

The “YOKONARABI” culture and the principle of “Cherry, Plum, Peach and Damson”

It is said that the book “The collective works of jokes about Japanese in the world” has been selling well in these years. Actually, in my opinion, it’s difficult to find a nation which cares more about how it is viewed by people. Oddly enough, we accept even strong and exaggerated criticism aimed to ourselves.

I myself have been also fond of jokes. When I visited Nicaragua as a correspondent for the Seikyo Shimbun, I would exchange jokes with my friends after lunch in this country where internal strives were still in rampant.

In general, people in Latin American countries love jokes. When I told jokes, they joined in energetically and counter with their own. Let me introduce two jokes I heard that were favorites among Latin American people:

Joke 1

“One day, a ship crossing an ocean began to sink from a collision. Passengers were thrown from the ship into the ocean. These drowning passengers began to swim toward an island they could see afar. Among these passengers, only three of them were able to reach the shore of this island. They were two men and a young woman.

Now I would like to ask you, depending on their nationality, how would the two men possibly react to the young woman under this situation?

I would tell you this would happen:

If they were Frenchmen, one man became her husband and the other, her sweet heart.

If they were Englishmen, they would leave her alone, and became each other’s lover.

If they were Italian, the two men would have a duel to determine who should have her.

If they were Japanese, the two Japanese men would go around the island to look for a telephone. They would make a phone call to their individual bosses asking, “What should I do now?”

Joke 2

The biggest super liner, “Titanic” was going to sink into the ocean. The passengers, gentlemen and ladies, began to run for the rescue boats. The venue is turning into tumultuous. The captain of the ship persuaded the male passengers, to give priority to ladies and children, as follows:

He said to the Americans: “Here is your chances to become a hero to let them (women and children) go first”



Then to the Englishmen: “You are authentic gentleman. Take care of your ladies and children.”

Next to the Germans: “The law of your country obligates you to this as the most proper thing to do.”

And to Japanese he said: “You had better copy what other passengers do.”

Just like these examples, the Japanese have a tendency to follow what others are doing. They feel too self-conscious how they appear in others’ eyes. They are afraid to stand out. I think that Japanese are too concerned about others’ opinion.

The first story refers to the tendency of the Japanese who work for a company to ask their boss for advice even on personal affairs (like how to handle a young woman). The second story refers to the Japanese sense of conformity, i.e. “Do as others do”. Both of these stories make fun of the weakness of the Japanese who have little individual thinking.

I think this is connected to the “YOKONARABI” (to be in line or be at the same level as others and do what others do)culture, something like, “MINNADE WATAREBA KOWAKUNAI (There will be no danger to cross the street even on the red traffic signal if we cross it together with many other people.)



Under these examples, I would like to introduce a forward thinking phrase, “OUBAI TOURI”*. Here “OU” means “cherry”, “BAI” means “plum”, “TOU” means “peach” and “RI” means “damson”, indicating flowers of different trees would blossom in full expressing their own character and beauty. The important thing is that each flower expresses her utmost beauty. Then the environment itself will become most beautiful and comfortable.

Likewise, I believe, if people in this human world would live in a natural form like flowers without envy or just to follow temptation, we would have a peaceful, tranquil and beautiful life. I would dare say that even though we can cover up our faces with makeup, we cannot depend on that alone to give off a true brilliance in our lives.

In this world, people have a tendency to chase after money, position, reputation or desire to reach the same level as their neighbors; they would eventually destroy their own lives if these were their only motives.

I would like to assert that each of us has own initiative and if we go forward with a true intention to “build up ourselves so we could be better today than yesterday”, we will be able to enjoy our lives with fulfillment.