

Telling the Tales of Diaspora

*Japanese root

I was appointed as the Japanese editor of the *Nikkei Voice* in September, 1989, one year after the redress was settled. It was the time when enormous energy was rising to make many things happen. The energy was put out by various generations including not only the sansei generation but also senior niseis. Everybody seemed to be feeling energized and refreshed.

My first report as the editor was about the 1989 Seniors' Conference in Calgary. Rebuilding the Nikkei community and developing the Nikkei identity were the key words often heard at the conference that brought over five hundred Nikkeis in North America. The post-redress cultural movement was booming.

But what was my commitment? I am a post-war immigrant who was supposed to be out of this whirlpool of energy. Post-war immigrants were not eligible for the redress compensation, nor were they affected by the War Measurement Act of Canada.

Then, why was I interested in this ethnic cultural movement? There was a letter-to-the editor from a nisei woman who was determined to "forgive and let go the pain."

"...How much of my life has been lived shadowed under an umbrella of collective shame," "...we deserve to be punished for daring to be different from the homogenized white," "I'm now ready to stop living like an apology," "I am ready to forgive. I'm ready to give forth from the essence of my true nature for my true nature is pure and I was innocent" (June 1989 issue, *Nikkei Voice*)

There, I saw a group of diaspora who had been deprived of their pride and identity. This instantly reminded me of the minorities in Japan: Korean residents, Ainu people. Moreover, it somehow resonated with my own experience.

In 1985, I married a Caucasian Canadian in Tokyo. Suddenly, the whole Japanese society turned their back to me, or at least I felt so; they refused to register my newly born daughter's name, "Kathleen Sonomi," because, they said, "our computer can not accommodate a name over eight syllables." The spelling of "Kathleen" was forcibly changed to "Kiyasarin" according to the official "Hepburn style." The name of my gaijin (foreigner) wife was nowhere found in my daughter's birth certificate as her mother; thus, making me feel like I was the "Virgin Maria" (this regulation

changed later); Name calling, “Keto” or “Barbarian,” referring to Caucasians in
often was often heard in my client’s office, one of the major heavy industrial firms in
Japan. It did not take one year before we decided to emigrate from Japan to Canada.

Deleted: Japan

*Canadian soil

We all know that immigrants are supposed to adapt themselves to their adopted society, learning the language and culture. So we work diligently in order to become part of the society. However, no one wants to lose one’s own culture that shapes his or her identity.

So when we are exposed to the “Japanese culture” which is distorted or misinterpreted, we naturally deny and feel “this is not ours and this is not right.” This is what happened when I went to see the premier of “Naomi’s Road,” a theatre play geared to the young audience and performed by Japanese Canadian actors. I, as the Japanese editor of Japanese Canadian community newspaper, had to raise my voice to right the wrong things.

Quote:

“As a story about Nikkei, acted by Nikkei and to be seen by Nikkei, this fact not only indicates lack of respect for the Nikkei language heritage, it totally ignores the presence of recently arrived Nikkei. Why wasn’t the script checked out? As an issei and the Japanese language editor of an English-Japanese newspaper which appeals for fairness and mutual understanding, Stephen’s angry reproach, ‘Speak English!’ was like a cold water splashed in the face....”

To my article, later came a counterargument from a sansei who was an actor and the director of the play.

Quote:

I returned my response:

Quote:

I did not receive a response from the contender. But instead, by telephone, the author, Joy Kogawa, called my home and left a message for me: when we will have

another performance, we will counsel with the immigrants. It seemed like this whole commotion ended at this point.

Sometime before this incident happened, I had written an article both in English and Japanese with regard to the development of Nikkei identity and the need to retrieve the Japanese language. The reaction that was thrown at me from the nisei publisher was harsh indicating their majority consciousness. The then publisher said, "We do not need Japanese editorial. *Nikkei Voice* is a newspaper to teach our Canadian way of thinking to the new immigrants, not vice versa."

I was appalled and the editorial meeting was dismissed while I was trying to find the words to say. I thought we were equal and interactive when we talked about "rebuilding our community." But I was made to know that the immigrants were a minority group among an ethnic minority in Canada called the Nikkei community.

What can possibly be extracted from above two episodes; 1) The structure of discrimination by the majority against minority can exist anywhere in the society. 2) Acculturation can disturb only the people who practice the culture because it endangers their identity. While, once the culture was passed onto the other people's hand, it diffuses and evolves by itself. The language barrier and the lack of culture formed the communication gap between the group of nisei, sansei and the immigrants. This led them to feel distant against each other. This is unavoidable.

* Scattering cultural seeds through storytelling

If we focus on the difference between the generations, the gap widens and deepens. But what if we try to create a new culture together?

I stopped arguing and decided to sow our own cultural seeds into this gap. In our case, the seeds were storytelling and writing short plays that were geared toward multi-generations, young and old. A bunch of immigrants who were mostly Japanese teachers at the heritage language schools formed a group called "Katari Japanese Storytellers" in 1994. Since then, we have been telling the stories both in English and Japanese as part of the annual Toronto Festival of Storytelling and at community events, presenting five to ten new stories every year.

In 1997, we were given an opportunity to make ourselves present in the eyes of nisei, sansei, and yonsei when the NAJC Toronto and the JCCC celebrated the 4th Nikkei Heritage Day in Toronto. We told the stories in English, "Kaguya Hime

(Bamboo lady)” and “Yuki Onna (Snow Woman).” In 1998, we had our first short play “Momotaro (Peach Boy)” at Nikkei Heritage Day held at Momiji Health Centre. Up until now, Katari Japanese Storytellers presented five different stories (three of them have been repeated twice or three times by now.)

1998: Peach Boy (Momiji)

1999: Urashima Taro (JCCC)

2001: Bamboo Lady (JCCC)

2002: Manzo Nagano Story in commemoration of the 125th anniversary of the arrival of the first Japanese immigrant in Canada. (Momiji)

2004: Peach Boy

2005: Urashima Taro (JCCC)

2006: “Suddenly Suan Maru! (Hyokkori Suan Maru!)” in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the boat which brought 82 stowaways from Japan (Momiji).

“Momotaro” was chosen as the first play because many nisei knew this story from the text book they used in the prewar days at their Japanese school in B.C. “Urashima Taro” and “Kaguya Hime” were chosen because of their rare and spectacular stories.

One factor that can be commonly seen in those five stories is that the protagonists are all diaspora: Three major characters, Momotaro, Urashima Taro, Kaguya Hime are non-human; Momotaro was born from a peach, Kaguya Hime, an ET from the moon, Urashima, a time traveller. They do not belong to anywhere. Very exotic characters and extraordinary storylines indeed.

I, as the script writer, tried to insert Nikkei taste to its sideline to make the audience feel intimate with the stories.

For instance, Momotaro recognizes himself that he was not a human but the same beast as the Oni (goblins). Accordingly, Momotaro reconciles with the Oni and leads the rally to the Ottawa government to seek birth right and redress settlement for the Oni, the indigenous creatures.

All the lines were a total mixture of English and Japanese. Only the narrator is a bilingual yonsei who narrates the story in natural English so the audience can fully understand. The audience loved the funny actions and familiar songs such as “Yellow Submarine” (Beatles) sung by Urashima and the turtle on the way to the Palace under

the sea, or “Fly me to the moon” sung by Bamboo lady.

While the story of the pioneer Jinzaburo Oikawa and his boat “Suian Maru” which sailed into the port of Victoria, B.C. was celebrated by the theme song “Hyokkori Hyotan jima” (NHK TV’s legendary puppet show).

With only three rehearsals each year, authenticity is something that we might be lacking in our play. Nevertheless, the time that the audience and the performers can share at the gathering is quite precious because there we feel “one-ness” for a moment. Seniors wish to stay in good shape to see next year's play.

*Emerging cultural evolution

It is still quite rare to see a movie that has Asian protagonists among the feature films in North America, while the Asian communities are expanding rapidly. The reality will be reflected in mainstream culture in the future. It is just matter of time. But in some areas, like food, sushi has already penetrated into the mainstream culture, with the newly developed cuisine mixed with other ethnic ingredients, in another words, the new-age Sushi.

This could happen to the Japanese folklore as well. Japanese fairytales can be forged into new stories. No one can stop it. We should rather try to enjoy and promote its metamorphosis. Of course, there always a conflict and tension between the transmitters and the host society. Katari Japanese Storytellers have experienced some of it by now.

*Wind that blows away foreign culture

Katari has been the only Asian component that regularly joins this annual storytelling festival in Toronto. One of the big hits was the “Big Fart Woman” performed by one of Katari members. People loved it and we presented this story several times. But occasionally, salty faces were seen in the audience. One time, we indirectly received a complaint that says “Canadians do not talk about farts in the public. I do not appreciate this kind of stories told in the face of children.”

Well, well, suddenly stinky wind chocked me up.

After this incident, we were invited to Buffalo Jump Storytelling Festival held at the Native Canadian Centre and had this story told again. In advance to this story,

Native version of clown showed up and made us all laugh by mimicking fart. Our “Big Fart Woman” naturally made the whole audience burst into laughter. How embarrassing is it in the eyes of “Canadians”, I wondered.

There is a storyteller called Robert Munch renowned to be the best child book author in Canada, and many of whose stories are about kids peeing, shitting, dirty underwear; full of stinky episodes that make the kids jump up and laugh. How shameless is this “Canadian” author, I wondered.

The answer is blowing in the stinky wind of “Our Culture.” Certainly, the times, they are a changing.

An anthropologist visited me in my office to interview me sometime ago. The researcher of Chinese descent boasted that the story of “Cinderella” had originated in China. This was an eye-opener to me.

He said the scene of looking for the smallest footed woman refers to the Chinese “bound foot.”

It might have taken hundreds of years for the Cinderella to travel to Grimm Brothers’ house from China. However, in this world of borderless, it will not take many generations to develop Canadian versions of our Momotaro, Urashima Taro, and Kaguya Hime.

Toronto’s annual Nikkei Heritage Day carries “Japanese root, Canadian soil” as its logo, which, I found, is quite appropriate wording because we are there to sow our cultural seeds over the Canadian soil by telling the tales of “Diaspora” meaning “scattered seed” in its Greek origin. Everything evolves.