

Africa and I

< My introductory note >

Every year I hand my brief introductory handout to the freshmen in my English classes. This is the English manuscript of my introduction for the students of the 1997 school year. That year I handed the Japanese version, too.

I began to think of Africa by chance. Since that time I felt inclined to live somewhere in Africa for some period with my family.

In 1992 I visited Harare, Zimbabwe and lived there with my family for two months and a half. When I was there, I felt suffocated all the time, maybe because of subconscious feelings of guilt; I had come to realize that we are on the side of the robber in the world. The reality I faced was overwhelming; the gap between the rich and the poor was far more tremendous than I had imagined. I remember clearly how relieved I felt, when we dropped in to Paris on our way back home, and briefly benefited from its many comforts.

I visited Africa as a research associate of the University of Zimbabwe. We rented a house near the University for ¥ 100,000 per month. The sum was about 800 US dollars (US\$) and about 4,000 Zimbabwe dollars (ZW\$). The house lot was about 1,600 square meters in area. I met Mr. Garikayi Mhoyo there. He is a Shona, which is the majority ethnic group. He was hired as a 'garden boy,' an ordinary domestic worker, by an elderly white woman. We became close friends. I called him Gary and he called me Yoshi. I found that he lived alone, except when his family came to stay with him during the school holidays. Our family came to spend much time with his. Our children played with his children all day long. My wife asked his wife to be a model for her water-paintings. They had no common languages, but enjoying their time together was no problem.

I was told that his monthly wage was only ZW\$170 and that most people could not afford to send their children even to secondary school. The basketball with which they enjoyed playing in the garden was worth ZW\$199! I heard the minimum wage for domestic workers for white families was ZW\$130 per month. Some workers might even have been paid less if the government had not controlled wages; women workers in particular might have earned significantly less. I found later that the room rate at the Sheraton Hotel was about US\$150 a night, equivalent to about ZW\$750. It would have taken Gary more than four months to earn enough money to stay only one night at the Sheraton Hotel!

One day I visited his village to see his children who had already returned to school. His homestead was at the foot of a hill on a plateau. He pointed at the hill and explained, "This is our land, right up the flank of that hill." It was spacious, indeed. I felt stunned to find that he had been thrown into virtual serfdom, forced by economic necessity to work as a cheap labourer. Yet, Gary's forefathers lived a self-sufficient, rich life, in peace, just a hundred years ago. Gary had to live alone in the city a whole year, apart from his family, though his family had spacious land in their village. That was the reality.

My mind remained out of balance for a long time since then.

One day I wrote to Michel Fabre, a professor of English at the Sorbonne, Paris, "I'm sorry

I can't write soon. After coming back home from Africa, my mind is out of balance, I'm afraid. I sometimes feel too reluctant to write to anybody. Now 'I'm sorry I write too late.' has become one of my mottoes." The reply came as follows: "It is always a pleasure to hear from you. But do not apologize if you are behind in your correspondence. Friends are people with whom one need not apologize because they like you for what you are and accept you as you are."

I met him first in 1985 at an international symposium in Mississippi. He was one of the speakers. I had come to know his name through his writings. I was lucky enough to spend one night with him in the dormitory, but I was not able to make myself understood in English. I had long rejected English speaking and listening because of the overbearing American influence on Japan. I keenly felt that I wanted to share feelings with him. That motivation led me to polish my English.

I was glad to find that I was talking freely with him in Paris on our way home from Zimbabwe. He taught my children how to play domino in English. They enjoyed the play very much though they understood few English words.

When I called him Mr. Fabre, he said, "I call you Yoshi. You call me Mr. Fabre. It's not fair. Call me Michel." Outside the country I am called Yoshi. I was called Tama by my basketball teammates. When I was a high-school teacher, I was called "Tama-san." Some students called me "Tama," like a cat. I don't like to be called "sensei." I cannot identify with that word. In the same way that I like to say "Michel," I hope you call me "Tama-san," not "sensei."

April, 1997

Tama.