

EPISODE 11 TRANSCRIPT

*Hello, everyone. Welcome to Shizuoka Speaks. I'm Sonia Paul, the host of this podcast. At Shizuoka Speaks--based here in Shizuoka City, in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan--we discuss experiences of Japanese and English language learning from different cultural perspectives.*

*One of our featured guests on this podcast, 24 year old Kotomi, stated last week that the culture of the English language in Japan has roots in "white people culture." As a young Japanese woman who has lived abroad and studied international relations, her opinion is that Japanese people are not very internationally minded.*

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Kotomi: "...But still, I really feel...we see the foreigners as different creatures..."

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*What about foreigners **outside** the country?*

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Manasi: Also, most of them don't know about countries of the faraway world. I mean, I said Slovakia, and they were like, where is that? And I was like, Czechoslovakia, haven't you watched the TV? Or a beauty pageant?...

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*That was Manasi, from India, speaking. Many journalists and academics cite the Japanese culture as being "inward-looking" as well. And we know from our last episode that Japanese people may not always have positive reactions toward foreigners...and sometimes, they don't show **any** reactions.*

*Today, we're going to discuss why this is.*

*First, let's talk to Hakamada Sensei, the principal of Kokusai Kotoba Gakuin. She was hesitant to go into detail about this topic....*

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Hakamada: The research says that...it's recording!...

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*Considering the delicacy of the topic, it's no wonder Hakamada Sensei was self-conscious. But, after a little while, she opened up:*

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Hakamada: The research says that the Japanese people are the most strict...to the unknown thing. So, if there is a stranger here, in front of me, I will ask him many questions to know what kind of person he is, or whether he is safe or not, where he is from, whether he is married or not, how many children he has, or whether he is a student or not, why he is in Japan now, and how long he will be staying here. Because in order to make sure he is okay or he is dangerous. So, to know that, to make sure. And um, if we notice that he is safe, it's okay. We welcome him into our world, into our society. But, if we notice that he is dangerous, we keep...mm...specific distance between us and him. We can get along...keeping a part....but if we don't know whether he is dangerous or not, you know, why he is here or some other things, we don't know what kind of attitudes to take to them, we don't know...ah. This is the most thing we don't like. Japanese don't like...um, this is our problem.

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*We've heard in the past that some foreign students have difficulty making friends. Their schedules may be one factor. But, this "fear of the unknown," as Hakamada Sensei says, may also have something to do with it.*

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Hakamada: So for instance, the people living around here. They don't want to approach to us, because they don't know whether we are safe or not for them. But some of the people who are interested in foreign things, foreign people, foreign countries, they can come closer to us. But most of Japanese people are the same...they feel much safer, just being with Japanese people, not with foreign people.

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*Now, as Hakamada Sensei says, there are certainly outliers in this assessment. For example, intermarriage between Japanese and non-Japanese people is not uncommon in Japan. And younger generations are being exposed to foreign cultures more at an earlier age. But, it seems that most of this exposure to foreign countries and cultures has come from **within** Japan. Like having native English teachers in the classroom, rather than from getting out of the country. With global competition and a poor economy, Japanese companies can't seem to keep up. They are less inclined to send their workers abroad for work than they were in previous decades...meaning new employees are more likely to stay in Japan. And statistics show that study abroad rates among students have been decreasing for the past several years.*

*The result is this "inward-looking" generation...meaning a generation of Japanese who end up staying in Japan...and mostly, knowing only about their country.*

*Kotomi doesn't seem to fit this description. But, she says, in general, her generation does.*

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Kotomi: My generation...I'm now 24 years old...and...you know, when we were elementary students, Japanese economy was really bad. Still, even now, same. But that time, it was so bad.

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*That time, 1990, was when the Japanese bubble economy--which, before then, had been growing at an extremely rapid rate--finally burst. And people felt the affects of the economy on a personal level--including children.*

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Kotomi: ...So many families, like, "Oh my God, my father lost a job, my father got fired, yeah." So let's say, our generation was hopeless generation.

Sonia: Hopeless generation.

Kotomi: Yeah. So we are so hard to find our dream. I mean, big dream. "I wanna be like, baseball player in the U.S.!" So almost the news...very bad news...economy is getting down. So, in my generation, they just chose to stay...to live safely? Even with little money, "I want to stay here, I want to work here, I want to live with my parents." So like me, I am very freelance worker? Like, several part-time jobs? That is really different from others, even same generations.

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*Japan's economy has been stagnant since the bubble economy burst. Its political situation remains muddled as well. Prime Ministers are constantly changing, and even when a new political party came to power in 2009, it failed to live up to citizen expectations. Children like Kotomi--who have now come of age and entered the workforce--grew up in a climate that was, psychologically speaking, fearful and pessimistic.*

*Not only that, but the use of computers and mobile technology has also had an influence. Now, many people--especially young people with no money--believe they can access all the information they need about the world from the Internet.*

*But, certain moments in history--like the end of the bubble economy, or the rebuilding of Japan after World War II--tend to cause a paradigm shift in the way a country views itself, in the way it interacts with the world.*

*And because of that, you can't generalize a whole population. Different age cohorts have different views. Here's how Manasi sees it in Japan:*

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Manasi: I think the Japanese people now, and the Japanese people a decade ago are extremely different. If you go talk to a little older people, they are really patriotic. Because I feel they've really rebuilt the nation like anything...

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*She's talking specifically now about the time after World War II--which, of course, Japan lost...*

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Manasi: ...They were the ones who worked really hard to build up this whole of Japan, and have gotten it to such a level. That's why this whole thing about them being such workaholics and concentrating so much on careers, comes from. But now people, I feel, are getting more selfish...as in to make money, or to make themselves sufficed of whatever they want...rather than thinking about their country...is what I've realized. So, if you talk to them about their country, they won't really say much about it. They don't really have an opinion. They just nod on to what you say...is what I've seen. But if you speak to older people, they know a lot more about it. Because they've really worked for their nation, I feel, and so I really respect them for that. I mean, that is something that I'm really in awe of.

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*Since the time the interviews for this project took place, another major event occurred in Japan that is bound to cause another paradigm shift: the 9.0 magnitude Tohoku earthquake that occurred on March 11, 2011, the tsunami that soon followed, and the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power Plant.*

*Children have lost their schools, their parents. Adults have lost their jobs, their homes. Entire portions of the country which used to house communities now house nothing but rubble.*

*The toll of these disasters on Japanese culture and thinking is going to be huge. Not to mention the economics of them...which will also have an affect on the way the Japanese live.*

*We can't say for sure what will happen. But, it's something to pay attention to. Japanese people may not always be thinking about other countries, but now, more than ever, the rest of the world is watching Japan.*

*Thank you to Kotomi, Manasi, and Hakamada Sensei for their contributions to this episode. For Shizuoka Speaks, I'm Sonia Paul. Thank you for listening.*