diego translates this to Fumihito.

INTERVIEWER: And then the third thing is that my professor does research here, so it was a natural progression to start working here. He has been doing research here since the 80's. Right now, he mostly studies media and the effect it has on smaller cities.

DIEGO translates: Actually, he has studied Japanese immigration all over Brazil. He is only just now in the last couple of years studying food, but he specializes in Japanese immigration.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, that's so cool! So, does he have any publications, or how has that worked?

DIEGO translates: Yes, he has published books. He spent two months going down a kind of dirt highway that goes all through the Amazon. It goes all down the Amazon River and then down the coast.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, that's incredible! So, was he studying Japanese culture in general, or was he looking at something in particular?

DIEGO: So, he went there because he was a journalist and he wanted to see with his own eyes what was going on.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, that's amazing, how long were you in journalism?

DIEGO translates: About 40 years until recently He retired in 2018.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, that's so cool. Anthropology and journalism have some intersections, so that's really cool. So you say he's written books? What are they called?

DIEGO: So, the books are a celebration of the 60th and 70 anniversary of the immigration.  
If you try to google - Tokoa Titiumi

INTERVIEWER: Just look his name up? Okay, I can do that.

DIEGO: Here is what the book looks like. He also researched the guy who brought Jiu Jitsu to Brazil.

INTERVIEWER: No way! My friend who just came into town is studying that! If he's okay with it, I might see if she wants to set up an interview as well for their research.

DIEGO translates: He said it would be his pleasure to get to help.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, thank you so much! I'll let you know. I think I have asked most of my questions now.

DIEGO translates: He did Karate with a katana.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, cool. I've seen people doing that in the Kendo class. I guess one question I have is, is there another way that I can come in and get more involved with the center? I'm already taking Bon Odori classes, Taiko classes, and Kendo classes. Is there anything else I can do to get involved here at the center?

DIEGO translates: So, there's this one group that recites old poems like a song, and they sing in a very different way. That's another group here.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, wonderful! Did they perform at the last festival?

DIEGO translates: yes, they did this at the last festival, Animindewa.

INTERVIEWER: oh, I saw them at the last festival where there were three women and three men, and they were singing in Japanese, and a man was writing the calligraphy of the words off to the side. That was a really cool performance. Okay, I have another very open-ended question: how would he describe the mixing of Japanese and Brazilian culture?

DIEGO translates: He says that it's a natural thing because it doesn't matter where you go. You go to a new place, and then it's almost impossible to maintain things the way they are, so you end up having to mix some things. For example, Bon Odori here is a very quiet dance in Japan, but this does not work as well, so here they are more energetic, and it's louder and more and more and more people come and gather, so it's just the way things are, it's natural.

INTERVIEWER: So, there's a natural exchange of customs and ideas between the two cultures?

DIEGO translates: So, marriage works the same so when first came here, you can only marry among them, but with time and generations, they had to change, and now, of course, it is normal to marry a Brazilians and for them have different meals and different customs.

INTERVIEWER: That's a really common practice when cultures mix where at first they marry within themselves, and then over time they start to marry outside of themselves.

DIEGO: So, the Jewish people are still trying to preserve their way of living, and they don't want to get out of this bubble, but what happens is that you re-isolated as a society

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's interesting. So, is Japanese his first language?

DIEGO translates: Yes, he came here when he was 26.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so where was he from in Japan?

DIEGO: Hmm, that's a complicated answer. He was born in one place but grew up in another. He was born in Kyushu, so he moved a lot. His longest stay was two years.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a big culture shock when he came to Brazil? Why did he come here?

DIEGO translates: So basically, in Japan, he was working as a public servant, and he already knew all his life that he wanted to do something different, and he saw an ad that said “want to come to Brazil” like Brazil was not the goal. He wanted to come here but then go to other countries later and then go from here to Mexico, but then he stayed here. So first he spent three years in São Paulo then he got married here, and so he stayed. So, he didn't have a big culture shock because he was continuously not thinking about it and comparing things, and the thing he was most worried about was food then. When he got to São Paulo, he realized that they had a lot of Japanese food. He didn't really have big troubles. He believes that everyone has a fate, that it's God's path, and that you don't really need to think too deeply about it. Just cool off and enjoy the ride.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting, “God's path”? He said God's path?

DIEGO: Yeah

DIEGO translated: Yeah, it was fate, but there are good and bad things. For example, there is winter, and eventually, summer will come. The same thing applies if the bad things ring through; eventually, the good will come.

INTERVIEWER: That's very Japanese of him, I love it.

*\*we all laugh\**

INTERVIEWER: So, random kind of question: is his wife Japanese, or is she Brazilian?

DIEGO translates: She is Japanese as well, but she immigrated here when she was 6, so similar to him.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. So, did they have kids? Did they teach them Japanese?

DIEGO translates: So, the eldest he knows, and he can understand, but the others don't; they had a rule that inside the house you can only speak Japanese, and then the two youngest stopped talking to them, and so he gave up.

\*all laugh\*

INTERVIEWER: So, I don't have many more questions, but in my discipline, there is an idea of reciprocity, so is there anything I can give him or do for him?

DIEGO translates: He doesn't have any questions for you, but he asked if you could give him a copy of this work when you finish it.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I would love to share that with him! Absolutely. And please tell him again, thank you so much for his time and for telling me his story and helping me in this way.

DIEGO translates: He is happy to help.

After the interview, we walked back to the front of the building and said goodbye. The total time of the interview was just over two and a half hours. From there, I got an Uber and went home. I was excited to review the interview and search for results. My reflections on the interview are included in the discussion section.

## Chapter Four: Discussion and Conclusion

### *Discussion*

I discovered that experiencing the culture firsthand was much more meaningful and fruitful to my research than trying to explore it online. The Japanese-Brazilians identified themselves in various ways, so finding people who identified this way was difficult. Ultimately, I found some social media accounts identifying themselves as Japanese-Brazilians. From there, I systematically worked through their postings which involved music. I discovered that many types of music needed to be defined by Japanese or Brazilian music. There was a prevalence of both or neither, depending on the type of prevalent Korean music and some music from the United States of America that was either in English or translated to Portuguese. This is not a shock as many of these posts were done by younger generations who adapted well to the globalized, digitized world in which they came of age.

The only place where I found a consistent, significant amount of Japanese music was, unsurprisingly, at the Nipo-Brazilian Cultural Center. This is the Japanese cultural center in Belém, where many cultural festivals are held, and many culturally relevant and specific activities are practiced and performed. Some of these activities include classes on Japanese dance forms such as Bon Odori, Japanese drumming groups or Taiko groups, and a Japanese language center that teaches how to speak Japanese and traditional Japanese calligraphy. All of these activities were incorporated into the monthly festivals that were put on at the Japanese Cultural Center.



During my time in Brazil, I met many people who identified as Japanese-Brazilian while at the Nipo-Amazonia Center. Many of these people seemed to negotiate their identity based on the space they were in, meaning that when they were at the Japanese center, they may have identified more with the Japanese parts of their identity than they might when they were, say, at the grocery store that is defined as a general public space. In the Japanese Center, many people identify more as Japanese than might while they are on social media or out in the typical context of a more generalized social setting where they may only identify as Brazilian.

While identity negotiation affects many people, there are specific aspects that can be explored and better understood by this particular cultural group. There are several generations of Japanese-Brazilian people present in Brazil at this time. There is a connection between identity and generational dilution of cultural heritage. Some people's family ties to Japan stem from the late 1800s and early 1900s; some are first-generation. If their family immigrated to Brazil in the early 1900s, they may be as much as 5th or 6th generation. In that case, they may have some daily life aspects reflecting their cultural heritage. However, there is also a strong likelihood that they identify more with being Brazilian than Japanese.

Within migrant groups, there are several different ways that they express their identity. It is usually complete assimilation (Brazilianized name, not teaching children language) or fully retaining the home culture. Neither is good or bad — it just is. However, cultural norms and a mixture of ideas and identities often blend as immigrants and naturalized citizens negotiate their space. This negotiation can be seen throughout the

history of the Japanese diasporas in Brazil, and it usually had a significant amount to do with the state of the Japanese economy and government.

One significant factor in becoming part of a culture is learning the language. Language learning is a complicated process and can be an essential part of accepting culture as one's identity and as a tool for determining one's space within a group. This means that if someone, for example, only speaks Portuguese, they may not relate to their Japanese heritage as easily. This is only sometimes the case, as identity negotiation is inherently individual.

From the data I gathered during my time, only a few individuals self-identified online as Japanese-Brazilian unless it had something to do with their career or a specific activity (mainly soccer). I found some sumo wrestlers who identified online as Japanese-Brazilian, as this had to do with their profession. I also saw some models whose identity as Japanese-Brazilian played a significant role in their online presence. Many people, however, need to identify this in their social media accounts bio. Sometimes, people would use their username to identify themselves as Japanese. They would do this by including their family name or "Japanese" name so that their family may call them one name while they may go by something more "Brazilian" in public.

The Center mainly consisted of people who wanted to learn more about Japanese culture or tried to connect to their cultural identity as much as possible. The Center is a skewed data point because it differs from where people typically live. It is a place where they are choosing to exist. The people there make a conscious choice to be there and participate in whatever is going on there, so it is not a neutral data point. For this reason, my data was skewed because it does not represent the entire population of the

Japanese people in Brazil. Plenty of the 40,000 some-odd Japanese people may be of Japanese descent but choose not to make this part of their outward identity. This skewed the data because most of my interviews, interactions, research, and participant observation happened within the confines of this cultural space and did not include the many other cultural spaces that may be present but could not be explored.

As I began my research, I discovered that experiencing the culture firsthand was much more meaningful and fruitful to my research than trying to explore it online. Attending festivals in person and involving myself in daily and weekly classes at the Nipo Amazonian Center allowed me to experience a more rounded view of the Japanese Brazilian culture in Belém. The only place where I found a consistent, significant amount of Japanese music was, unsurprisingly, at the Nipo-Brazilian Cultural Center. This is the Japanese cultural center in Belém, where many cultural festivals are held, and many culturally relevant and specific activities are practiced and performed. Some of these activities include classes on Japanese dance forms such as Bon Odori, Japanese drumming groups or Taiko groups, and a Japanese language center that teaches how to speak Japanese and traditional Japanese calligraphy. All of these activities were incorporated into the monthly festivals that were put on at the Japanese Cultural Center.

For the netnographic section of my research, I had initially planned to find Japanese-Brazilian accounts in Belém and systematically go through their video postings. I would then listen to and be aware of music that was present, then categorically organize it by style or genre and see what those results rendered. What happened was more chaotic and unplanned but still fruitful and exciting research.

My original plan for netnographic research went differently than I had hoped. Urban ethnography is already a big can of worms, not to mention the difficulties around online ethnography (netnography). This was too much to plan on accomplishing in the time frame I was working with. While this was disappointing, it was not entirely shocking as I tend to take on too much and hold myself to a high academic standard.

One of the most significant difficulties when conducting ethnographic research was identifying online users who were a) within the scope of my study and b) whose posts I could use as valid data points. When I realized that few Japanese-Brazilian individuals identified as such online, the netnographic portion of my research became substantially more complex and felt near impossible. When I realized just how hard this research is to complete, I began to understand why there was a gap in netnographic literature. Traditional ethnographic fieldwork was, and in some cases still is, conducted with isolated groups in remote places worldwide and for extended periods of 12-18 months or even years. Given that this was different from the timeframe I was working with, a holistic study using netnographic research was outside the scope of this project.

Ultimately, I found some social media accounts identifying themselves as Japanese-Brazilians. From there, I systematically worked through their postings, which involved music. There was a prevalence of both or neither, depending on the type of prevalent Korean music and some music from the United States of America that was either in English or translated to Portuguese. This is not a shock as many of these posts were done by younger generations who adapted well to the globalized, digitized world in which they came of age.

## **Interview Discussion**

This interview intended to gather data and information regarding Japanese culture in Belem. An important part of anthropology is not going in with expectations, as this can create bias and give one the answers they want, not the answers that are necessarily there. In other words, confirmation bias is a very real issue to be conscious of when conducting this kind of research. For this reason, the prepared and asked questions were very open-ended and fluid, as was the interview itself. As the researcher, I was interested in where the ideas I brought up would take us and what information could be understood from this conversation. Upon reflection, the main topics that were covered were social media usage among different generations, the transmission and adaptation of food within the Japanese-Brazilian community, music within the Japanese-Brazilian community and how it had changed over time, and how the Nipo Center engaged with community members and participated in community outreach.

As a researcher, I would have preferred to have conducted several, if not hundreds, of interviews similar to this so that I could have a plethora of data points and information. However, given the time constraints I was working within, only this one interview was freezable. Be that as I may, there was still valuable information from this interview that inspired other parts of my research. The discussion of the ways in which Japanese food had been integrated and acculturated to better fit the space in which it was being made (ex., different kinds of fish being used) was a direct example of the ways that culture can shift to fit a new environment. It is a given that culture is always shifting and changing as the people practicing that culture also do. However, it is fascinating to see prime examples of

this phenomenon. Another example of this was the ways that music had changed over the last few decades.

Fumihito discussed how karaoke and other forms of music had changed within the Nipo Center and how there had once been more of an "open call" when it came to performers for the festivals. Now, as there is a stronger Japanese presence within Belém, there is much less of an open call. Much of the festival now focuses on the plethora of clubs and organizations associated with the Japanese culture and Nipo Center. Examples include the Bon Odori group, calligraphy class, Kendo club, Taiko group, Karate club, children's choir, and Koto club, which performed at bi-weekly or monthly festivals. The number of clubs and the level of engagement within the center demonstrates the presence and concurrence of community members, both of Japanese and Brazilian descent, within Belém.

Social media was brought up several times throughout the interview. There seemed to be a significant amount of involvement with younger generations and an online presence at the Nipo Center. While this may seem like a conclusion that can be expected, the usage of the internet and social media among older populations of translation people can vary greatly. This is because the internet and social media can be used to stay connected to their friends and relatives in their home country. While this is most often seen within refugee populations, it may still be prevalent within this community, given the level of connection that Brazil and Japan still have.

## Conclusion

My significant findings were that there seemed to be some significant identity formation around the transnational and Japanese-Brazilian groups in Belém. The identity formation around transnationality or immigration was mainly present in their activities, as much of it was clearly of Japanese influence, with some aspects fitting a more Brazilian context due to the availability of resources. The presents and scale of the Nipo Center are crucial in demonstrating the level of cultural presents and cultural identity of the Japanese population within this city.

There were some holes in my research. First, I only worked with a select group of individuals for this research, and my sampling was very heavily influenced by the center where I focused most of my time. Another was that much of my data came from one place and was limited by a short timeframe. Lastly, the interviews I conducted were less in-depth than I had hoped, as I was not fluent in the languages spoken in them.

My suggestions for future research would be to pull from a more random sampling of individuals within the community. More data and research are needed within this community, both in person, online, and within musical literature. I suggest an all-encompassing study done in these areas with this group for future research. Another etymological question I wish I could have read more about is the progression of the term “Nikkei,” used both within the population and as a blanket term used by Brazilian people to describe this cultural group.

Upon reflection, I learned many things about myself and about conducting research from my time working on this thesis project. I learned communication skills, how to live in another country for an extended period, how to deal with crippling anxiety with almost

no physical support network, the feeling of not completing as much of a project as was initially planned, how to plan a project and execute challenging aspects of that project, how to handle chaos in the field, and how to rely on myself and trust my gut in new and uncomfortable situations.

I, of course, also learned about a welcoming, kind, generous, loving group of people who have come to mean so much to me. I also had the opportunity to grow as a researcher and learn more about my insatiable desire for knowledge, travel, and to make a difference in the world. I want to develop my skills in applied anthropology and use what I have learned in these past few years to make a positive, meaningful, and profound difference in the lives of those I will have the pleasure of getting to know and work with. This project has only been the tip of the proverbial iceberg of my professional and academic life. I am ecstatic to see what other adventures and opportunities lie ahead.



## IRB Exemption Email

Nolan Hatley <Nolan.Hatley@mtsu.edu>

Mon 11/13/2023 10:58 AM

To: Danny Jenkins <lfj2f@mtmail.mtsu.edu>

Hey Danny,

I reviewed your proposal in more detail, and I have concluded it does not require IRB approval. In the future, if you are conducting an interview and you're not sure whether or not you may need IRB approval, you have to get IRB approval prior to the interview. However, once again, primarily based on your thesis and your answers to my questions in this email correspondence, I have concluded that you don't need to submit an IRB application. Feel free to reference this email if necessary when submitting your work to the Honors College. Take care!

Nolan Hatley, Ph.D.

Research Compliance Officer

Middle Tennessee State University

[nhatley@mtsu.edu](mailto:nhatley@mtsu.edu) 615-494-8918

## Appendix A

List of *informal* interview questions:

1. Do you consider yourself to be of Japanese descent?
2. Do you use social media?
3. Do you follow any “Japanese ” or “Japanese-Brazilian social media accounts”?
4. What kinds of music do you notice on those accounts?

List of *formal* interview questions (edited for clarity and conciseness):

1. When people talk about Japanese culture, what do they say about music?
2. What is the influence of Japanese music here?
3. Does it carry over from generation to generation?
4. Do older generations listen more to Japanese music than other generations?
5. What genre of music do they usually sing here? (explicitly referring to karaoke)
6. How do you see social media mixing with the cultural identity here?
7. What types of music do they offer here at the center, and who often listened to them?
8. Are there generational differences between people who play or listen to the music practiced here?
9. Are they looking at expanding their reach online to include Brazilian people, not just Japanese-Brazilian people?
10. How many Japanese-Brazilian people would you say live here in Belém?
11. Are there still people immigrating from Japan to Brazil? To Belém?
12. How do they advertise the events that happen here at the center? Is this mainly done on social media? Do they use music for this?

13. Are there specific types of Japanese music that are found in Belém?
14. Do you notice any mixing of Japanese and Brazilian styles of music, or have they stayed separate?
15. What is your opinion of this cultural mixing of different types of music? Is this something you see as a positive or negative thing?
16. Do younger generations seem to embrace this mixed identity?
17. How is Japanese music presented here at the center?
18. When people perform here, how and where do they learn the instruments or the music? Is it mostly all from the center, or is it passed down from their family? How does that work?
19. How important is social media use within the Japanese population here? Is it something they use a lot and that is part of their cultural identity, or do they use just as much as everyone else?
20. Do you see a difference in the type of apps people use based on age?
21. Does he notice a push from older generations to bring more Japanese music into the Center or social media sites so that they have more representation?

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