

My Experiences of Japan

By

Jane-Frances Agbu

Doctoral Candidate of Clinical Psychology

University of Lagos, Nigeria

I think I got interested in Japan even before I got this beautiful opportunity to accompany my husband on a year long academic sojourn. From my readings about Japan and its culture, I was intrigued with her very rich culture, the healthy diets and the long life span of the Japanese and more. However, the very long and tedious flight to Japan from Nigeria, especially with three kids almost dampened my enthusiasm but my first view of Japan from the air compensated for the long flight. It was beautiful, green and fresh, though the weather was unbelievably hot, as we were made to understand that Japanese summer is usually very hot and humid.

After all the excitement of being in a different country, far from home, we settled down to life in Japan, hoping to enjoy all that Japan has in stock. Perhaps, I got my first culture shock the first time I went shopping. I realized that I could neither read the letters nor recognize most of the things displayed on the shelves. I spent several weeks trying to experiment with the few recognizable ones and not surprisingly, I made lots of mistakes. I bought rice water thinking it was cooking oil, bought dog food and thought it was an exotic type of canned fish. It was also difficult for my kids to adjust to the different types of food but I guess it was part of new things to learn and adjust to. Also, the television programs didn't seem to provide the much needed succour as everything sounded different but surprisingly my children did not complain much. In fact, their first Japanese words were picked from watching the Japanese cartoons. I must also confess that I grew to love the happy and playful attitude that the Japanese generally displayed on the TV programs. I realized that the Japanese love to sing, play, eat and generally enjoy life. There were lots of laughter on the programs and one couldn't help but join in, even without understanding a single word. And oh! I love the different menu displayed on those programs and the uninhibited ways those foods were sampled.

My first real contact with the people was when we decided to enroll our children into Japanese schools, a move that initially appeared suicidal, but it paved way for us to meet the very kind, warm, friendly and efficient Japanese. My son was enrolled in a public school while my two daughters were both accepted at a private kindergarten

close to our house. Though my daughters settled quickly to school life because their head teacher speaks a little bit of English and could communicate with them, it was very difficult for my son as none of the teachers could speak English. The much needed help and perhaps, our guardian angel came in the form of Mrs. Hayashi, the Principal of Uenodai Elementary School, Makuhari-Hongo, Chiba. The nice lady took so much interest in me and my family that she even got volunteer English language teachers to seat beside my son in class and help interpret his Japanese lessons. She also advertised in the school bulletin for English speaking mothers to come to my house and assist in anyway they could and that was how I met Yasue, Akemi and Mayumi. They assisted with my shopping, showed me some tips of Japanese cuisine, invited me to their homes and made me very comfortable. The gesture was quite touching and it made my son comfortable with school work and very happy too. The invaluable assistance of my sweet friends made our stay in Japan very exciting. Of course, in no time, my son Chinedum became the most popular kid in the area as other kids were curious of the English speaking boy from Nigeria, Africa, in an all Japanese school. They wanted to know a bit about Nigeria and most importantly were eager to speak few words of English with him. My son enjoyed going to school, he made so many friends and in no time started communicating in Japanese. Also, my two daughters were even faster in picking the language and all three could recognize and write few words in Hiragana and Katakana.

Interestingly, I was also intrigued with the fact that most of the women I met were either housewives or part-time workers. Most complained that the Japanese culture and expectations are not very conducive for them to hold on to a career, unless one is prepared to remain unmarried. They are unhappy about that, while most complain of being lonely because their husbands work late most of the time. We also compared the experiences of working women in Nigeria as well as other feminine issues.

Perhaps, the most challenging experience, aside from the language shock, was the cost of living in Japan, which is very expensive and mind bugling. For a foreigner, used to a relatively modest spending and living habits, the Japanese medical bills, housing, school bills and others could get very upsetting. This is obviously one of the very few hiccups to life in Japan.

With a strong determination to enjoy our stay in Japan, I tried my hand on so many extra activities. First, I enrolled for Japanese lesson to improve on my Japanese and also shop and move around better. I also enrolled for a Japanese flower arrangement

March, 2006

class, learnt to sit on the mat, eat with the chopstick and practiced the art of making the green tea. I also had a night out at a Karaoke club with friends, sampled different kinds of Sushi and even enjoyed a Japanese hot spa. I also visited the Tokyo Disney Land with my kids and other beautiful places. As a thank-you gift for the PTA mothers at Uenodai Elementary School, I offered to teach them the art of making African prints known as 'tye and dye'. The experience was beautiful and also fulfilling because I finally got the chance to give back to Japan something for being a very friendly country.

Generally, I noticed that the Japanese are a very kind people when you get to know them better, even though they initially appear distant and shy. I was overwhelmed with the kindness I got from the very many friends I met and was really touched with the way my son's principal made us feel at home. The Japanese do have respect for the human person and to them, everyone counts. They are also very neat, detailed, hardworking and efficient. As an observer, I also noticed that the Japanese smile a lot and they also love to sing, and the women love to look beautiful but humble. Perhaps, the longevity of the Japanese could be the result of good eating habits, good medicals, clean environment, and uninhibited expression of feelings. This is a place where men are not ashamed to cry.

What more can I say. I sure enjoyed my stay in Japan and hope to keep in touch with the very many nice people I met here. I will always have Japan in my mind.

