

Floating Sentiments: On silence and misunderstandings of cultural performance around generations of Japanese migrants in a riverine town in Brazil

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Abstract

On 2 November, it is All Souls Day in Brazil. Whilst the majority of the Brazilian population visit the graves of beloved ones, families of Japanese background release small lanterns from the banks of Ribeira de Iguape river. For the latter, it is time for Tooro Nagashi. Memory has it that it has been like this since the 1950s. However, documents registered that the first Japanese immigrants arrived in the area in 1917. Death in a different country and the practice of celebrating the memory of one's ancestors took some time to gain a public rendition among these Japanese immigrants and their descendants.

In 2008, organisations holding the legacy of these immigrants in the small town of Registro asked for Tooro Nagashi to be included as Brazilian intangible cultural heritage because they recognised that the celebration was a way that some Japanese immigrants and their descendants found of being part of Brazil. Their request was put on hold by the national cultural heritage authority for not 'matching' the rules of the intangible cultural heritage policy in Brazil.

This case challenges some assumptions about 'culture' and national heritage policies. Firstly, it interrogates the recurrent idea that migrants reproduce their 'native cultures' and set their lives in homogeneous groups with closed relationships among themselves. Secondly, it questions ideas of authenticity intrinsic to 'national cultures'. Furthermore, it claims for a more processual and complex outlook in the making of 'culture'. Finally, it reveals the limitations of cultural heritage policies with national frameworks in dealing with migration heritages.