

JAPAN: A FASCINATING CHALLENGE

By Maria Edileuza Fontenelle Reis

The most interesting aspect of a diplomatic life is, undoubtedly, the opportunity of living in different societies, studying different languages and learning about different cultures. In this respect, Japan turns out to be the most fascinating and complex challenge for a foreign diplomat. The distinctiveness of Japanese culture is reflected in the complexity of the language and in the constant and endless amiability of the Japanese people.

It is absolutely striking, from the foreigners' point-of-view, to feel that every single day in Japan will provide a different lesson in a never-ending process of learning about Japan. The impression one has is that even the span of one whole life-time would certainly not be enough to understand, or even to have a grasp of, the vast heritage of beauty and sensitivity in the Japanese culture. A culture that seems to have sought along the centuries the approach to spiritual divinity through the constant improvement of what seemed already perfect.

It is, therefore, a privilege to live in Japan and to have the chance of getting acquainted with the Japanese concept of continuous learning and to benefit from the Japanese talent for permanent improvement. This provides the foreign observer with the impression that learning is seen by the Japanese much more as an act of spiritual perfection and personal self-development than a simple process of acquisition of knowledge and skills.

This is what we see, for example, when we admire the beauty of an ikebana flower arrangement, the ritual of a tea ceremony, or a sumo contest.



Resemblance of Japanese beauty: a temple in Kyoto

They show a beauty that stems from simplicity, refined to the point of austerity, and above all, a beauty that goes beyond the superficial appearance to touch our spirit, to reach our soul.

I had this feeling when visiting the Zen stone gardens or Katsura Rikyu in Kyoto, the Iris garden at Meiji Shrine at the beginning of summer, and when simply strolling through Yoyogi Park during spring when sakura (cherry blossoms) are in full bloom. I experienced the same sentiment when walking through the narrow streets of Kamakura, and when admiring a beautifully arranged sashimi dish at lunch time. These impressions are very difficult to put into words: an attempt to do so would be futile.

It is also interesting to observe the reflection of the beauty that Japanese culture has produced over centuries in

the construction of the country's modern style. A very simple example of this I have through the windows of our Embassy: from one side of the house we can see the little shrine of Yoyogi Hachiman and, from the other, the high towers of post-modern buildings of Shinjuku. By the same token, I have special pleasure in noticing the contrast of the shadow and light of Japanese temples and the profusion of the glaring neon of Ginza or Shibuya. The contrast is, in my opinion, only apparent; rather, it reminds me of the pattern of permanent change and continuity which is one of the enchantments of this puzzling country.

It is also fascinating from the foreigners' point-of-view to observe the interaction of Japan with the rest of the world, especially in light of nearly two

centuries and a half of self-imposed isolation under the Tokugawa shogunate.

Since the opening of this country to the West and to the rest of the world, the influences of different cultures have reached Japan. Since then, the essence of Japanese mind, "essentially perceptual rather than conceptual"—as defined by Peter F. Drucker—seems to have worked in the direction of making those foreign influences part of Japan's own experience as if following an irresistible impulse towards perfection. I would venture to say that Japan has not changed with those foreign influences—rather it has perfected them to fit its own needs in such a way that, even when Japan changes, Japan does not change.

On the backstage of everything is a millennium old culture of which we—foreigners of a short stay in Japan—perceive only the external expressions, especially through the various manifestation of art and religion. On the other hand, anthropologists and sociologists introduce us to concepts and to values such as "ie", "on", "giri", "tatemaie" and "honne", which form the invisible part of this rich and dense culture. It requires from the foreigner a constant exercise of sensitivity in order to understand what those expressions really convey. We cannot grasp their meaning by visual perception alone. But we know—or perhaps we just feel—that they are the very essence of the Japanese people and the key to the success of the Japanese society.

It is, therefore, a fascinating experience for a diplomat to have the privilege of living in Japan. Diplomats are public servants and their riches are of a different kind: they have the chance to accumulate a vast fortune in terms of cultural experience. They even have the opportunity of being privileged witnesses of some historical events.

In that sense, to serve in Japan as a Brazilian diplomat is really very

rewarding. The relations between the two countries started with the signing on November 5th, 1895, of the Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation. Since then, Brazil and Japan developed very special links. Brazil is proud to host the largest Japanese community overseas: nearly one and a half million Brazilians are of Japanese origin. Because of these human ties I could say

descendants of the Japanese immigrants. For all those reasons the Brazilian people celebrated with great joy the State visit to our country, in June 1997, of Their Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko. This was really an historical event with deep meaning. We know that the Emperor of Japan is "the symbol of the State and the unity of the people"—therefore, His visit to Brazil implies a sense of permanence in the fraternal relationship between the two nations.

This landmark in the relations between our countries was preceded by two other visits of Their Majesties Crown Prince and Princess and the visits by Crown Prince Naruhito, Prince Akishino, Princess Sayako, Prince and Princess Mikasa and Prince and Princess Hitachi. All Brazilians feel most honored for having had the privilege of hosting such great events which symbolize the solid friendship between Brazil and Japan.

I have both professional and personal reasons to consider my stay in Japan as very gratifying. As I mentioned before, each day supplies a different lesson—a lesson of beauty, friendship and cultural enrichment.

As time goes by, our fascination has turned into a deep respect—this is the

most important element in the relationship I have developed for Japan, a love relation that I will always carry with me.

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Maria Edileuza Fontenelle Reis is the wife of the Brazilian Ambassador to Japan.

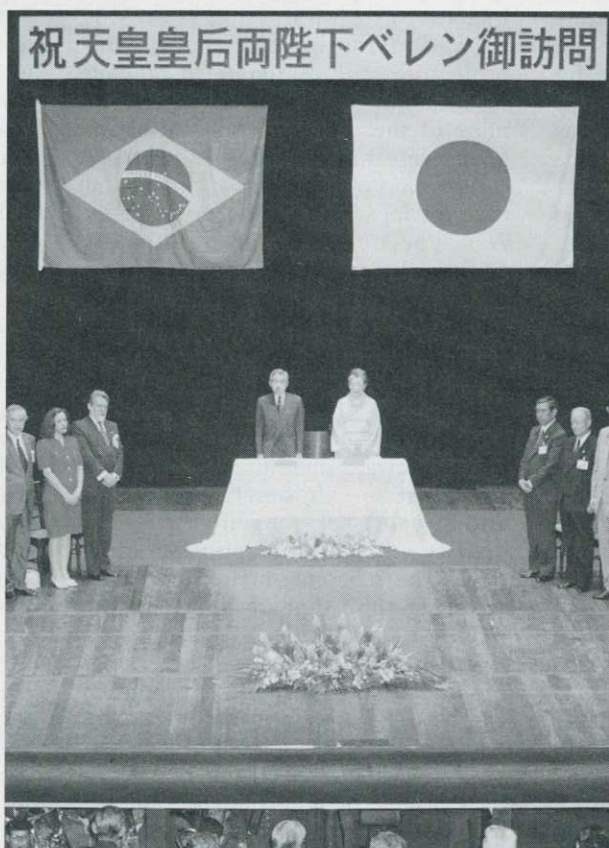


Photo: Kyodo News

Setting a bridge between two nations: Japan's Emperor and Empress make a formal visit to Brazil

that there is a family relationship between both nations.

In my country, we are very grateful to the Japanese immigrants, for their contribution to our culture and our society. The positive influence of Japanese ethnicity can be felt today in the Brazilian way of life. I should also mention that 15% of the students and 8% of the teachers of one of the most important academic centers of Brazil—the University of São Paulo—are