

A Land of Diligence, Trust & Discipline

By *Khaldon Azhari*

SOME of the first advice Muslims and vegetarians get when they visit Japan is to make sure that no bacon is added to their green salad ordered at restaurants.

Is Bacon a Vegetable in Japan?

The reason is clear but puzzling at the same time: Many Japanese restaurants consider bacon to be *yasai* or vegetables. This has always been the case during the 15 years I have been living in Japan. I still do not understand why I cannot get a bacon-less piece of cheese or vegetable sandwich. The most common answer I got has been that “bacon is almost *yasai*” in Japan. That is why sushi restaurants have become my favorites as I do not have to worry about giving the waiters the usual warning: Please do not add any bacon to my vegetarian salad.

This issue was one of four remarkable observations I made shortly after arriving in Tokyo.

Speaking of *yasai* and fruit, I have to admit how shocked I was to see the price tags of farm and garden produce in Japan. It is my favorite topic to report on, with front-page or prime-

time status guaranteed in the news: A bunch of grapes or a small fancy box of perfect cherries or melons in Japan is sold at a “normal price” of more than \$100 in many supermarkets. This is not to mention the unbelievable prices of other products like apricots and figs, main items on summertime tables in my native Syria.

I noticed quickly that if I had to live in Japan consuming fruit and vegetables at the rate consumed by an average Syrian or Jordanian family, the budget needed would be no less than \$6,000. I conveyed this “fact” to those friends and editors who previously “envied” me for being in a country with the second most powerful economy on the Earth.

On a related topic, one also cannot believe that there are still some spots in rural areas where you can find small bunches of fruit or vegetables on sale, with a price tag but unattended by a salesperson. At one place on the outskirts of Tokyo, you take what you want and leave the money in a box left at the stall. There is nobody else to witness that you paid for the product. A remnant of an old-style culture based on trust is still alive.

receipt, and then she ran inside. After less than 20 seconds, she rushed back with the package and delivered it. I thought then that she had some other urgent duty to do and she had to handle my business as fast as possible so she can devote her time to the urgent matter. But when I went to the same post office many times later on to get packages, I discovered that the urgent matter was “me” and all other customers waiting in line in that extremely clean post office. The “running” was part of the excellent and professional performance of the employees there to guarantee quick and efficient service.

In 2005, I reported heavily on Japan’s postal reforms, dubbed by media as the baby project of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro. He went on to dissolve the House of Representatives and called general elections after the House of Councilors failed to endorse a set of bills to privatize the postal services. Koizumi won the elections by a landslide by skillfully using his campaign appeal: “Are you for or against the postal reforms?” Needless to say, the new House of Representatives approved the bills, and the “intimidated” House of Councilors followed suit.

After the postal bills passed, I kept wondering: Will the post office employees keep running under the reform of Japan Post and give me my package in a “running” mode while saying “*omatase-itashimashita*” or “sorry to have kept you waiting”?

This leads me to a related impressive feature in Japan, which is home to a culture so considerate about the time of customers and guests. When I called KDD (which had a monopoly of overseas telecommunications at the time) for the first time more than 15 years ago to inquire about some information, the answer came without my even hearing the ring on the other side: “*Omatase-*

Photo: A. Miyake, FCCJ



The author introducing Environment Minister Koike Yuriko

Apologizing for the Slightest Delay

Another positive impression was when I went to a post office to receive the first package my mother sent me after I arrived in Japan. She was worried that I did not have olive oil and “peta bread” and “pomegranate syrup” used in cooking some Arabic cuisines. Once I arrived at the post office counter, I saw a clerk running toward me to pick up the

itashimashita.” I mean you hold the telephone handset, call the company, and in less than 2 seconds comes the answer: “Sorry to have kept you waiting.” It sounds like a “joke” in some countries, but this was a prime sample of the Japanese culture’s respect of time. Additionally, at the immigration gate for arrivals of foreigners with a reentry permit, I usually give my passport and count the time required for processing it. Most times, I get it back stamped within 10 seconds, with the officer saying, “Omatase-itashimashita.”

Strict and Amazing Society

One night, some 10 years ago, I was reporting about an annual white paper of the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) that detailed Japan’s views of international military situations and Japanese defense policies. I needed certain details about how Japan viewed the Middle East situation and its impact on Japanese security. All that was available in the English version of the report and JDA releases was the agency’s view of North Korea and China. I then sent a fax to the PR section of the JDA around 12:30 am. and said to myself, “By the time I get the reply in the coming days, I will be able to find a translator for the Japanese version I was expecting.” But after some 30 minutes, my fax machine “silently” received the replies to inquiries after midnight from the office of the JDA including copies of the papers I needed. It was breaking news in itself that somebody at the JDA’s PR office replies to inquires after midnight. This was another example of great attention given to foreign correspondents in Japan, at least as far as I was concerned.

Also impressive was an incident on a rainy but warm day in 1993 when I was having coffee at a sidewalk café in Roppongi around noon. There was, as usual, some road construction work going on and a Japanese man was placed there to guide pedestrians. It started to rain very heavily and I expected that man to seek shelter near the wall. I even asked him to come and sit with me at the table and have tea or coffee, but he said “no” with a polite smile, and stayed at his post in the heavy rain as if he was a guard on the World War II front line, another prime example of the discipline, commitment and seriousness the Japanese have for their jobs.

But not everything warrants praise in Japan. I am always shocked by how

much paper and wood are consumed in this country so easily and sometimes in a wasteful way. But again, one should admit that the garbage collecting system in this country is so sophisticated and environment-friendly as it is categorized into so many items: burnable, unburnable, bottles, cans, etc. You have to take a course to learn how to package your trash, when to throw it away, sometimes, how much you have to wait and pay to get rid of some household appliances like TV sets, washing machines, audio sets, furniture and even cameras and musical instruments. This is my favorite topic for reporting when I run out of themes.

There are many interesting features in the land of the yen. Yes, the yen currency. I am always bothered by the many yen coins that accumulate in my pocket. My favorite coin here is the ¥500 but I always find at least 30 ¥1 coins around my desk and forgotten in my pockets. Once I said while laughing at a Ginza department store: “The one-yen coin bothers me and it should be discontinued.” I got an immediate answer from the cashier: “Don’t laugh, okyaku-sama (dear guest). The one yen that makes you laugh can also make you cry for it.” So goes a Japanese proverb. Since that moment, I have been trying not to shed tears over having many ¥1 coins in my pocket in this city, Tokyo, one of the most expensive cities in the world. **JS**

Khaldon Azhari is the Tokyo Bureau Chief of the Jordanian news agency PETRA.

