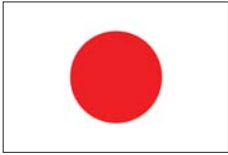


A Japanese woman naturalized as an Omani wonders...



What Is Identity?



By *Suad Al-Mudhaffar*



What does identity mean? The question of what it entails to have an identity is one that over the years I have considered. Frequently I have found myself searching for a definitive answer, but then I have to ask you to tell me if you think there is a definitive answer to this question. Let us see.

A Japanese Woman Who Met Oman

Though I was born and grew up in Japan, I became an Omani and have been involved in education in Oman since 1990. I am a school principal, and am also the school's financial manager and have worked in both capacities for the past 17 years. What circumstances led me to establish the school in a foreign land that is some distance from the land of my birth? Actually, I never really thought about it until quite recently.

Let me tell you! From a very early age, I traveled a lot to many different countries. In spite of the variety of locations I journeyed to, I never encountered any difficulties whatsoever with immigration unlike many Asian women facing major problems at airports throughout the world, even those who have all their papers in order, including the visa. I found it was not usual to be able to enter a great many countries without the mandatory visas, like a Japanese passport holder.

Finally, after many years, my destiny took me to the beautiful Sultanate of Oman located on the Arabian Peninsula. This is where I settled and have lived since 1980. At that particular point in time, back in the early 1980s, nobody in Japan had

any idea as to where Oman was. Even today it is not a particularly well-known country, and frequently when I say that I live in Oman, many people think that I am talking about Amman in Jordan.

It was at that time, 27 years ago, that Oman was just starting to modernize. You must remember that Oman only opened up its doors to the outside world in 1970. Prior to that point in time, Oman was virtually closed off to the rest of the world.

What I would like you to do now is to close your eyes for just a few seconds and come on a journey with me. Just pause and reflect upon my situation. At that time in Oman, there were no highways, no high-rise buildings, no shopping malls, no cinemas or cafeterias...it was no modern creature at all! It would be just impossible to compare it with my life back in Japan at that time. Everything in Oman was ultra-simple. However, I feel it was so invigorating, so fresh and so unspoiled, not a busy hectic life like in Japan. At the time, all Omani women wore beautifully hand-embroidered colorful national dresses having their own styles according to regions while men wore a white *dishdasha* similar to a long white robe/dress. Today, however, women wear a long black gown/overcoat called an *abaya* on top. Men still wear a white *dishdasha* as a national dress; it is mandatory for all men to wear it in government offices during working hours.

I was all so new to me. Everyone I came across was simple, sincere and uncomplicated. I had the feeling of being swathed in lots of warm air. It was so comforting as if I was in a lovely

Photos: Azzan Bin Qais Private School



Students from kindergarten to high school keep coming to Ms. Suad.



A science class exhibition: The school level ranks among the top 3 in Oman.



A monthly mountain trip: Her school life in Japan helps her manage the school and campus events well.

warm woolen blanket. When I reflect upon that time of my life, I can still feel that great sense of warmth surrounding me as though I was an unborn baby in my mother's womb.

■ Proud to Be a Japanese as Every Omani Is

To my utter amazement, there were a great many people including the women who were extremely knowledgeable, socially, geographically, historically and politically. It gave me a jolt! I realized that I needed to wake up and learn more about the world that I lived in. Even though the country had only undergone 10 years of development, many women were extremely eloquent and could discuss a range of issues, such as world politics or the history of other countries. This was something with all my education and experience that I had never done with any of my friends in Japan or elsewhere in the world! Just think about it and remember that prior to 1970 there was only one school in Oman. Only boys could attend! Girls stayed at home and learned how to clean, cook and sew so that they could become good wives and mothers!

I was educated in Japan and had undergone a good study program. I had also had a lot of life experience and had had a very good career prior to leaving Japan. However, I felt as though I was nothing when I compared myself with these highly confident and articulate Omani women. It came as quite a surprise to me that all of them, without exception, were proud to be Omani. Did I have those same feelings to my mother country or is it special to those born in the Sultanate of Oman? I realized I had never given it much thought and felt this sense of pride in Japan. I would say to myself, "Maybe, I am only wearing my Japanese face!" At that time, I did not feel that I had a strong soul, a spirit that was in its very essence Japanese. It was then that I finally woke up and said to myself: "I have to be really proud that I am a Japanese and that I can talk about myself as a Japanese 'lady' who has experienced a lot and who can tell others all about my country, Japan."

■ Thanks for Both Countries

Now you know that I am living far away from Japan and that I am a naturalized Omani national. However, in spite of the fact that I carry an Omani passport, I can never change where I came from or where I was born and raised.

My ambition, dedication, commitment and efforts come from my roots as a woman brought up in Japan, a Japanese woman that has her birth country's values at her very core. But part of my identity is also very much linked to my adopted country, the Sultanate of Oman, for it is she that has placed her trust in me and given me the name by which I am known today, Suad. So it is with my most sincere and grateful

Photo: Azzan Bin Qais Private School



Graduation ceremony: "What I could do as a Japanese was to introduce the essentials of Japanese education for the country which accepted me."

thanks that I really welcomed the opportunity to return all the joy and happiness that I received upon my first coming to Oman into establishing an educational field, a school for Omani children from kindergarten through to Grade 12.

I believe that I have proven to be a flexible, resilient Japanese woman with a strong spirit, having adjusted to a very different culture and environment from that in which she was raised. And I have gone on to create and develop an educational institution in an Arab country that is renowned for its excellence. I am very much proud that I am a Japanese Omani living in Oman and that I have had the opportunity to introduce Japan to so many Omani nationals. And, in reverse, I also have had the chance, with a strong Omani-Japanese spirit, to introduce Oman to Japan.

So what is and wherein is one's identity? Today the world is a conglomerate mix. It is a big melting pot. If we do not know ourselves, how then can we become global citizens in a rapidly changing world? How can I achieve my optimum if I do not have a very clear sense of my own identity? We, as individuals, can live for only a very limited time. If you started counting from the time when God created Earth, we can only live for just specks of time in the history of the universe and our presence is like a dot in space. Even so, to know our own identity is the most important mission in life.

We must realize that none of us chooses to be born. We cannot change our background. We can be grateful and proud for whatever we have become and whatever milestones we have achieved in life so far. We should all aim to study and understand our own identity, and create our own unique personality for living in the melting pot.

Identity – that is who we are, the very essence of our existence and essential to our very survival and well-being. It is for this alone that we will all be remembered. **J.S**

Suad Al-Mudahaffar, a Japanese woman naturalized as an Omani, is the principal of Azzan Bin Qais Private School she set up in 1990. Once listed by Newsweek magazine as one of 100 Japanese respected by the world, she has been widely covered by Japanese newspapers, weeklies and TV / radio stations.