

Spicing up a traditional pottery village: a Brazilian in Arita's Happy Lucky Kiln site

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1. Aim

This paper explores the role of a foreigner in the revitalization of a Japanese traditional craft community by looking at the specific case of Kourakugama, a 150 year old porcelain factory in Arita. We will look into the activities of Sebastião Pimenta, Brazilian artist and potter, as the coordinator of two revitalization and artistic exchange projects in the factory, the Treasure Hunting and the Art in Residency Program and the changes that his presence has sparked inside the community.

2. Data & Methods

This presentation is the result of fieldwork conducted at the Kourakugama in November 2016 and May 2017. It is based on semi-directive qualitative interviews with Brazilian artist Sebastião Pimenta, the president of Kourakugama, four factory workers and two artists in residency.

3. Results

The Kouraku kiln site is a porcelain factory created in 1865, now in its fifth generation by the hands of the director Takanobu Tokunaga. The factory has struggled with the economic recession that hit Arita's ceramic industry in the mid-1990s after the bubble crash, intensified by the declining population, the lowering prices of porcelain and the general change in lifestyle and tastes. With the goal of culturally and economically revive the factory's activities, the director invited Brazilian ceramic artist Sebastião Pimenta to create an in-site Art in Residency program starting in 2015, which has received around 30 artists, potters and designers from all over the world to work at the factory's headquarters between 2 weeks to 3 months. In addition, Pimenta created a Treasure Hunting project in the factory's abandoned areas, which has brought much publicity to the region, receiving an average of 20 to 50 people per day. With this project, he became the "emblem" of the Kourakugama, surprising Japanese visitors who go to the traditional porcelain region. Together with a guesthouse accommodation, Pimenta's Art in Residency and Treasure Hunting projects make up 30% of the factory's net income.

4. Conclusion

The presence of a foreigner in the region has brought a few local tensions, since Arita's pottery making is still monopolized by old traditional families, reflecting the rigidities of the Japanese government's promotion of traditional techniques. However, the presence of foreign artists has contributed to the development of a multicultural atmosphere, highlighting the role of internationalization in Japan's countryside and the contribution of foreigners to the revitalization of local traditions. With this case-study, we intend to bring a discussion about the role of migrants as active members of their communities of destination and their impact on the development of multicultural dynamics and interactions through the creation of transnational localities.

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