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ICHIGOICHI: MY EXPERIENCE IN THE JAPAN FOUNDATION FOR SPECIALISTS PROGRAM IN KANSAI BY ELIZABETH MCDONALD

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Last October, I met with my tutor Yazawa-sensei in the library of the Japan Foundation center in Kansai. I needed help reading a flyer in Japanese about a music performance by a music duo from Sao Paulo that would take place in Tokyo.

Sensei taught me the kanjis necessary to read it. Many were words that I regularly heard such as *ensou suru* (to play a musical instrument), *minyo* (folk song), *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute), and *shamisen* (a three-stringed banjo-like instrument). Yazawa-sensei tested me after teaching me the characters. “You just learned this one. Remember? Now, please read it for me,” she said. After reading the flyer together, I discussed traveling to Tokyo to see the performance, and Yazawa-sensei supported me. She recommended low-cost airline tickets and arranged accommodations at a Japan Foundation Language Center in North of Tokyo. My visit to see the concert resulted in subsequent trips to Tokyo for interviews, as well as many audio-visual materials that supported my doctoral dissertation project on music by Nikkei Brazilians.

I am a graduate student in Ethnomusicology at the University of California, Riverside, and my research deals with music in the South American Japanese diaspora. I recently returned California from participating in the Japan Foundation Japanese Language Program for Specialists in Cultural and Academic Fields, a six-month training program in Kansai. Thank

the program, my ability to do research in Brazil has progressed. In earlier research trips, there were many people who I could not speak to since I could not speak Japanese. Now, I am much more confident in my ability to communicate with Brazilian Nikkeis, especially *Isseis*, or first-generation Japanese Brazilians who often prefer to interact in the Japanese language.

Ichigo ichie is a phrase that my Japanese dictionary translates as “once in a lifetime encounter (and should be cherished as such).” This expression describes my six months in Kansai; it is a rare privilege for an US-American graduate student to focus exclusively on language training and research.

Daily life at the center was rigorous. Mornings were reserved for Japanese language lessons, such as kanji and grammar. Classes on a variety of topics such as giving oral presentations, academic writing, and individual tutoring took place in the afternoon, as did special lectures explaining Japanese holidays and festivals, and workshops on topics such as “how to email university professors for the first time” and “Kansai dialect”.



The Japan Specialists program arranged many visits to institutions to facilitate our research such the Wakayama University and National Diet libraries. We met Japanese scholars who were working on similar topics to our own. Thanks to an organized outing to the Nichibunken Institute for Japanese Studies, I met with Shuhei Hosokawa, one of my favorite writers and researchers in musicology. Time to conduct research was also a component of our routine. With support from the program’s tutors and administrators, I travelled to cities with

high-Brazilian populations, attended concerts, and conducted interviews with Brazilian musicians living and studying in Japan. I learned about the wide range of experiences of Nikkei Brazilians living in the country of their ancestors. I spoke to scholarship student researchers, young people training to become Japanese language teachers, *Dekassegis*, or Brazilian guest workers, and children of *Dekassegis* who chose to remain in Japan after their parents returned to Brazil.

There were also many opportunities to connect with the local community, such as a conversation-partner program. I met regularly with a woman around my age for coffee and conversation. Her mother-in-law taught me the basics of koto when I visited their home!

tutor also introduced me to a local *shodo* teacher, Setsuko Nagayama, who held semi-private classes in her home every other week. These classes were full of conversation and laughter. They also helped me to improve my Japanese!

My colleagues, who were researchers and librarians from Korea, Europe, Vietnam, China, and Taiwan, were an amazing source of friendship and inspiration. Two other participants in the Japan Specialists program researched on Japanese migration to the Americas, and I thoroughly enjoyed hearing about their research throughout the course. My talented classmates shared study materials related to grammar and kanji lessons, organized study sessions, and encouraged me to read materials related to my research when I did not feel ready or capable.



Many groups from various courses at the Kansai Center wandered in and out of the center. A group of diplomats from Asian, African, and Caribbean countries, who were learning Japanese to be posted in Japan, accompanied our group throughout our stay. I learned from these talented young people about English as it is spoken in Jamaica and Liberia, and about the nomadic history of Kazakhstan, among many other topics. Other groups were at the center for only two to four weeks, and I wished they could have stayed

longer in the center. Time always felt too short.

When I left the Kansai Center for the final time in early April, the cherry blossom trees around the center were in full bloom. Cherry blossoms, I was told, are a symbol of the beauty and ephemerality of life itself, and they remind us to savor every moment. I deeply treasure my time at the Japan Foundation Center in Kansai. While six months passed quickly, the materials I collected and created, and the skills that I acquired through my six-month training will help me throughout my career. Thanks to my second tutor Hayashi-sensei, I was able to create a trilingual portfolio of research materials, including photos, video clips of interviews, and short texts, which will assist me in explaining my research long into the future. Most importantly, my time in Kansai gave me a basis to conduct my research in Japanese, an important skill for my career.

I am deeply grateful to the tutors, teachers, librarians, staff, and students at the Japan Foundation, who received me with kindness and listened to me with patience, and for my professors at the University of California, Riverside, who supported me in applying for the Japan Cultural Specialists program. I hope that the program can continue to support other researchers for years to come.



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