

# “Unthinkable Cross-Culture”

## Different country, Different culture



The first part: From my experience and what I saw and heard in Latin America

A gap that comes from time differences in international calls

On the 8th of last month, I went to Tokyo Sports Square in Yurakucho to be interviewed for the role of volunteer for the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics Games to be held next year. I applied for a position in the “media department.” The training session is to start this September.



Next summer many correspondents and reporters worldwide will visit Tokyo to cover the big events. I think they may become a little confused when they start contacting their home offices over the phone.

This is my experience when I was dispatched to Brazil as a correspondent.

It was at about 10 o'clock at night when I made an international call to the head office in Tokyo to send a manuscript I wrote.

In Japan, it was 10 o'clock in the morning. Between Japan and Brazil, there is exactly 12 hours' time difference.

I said “good evening ” under the dimly lit light in the hotel room.

However, the greeting which came back from my partner was “ good morning.”

Moreover, I was tired after a long workday and it was a time for nightcap such as brandy, but my partner was in high spirits, breathing fresh air and having his morning coffee.

This time difference is a source of small confusions, though international travelers gradually become accustomed to it.

Is Japan on the backside of the globe?

When it comes to Brazil, I had an awkward experience.

Brazil is exactly on the opposite side of Japan on the globe.

One day, when I was chatting with a Brazilian, I casually said, “ Brazil is located on the back side of Japan.”

The man had a very strong reaction.

He said, “What are you talking about? Japan is on the back side of the globe if we view it from Brazil. Don't you think so?”

Yes, it surely is.

When viewing the round globe, there is no “front” or “back.”



By the way, the world map I saw in South America is quite different from the one in Japan.

On a map (Mercator projection) used in Japan, Japan is in the center and the Eurasian Continent and the African Continent are on the left side, and the North American and South American Continents are on the right beyond the Pacific Ocean. Brazil is located down below.

However, on the map used in Brazil, the North and South American Continents are in the center. Therefore, Japan is on the upper far left, or even at the end of the world in the map used in Japan.

Now, I understand why he was offended by my remark.

What do you think about this perspective?

This is a quiz about the equator. Straddle the earth.

Let me give you a quiz.

Here is a question that I often ask my junior high school students. It may be rude to ask this question to you, who have had rich life experiences.

Now, which of the following are accurate descriptions of the equator that are shown on world maps or on globes?

- ① A red line drawn on the surface of the globe.
- ② The hottest area on earth.
- ③ A line that divides the North and the South hemispheres of the globe.
- ④ A large circle on the surface of the globe that would be formed if a plane that is perpendicular to the globe's rotation axis were to bisect the globe.

It can be said that No.3 and No.4 are basically correct. But as for No. 2, some of you may have objections and as for No.1, it's completely out of the question.

I once visited the Equator monument in Ecuador.

Actually, the name of this country "Ecuador" is "Equator" in English. Ecuador is Spanish. The Equator monument is about one hour by car from Quito, the capital of the country.

On a large plateau at the foot of a desolate mountain, I saw a square pole about 15 meters high, with each side of the base meters long.

On the top of the pole was a globe about 3 meters in diameters.

On each side of the square pole, a large letter was inscribed:

E,O,S,N, respectively. The letters indicate Este, Oeste, Sur y Norte in Spanish. In English, they are East, West, South and North.

On the ground, there was a line 10 centimeters wide extending east to west from the center of the monument.

This line depicted the equator that divided the earth into the north hemisphere and



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the south hemisphere. But it had no color; it was not red. It was a dark color with much dust.

Remembering my friend's suggestion, I handed my camera to an accompanying friend and straddled the line and posed for a picture.

The friend smiled, saying, "Oh! Mr. Shimizu, you are straddling the earth at last!" He said, "You are standing in the two hemispheres of the globe at the same time, the North hemisphere and the South hemisphere."

Hearing his humorous comment, I felt as if I had straddled both hemispheres at the same moment. It is interesting, isn't it?

Needless to say, I didn't get burnt in the legs, nor the groin.

The temperature in this area was far from being hot. It was around 10 degrees centigrade and chilly.

It was because Quito City is located 2,800 meters above sea level.



Meanwhile, the Galapagos Islands are in the Pacific, off the coast of Ecuador, the country to which they belong.

I visited those islands, which are located on or near the equator, west of Quito. Its sea level of the place I visited was zero. So, the

temperature of the island is around 30 degrees centigrade all throughout the year.

In the hemisphere south of the equator, or the Southern Hemisphere, the four seasons are opposite from those of the Northern Hemisphere.

We are now in spring, but in Brazil or in Argentina, they are in autumn.

A Panamanian said to me, "When I visited Japan, almost all the people were Japanese. It was quite odd."

One major feature in Latin America is the mixture of different races.

New York City is called a melting pot. Panama City, where I lived, was almost the same.

One day, a Panamanian who participated in a training course in Japan said to me after he got back to Panama.

"Sr. Shimizu (Mr. Shimizu), the training course in Japan was wonderful. I made many friends. And I got on the famous bullet train, the shinkansen. The Japanese people I met were so kind, and I was impressed. It was a very fruitful stay in Japan. But Mr. Shimizu, I was so surprised about one thing—that nearly everyone I saw was Japanese."

Panama has a history of racial diversity.

Indigenous people were brown-skinned; white-skinned people from Europe arrived after Columbus explored the Caribbean Sea.

During the construction of the Panama Canal, many black-skinned people and Chinese came as laborers to build the canal.

Races have mixed over the centuries. So, we can even say that if 100 Panamanians gather in one place, the number of skin color shades is 100.

Under such circumstances, what my Panamanian friend said to me is understandable. However, Japan has changed in the past decades.

Quite a few foreigners are now living in Tokyo and other places throughout Japan.

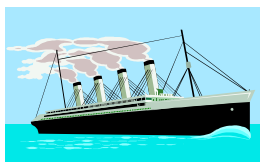
It is reported that some 300,000 (three hundred thousand) more international people will immigrate to Japan to make up for the shortage of workers.

The situation has been and is changing.

### Jokes about the Japanese spoken in the world

There are many jokes in the world referring to Japan and the characters unique to the Japanese. The following is one of them.

This is a well-known joke about the Titanic. Some of you may have heard it.



The ship was about to sink. The men and women on board were evacuating by lifeboats.

The captain tried to persuade the men to let the women and children go first. The deck of the ship was a frightful mess.

First, the captain said to an American:

Don't you want to be a hero? (America is a country where people admire heroes.)

To a British man, he said:

You are a real gentleman, aren't you? (The UK is a country where gentlemanliness is esteemed.)

To a man from Germany:

You respect German law, right? (Law is everything in Germany.)

And to a man from Japan:

Others are letting women and children to board first, so you should follow them.

As this joke conveys, Japanese have a tendency to do what others do. They care about what others think of them. They fear standing out and prefer being ordinary. And they like to do collectively.

I think Japanese people worry too much about how others look at them.

### Second part. Episodes in studying abroad after retirement and visiting the scenes of well-known novels

Finally, I was able to realize a dream from my high school days.

An important realization that I had during my 10-year stay in Latin America was that Spain has greatly influenced culture in Latin American countries. (The culture of Brazil has been influenced by Portugal.)

Since Columbus reached the New Continent in 1492, European culture, centered on Catholicism, has been a dominant force.

Realizing that fact, I began to dream of visiting Spain, especially to study the novel *Don Quixote*, the most influential Spanish literary work of all times.

After I retired in 2001, I was able to realize that dream and I studied at Malaga University in Spain for one year.

When I was a high school student more than 50 years ago, studying abroad was an impossible dream.

I heard that only super talented students in big cities such as Tokyo could manage to study abroad, through a Fulbright Scholarship, for example.

At that time, one-dollar cost 360 yen, and it was very difficult to get foreign currency. The environment of Japan and the world has changed greatly since that time.

Now we can get one dollar with about 110 yen. The time has come when everyone can go abroad, living in the age of globalism.

Studying abroad is not a privilege for young people alone.

Elderly people who have worked hard to support their families for many years should also be allowed to study abroad, now that they are retired and have free time to enjoy. That's why I started my second life in Spain.



### Research Presentation on Japanese

Now, I would like to introduce some of my experiences and episodes at Malaga University.



In my class, there were students of various nationalities, young and old. There were students from the Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark; European countries such as Germany, the UK, France and Estonia; North and South American countries and Asian and African countries.

In our class, we called each other by first names. My teachers and classmates called me “Takeshi” even though I was far older than they were. We called our teachers by their first names, like Laura, the grammar teacher, and Rafael, the conversation teacher. This is almost the same in the countries where English is spoken.

It is pretty difficult to master the conjugation of Spanish verbs but I think, for Japanese, Spanish is easier to pronounce than English, because the vowel sounds of Spanish and Japanese are the same: a, e, i, o, u.

Meanwhile, Japanese has three sets of characters.

They are *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*.

Each of *hiragana* and *katakana* has 48 letters.

But when it comes to *kanji*, you need to know about 2,000 *kanji* characters so that you can be somewhat literate in Japan.

Non-Japanese need a great deal of effort and time to master so many *kanji*.

The following is the presentation I gave in a class at Malaga University.

In the first place, there are about 10 expressions to refer to yourself in Japanese.

*Watakushi*, *watashi*, *boku*, *ore*, *ware*, *uti*, *temae*, *shousei*, etc. *Watakushi* is a polite and formal expression. *Watashi* is a comparatively polite way of speaking and is commonly used. *Atashi* is mostly used on stage and in songs.

*Boku*, *Ore*, *Ware* are used by men. *Boku* is most colloquial expression. *Ore* is not very polite. *Ware* is old fashioned. *Uchi* is used by both men and women. *Temae* is a humbled expression. *Shousei* is also used in letters and writings as a humbled expression.

The most important thing in Japan is modesty.

If you don't take this into consideration, you will most likely be criticized.

People might say or think, "You're arrogant," or "He doesn't know how to conduct himself in society."

In English, the pronoun to express oneself is only one word. That is "I". It is the same in Spanish. That is "Yo" only.

Of course, we also learn ways to say something politely in English by using verbs or auxiliary verbs. But that's not nearly as complicated as Japanese linguistic rules of politeness.

#### I invited my classmates to my apartment.

One day in October, I invited my classmates to my apartment because they earnestly wished to eat Japanese dishes.

They were roughly the same age as my own children.

When my daughter was in college, she studied at Guanajuato University in Mexico about a decade ago. At that time, she may have been taken care of by many people. Thinking of this, I was glad if



I could encourage my classmates who were studying away from their home countries.

I think it is important that we human beings help each other, wherever we are on earth. After all, we're all part of the human family.

After my retirement, I had gone to a cooking school for one year. So, I prepared many kinds of dishes together with my wife.

#### Kissing beautiful girl college students.

I had told them that we would begin lunch at two o'clock. The lunch time in Spain is

basically from two o'clock to four in the afternoon. And some people in Spain take a siesta, sleeping for one or two hours.

Just when I finished cooking, the bell rang.

I hurried to change my slippers to shoes, trying to look taller as they were much taller than I. I didn't want them to think they had to take off their shoes. I thought I had to wear shoes inside the house, like they do.

The eight students came in.

"Muy bienvenidos (Welcome)!"

I took off my apron and stood at the front door, welcoming each one of them, kissing both cheeks of each girl, and firmly shaking the hands of boys.

In classes at school, they don't kiss unless they are a couples loving each other. But once we are out of school, it is a kiss that expresses our sincerest welcome.

It's not a kiss on the lips but rather a hug as you softly touch each other's cheeks on one side and then the other.

If we don't do this, your welcome is not complete, and the atmosphere becomes too formal.

It is exciting to kiss beautiful blond female students, even for a moment. My wife was also kissed by the male students, so it was no problem for me.

I was older than *kanreki*, 60 years old, and I touched my cheeks to those of foreign young women.

This I could do only because I was living in the culture of Spain.

### I miss my mademoiselle



Five years ago, I visited Paris to visit the locations of certain scenes of the novels *Les Misérables* and *Les Trois Mousquetaires*.

On my first day in Paris, at about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, I had some free time, so I decided to enjoy an opera at the Opera Theater located in the center of the city.

After getting a ticket for non-reserved seats (just 100 euros, it's about 13,000 yen) I went to a vacant seat.

A beautiful young lady was sitting next to the seat. So, I asked her in English, "May I take this seat?"

She probably understood my English and nodded with a smile saying, "Sure, you can."

She looked to be in her early 30's, and she was amazingly beautiful and attractive.

I tried to make use of this occasion to tell her about my plan to visit the scenes of the two French novels.

Then she said, "We don't have enough time to discuss your plan as the opera is about to start. Why don't you come to my house and have a talk after this show? I live not far from here."

How lucky I am! After the play was over, I went to her house cheerfully. Her house was really near the Opera Theater.



She ushered me to her room on the third floor of a beautiful mansion.

Then, to my surprise, she kindly served me wine in the reception room, saying, "I am sweating. Let me take a shower first and put on something more comfortable."

She promptly went into the bathroom. I stayed in the room alone, sipping the wine she served me.

After a short while, she came out of the bathroom.

What a surprise! She came out wearing only a light blue negligee and her beautiful slender body was slightly transparent through her loose garment.

I was shocked and remained motionless, not knowing what to do.

Then she walked straight toward me and extended her arms to hug me.

"If I don't receive her now, it will be a disgrace to a Japanese gentleman ship."

Enchanted by her beauty, I desperately extended my arms to embrace her tightly, but in vain.

At that moment, I woke up from the dream.

I found myself embracing a pillow on the bed in the hotel room, my eyes completely blurred from jet lag.

There is an 8-hour time difference between Paris and Tokyo. Five o'clock in the evening in Paris was one o'clock in the midnight in Tokyo.

### While I am sleeping, I have magicians working in my pillow!



Today, I have referred to time differences several times. For my last episode, let me share with you my experience with a personal computer and the internet.

One of my friends once said to me, "I saw English and Spanish pages on your website. How do you work on the translation and proofreading?"

Now, let me introduce to you the magicians in my pillow who are behind my translation and proofreading.

I am not confident in my translation. I need to ask native speakers to proofread my work. I have some friends in Japan but most of them are too busy to proofread my translations.

How lucky I was! While I was trying to find capable translators here in Japan, some friends of mine living overseas started to offer me their support.

For English, I have Mr. K who lives in the United States. For Spanish, Mr. M in Panama has volunteered to help me. Mr. K was a pediatrician and Lieutenant Colonel at Yokota Air Base in Tokyo and Mr. M was a businessman and is now helping to edit



the newsletters of our Buddhist organization in Panama. I am very grateful to them for their kind support.

Come to think of it, almost 100% of native speakers of English and Spanish live in their respective countries.

With the technology of the Internet, if I send my translated manuscript from Japan to the US or Panama in the evening, I can receive a proofread copy early in the next morning. The time difference between Japan and these countries gives me this advantage.



In other words, the task is done while I am sleeping!

A friend of mine once said, “How lucky you are! You have a magic pillow.”

This kind of trick can also be done in global companies with offices around the world.

In their offices, they utilize the internet and the time difference.

For example, at the end of the workday in the US, someone working on a project in America could send a digital document to India via the Internet.

In India, they could continue working on the project and when they finish, they could send it to the UK via the Internet.

Then people in the UK could do more work on the project and at the end of the work day, they could send it back to the US via the Internet.

In this way, the project is developed throughout the continuous daytime across the earth.



In other words, work done in their respective countries continues even when the workers are sleeping.

The project is attended to for 24 hours a day in some countries.

This is one of an example of today’s advanced information technology.

I have presented episodes about cultural differences, as well as time difference.

I hope you’ve enjoyed my story and have learned something from it.

That is the end of my speech.

Thank you for listening.