

AAINews

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Life in a character town - on my return from Salalah, Oman

After three years of service as a dispatched expert in Oman, I came back to Japan last December. In Oman, I was engaged in cultivation and research at a new pilot farm in the middle of the desert in Dhofar Province. I lived there with ten counterpart staff members. (See AAINews No.7)

During the week we used to stay, working day and night, at the farm 160km away from Salalah, and on weekends we would go back to Salalah and spend time with family. On the weekend in Salalah you can see people enjoying a game of chess over a cup of tea at a cafe, families going on picnics and having BBQs in the shade cast by trees, and children relaxing on the beach. They enjoy their lives wherever they want and in whatever way they like, without being confined to particular times or places. Physically or mentally handicapped people are also seen in the streets enjoying themselves in the same way. They are fully accepted as part of the community, and although people around help them, they do not see them as something special or strange. As for myself, like everybody else in the town, I would exchange pleasantries with the owner of a snack bar, or smile back and start chatting with those who spotted me and greeted me in the street.

Having been accustomed to such a relaxed life in Oman, what I felt on my return home was that life in Japan is somehow solitary, even if it might be more orderly compared to Oman, where the towns are full of people expressing themselves in a lively manner. If you enter a restaurant in Tokyo, a waiter or waitress will take your order in a highly prescribed manner, and you are expected to eat up whatever comes to your table without uttering a word, and leave the place with very few greetings or pleasantries, if any. In trains seated passengers will not make room for others until they are asked to do so. People have very little interest in what is happening around them, and even when somebody comes and tries to talk to them in the street, they will first look at the person suspiciously then hurriedly leave the spot. What I fear most is that as soon as I find myself among the people back in Japan, my face also seems to transform into one similar to those around me; that is to say it becomes a face devoid of expression.

For the sake of higher convenience and efficiency, it might appear useful to standardise the manner of serving customers in restaurants. Also, it might help minimise possible mistakes and troubles if one carves out one's own mental territory and operates within this limited range without paying attention to one's surroundings. Probably it cannot be helped that many people assume this kind of attitude in Tokyo, a metropolis swollen with such a huge population. However, it seems to me that people here are having to pay the price as they lose their healthy humane emotions and expressions, and every corner of the city looks identical to the other parts, poor in liveliness and vitality. In the field of international development cooperation, the importance of local communities is being stressed. However, the local communities of aid recipient countries seem to have more lively and vivid expressions compared to those of donor countries. We development specialists and consultants from Japan may be able to instruct our counterpart staff on specific technical matters, but I wonder, in return, whether they could provide people in Japan with the know-how of their lively expressions and lifestyles.

(By ZAITSU, Feb. 2000)



His Excellency Ambassador Mr. Kaminaga and counterpart staff in Oman



A resort near Salalah (a tidal blowhole)