

Presentation at Akishima, May 2005

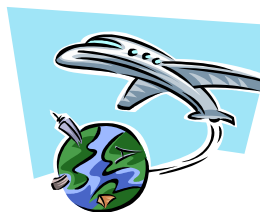
Message from Latin America

Introduction of myself

First, let me introduce myself briefly.

I was born in 1941 in Nagano Prefecture. I just celebrated my 64th birthday two months ago. Interestingly, in my middle school days I was a skin head. In my high school days I thought I was a brilliant, handsome boy with abundant hair. Fifty years have passed and now, the only brilliant thing I have is this bald head.

After I graduated from Waseda University, I worked for NHK Gakuen high school, in Kunitachi city, as a teacher of bookkeeping and accounting. After that, I worked for the Seikyo Shimbun, the core newspaper of the Soka Gakkai, the largest lay



organization of Buddhism in Japan.

In 1976, I was dispatched to Panama as a correspondent and I was stationed there for 10 years. During those 10 years I visited almost all the countries in Latin America. I also had opportunities to visit European countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Germany, Holland and Belgium. After I returned to Japan, I visited Latin America several times also.

Four years ago, I retired according to my age requirement. In the first year after my retirement, I studied American culture at the Central Texas College at Yokota Air Base. In the second year, I spent a year in Spain to take a course for foreigners to improve my Spanish abilities.

There, my life living with young students from the UK, Germany, Sweden, and Italy and from the African and American continents was very interesting and exciting. There were a lot of things that an elderly Japanese like me could learn from them. I

wrote a book to share these experiences with my fellow Japanese.

The title of the book is: “WHY DON’T YOU TRY TO STUDY ABROAD AFTER RETIREMENT?” The subtitle is: “RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN ACTIVE LIFE AFTER 60 YEARS OF AGE”.

Now, I am working for a bicycle parking lot near the JR Akishima station for three or four days a week, averaging four or five hours a day. I have been working at a metropolitan high school also until last month. The work involved preparing materials for social studies to put online on the Internet. One of my projects was to edit a book focused on international mutual understanding. The title of the book is “DON QUIXOTE ON AN AIRPLANE”.

Today, I would like to share with you some experiences of my life from this book, mainly focusing on Latin America.

What is the definition of “the equator”?

First of all, let’s take a quiz, shall we?

When we look at a world map or a terrestrial globe we notice the equator. What is the equator, actually? What is the correct definition of “the equator”?

I prepared four definitions as follows. So please choose the correct one.

1. A red line drawn on the globe.
2. A circular line which runs over the side belly and separates the globe into two halves: the Northern hemisphere and the Southern hemisphere.
3. A grand circle, which is formed by a flat line, that crosses at right angle to its own axis, or
4. A chain of the hottest points on the globe.

What do you think of these four definitions?

Most of us may say that answers No.2 and No.3 are basically

correct. As for No.4, some of you may wonder what that is. Lastly, we may think answer No. 1 is definitely out of the question?

When I visited Quito, the capital city of Ecuador, I had a chance to visit the monument dedicated to the equator. This monument was situated at the outskirts of the city, about an hour by car. This structure was a four cornered tower, about 15 meters in height. At the top of the tower, there was a big globe, about 3 meters in diameter.

On the four faces of the tower, there were big letters: E, O, S, N, respectively. These represented the first letters of Este, Oeste, Sur and Norte for East, West, South and North in Spanish, respectively.

In front of this tower, I saw a line drawn on the earth extending from east to west. This line was, in fact, the equator line that divided the globe into two hemispheres: the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere.

I also noticed the color of the line was not red. It looked more like a dusty black color.

Listening to my friend, I took one step toward the equator line. He took photos of me, one leg on the north side and other leg on the south side. He said with a smile, "Congratulations, Mr. Shimizu! You have stepped over the "Globe", at last!"

He meant that when I stepped on both side of the line at the same time, I was simultaneously on the Northern hemisphere and the Southern hemisphere. I thought he had a very interesting sense of humor. At that moment I surely felt I was visiting the two hemispheres of the globe at the same time.

Another amusing fact is that even as I was "crossing the Equator", I must confess I felt neither heat in my legs nor any burning sensation in my groins. The temperature around the Equator monument was far from hot. It was about 10 degrees Centigrade and I actually felt rather cold. It was because the capital city of Quito was located 2800 meters above sea level.

By the way, the name of the country, Ecuador actually means equator in Spanish. Isn't this interesting?



In Ecuador, being below the equator; rather, I should say, on the southern part of this equator, (that is in the southern hemisphere), it has opposite climates from here in Japan. For example, during the cherry blossom season when fresh leaves are blooming abundantly in Japan, in countries in south hemisphere, such as Brazil or Argentina, the leaves of the trees are changing colors to yellow or red.

Is Japan “on the backside of the globe”?

Talking about Brazil, I would like to share with you this episode. As you know, Brazil is situated just on the other side of the globe. We, Japanese people, have heard many times that if we dig through this earth where we stand now, toward the center of the globe, we will be able to reach Brazil on the other side.

On one occasion, I was talking with a man from Brazil and I carelessly said: “Brazil is located at the back side of the globe.....” He suddenly exclaimed, “What do you mean by this? From the viewpoint of the Brazilians, I dare say, the country that is located on the backside of the globe is your country, Japan”.

I think what he said was surely correct and understandable. Looking at the globe, it is impossible to decide which side is the front and which side is the back.

In this respect, I noticed the world maps drawn in South American countries were different from those found in Japan. Depending on how they were drawn, there were differences in the world maps from different countries.

Remember the map you used in primary or middle school?

For instance, a map drawn in Japan by the Mercator method is one of the most popular maps in Japan. On this map, Japan is situated almost at the center.

The Asian, European and African continents are on the left side of Japan and the North and South American continents on the right, across the Pacific Ocean. So, on this map, even Brazil, being one of the largest countries in the world, is seen at the bottom of the map in a modest location.

According to the maps in Latin America, however, the continents situated at the center of the map are the North and South American continents. Then, where do you think Japan is located on these maps?

Japan is drawn as an island at the left side and above, pretty much like how England is drawn on the world map in Japan, (almost toward the corner). Considering these, can we possibly understand and accept what the Brazilian said that Japan is “on the backside of the globe.”? What do you think?

Pleasant life, “Hasta Manana”

So far, I have been referring to the geographical features of Latin America. From now on, I would like to discuss its human geography.

The cultures in Latin American countries are greatly diverse. As to music, we can count the Samba in Brazil, Tango in Argentina, and Salsa in the Caribbean islands. Soccer is the most popular sport in Latin America. They call soccer “football”.

The way of living in Latin America is generally very slow paced. They are not as hectic in their work. When closing time comes, most of the office workers leave the office immediately, even though the work has not been completed yet. There is no problem to postpone work until the next day. For them, it's more important to live a private pleasant life.

The word that expresses this situation most commonly is “Hasta Manana” (the first “n” has tilde in Spanish). This Spanish phrase means “until tomorrow”, “by tomorrow” or “see you

tomorrow”. It is a very convenient expression, I think. Work is delayed or an appointment is postponed sometimes but this never means that they won’t do it. They will surely complete the work someday. So this expression doesn’t hurt the hearts of others.



Under such circumstance, however, I was frustrated in my first year in Panama. When I received a request from the head office in Tokyo that I should complete some work within a short period of time, I tried my best to do it within the same day (although, at times, it was impossible to do). In Panama, from the way of living of the people, it didn’t bother them if they didn’t complete the work by the end of the day that I asked them to do. Their reply was “Hasta Manana”.

So, making use of the word “Hasta Manana”, I invented five mottoes to proceed my work in Latin America, In Japanese, they are: ASERAZU, AWATEZU, AKUSEKUSEZU, ATENISEZU and AKIRAMEZU. They basically mean respectively “Don’t be impatient”, “Don’t make haste”, “Don’t busy oneself”, “Don’t rely on” but “Never give up”.

The interesting and unique point of these words in Japanese is that each word has the same letter and pronunciation in its first letter “A”.

As I began to bear this in mind, I didn’t need to be as frustrated even though my workers didn’t complete the work on time when I asked. I considered this as a great experience in my life while in Latin America.

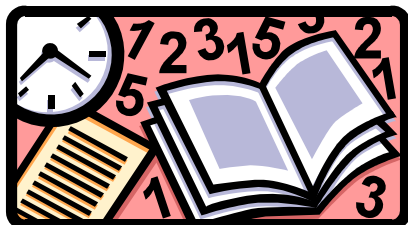
Traveling in Latin American countries it is not rare that an airplane delays one or two hours. Passengers, however, don’t complain so much in general and wait calmly until the plane

leaves, as if conscious of the fact that “Anyway it will leave in some time”.

Most of the Latin American people who have visited Japan make reports about good security, well-organized activities and the accuracy of public transport in Japan.

In metropolitan cities, a large number of trains are commuting every two or three minutes. The bullet trains stop at the destination just on time at the very accurate point of the station. Latin American people might interpret these facts as “KAMIWAZA”, action controlled by god.

On the other hand, the image of so many Japanese walking silently from the bus stop to the station and to the platform as if they were ordered by these transport systems might look very odd to them. Large crowds of commuters who wear almost same dark suits come out of stations in angry waves in the morning. I heard an episode. A man from Bolivia, who was watching this scene, began running suddenly, screaming “An outbreak of war!”



Anyway, the character of Japanese people, punctual and diligent, is reflected also on the working way of Japanese businessman who is in Latin America. Latin American people stop their work at the finishing time and go back to their house saying “Hasta Manana”, even though they haven’t finished the work yet. The work left can be done the next day. The important thing for them is to enjoy their own life together with family.

Japanese businessman, however, cannot do like them. Sometimes they have to have contact with the head office at a time when their boss is at the office in Tokyo during the daytime, and this means nighttime in Latin America. I assume that most of the building in which the light is on in the night are building in which Japanese are working until late at night.

Watching these phenomenons, I may dare say, “Human being is master and time is his subordinate in Latin America” and “Time is master and human being is it’s subordinate in Japan”

Which do you think is a more humanistic way of living, Japan or Latin America?

Diversity of races

Now, I faced an interesting experience. It is in regards to the mix of human races. It is said that New York City is the melting pot of mankind. So is Panama City.

One day, a Panamanian returned from Japan, came to my office and said; “The trip to Japan was very interesting and exciting. I experienced the Shin-kan-sen: the bullet train. The Japanese I met were very kind to me and they took good care of me. It was a wonderful stay. But I noticed one curious thing. When I was in Japan, almost all the Japanese there were ethnically Japanese. There were ethnic Japanese wherever I went. It was very odd to me”.

What he said was very odd to me, too. After analyzing the situation of Panama, I could understand well what he had intended to describe.

Unlike Japan, people of Panama are of many racial backgrounds. There are native Indians, Caucasians whose ancestors came from the continent of Europe, mainly from Spain, black colored people whose ancestors came from Africa (during the construction of the Panama Canal) and Asian people who came to work in Panama.

They interacted and intermarried racially during these centuries. I can probably say that when 100 Panamanians assembled, the skin tones of the people were diverse into at least 100 types.

The situation in Japan, however, has been changing, too, recently. We see many foreigners not only in Tokyo, but also in rural villages all over Japan these days.

Generally speaking, there are three kinds of races in Latin America: Native Indians, Caucasians from Europe and those who are mixed. The history of conquests from outside and mixture of races from within is now showing their diversity of colors in the people.

However, there are countries in Latin America where nations are composed almost only of the white race because they had eliminated the native Indians. In countries such as Costa Rica, Uruguay and Chile, there have always been fewer native Indians historically.

Brazil has developed into a cosmopolitan nation. People there see it quite natural to have a diversity of races. They would feel odd to be in a country whose people are composed of almost only one race, like Japan.



Therefore, living in Japan, the theme of racial problem may not be in the consciousness of the people. But overseas, the people entangled in racial problems are, in my opinion, both victims and assailants.

My bitter experience on an airplane

Once, I was on a domestic flight in Venezuela. There were only about 30 passengers on the plane, while there were about 120 seats available. Looking around me I found that I was the only passenger from an oriental background. A stewardess with blond hair began her regular service to offer drinks to the passengers.

She asked each passenger one by one what kind of drinks he or she wanted. But when she came toward my seat she passed me by without saying a word. I don't think she thought I couldn't understand Spanish or English. From her attitude toward me, I

felt she was intentionally discriminating against me on the basis of my race.

Trying to control my humiliation, I called to the stewardess calmly and asked her with intentionally clear sounding Spanish, “Would you please give me a cup of cola?”

The stewardess went by, still saying nothing, and came back later with a cup of cola and left a small cake on my table. She departed again without ever uttering a single word.

Do you think this was acceptable? I was in an airplane where the courteous services from the flight attendant were definitely expected. I pondered about this unique experience all day at work and until I went to bed at the hotel. I felt strongly, that to this flight attendant, we, Japanese, surely belonged to the “yellow colored” people,

Out of my goodwill, I might have ignored the incident as an accident for the reason that the flight was not international but domestic, and probably because the flight attendant at that moment was in a bad mood. Even though, it was an experience that fairly shocked me spiritually.

I would assume that such an extreme case wouldn't happen so often. However, I sensed that, deep down that some folks in Venezuela despised oriental people. Unfortunately, for me, this presented itself as an attitude from a flight attendant who was supposed to be courteous toward every passenger.

“Honorary white race”

Now, I would like to present another illustration. I belonged to a sport club in Panama. Once, as I was changing my clothes in the waiting room, a sales associate of this club said to me,

“We are recruiting new members. Will you please recommend me some Japanese, because Japanese are not as bad as black people.”

I was shocked to hear these words, “Japanese are less bad than black people!” In his very short remark, we can perceive his basic way of thinking toward racism. If you permit me to add

some words to complete his thought pattern, the rest would be as follows:

“ We would like to bring in white colored members as far as we can to maintain the status of this club. If we accept black colored members, the atmosphere of this club is going to change to worse. However, for the sake of increasing membership, we cannot limit ourselves only to white members.

What is important is that we have members who are able to pay the initial admission and the subsequent monthly fee. Therefore, even Japanese are considered colored(yellow) people, because they have money, they are better than black people, or not as bad as black people.



In African countries and some countries in the world, Japan, also known as the “yellow colored nation” have been called sometimes “honorary white race”. This position has been given owing to the economic power of Japan and the financial status of businessmen dispatched from Japan to developing countries.

With this Japanese title of “honorary white race”, are we then subconsciously discriminating against other people in Asia who have the same yellow colored skin? I think, the issue of racism is surely very delicate and complicated.

Tendency to have a racial prejudice

Let me share with you another life experience. Once, as I entered a shopping center in Panama, a salesman came close to me and said; “What would you like, chinite! ‘ This word, “chinite” is generally used to denote Chinese in a kind and friendly manner. Seven times out of ten, not only at this place

but also at other places, wherever I went, I was called by this word “chinite”.

In the beginning of the year of my stay in Panama, I tried to correct this but soon after I stopped doing that. Because I understood that it was very difficult for them to distinguish a Japanese from a Chinese just as it is very difficult for us to distinguish a Spanish from a French or an Englishman from an American. I thought at least they treated me very politely as a guest.

Nowadays, the situation and the conscience of the Japanese toward the Korean or Chinese people have been changing by the movie “Winter Sonata” from Korea. The economical development in China, I believe, also has some effect. To me, the Japanese have had the tendency to have a discriminating racial prejudice toward people in other Asian countries as a result of their economic power.

I would like to insist here that we, Japanese, should now remember the long history between Japan and these countries. Historically, the most part of Japanese culture has been transferred from China by way of Korean Peninsula. We owe so much to these countries.

Anyway, we may have had tendency to have some discriminative thoughts toward foreign people for some time. To change the situation for the better, I believe, we need to learn the history and to participate in the many international activities that we are now promoting.

Two episodes about the Japanese people

I apologize that my speech has become a little bit serious in nature. I would like to conclude by introducing two lighter episodes about the Japanese people: one from Latin America and one from a historic tragedy.

Once upon a time, a ship crossing the Caribbean Sea sank by accident. All the passengers were thrown into the ocean and some of them swam to reach a far away island. Only three

passengers could reach that island. They were two young men and a young woman. Hypothetically, it was said, IF the two young men were

1. French: one would become the young girl's official husband and the other her lover.
2. English: the two men began to love each other, leaving her alone. Surprised?
3. Italian: the two men began a duel to win her favor.

Here comes a question to you all.
What if the two men were Japanese?

The answer given to me was:

If the two men were Japanese, both would go to find a telephone to call to their bosses. They would both ask their bosses what to do with this woman.

This joke, I think, is expressing well the tendency of the Japanese.



I heard another joke that referred to the Japanese character involving the Titanic. Some of you may have already heard this.

The steamer Titanic was going to sink. All the passengers were running in a panic to the rescue boats. The captain tried to persuade male passengers to give priority first to females and children. The Captain told them as follows.

To the Americans: Don't you want to be a hero?

To the Englishmen: You are true gentlemen., Thank you!

To the German: In your country the law requires you to do this.

And to the Japanese: Other people are doing that, so you had better copy them.

Like these examples, I think the Japanese have the tendency to imitate others. They don't have their own personal opinions or their own ways of thinking. They care too much about the reaction of others.

Having lived overseas for more than 11 years: 10 years in Panama and 1 year in Spain, I am inclined to agree with this opinion.

I might have expanded too broadly outside the theme of this talk. I hope you learned something useful from my speech.

It has been my great pleasure and privilege to entertain you. Thank you very much for your attention.