

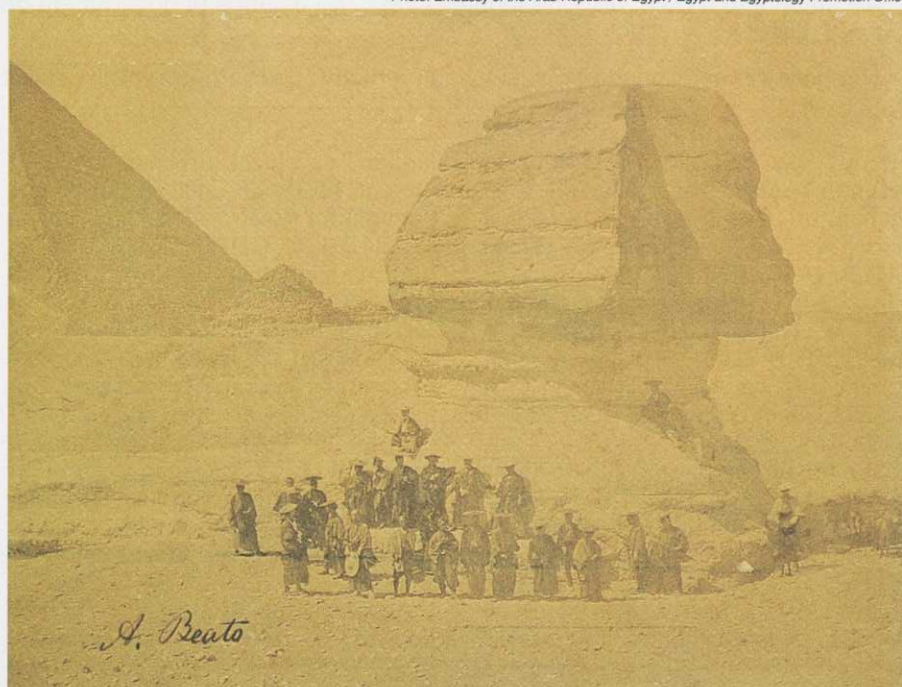
# Impressions of Japan

By *Yasmina Karem*

My first impressions of Japan came from my reading. As an Egyptian I was concerned more with the history of bilateral relations and whether we had very early contacts with Japan, and in which period of history. I was looking at the geographical distance that separates both countries and was wondering if this distance kept us apart or brought us together. Although many historians date the relations between Japan and Egypt to the era of the Silk Road formation, the first samurai expedition arrived Egypt in 1862 during the era of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867). Thirty-six members headed by Lord Takeuchi Yasunori traveled from Suez to Cairo and filed detailed documentation on what they saw in Egypt. This report is still kept in the National Diet Library. Two years later, the second expedition reached Egypt again and the moment was recorded for posterity by an impressive photo of the fully dressed Samurai members at the footsteps of the Sphinx. The Embassy of Egypt was proud to use this valuable reprint as part of its stationery and celebrations of this historic event in 2002.

Japan has always been held high in the ethos of Egyptians.

In our literary works Japan has long been at center stage. As a young schoolgirl, I read a moving poem written by a great Egyptian poet Hafez Ibrahim. He wrote an extensive epic poem entitled *The Japanese Maiden* in 1905. This was taught in elementary schools throughout Egypt. Before him a noted Egyptian nationalistic leader wrote of the land of the "Rising Sun," describing to Egyptians the examples Japan set for the cause of national liberation and patriotic consciousness. His conclusion was that Japan was an example we should emulate. In school, as young students, we were taught about these great Japanese accomplishments. These artistic and literary works



*The second samurai expedition arrived in Egypt in 1862*

inspired Egyptians, and set Japan as a model. I discovered later on that trade relations in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became stronger as Japan discovered unique long fiber cotton in Egypt. Kobe (Hyogo Prefecture) became the central market for the Egyptian imported cotton. Egypt appointed a young sterling diplomat in Kobe. Dr. Mahmoud Fawzy, who started his career in Japan, later became deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs of Egypt, a pillar of Egyptian modern diplomacy. In all his memories and writings, Dr. Fawzy cherished and esteemed Japan, predicting as early as the 1950s that it would soon become a global economic power.

As life moved on, I was once again introduced to Japanese culture, this time in New York in 1977, when I took Japanese flower arrangement (*Ikebana*).

I took some lessons and became fascinated by it, especially with the simplicity and grace that one can see in any arrangement. For me this was a turning point, as I started to learn more about Japanese and Asian history. One unfortunate thing was that I could not continue with the Ikebana lessons since my college studies and my new baby were taking too much of my time. I did not, however, forget about Ikebana and promised myself that I would certainly resume it, when given the chance.

So when I was told that we were being posted to Japan in January 1999, my first thought was that I had finally been given the chance to fulfill my dream of learning more about this rich and diverse culture, including the art of flower arrangement, which I started in Japan soon after my arrival. Deep inside I was happy that this marvelous

Photo: Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt / Egypt and Egyptology Promotion Office



opportunity was afforded to me to visit a part of the world I had never seen before, but which I had read so much about it. I was really excited.

Japan to me has always been the land synonymous with the Rising Sun, mysterious, inscrutable and unknown. It was also the electronic capital of the world. Everybody was always talking about Japanese inventions and how advanced they were. I was amazed at these accomplishments despite the limited period of time for the realization of these modernization achievements, in addition to the location of Japan, and its limited natural resources. The questions were how could Japan achieve all these successes, and grow to become the second largest world economy. The answer to me lay in its strong social system and proud history.

I started reading about Japan's history a bit, and talked with colleagues who had served in Japan. They all said the same thing "we loved it," each one, though, for different reasons. These words of praise made me very happy, as it meant that I was going to enjoy Japan. Friends also gave me books with tips on Japanese life, which I found very instructive.

What surprised me when I first arrived was how narrow the side streets were and how small the houses and apartments were. Of course after a while I adapted myself to the surroundings and got used to it and did not think about it anymore. Moreover, I discovered how Japanese used space with maximum utility. I could not believe that I would find sleeping on the floor not only healthy but comfortable too. I was also surprised at the use of pillows filled with beans, called *sobagara*. Another source of surprise to me is the patience, politeness and fine manners of the Japanese people, especially during traffic jams. While in other parts of the world everybody would be using their horns to vent their frustrations at being stuck in traffic, the Japanese people remain calm and very polite. I have not seen fistfights here and noticed how drivers resolve their driving problems

Photo: Yasmina Karem



Mrs. Karem wearing a kimono

only with a look. That look says everything and is a substitute for the outbursts of anger which one sees in other parts of the world. In addition, Japan is blessed with a high standard of security. Safety and honesty creates a feeling of serenity, even for my children who could walk alone enjoying the beautiful nature.

What I admire most about Japanese people, besides their courtesy and politeness to everybody, is their loyalty to each other, to their country and to the slogan "Made in Japan."

Japan's level of cleanliness and health standards are unparalleled in any other part of the world. When I introduced Egyptian cuisine to the Japanese people, I found that their questions centered mainly on whether this food was healthy or not. For this reason I started to use more herbs and natural, healthy ingredients in my cooking. I discovered that molokhia is popular here. Molokhia is an original Egyptian vegetable, used since the years of the Pharaohs. I am also introducing gargir, another vegetable that is very rich in iron and iodine. This is also known as

arugula or rocket.

Even though Japan is very modern and cosmopolitan, I found that customs and traditions are very much part of life here. This is why I noticed how very similar we are. As Egyptians, we value family very much; we take care of our parents when they are old, as well as respect and honor them.

A big discovery for my family was the *onsen* (hot springs) which I found to be relaxing and therapeutic. I read about the therapeutic value of more than 10 types of *onsen* (such as *tanjun-sen*, *tansan-sen* and *shokuen-sen*) and what they may cure. Strangely enough, we have had these types of therapeutic baths since the time of the Pharaohs in the Sinai and the Oases. Unfortunately, they were left alone for so many centuries that people forgot about them. However, nowadays people are starting again to use them and we have a budding tourist market for these baths. I also discovered the *geta* or traditional footwear, and noticed that we used it in Egypt many centuries ago. But while these traditions are fading elsewhere, they still remain strong in Japan.

A big misconception that most people have is that all women in Japan wear *kimonos*. I was astonished to discover that *kimonos* are rarely worn except on special occasions. I also discovered the strength and power of Japanese women. They are extremely hard workers, taking care of their homes, children and finances as well as major decisions.

But perhaps the biggest challenge for any visitor to Japan is to adapt and learn more of this great culture. But as time goes by, and as one's appetite to learn more grows, we only find that it is time to move. Yet even with our transfer somewhere else, our love for Japan will always grow. JJI

Yasmina Karem is the wife of the Egyptian Ambassador to Japan.