

“Why do Japanese like YOKONARABI?”

Presentation at Central Texas College, Jan. 2002

It was about 15 years ago that I returned from Panama after 10 years of stay. I was a correspondent of the Seikyo Shimbun in Panama, the organ newspaper of the Soka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist organization. During these 10 years I had the opportunity to visit all the countries in Latin America. Traveling through these countries, I noticed not only the different the cultures but also the different ways of thinking of the people. Latin Americas and Japanese think differently. One of the most curious feelings that I had when I came back to Japan was YOKONARABI.



They are nearly all alike.

YOKO of YOKONARABI means horizontal and NARABI means standing in one line. When we use this word in Japanese society, it generally means that people want to be at the same level or they want to have same things.

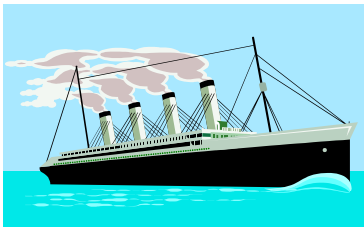
For example: When a family bought a new car, their neighbor would say, “Ah, my neighbor bought a new car, we need to buy one, too”. This way, the neighbor thinks he/she is maintaining his/her status. The situation is the same for other high priced items. When a family takes a trip abroad, the neighbor begins to think to travel abroad also. This is as if to catch up with the neighbors or to show that one’s family can also afford the same luxuries. It is clear they actually think this way. How ridiculous!

Nowadays, CHAPATSU (LOOSESOCKS) are very popular among middle and high school girl students. I cannot understand the reason behind it at all. Is this youth’s modern fashion? To me, the CHAPATSU (LOOSSOCKS) looks as dull as its name. I believe tight socks make a girl student look more active and pure. But they say, “My classmates wear them, so I have to wear the same. I don’t want to be kicked out of the group. The same situation occurs with KEITAI, the cell phone. Also, many Japanese girls regard black hair as more beautiful than brown hair. Truthfully, what a curious community we have?

Many Japanese women desire to hold a “Luis Viton” handbag. They consider this one of the status symbols. I think that many women have a tendency to put too much weight on money or material things. While shopping, they select things according to the criterion that their friends have the same, and not by the criterion whether the

item is suitable for them.

I don't think that there are many nations in the world that put as much importance on reputation as the Japanese. An American author Ruth Benedict said in her famous book, "Chrysanthemum and sword", that Japanese culture is the culture of shame. Japanese put more priority to disgrace than to crime. I share her opinion. We sometimes see a mother saying to her child, "Don't do such a thing! You don't want to be laughed at by SEKEN, people in society". Is this mother more concerned about other's opinion rather than to have an intention to teach her child the correct way of living? To me, the Japanese have a tendency, in general, to depend on other's opinion to decide on their own behavior.



There is an interesting joke about the behavior of people from different countries.:

The great steamer Titanic was going to sink. All the passengers were desperate to ride on the life boats. There were many passengers and not enough boats. So the captain had ladies and children go first to and tried to persuade men-passengers to wait. What did he tell them? Can you imagine?

To the English man he said; "You are a gentleman, so you should give way to ladies and children. OK?"

To the American; "Don't you want to become a hero?"

To the German; "It is the rule of this steamer to yield to ladies and children first. Do you understand?"

And to the Japanese, the captain asked; "What do you think?"

He said to the Japanese; "Every one is giving way to ladies and children, so you should behave like them".

What an interesting joke! This explains precisely the character of each nation, and the tendency of Japanese in particular

Now, why Japanese people have such a tendency?

I think this comes from the history of Japan in these six decades. Thanks to the United States, Japanese society was liberated after the World War II. People began to enjoy liberty. However, the democracy in Japan was not been achieved by the struggles of the people but was given by America. So they don't have much initiative in many things.

Thanks to the endeavors of the Japanese people after the war, Japan has

achieved economical development and has become rich materially. But behind these developments, people have forgotten the importance of the spiritual world. They have formed a tendency to follow or copy the others and they refrained from doing things against the current of the society.

We have proverbs such as:

DERU KUI HA UTARERU. A stake that tries to go up will be beaten down.

NAGAIMONO NIWA MAKARERO. It is better to leave things as it is and to follow obediently while the leading power is strong.

SAWARANU KAMI NI TATARINASHI. If you don't touch the God you can evade the curse from the God. ---"Let sleeping dogs lie."

We have also a saying; MINNADE WATAREBA KOWAKUNAI. Even when the traffic signal of the road is red, if we cross it together with all people, we don't feel fear.(because cars will stop in front of them)



I think that these proverbs and sayings are expressing what I mentioned.

Right now, as for myself, I have made my particular name card after I retired last March. I have a dream to study in Spain from this year. Someone may say, "What kind of venture are you doing at your age, after 60 years old?" Because in general, people think that a retired person should live a calm life.

I claim to be special. This is why I invented my title for my name card;

The title reads: "JIYUJIN"—a man who creates pleasure by oneself. And the subtitles are: "Live a life of Don Quixote" and "Researcher of studies abroad as a retired man".

On the other side of the name card, I cited a passage from Don Quixote.

It says:

"I am rushing forward to ideals and justice, but people call me crazy. I would dare say that they themselves are crazy because they dare not do what they want to do. Owing to some kind of fear of being criticized or to keep up their appearances, they finally compromise to reality".

So I am trying to be an example of a retired person who lives positively without being influenced by YOKONARABI.

Thank you very much for your attention.