

## **Two Japanese Women Ceramists in Brazil:** Identity, Culture and Representation

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By presenting the life-story account of two Japanese women ceramists, Shoko Suzuki and Mieko Ukeseki, inserting it in its historical and sociocultural context, this work aims to present the historical constructions, cultural representations, personal experiences and subjectivities involved in the construction of their identity. From their discourse and practice analysis, collected from the precepts defined by Daniel Bertaux (1997) as *récits de vie* ("life story accounts"), we intend to understand the personal processes involved in the construction of their cultural identity, marked by the transcultural experience due to the immigration to Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s respectively. The history of Japanese ceramics takes here an important part for the construction of images of "Japaneseness", which are translated in the discourse and practice of these potters. However, it is in the appropriation and reinterpretation of these representations in dialogue with their personal experiences and subjectivities that cultural identity is created. By shedding light on the personal account of the life stories of two Japanese women potters in Brazil, this research also aims to contribute to illuminate various aspects of history, society and culture of Japan and Brazil in the last century, in particular, the processes involved in the construction of Japanese cultural identity through craft and pottery, the situation of women in Japanese ceramics, the immigration of Japanese artists and craftsmen to Brazil and the creation of a Japanese-Brazilian identity.

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Japanese Immigration to Brazil, Ceramic Art, Women's Studies, Life-story Accounts

### **Introduction**

This article aims to present the life-story account of two Japanese women ceramists, Shoko Suzuki and Mieko Ukeseki, who immigrated to the São Paulo state, Brazil, in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, through the analysis of their practice and discourse, collected from the ethnosociologic precepts defined by Daniel Bertaux (1997) as *récits de vie* ("life story accounts"). By inserting it in its historical and socio-cultural context, we seek to understand the processes involved in the construction of their cultural identity, marked by historical constructions, cultural representations, personal experiences and subjectivities. By shedding light on their life-story's personal account, we also aim to contribute to illuminate various aspects of the history, society and culture of Japan and Brazil in the last century, in particular, the processes involved in the construction of Japanese cultural identity through craft and pottery, the situation of Japanese women in ceramics, the immigration of Japanese artists and craftsmen to Brazil and the creation of a Japanese-Brazilian identity.

### **1. Ceramics in the context of Japanese Culture**

National culture is made of institutions, symbols and representations. According to post-modern anthropologist Stuart Hall (2006:13), it is a discourse, a way of building senses that affects our actions and our own conception of us. It produces senses about the nation, which we can identify with, thus, it constructs identities.

Nation is, then, an “imagined community”<sup>1</sup> politically constructed through the manipulation of elites that can invent traditions, symbols, history and culture to instill national consciousness in common people. In this context, tradition works as a set of “symbolic resources” (such as language, ideas, images and physical attributes) that define a person’s or a nation’s identity through the interaction with the “other” (Morris-Suzuki, 1997: 38). The process of imagining the national community is made throughout time and space and through it certain people and events are defined as belonging to “our” past while other are excluded (*ibid.*: 33).

The construction of national identity is generally associated with the building process of modern nations in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in Japan it was no different. The creation of a national culture developed in the country during the Meiji period (1868-1912), when Japan opened itself to the world after a long period of isolation and began a vast program of reforms that intended to modernize the country. The construction of a Japanese collective identity happened, at the time, as a need of assertion towards Western supremacy.

Between 1862 and 1910, Japan participated in three international exhibitions and ceramics was one of the crafts most frequently presented. The traditional hand-made crafts became the symbol of this newly-formed nation, something that Japan was better at than the West. Consequently, between 1890 and 1944, the Imperial House of Japan implemented laws to protect the traditional crafts and Japanese artists made an effort to incorporate elements of the traditional crafts in their work, by recovering techniques and styles that were practically extinct.

Edmund De Waal (2002:188-189) states the similarities between the process of protecting national culture through the promotion of traditional crafts both in Japan and England. In fact, the Arts & Crafts movement, which affirmed itself as a reaction to the mechanization imposed by industrialization and the resulting decline of the artisan’s role, emerged in England between 1860 and 1919, at the same time that Japanese art started to influence European impressionists. According to Japanese philosopher and literary critic Kojin Karatani (1998:152), the romantics started to praise the traditional crafts of the past at the moment they became obsolete by mechanical reproduction. Other authors (Moeran, 1997; Faulkner, 2003; Kikuchi, 2004) point out the analogies between the British Arts and Crafts movement and the Japanese *Mingei* movement, which sought the appreciation of the traditional artisan as a reaction to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Japan. Through the work of the artisan, its creator Soetsu Yanagi sought a peculiarly Japanese lifestyle and means of production, in a need to assert the cultural identity of the country.

According to Faulkner (2003), “the Japanese Folk Craft Movement was formulated as an instrument of social and artistic reform that looked to the past as a model for the present”. The beauty of the objects created by the collective work of unknown craftsmen, using traditional styles and techniques, was glorified by Yanagi and pointed out as a social and artistic model. The work of these artisans was, thus, presented in opposition to the capitalistic and industrialist logic and the mass-production, and related to the original Buddhist precepts. “Combining Japanese art and its Buddhist ideas, Yanagi began to develop the idea of preaching his ‘Buddhist aesthetics’” (Kikuchi, 2004: 199). It was in the process of hybridizing western and eastern ideas, especially the British Arts & Crafts movement, Zen Buddhist concepts and the tea ceremony, that Yanagi found a sense of eastern cultural identity (*idem*).

With the reconstruction of Japan in the post-war period, the theories of Japaneseness (*nihonjinron*) reappeared in a new context of reaffirming national identity after American occupation. This period saw the establishment by Japanese authorities of several measures to protect traditional culture, such as the title best known as Living National Treasure (*ningen kokuhō*). Given to craftsmen who possess important traditional knowledge and techniques, it showed an institutional promotion of the values of traditional aesthetics (Befu, 2001).

Furthermore, the Japanese government took for itself the task of propagating the official *nihonjinron* abroad. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni (2005) argues that the concept of Japanese culture promoted in the cultural ventures related to Japan abroad “is strongly influenced by the way Japanese culture is presented by Japanese both in Japan and in the framework of organized international contacts. What is put on exhibit as ‘Japanese culture’ is mostly an officially endorsed ‘traditional’ culture” (*ibid.*: 157). This essentialized representation of Japanese culture emphasizing hand-craft traditional knowledge is widely consumed and reflects in the image of Japanese pottery and Japanese potters in Japan and abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> ANDERSON, Benedict. **Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism**. London and New York: Verso, 1991.

## 2. The feminine issue

The first ceramic objects appeared in the Japanese archipelago in the Jōmon period (13.000-300 B.C.) and were manually produced by women in the domestic real, as it was in most primitive societies. However, with the introduction of the potter's wheel in the Kofun period (300-593), ceramic production was organized in workshops and became a male activity, obeying a patriarchal logic in which apprenticeship was made from master to disciple and from father to son. Besides, the strength necessary to work with the traditional wood-fired kilns *anagama* and *noborigama* also made it difficult for women to participate. Because of that, for centuries, Japanese women were limited to menial tasks and excluded from the creative process. This didn't just happen in the field of ceramics in Japan. There is an international history of depriving women from the opportunity of becoming artists on their own right and in Japan it was no different.

According to Midori Wakakuwa (1995), Japan had less women artists than Western Europe because of the more pervasive influence of patriarchy in many aspects of Japanese society. In the West, the birth of humanistic thought contributed to the development of an idea of equality amongst human beings, including women. Meanwhile, in Japan, before the Meiji Restoration of 1868 there was no force of compensation against the persistent patriarchal system and its ideology, since a rigid feudal system was fundamentally supported by it (*ibid.*: 62).

Thereby, until Edo era, most professional artists were men, since women were supposed to fill certain family and domestic duties before leisure activities. However, there were some arts in which female participation was socially accepted and some crafts have been traditionally associated to women because they were directly transferred from domestic duties, such as weaving. As Midori Yoshimoto (2006: 2) writes, Japanese society allowed few alternatives to the woman traditional role as *ryōsai kenbo* (good wives and wise mothers).

With the Meiji Restoration Japan opened its doors to the western world and the governmental and social systems were altered in favor of women (McDowell, 1999: 17). The abolishment of feudal system meant the dissolution of *samurai* class and established basic equalities for all people. But it was only after the Second World War that women received the right to vote in Japan and that they were accepted at universities. The proliferation of artistic education contributed to the development of contemporary ceramics, separated from the traditional hierarchical and patriarchal logic, allowing several women ceramists to stand out, especially after the 1960s.

Although in the last decades many women have earned their space in field of studio ceramics, until today no woman ceramist was ever nominated as National Living Treasure (*ningen kokuhō*). And even in the Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition (*Nihon Dentō Kōgeiten*), created in 1953, it took almost ten years for active women participation to be possible. This shows how the discrimination towards women was present not only in the world of traditional craft societies, but also in the organizational levels of relatively progressive associations (Todate, 2009: 19). That's because the Japanese art world was, still in the 1960s and 1970s, controlled by patriarchal values, a strict order of seniority and the politics of various artists associations known as *bijutsu dantai* or *kai* (Yoshimoto, 2005: 11). Thereby, even though women could be recognized by their achievements, they were in the bottom of social hierarchy and, hence, for them the scrutiny was much stricter. It was very difficult for women without the right contacts to reach a position in the artists associations dominated by men (*op. cit.*).

However, the emergence of *avant-garde* groups after the Second World War introduced the concept of *objet d'art* in the world of Japanese ceramics, contributing to the admission of the non-functional ceramic object and, ultimately, the opening to women participation, by distancing itself from tradition and, thus, the hierarchic patriarchal system. It was in 1957 that the first circle of Japanese women ceramic artists, *Jōryū Togei*, introduced the concept of feminism in Japanese ceramics. The association was founded in Kyoto by Asuba Tsuboi, who was one of the first women to vehemently challenge the male hierarchy, building a space for women ceramic artists that didn't exist before in Japan (Nicoll; Aoyama; Todate; Morse, 1999: 108).

Despite the evident growth of female presence in Japanese ceramics in the last 60 years, Japanese society is still far from allowing a total equality of rights, even in the field of arts. Because of that, in the last decades, many women artists have left Japan in search for more freedom and equal opportunities. In fact, the number of Japan artists that build their careers in the West is noticeable and it includes the renowned *avant-garde* painter Yayoi Kusama (Kelsky, 2001: 109).

In Brazil, the ceramic artists whose life-story will be presented ahead are examples of women who chose immigration in search for more artistic freedom, challenged the hierarchical patriarchal system of Japanese traditional ceramics, blurred the borders between arts and crafts and between functional and non-functional objects and became two of the first women ceramic artists of their own right in Brazil.

### 3. Japanese immigration to Brazil

Japanese immigration to Brazil started in 1908 with the arrival of Kasato Maru to Santos, São Paulo state, from Kobe port, bringing 790 Japanese people, mostly farmers, who were sent to work in the coffee plantations in São Paulo countryside. But it was only after the end of the Second World War that Brazil saw the arrival of specialized and qualified artisans and technicians, who came to work in recently-founded companies, factories and workshops. Some of the technicians who went to Brazil to work in Japanese porcelain companies ended up founding their own factories or left their jobs to become ceramic artists. A wave of Japanese artists also left Japan to establish in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s in search for more artistic freedom or with a thirst for adventure and a romantic exotic fantasy of the tropics.

In the 1950s, the artistic environment of São Paulo erupted and several important art exhibitions were instituted, which included the presence of artists from the Japanese community. But it was in the end of the 1960s and especially in the 1970s that ceramics started gaining relevance as a contemporary artistic expression and Japanese ceramists started arising in such scenario. The organization of several art exhibitions within the Japanese community partially contributed for the success of these ceramists and many newly arrived artists had the opportunity to show their works in places such as the *Kōgei Art Exhibition*, organized by the Brazilian Society of Japanese Culture and where ceramic art was always present since its first edition in 1968.

Furthermore, the expansion of Japanese food was instrumental for the circulation of Japanese ceramics. Constituting itself as a “cultural set” consumed only inside the *Nikkei* community until the 1970s, from the 1980s forward it also began to be appreciated by non-*Nikkei* Brazilians, especially those of higher social classes (Mori, 2003:7). This expansion of Japanese food implied a growing demand for products adequate to contain it, that is, ceramic vessels. In fact, selling for restaurants was, in the 70s and 80s decades, one of the main destinies of several *Nikkei* ceramists’ production. This process contributed to the formation and development of a specialized market in ceramic and porcelain reminiscent of the Japanese aesthetics, which implied an objectification of artistic products and the construction of stereotypes of Japanese ceramists themselves.

### 4. Life-story accounts

#### (1) Shoko Suzuki

204 Shoko Akiko Oshima was born in 1929 and grew up in Yokohama during the beginning of Showa era (1926-1945), period that saw the growth of nationalism in Japan. The continuous aggressions towards China and other Southeast Asian countries from Japan led to the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which culminated in the entrance of Japan in the Second World War in 1941. The experience of war shaped the trajectory of Suzuki as an artist, as well as of many others that experienced it.

*To talk about my work unfortunately I have to talk about war ... because it is one of the reasons that made me want to deepen the situation of the human being and the meaning of life.*

In the beginning of the 1950s, disappointed with the human character and in search for something to do with her hands, Suzuki started to visit the studio of several ceramists and developing an interest in ceramics. However, it was very difficult for her to find a master who would teach her the art of pottery. Besides the strict and challenging system, it added another relevant obstacle: being a woman.

*At that time, it was very difficult for a master to choose a student. You couldn't just go there and pay to learn. They would choose. Hence, all their lives, students would become disciples of such and such master, potter or painter. They didn't have students... The disciple was the one who would continue that person's name. It was another model at that time [...]. Then I found my master, he accepted me after many others had refused me for being a woman. Because a woman wouldn't make pottery, no one believed me. There weren't any women who*

*made ceramics. I knew only three who did it at that time. The masters who refused me thought it was absurd that a woman wanted to be a disciple.*

After several refuses, Suzuki finally became apprentice of Tōko Karasugi, who became her master during 10 years. It was also in this period that she met her future husband and companion for life, painter Yukio Suzuki. Both young and artists, the Suzuki dreamt of leaving the strict and traditional Japanese art system and start their life from zero in another place. It was in the end of 1961 that Shoko Suzuki saw a television program in NHK about Brazil and “fell in love”. In the next day, she started taking care of the documents to sell the house and the studio and in 1962, with 32 years old, Suzuki and her husband left Japan on board of *Argentina-Marú*. In May 11<sup>th</sup> they reached Santos port and stepped on Brazilian land for the first time.

*Since I was young, after I started working, I always thought: “Where can I work with ceramics?” It was not Japan, but elsewhere in the world, I just don’t know where... I always wanted freedom. [...] When I saw that program at NHK, I decided right way: “it’s there that I want to go!” It seemed like fire, you know, like love at first sight.*

After their arrival in Brazil, the couple rented a wattle and daub house in Mauá, São Paulo state, where Suzuki immediately began working in ceramics, by installing her manual potter’s wheel (*te-rokuro*) and exploring different types of clays and ash glazes made from wood and plants. In 1964, the couple bought a land in Cotia and began the construction of their house. At the same time, Suzuki started building, on her own and with reused materials found in the neighborhood, a traditional Japanese wood-fired kiln *noborigama*. In 1967, after four failed firing attempts, Suzuki finally obtained the desired results and showed her work for the first time in Brazil in an exhibition in her studio, which gathered around 800 people from the artistic Japanese-Brazilian community.

*I rented a small caboclo<sup>2</sup> house, really small, wattle and daub. I started there, barefoot. I walked alone, carrying nothing. There was no one, only caboclos [...]. Caboclos always walk barefoot and I also wanted to start like that [...]. I wanted to start from scratch and have nothing, to test myself, my life is mine alone.*

The first public batch opening made in 1967 gave start to Suzuki’s ascending career as a ceramic artist in Brazil. In the following year, she started participating in the *Kōgei Art Exhibition* in the Brazilian Society of Japanese Culture. From 1968 onwards, besides participating in several collective exhibitions, Suzuki also presented her work on solo shows throughout Brazil. In 1975, she presented her work in at the São Paulo Museum of Art, which showed the recognition of her work in the Brazilian art realm and became one of the highest points in her career. In 1989, she came back to Japan for the first time and visited the former studio and kiln of National Treasure ceramic artist Shoji Hamada, to whose firings she used to watch in the 1950s. In 1995, as part of the 100 years anniversary of the Treaty of Friendship between Japan and Brazil, Suzuki participated in a collective exhibition at the Niigata Prefectural Museum of Modern Art, together with other 40 *Nikkei* artists, but with only her as ceramist. Finally, in 2003, in commemoration to her 50 years as a ceramic artist, she presented her work in a retrospective exhibition at Brazilian House Museum. It was then that she met young ceramist Ivone Shirahata, who would become her disciple.

Thereby, between 2004 and 2006, Suzuki taught the traditional Japanese techniques by which she became famous in Brazil to Ivone Shirahata: clay molding in the manual wheel (*te-rokuro*), firing in the wood-fired kiln *noborigama* and ash glazing. In 2006, using the same architectonic project that was given to her four decades before by a friend in Japan, Suzuki and Ivone started the construction of the third *noborigama*.

*If I disassemble that noborigama there would be no more. I have to pass it to someone for it not end [...]. But now I am light, I am very light that I pass it to her. [...] Here I can say I did the third kama<sup>3</sup>. It is very important to show it, to continue.*

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<sup>2</sup> Name given in Brazil to white people mixed with native Indians, whose physical traits include dark skin and straight dark hair.

<sup>3</sup> Japanese word for kiln.

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From left to right: Shoko Suzuki and her *noborigama*; Suzuki's manual wheel; Suzuki's *Cosmos* ceramic sculptures.  
All photographs by Felipe Costa (2012).

## (2) Mieko Ukeseki

Mieko Shimomura was born in 1946 in the small village of Ago, in Mie prefecture. With 18 years old and through the indication of her family, she moved to Nagoya to become a nurse. At the end of the 1960s, she met Toshiyuki Ukeseki and it was by the time they got married that Toshiyuki decided to give up his nursery career to dedicate himself to pottery. Thus, in 1971, Ukeseki moved to Fukuoka prefecture to join her husband at the small traditional pottery village in Koishiwara. During their first years there, Ukeseki helped Toshiyuki with his experiments with ceramics, but more as a housewife than a ceramist.

*Then, we were living in the middle of that ceramic village, it completely changed our lives. And we began to learn, to research [...]. I ended my career as a nurse and went to live with him, helping him with his ceramic work... but more as a housewife than as a ceramist.*

In the end of 1972, a young Portuguese architect, Alberto Cidraes, arrived in Koishiwara to learn more about wood-fired ceramics. He and his wife rented a house next to the Ukeseki and from their daily conviviality developed a strong friendship and the idea of creating a ceramic art collective in Brazil.

*Just before he left we made an agreement. He was not going back to Portugal. He was already determined to go to Brazil [...]. And he wanted us to go too, to form a group and make pottery there in Brazil. We had no idea how Brazil was, we knew nothing about it.*

Cidraes arrived to the country in 1973 and waited two years for the arrival of the Ukeseki. Although they first established in São Paulo in 1975, the idea was to look for an adequate place to establish a collective ceramic studio outside the city. The goal was to create a communitarian experimental ceramic studio in a place far from big urban centers, which allowed proximity to nature and a convivial libertarian environment. They then decided to begin the search in Paraíba valley, a mountain region between the state capitals of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but far from the urban centers and with abundant natural resources.

*Those who wanted to do experimental ceramics were already waiting for us. So, every day, we would go by car to search for a place in the state of São Paulo, preferably a quiet place in the countryside, with an easy access to material, with clay ... It was quite clear that we wanted a wooden kiln, the most primitive thing possible.*

In the fall of 1975, the group formed by Alberto Cidraes and his wife Maria Estrela, brothers Vicente and Antônio Cordeiro, the Ukeseki and their two-year-old daughter and the newly-graduated painter Rubi Imanishi, arrived at the small town of Cunha, in the São Paulo state. The mayor then offered them an old inactive

slaughterhouse, where they could install a collective studio. In September 1975, the group started the construction of a traditional Japanese wood-fired kiln *noborigama*, under the instructions of Toshiyuki. After the first firing, made in December of the same year and constituted by the individual production of each ceramist, the initial group dispersed. In 1977, it was Mieko Ukeseki's turn to leave the town. Newly-separated from her husband, she moved to Teresópolis, in Rio de Janeiro state, to share a studio with Vicente Cordeiro. In 1978, Toshiyuki left to Japan, abandoning Cunha definitively.

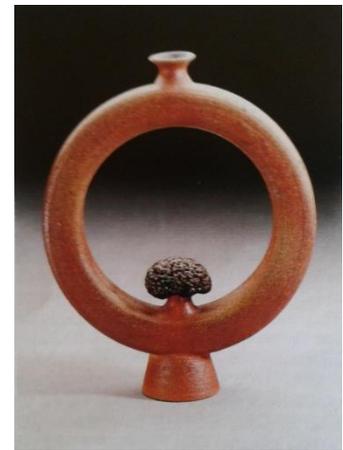
*At that time, the group of seven people lived together, sharing the slaughterhouse. We woke up together, ate together, worked together... Each of us worked under the guidance of Toshiyuki. But, shortly after the first firing, the group began to disperse, some people wanted to leave, to have their own place... After the first firing the money was over and this also created a division.*

In 1981, Ukeseki came back to Cunha, managed to exchange her ceramic works with a land and, in 1982, built her house and studio but, first of all, a *noborigama*, an essential work tool indispensable to her survival and independence. One year after the construction of her kiln, Ukeseki made her first firing, without water or light. It was the beginning of the 1980s and ceramics had consolidated its place as a form of art, with the proliferation of ceramists, galleries, exhibitions and material suppliers. In 1986, she traveled to Japan for the first time since her arrival in Brazil nine years before. In 1987, Ukeseki participated in the *North Coast Art* project and, inspired by the debates with visual artist Antônio Carelli, she started to dedicate herself to the production of sculptural objects.

*At that time, I used to make more functional objects to survive. Carelli said it couldn't be like that, because ceramics can be art. We discussed a lot during the fifteen years that we worked together [...]. Japan has a different concept of art. A bowl can be art. This raised much discussion. Because here utensils equal industry. It is difficult because it is a philosophy that Japanese have on the traditional pottery that they don't have here.*

From the 1980s onward, the small town of Cunha began to grow as a rural touristic pole. After the 1990s, several other ceramic studios were established in the city and today there are about twenty open to the public. Cunha also hosts seven of the around 20 *noborigama* kilns in Brazil, becoming the biggest concentration pole of *noborigama* in South America.

It was by the end of the 1990s that Mieko Ukeseki felt the need to write the history of ceramics in Cunha since the arrival of the first ceramists, motivated by the death of several former members of the initial group. The book was published in 2005, commemorating the 30 years of the establishment of the former slaughterhouse ceramic studio in Cunha. It was around that time that Ukeseki visited Shigaraki Ceramic Park in Japan, which inspired her to elaborate a similar project for the city, the Cunha Ceramic Memorial. Through it, the collection of about 200 ceramic works produced by the ceramic pioneers in the city and by the traditional local pan producers was collected, treated and catalogued. The project was finished in 2010 and is available online waiting for the building of the physical place of the museum.



From left to right: Ukeseki's first firing in her personal *noborigama* in 1983; Ukeseki working at the potter's wheel in 1997; one of Ukeseki's sculpture pieces. All images are from the artist's personal archive.

## 5. Life-story account analysis

The life-story accounts presented above were collected from a set of semi-directive qualitative interviews, in order to build a representation of these potters in their feminine, immigrant, ceramist and Japanese dimensions. Thus, in a first moment, the questions were directed to their experiences in Japan, focusing on their role as women potters, in order to comprehend the motivations for emigration. Secondly, we focused on their practice as Japanese potters living in Brazil, in order to understand the technical processes and cultural views that defined and distinguished their work in the country. In this sense, their experiences and discourse were placed at the service of understanding the processes of construction of their cultural identity, in dialogue with the historical and sociocultural context and the transcultural experience. Since, according to Claude Dubar:

*There are thus two axis of identification of a person considered as a social actor. A "synchronous" axis, attached to a context of action and to a definition of a situation in a given culturally marked space, and a "diachronic" axis, attached to a subjective history and an interpretation of the socially constructed personal history. It is in the articulation of these two axes that the ways in which each is defined are involved, both as an actor of a certain system and as a product of a specific trajectory (Dubar, 2005, XX).*

That said, from the analysis of the artists personal life-story account, we can find several common points in their practice and discourse. By being both Japanese women ceramists who immigrated to Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s impelled by a spirit of adventure, the life-stories of Shoko Suzuki and Mieko Ukeseki present many dialogues and intersections. The experience of being a woman in a country still dominated by traditional values and a patriarchal hierarchy, marked the life of Suzuki especially, but it is also seen, in a more private realm, in Ukeseki's life and her relation to her first husband.

In Japan, by the time the two artists came to Brazil, little was known about the reality of Japanese immigration to the country, even though it started a few decades before their arrival. In fact, both ceramists took the initiative to immigrate to the country with little or no knowledge about the Brazilian reality, besides an exotic and romantic fantasy. They both decided to depart from Japan to an unknown country for little more than mere chance, taking the risk of a several week ship journey, without even knowing the language and with little contact with people in the country besides, in Ukeseki's case, Alberto Cidraes. So, when we speak of their adventurous spirit, we must contextualize this reality.

Anthropologist Harumi Befu (2000) writes about a new type of immigrant who left Japan in the 1960s and 1970s and which can certainly include these two ceramists. According to the author, these people didn't leave because they were poor or because they wanted to become rich abroad, but for a number of reasons that can include a dissatisfaction with their life in Japan, discrimination in the workplace, especially for women, or the rigid treatment given by Japanese society to individuals seen as outsiders (*ibid*: 34). They can also leave not because they have a strong reason to establish their lives elsewhere in the world, but more of a curiosity for exotic places or simply for being bored with their lives in Japan, due to an adventurous spirit and the disposition to take chances and face the unknown (*op. cit*).

In addition, we can't forget that the 1960s and 1970s were marked by the emergence of several counter-culture and subversive movements, which frequently included a search for adventure and alternative experiences. One of those was the hippie movement, which developed in the United States in the mid-1960s and influenced Mieko Ukeseki's trajectory in her first years of alternative, experimental and communitarian living in the former slaughterhouse studio in Cunha. In fact, community bonds seemed crucial in the development of both artists' projects. The relationship with other Brazil-based Japanese ceramists and the participation in collective activities inside the *Nikkei* artistic community are also a common trait in the trajectories of both artists.

Another common factor was the concern in guarantying the continuity of their memory in Brazil. While Ukeseki was focused in the public diffusion of the pioneering role of the former slaughterhouse studio's initial group and in the preservation of Cunha city's collective memory, Suzuki found in *sansei* potter Ivone Shirahata someone to become her apprentice. In her case, despite her coming to the country being related to a search for greater artistic freedom and the escape from the weight of Japanese tradition, she appropriated herself of that tradition and was concerned to give continuity to it through the younger generation.

*I never thought about maintaining the Japanese tradition, but it's something that is inside me, the root is here, I cannot escape from it. At the beginning I wanted to throw it all away and start all over again, but it is very hard. I learned that blood is a good thing. Now I am very grateful.* (Shoko Suzuki).

Another element is the fact that both ceramists built their kilns and studios before their own house, because their survival and independence depended on it. For the same reason, both were installed in, at the time, almost inhospitable regions, in the countryside, far from the urban centers, that allowed a greater proximity with nature, on which they also depended to produce their work. Besides the easy access to natural resources and the use of wood-fired kilns, this proximity to nature also constituted as an important source of inspiration for the artists.

Furthermore, the ceramists produced both utilitarian objects, such as tableware, and ornamental sculptural objects. Even though the former guarantees their daily survival as potters and the latter allows a greater boldness of forms and expression, the two elements cannot be unbound. The production of utilitarian objects, which is sometimes depreciated for its repetitive and less creative character, appears to the artists as an essential part of the future ceramist's development. The importance of repetition is not only related to the improvement of technique, but also, as Suzuki declared, to the way of being of the object and the artists himself, besides working as a meditative activity. The importance of utilitarian work is also related to the relevance given to the use and function of an object. Both ceramists consider it is important that their works participate in people's daily routine through the stimulus of different sensations, not only vision, but also touch and even smell.

As for the technical process used by the artists, it is basically the same as the one used in Japan: the local collection of clay and its preparation through the addition of minerals, the molding in the traditional Japanese wheel, the preparation of ash glazes through wood, plants and rocks collected in the region and the use of high temperature wood-firing kilns such as the *noborigama*. All of these stages are common to most Japanese ceramists based in Brazil, as well as to most ceramists who live in traditional pottery production regions in Japan.

*The basis of my technique is totally what I've learned in Japan. Actually, it is not only technical; you have to know the clay, the kiln construction... It's not just how to make ceramics. It is the whole process that we do in Japan.* (Mieko Ukeseki)

In fact, high temperature wood-firing kilns are a heritage of Japanese immigrants in Brazil. Even though today high temperature can be obtained through the use of electric or gas kilns, most Japanese ceramists in Brazil still prefer to use the wood-firing kilns. This is because of the accidents that happen from the contact of the wood ashes with the glaze and from the different atmospheric temperatures, which can only happen in wood-firing kilns. The result is the appearance of unexpected effects in the surface of the ceramic pieces which are, in a certain way, uncontrollable to the ceramist and which reflect the delivery of the final stage of the ceramic production process to the forces of nature.

In fact, this relationship with nature that reflects itself in the ceramic process and in the ceramists view of their work is generally pointed out has a singular trait of Japanese potters. In fact, the almost entirety of Japanese ceramists that work in Brazil have their studios in the countryside, far from big urban centers. Many of them also possess Japanese traditional wood-firing kilns such as the *anagama* and the *noborigama* and depend on the local collection of natural materials to produce their clays and glazes. This situation is similar to that of many Japanese ceramists in Japan, especially those who work with traditional styles and techniques in old pottery production centers in the countryside.

*I was born and raised in Japan, I came here when I was already an adult. Within the knowledge of my life in Japan we knew the story about mingei [...]. Mingei is what people do, everything that people create by hand, manually, at home [...]. It affected me a lot when I started working with ceramics* (Mieko Ukeseki).

However, Brazil seems to appear in these potters lives has a privileged space for the continuity of the Japanese traditional process. This is visible in several of their statements, such as when they say that in Japan, due to intense urbanization and the lack of space and natural resources, it is no longer possible to built *noborigama* kilns and work with local materials. On the contrary, Brazil's huge size and abundant natural resources allowed and even encouraged the desire for this type of kiln.

*I was not going to build a noborigama in Brazil. But my friend gave me his project before I left Japan. [...] Then, when I came here, I remembered it and I thought: I will use this one. The size of the kiln was small and the topography of the land was perfect for it (Shoko Suzuki).*

It looks like these women potters have found in Brazil the ideal place to take forward the Japanese tradition they were escaping from, but in full artistic freedom. In fact, when asked whether his work would have followed the same path if they had remained in Japan, Shoko Suzuki and Mieko Ukeseki replied: “impossible” and “no, because pottery changes with your life experiences”. However, this process of maintaining Japanese tradition in Brazil is seen as an unconscious process, a cultural legacy acquired by their experience in Japan. Transcribing the words of Katia Canton (2009: 57), “the time of memory, after all, is not only the time that has passed, but the time that belongs to us”. Or, as Julio Plaza (2003: 2) has put it, “the past is not only memory, but survival as a reality inscribed in the present”.

*In fact, I never make ceramics thinking if it is going to be Japanese or not. Never. I don't even know. I want to do what I have in my memory (Mieko Ukeseki)*

However, memory does not exist outside the confines of history. It connotes what is personal and emotional in the individual's relation to the past. Hence, the “Japanese way” is present in the relationship of these potters with the process of making ceramics and their aesthetic sense, but should not be considered as something primary and inherent to all Japanese. In fact, when asked if they considered themselves as Japanese, the potters answered:

*I know I'm Japanese but I'm not worried about it [...]. I am 65 years old. I have been here longer than in Japan. I am Brazilian [laughs]. (Mieko Ukeseki)*

*When I came back to Japan, an old potter friend said: “Why did you run to Brazil? It looked like you caught fire on your behind” [laughs]. And I said: “I think I fell in love, right?” Then she began to talk about my work and said: “You are not Japanese anymore.” I was so happy! [laughs] I wanted to be in the middle. I wanted to learn by stepping on the floor, alone, absorbing. (Shoko Suzuki)*

### 3. Conclusion

The construction of a Japanese cultural identity in the modern period contributed to the dissemination of an image of Japan focused on Zen Buddhist ideals, the tea ceremony, *wabi-sabi* aesthetics, harmony with nature and other general aspects that ignore the diversity of Japanese people. Japanese cultural character, which is reflected in the discourse and practice of *Nikkei* potters, therefore, is a heritage acquired within Japanese society through a process that sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1997) called *habitus*, a preconscious system of dispositions learned through embodiment, which generates daily practice.

One of the customs and traditions kept by Japanese potters who immigrated to Brazil is the process of pottery-making, which includes: the use of local materials, the application of ash glazes, clay modeling in the manual wheel and firing in high temperature wood kilns. Some of the concepts mentioned by most Brazil-based Japanese potters concern the participation of the forces of nature in the process of ceramic production, the importance given to everyday use of ceramics and the importance of repetition before creativity. Like many of the Japanese potters who immigrated to the country in the 1960s and 1970s, Shoko Suzuki and Mieko Ukeseki brought a traditional process of making ceramics and an aesthetic sense regarded as uniquely Japanese.

However, as an ongoing conceptual project, a tradition is not only the result of careful preservation or pure invention. “Rather, it is a matter of reconciling past with present through the mediation of value-laded symbols” (Schenell, 2008: 202). As sets of traits passed from generation to generation, traditions are in constant process of reinterpretation, restructuring and interweaving (Morris-Suzuki, 1997: 6). And it is in this process of appropriating the representations of Japan by the Japanese themselves, that cultural traditions are again appropriated and reinterpreted in the light of the experience and personal history of each individual.

In fact, the process of constructing Japanese culture and identity is always in motion and is still occurring today, through a continuous negotiation of Japanese self-representations with the Orientalist imagery of the West, in an endless cycle of signification. These images are made of fragments and change constantly. So, what is unique is continuously simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, turned again into a simulacrum to be translated and made an original hybrid culture again (Kikuchi, 2004).

Moreover, as a result of an individual's sensitivity, art cannot be detached from the society in which it was formed. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1976: 1478) argues that artistic sensitivity is essentially a collective formation, whose foundation is as broad and deep as social existence. Art embodies a way of experiencing and its skills come from the life experience within a society with which other experiences and habits are shared (*ibid.: passim*), as was also pointed by Pierre Bourdieu (1997).

Thus, besides being a social construct resulting from political agendas and power relations constantly reviewed in relation to the "other", cultural identity is also multiple and dynamic, a continuous creative process unique to each individual. The situation of being in the middle of two cultures places these potters in a place of multiple possibilities, in which both identities, Japanese and Brazilian, are simultaneous, situational and symbolic realities. For, as Stuart Hall as stated (2006, *passim*), the decentralization of the subject in the contemporary world has given rise to new, hybrid, multiple, ephemeral and impermanent identities, that seem to float freely.

Brazil seems to appear in the context of these women potters lives as a kind of empty space, a magic mirror that allows them to infinitely recreate their own culture and identity. Thus, despite Shoko Suzuki and Mieko Ukeseki's ceramic making process has originated from Japanese tradition, it is in the dialogue of their personal trajectory, marked by the transcultural and migratory experience, with the personal appropriation of Japanese tradition and culture in function of their artistic sensitivity and personal expression, that their identities acquires a hybrid touch and dislocate into a third space, a space in between Japan and Brazil.

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