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A Man Born Happy



? 2000-2001 <http://www.arttoday.com>

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

慈悲あまねく慈愛深きアッラーの御名において

Written and Designed

By

Soumy Ana

(Hijri 1417 - Year 1996)

Non-Fiction

It was in a winter night, so chilling! The roads were split under the shining snow, sparkling like stars. Here the street was almost deserted by sounds except for crutches ripping all the cold. Suddenly, the voice of a man, like the voice of a child telling a story rose softly in the dry freezing night. The sound of the crutches stopped and, over there, under a street lamp a man and a girl were talking. It was not properly the voice of a woman I heard but a muffled, broken sound. I stopped to listen to it. The man was now warming up the youngster's hands, asking her in a cheering accent to take care of herself and to go home quickly. His face was welcoming. Under very long lashes his eyes were shimmering and strong white teeth were gleaming enlightening every smile. The youngster was from Japan, handicapped. When I dared not look and smile at her by mere shyness Ibrâhim, without any hesitation, approached and sheltered her. His words were very hearty like those of a father towards his daughter. But I knew instinctively that he wished not to accompany her for fear of frightening her, and I took this advantage to speak with him who was now smiling at me.

"Do you know her?"

"I met her several times. This girl is very brave," and this idea seemed to make him happy.

I noticed after having known him for a while that Ibrâhim was always happy, that he was "born happy" as he used to say:

"In my culture, nobody experiences mental dejection," he declared one day, "it is an illusion from the Occident. In my culture, we do not know the word despair. To even utter the word despair is like turning your back on God."

Ibrâhim lives in a home where he likes to watch the squirrels following each other in bunches of two or three. He likes to observe them sharing their meals and playing with the birds. He also spends time looking at the wild flowers blossoming at the top of his garage. If his landlord feels discouraged and dislikes that, Ibrâhim on the contrary finds it beautiful! He never fails to throw a piece of his dinner at the little animals who gather on the roof, since in his religion, to feed living creatures is charity, and even the peasant is supposed to leave a percentage of the harvesting to the dwellers of nature. Scarecrows are forbidden as well because they spoil birds of their daily meals. Ibrâhim lives close to nature; actually he feels he is a part of it, a part of the natural equilibrium. And he believes God -- Allâh has created every living soul so that they can worship Him. In the morning, when he wakes up, just before the sunbeams come striking the lace of the window curtains, he tries to answer the singing of the birds. After that, he prays. He prays five times a day, sometimes more when he chooses to. He informs me that even the tiniest creatures pray like him, "only," he says, "we do not know how they pray; we do not understand the

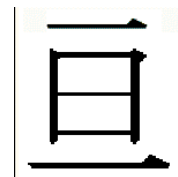
way they communicate, but they form societies like us and they have their own language."



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In his room, he has pinned a punch on a parchment where, through bluish and rosy clouds, a young Japanese girl reads poetry. It is astonishing to see an Asian woman in an Arab setting, but it is comprehensible if one thinks about it. Most Muslims live in the East, and Muslims have a long history of commercial exchanges with the Chinese. Even their traditional dress looks astonishingly alike. I look back at the picture. Only the guesha's hands and face emerge among

dresses of silk. She holds the scroll with dexterity, her head delicately bent over under a thick hair bun held back with sticks of sandalwood. Next to the bed, there is a book in which Japanese characters from the Kanji are explained as following the evolution of their creation. I read for example:



'the process of Time', *Jikan*,



“day after day the days are running away”. The course of time is almost perceptible with the image of the sun rising above the horizon [the floor], in the direction of the zenith [the roof] and its disappearance under the horizon. It makes even more sense if we know that the number three in Japanese Kanji is represented by three bars one on top of the other:

Three strokes: the number of
heaven,
earth, and
humanity

This means to me that the passage of time is independent from what goes on in the heavens or what happens to humanity; it just goes on and on, without stopping. Time is also measured in relation to the rotation of the earth, so the Kanji symbol makes sense.

I interviewed Ibrâhim about the mnemotechnic process of learning the Kanji offered in his book. The man's fine lids slightly shade away as if the veil of the time went passing by his eyes. He remembers his last voyage to Japan:

"I think there is something that impresses me: the Japanese language itself, the writing. Somehow, it is a mystery, something that... somewhere... that holds a message of an ancient culture and at the same time scheming. It is difficult to comprehend its meaning."

He asked me: "Is the Japanese language an illusion or a reality? Is it a medley of sounds and nice penmanship? No, the population itself is close to us or otherwise we would be incapable of communicating with it. No, their language is not an illusion, the writing has a meaning! But the meaning is concealed from us; we do not know its evolution so it escapes our understanding. Furthermore, Japanese do not need words to communicate; they express all by the movement of the eyes, by the impressions, by the eyesight. The natives will not declare: 'I am mad about you.' This would be improper. Instead, they would say: 'You

look like a dewdrop on a flower where a bird likes to fly over,' or 'our communion, our link of love is no more no less than this link of the nectar exchanged between a bee and a flower's pollen.' They do not use a poetical expression in order to describe more precisely a well defined feeling, no, they prefer to hide the feeling itself inside the piece of poetry. For that matter, it is improper to show feelings at all. The word 'love' will be uttered in the way of speaking. This requires you to know the culture, to assimilate the whole thing. I have always imagined I could see a Japanese family without being seen, i.e., if I could only become an invisible man and enter their privacy. Then I would know if they ever kiss one another. I do not think so. I imagine well this absence of communication, this absence of words that implies that a man who has not seen his wife for six months will greet her with a nod of his head and she with a discreet smile. We, we would hug each other, wouldn't we?

It is a silence with regard to us.

We, we need that everything be expressed. We need to feel, to embrace. We need a rational form in the language. Take the French poets, the German poets, the Roman poets; there is always a description that helps us to vibrate with the poem. When a poem succeeds in describing something overwhelming to us, then we grasp it and we vibrate. They, I don't think they need this. Everything is caught

outside the writing sheet, by the tone of the voice, by something elusive. In a way, I find them more... near my culture, not because we do not embrace each other, but because we are shy to do it in public, and because we have a whole world of silent expressions, a world of shared traditions.”

Ibrâhim took a stem of the Arabian Arak, a little piece of wood shaped like a brush. During his speech, he rubbed his teeth with it, then he stood up and disappeared for a moment. I could hear him in the adjacent room muttering some verses while performing one of the daily Islamic prayers.



A page of the Noble Qur'an written in Arabic and in Kanji

Source unknown. Please help us find the provenance.

While I am waiting for him to return, I look around his flat, intrigued by this incredible medley of cultures. I thought for so long

that they had nothing in common that I was surprised by my interviewee's point of view. Now I understand better how they could complete each other harmoniously.

Near the Noble Qur'an displayed on a traditional book holder, I discover a piece of board. Its red ink is obliterated. It is old and the words are written in Arabic. This writing for me seems as mysterious as the Japanese writing. Next to little Japanese punches painted with the traditional Indian ink, rest several Arabic calligraphies. One uses the script to define the shape of a Muslim performing his prayers.

Most notable, there is a picture of a barbarian woman wearing a woolen veil ornamented with staples of wool red, yellow and blue. Her face half hidden by the black cloak shows fair brown eyes spangled with the brown powder of the antimony.

When Ibrâhim enters the room again, I ask:

“Why do you think that the Moroccan culture resembles the Japanese culture?”

“Well... When a woman drinks tea, the manner she spreads her fingers, the habit she has to hide her mouth is very typical of the Arabic culture.

Although she uncovers herself or she bares her head, without a veil, the veil exists. She will not look you straight in the eyes, ever; her eyes will meet yours only for a few seconds. On the opposite side, a girl

from the Occident is able to look at you during hours without any problem. The fixation on something or someone is responsible for her to lose most of her expression.”



Veiled Japanese woman (up)

And

Traditionally veiled Moroccan woman(right)



Both images are

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The gaze of Ibrâhim had again this affectionate look that characterizes him. The power of the eyes, he learnt its meaning one day he took the bus to go to the railroad station, **EKKI**, almost the only word he knew at this time in Japanese. In his way to Ekki, he boarded a bus. He did not know how to pay the fare and as the situation was getting

embarrassing, a girl, without saying a word, gave him a ticket. At first he did not know what it was. He read on the ticket 250 and pondered for a while: "is it the number of the station or the number of the bus?" When he understood that 250 meant 250 yen, the girl had already left the bus and he was in sight of the railroad station. As soon as the bus stopped, Ibrâhim took a round ticket and fetched the girl to thank her and repay her kindness. But she was out of sight. So he went to Tokyo, Osaka, and one day he had to come back to the same town. Suddenly, in the bus he met the girl, this girl he recognized with her smile, a perfect smile "which is rather rare in Japan," he explains. Gesticulating, he succeeded in inviting her to the restaurant: "At seven o'clock, Saturday, EKKI." She understood and the next Saturday they spent two hours together, bursting out laughing but incapable of understanding each other. They laughed because they were happy or they laughed because they did not understand each other. Who knows? This would always be a puzzling question to Ibrâhim. As he continues to narrate the story, he declares:

"I said to myself: *You know several languages and there you are in a country incapable of communicating. Where are those languages that you have learned?* In this challenge of the non-comprehension, I think something was established. It is like sometimes we are obliged to go through a stage, a schedule to what we never escape, the stage on

which we tolerate and we know that the other is different from us. When we go through this stage where we accept others as unique, we do not need anymore languages, we need nothing, except spaces between the feelings, through the eyes. It is at this precise moment that I became aware of the world of the sight, the world of contrasts.

Therefore I was going through a cultural awareness. From the moment we let ourselves go to our emotions and to our contrasts, mistakes do not make sense anymore, mistakes are lost from our sight. Mistakes are no longer amplified, developed by the mystery of the communication, of the non-communication, of this non-utterance of the feelings. The emotion remains as it is, it changes only when we try to put it into words, when we give it a formulation. The happiness comes from this plot, the intrigue that consists in not pondering over if the person has understood or not. You let yourself go; the happiness comes from the ability to let oneself go..."

It is this very attitude that enabled him to meet people of all ages and nationalities. For example this granny with the gray hair, with the brown kimono set off by a laced blue scarf who taught him how to massage feet in the Japanese fashion. Or this young hostess to whom he once asked the road and who accompanied him all day long. Ibrâhim remembers her beckoning, an horizontal wave of the hand

from left to right, left to right. He remembers how she later wrote to him:



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“You man were a lot of fun and interesting. It’s really close to magic to crash someone like you out there -- someone who’s very

interesting to talk to and doesn’t see just the long legs and searches for opportunity how to hit on you.”

I read the message and I understand why Akemi, the woman of the bus, began to learn English in order to be able to communicate her admiration and her sympathy for Ibrâhim. She was about to be married in November of the same year they met and always she wrote the same letter, ten times, twenty times to Ibrâhim: “I can see you sometimes in my dreams,” and as postscript: “With much love.” She was trying, with the little English she knew, to revive several hours spent with a complete stranger and with the mystery of the language. It is so much easier to revive a dream rather than to face reality, and the traveler always takes the part of a magic person in it, a person who has much to share, much more than the ordinary man. I think that Ibrâhim has always been conscious of this. He never lured himself. He says something that I do not hear. I would find it later on one of my tapes. He says:

“To communicate in a language you do not master is something special. You express a feeling, a word when you feel it, without prejudices, and it is then that you begin to feel alive. You think you have obtained the good in this life since there is no more make up. It is you who is talking, it is the real self, it is not somebody else. No need of masks. The other self who tries to be conformist is not the one you

are learning to be at this moment. The other self, it is the one who somebody tries to create, the one who was created by education, by the bias of prejudices, by the means of the culture. We do not let ourselves go to our feelings because our society somehow drives us and somewhere controls us.”



Akemi sent him a picture of her wedding dress. She is petite, gracious, energetic with her smooth skin and her long nose. She resembles a Chinese lady. Her dark silken hair surrounds a face round like the base of a moon in the middle of sheaf of lotus and ribbons shaped like hearts.

And then Ibrâhim received the last letter of Akemi showing a golden reproduction of the Triumphal Arch, in Paris, a little letter as if she was herself lessened. In that very letter she wrote: “I don’t get along well with life in a marriage,” and: “I am looking forward to hearing from you.”

Ibrâhim did not write back because he is a lover of the instant and other moments had already faded away before he could answer. He forgot this missive and today he somewhat regrets the time never recaptured: “If I had properly read this letter, I would have answered it,” he affirmed.

The fact is that more than 60% of the Japanese men meet into the bars after work. There, European girls are waiting for them, making them drunk. It is like a drug. The gueshas are called more and more rarely; they accompany but people belonging to the past. Ibrâhim confides in me:

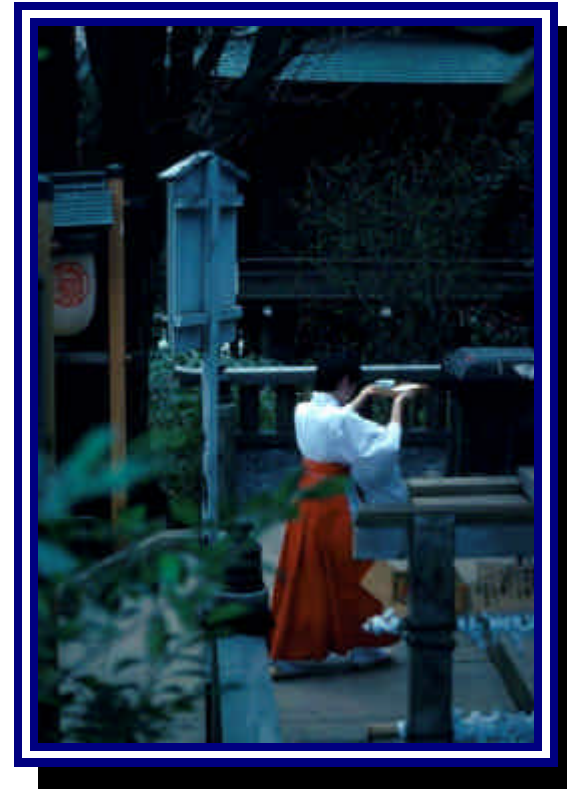
“The Japanese woman who accompanies, the Japanese woman the feeling of whom we do not understand, from whom the courtesy is either cultural or wished, it is this same Japanese woman of all times whose husband has the habit of beating her. I find this very sad. A woman should be what she is intended to be: a companion, not an enemy.”

Ibrâhim spread before me a series of pictures showing streets all provided with slot machines where the modern Japanese is seeking forgetfulness. He is glad that Islam has made gambling unlawful. When he watches these shots, he can perfectly imagine the sorrow of this woman who declares in a letter to a stranger: "I've had a quarrel with my husband every day. So I like single woman."

"At the same time there is another type of woman in Japan, it is the artist woman, the woman whose hands are possessed by the *SHIN-NYU*, the Japanese word to describe "the entry into the Divine."

The *Shin-Nyu*, this extraordinary dexterity acquired by our hands due to a long practice, Ibrâhim met one of its representative in the person of Madam Sakkai.

Mister Sakkai had purchased a wine from Bordeaux, France, a fortune in Japan for the sake of his visitor, but in the joy of the wine he forgot everything and he lost himself in a daydream as soon as Ibrâhim reminded him he was not allowed to drink alcohol. They were dining. Therefore Ibrâhim turned himself towards Sakkai's wife for entertainment, the woman who did not utter a word he wanted to understand her silent secrets. That intrigued him. At the very beginning they spoke about the household decoration and later he noticed a Chinese calligraphy hanging against the wall, on a blue-grey backdrop.



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He asked her, astonished: 'But you, you speak Chinese?' She suddenly answered, 'Yes, it is because I did a master of Chinese Calligraphy at the University. It was my project for the thesis.' 'You? You studied Calligraphy? But I am also used to brush calligraphies!'"

At this very moment, they felt an enlargement, the space between the words changed. Ibhâhim reflects:

"And suddenly a world was lifting up, a universe was awakening and a world began to stir behind this woman who was hiding her mouth while eating, who was concealing a part of her face by cheer sense of decency. And I began really to speak with her. Of what? Of the lines strokes, of the bamboo and reed pens strokes, of the brush strokes from the art of Calligraphy!"

"What is fascinating is that this lady, Mrs Sakkai, who was so modest, suddenly succeeded in establishing a link with the Arabic world, through the art of writing. I felt grateful to her for that. This secret woman of whom the eyes were not even seen, of whom the mouth was not to be seen began to express herself. To express herself in what? In the world of the Calligraphy, in the world of contrasts..."

法華義疏第一

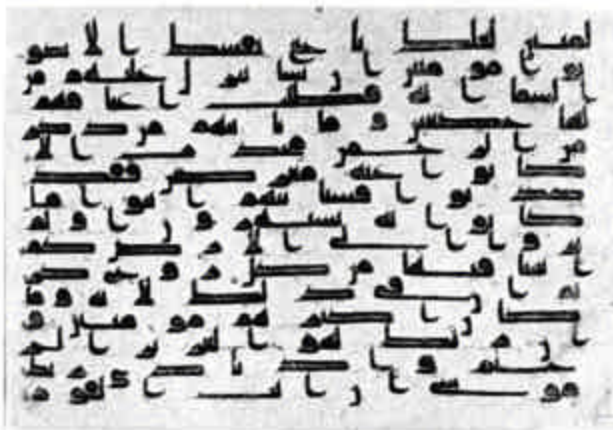
此是
大委上宮王彩
集非海彼本

夫妙法蓮華經者蓋是極深方善合為一曰之豐田七百近
壽轉成長途之神藥若論迦釋如來應現長之入急者
時歎真濁氏經教涌同歸之妙因今得莫之入果但衆生
宿值善激神圖根鉢五濁鄣於大嶽六弊獲且慈服卒不
可聞一乘因果之大理所以如來隨時所宜初就鹿野開三乘之

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Ibrâhim explains this technique to me without discontinuing. A great deal of time passes before he concludes.

"Traditionally, the Japanese use the bamboo to write and everything seems to come from the bamboo, of its inclination, of its hardness in features, of its delicacy. It is also represented in the traditional Eastern paintings where the long stem formed with joints gives an artistic orientation into the very image. Bamboo is to be found as well in all constructions of Zen gardens. The briar or the rose tree has the same spiritual appeal in the Arabic culture due to its ability to soak up the ink, to retain it into the stem. The rose bush stalk is cut to be a much refined drawing pen. The curved lines of the two calligraphic writings suggest the elevation and the modesty in the simple choice of colors. "



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8th C. fragment of the Qur'an: Traditional Arabic writing called Kufic.



由列先生陸

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Japanese calligraphies

Like the Japanese calligraphy, the Arab calligraphy has a formal style of writing and a cursive form of writing. It imitates natural landscapes like rock formations.



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Caoshu: Cursive Japan calligraphy also called 'grass writing'



"Le monde est une mer, notre coeur en est le rivage"
The world is an ocean; our heart is its beach

Proverbe chinois -- Chinese proverb

Modern Arabic calligraphy courtesy of Hassan Massoudi

<http://www.savimedia.fr/massoudy/home.htm>



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Later he explains again:

"In the Japanese calligraphy as in the Islamic calligraphy, human beings are rarely represented. If they are, it is a deviation or it has historic purposes. In both techniques, only natural landscapes and abstract designs of the pen predominate.

The Sakkai calligraphy was hanged on the living room; it was a poem of love. She possessed two copies of her work, a thesis project. She offered one to Ibrâhim. Here is what he recalls from this moment:

"She owned two copies; she gave one to me. And I wondered why she did that because she knew me only for a few hours. And I tried to figure out and I asked myself if at a moment, in our lives, we do not meet someone and we are able to vibrate with this person, just for an instant. It is no more no less than a share. The happiness of the instant is no more no less than two souls meeting a moment without any interest, without any delay. In this encounter, only one thing remains, it is to give what we own because we feel satisfied, we feel ourselves almost in ecstasy. And I spent really one hour and a half chatting about Calligraphy with her, without expecting anything in return except the happiness of sharing. Was it the first time or was it among the rare occasions that she was able to express herself? I truly don't know. The question is not to be asked."

Ibrâhim ponders for a moment about what he has just said, then he smiles. I suddenly feel embraced in this pause, wondering why this man could touch so many lives and touch them so deeply. Why do people trust him so readily? Then I remember, I remember what we talked about many days before. Ibrâhim is practicing the pure teachings of Islam. He practices the words, not far from the Zen words, that say: "*A good disposition and more silence are the best work.*" Silence is sometimes more revealing than words. I know thus why he finds the Japanese culture close to the one he was raised in.

He resumes:

"The real question is not if I am right or if I am wrong. The real issue is not to find an interpretation for all this. The most important is that we end everything in life by sharing."

Ibrâhim has kept strange snapshots from this encounter. The pictures are taken through mirrors and window panes. By refraction, it seems that we perceive the modern shops of the street down below with its hostesses wearing mini-skirts or the neon tube of the hotel USA. In the midst of yellow and red colors stand the mother and her two daughters seated a little bit below their father and sharing respect. Ibrâhim continues:


“It is at each instant that the magic of the interchange occurs; Japan is just a pretext. When I am unable to describe an image, to describe an emotion, to live an emotion because it happens sometimes that an emotion is too overwhelming, then I remain gasping and I am not able to say anything. Everything betrays me, my feelings, my memory. The only thing I can feel is the Blessing of God. It may be simply the sharing of a word or two, but it is a delight, and it is this word that gives us the courage to live, that enables me to cease the essence of the relation, to capture it. At this precise minute, a deep relationship makes us understand one another, to find our inner echoes. And there, precisely, I remember her face, this face smiling and far away, pale and beaming. There is a form of depth into the features of the face. Everything is captured by a simple look, the image is then distilled into the memory and into the feelings to give way to something different, inexplicable. The Japanese culture, as the Moroccan culture, is full of non-talking instants. In the West on the contrary, at the same moment we speak, everything is clear and well-defined because the culture makes it effective.

The Arabic alphabet حروف الهجاء العربية

Arabic	Translit	Name	Arabic	Translit	Name
أ	ā	Alif	د	d	Dād
ب	b	Bā	ذ	ḏ	Ḍād
ت	t	Tā	ڭ	ḡ	Ḡayn
ث	th	Thā	ح	ḥ	Ḥayn
ج	j	Jīm	خ	kh	Khā
ح	h	Hā	دال	dāl	Dāl
خ	kh	Khā	ذال	ḏāl	Ḍāl
د	d	Dāl	ر	r	Rā
ذ	ḏ	Ḍāl	ز	z	Zāy
ر	r	Rā	س	s	Sīn
ز	z	Zāy	ش	sh	Shīn
س	s	Sīn	ص	ṣ	Ṣād
ش	sh	Shīn			
ص	ṣ	Ṣād			

Our culture (German, French or Arabic) comes from 24 letters or from 26 letters or from 28 letters. The 24 letters or 26 letters or 28 letters enable us to build words and from the words to create a multitude of sentences. We create our language upon just a few letters. Therefore, our manner of thinking comes from this game of combinations. On the contrary, the Chinese and the Japanese do not have this; they learn the Kanji as it is. This very Kanji has got a precise signification; it speaks more by images than by association of words.”

For instance the character *YASUMU* 'to rest' comes from the

combination of two Chinese ideograms: the **man**  and

the **tree**  *moku*.

The character 'to rest' is created from a mind association.

休	キユウ	休日	きゅうじつ	holiday
	やす()	休む	やすむ	to rest
	6 strokes	休止	きゅうし	pause



The tree phonetically expresses stop, and also is a place to REST.

MAN RESTS UNDER A TREE

©1996 Rose Corp

Example taken from: <http://members.aol.com/rosecorp/index.html>

“When there is an image created in our mind, there is always a point of view, a concept attached to it. You can take ten persons and ask them to describe a garden; each one of them will describe something different, especially if they come from different cultures or different backgrounds. The description of an image is not logic; it is

personal. Besides, everything is captured in the Oriental mind by the play of colors, the play of forms, the play of images, the play of contrasts. It is a culture concerned with contrasts and who says contrasts says hidden, there is a first level, a second level, a third level of conceptualization. For instance, as in the example I mentioned earlier, the concept of 'resting', 'having a rest' implies a natural setting where men can lie on the base of a tree. At a second level, resting implies that the weather is clement. At a third level, it implies that the rest is taken during daytime. Now, each person can but imagine a tree of his own, with a different person under that tree, reclining in a different position. There is plenty of room for colors, scenarios, and improvisation.

If when there is an image, there is a point of view; when there is a metaphor, there is an ambiguity. A metaphor is basically the art of saying things without telling them; it is the art of saying something with an extra meaning added to it. Look at what happens in the Christian religion. Depending on who reads the Holy Bible, the interpretation is different. No wonder that monks used to rewrite and overwrite constantly during the Middle Ages! The presence of the image, of the metaphor, is at the base of the forks in the Christian religion.”

I gather from his comments that the Arabic language stands out of this obscurity. The proof is that Christians abandoned the Spanish

language, the Mozarabs, the Latin, for the sake of Arabic language in the Islamic territories of the Middle Ages. Since then, they never stopped speaking Arabic even if they never converted to Islam. Al-Biruni (XI C) pushed it to say that the Arabic translated into Persian: "loses all *éclat*, its meaning is eclipsed, its features are obscured, its utility effaced." Like the Kanji ideograms, Arabic words come from a root word. However, Arabic is a more precise language in a sense that the image is replaced by letters, but by letters with a great elasticity that can be drawn like images. I mean that every single word in Arabic has a very precise meaning, each one evokes an image much more precise than the images created by the Kanji's system of writing. Arabs have hundreds of words to describe for instance how one loves somebody. There is *wajd*, a strong unconditional love; *ichq*, a mad love; *razel*, a love that expresses itself through calligraphy, poetry, an act. And many other forms of love exist in Arabic, each form having a separate word to express it with a different root depending on the feeling we focus on. If it is very difficult for Japanese and Chinese to create new words, it is not the case in Arabic. European languages have affixes like "**-ing**" in English, meaning a progression in time, or "in" meaning something inner, but words are almost independent from each other and have different concepts. For example, even if 'like' and 'love' describe the same basic feeling, both words are written down

differently and they do not evoke any ideogrammic image that could connect them. The roots of the words are not very obvious. Unlike both Asian and European languages, Arabic has strong root words. This enables the native speakers to anchor what they say in deep meaning. For instance, the root K-T-B in relation with the writing gives successively KITAB-'book', KATIB-'writer' or MAKTAB-'office'. A writer is a person who writes books and an office is a place where books are eventually stored and utilized. Therefore, all words in Arabic have an intrinsic relation with a root word or concept.

As it is true for Eastern languages, the Arabic language is a vehicle to express feelings and emotions. All sorts of seemly idioms and artistic metaphors have been introduced in the Middle East language. The words were then used as ideographs, joining in the way the pictorial symbolic of remote Egypt. Like that, in Arabic, the moon referred to the luminosity, a tree branch to the tenderness or either the sand to the purity.



Image courtesy of

Similes and metaphors in Arabic suggest the virtues of a person. Natural objects are used to describe the depth feeling of love. So, we can find the image of the beloved woman compared to a moon resting on a branch of tree that fell on a sandy beach. This is the image of the loved one pure and untouched by the filth of the world.

The Middle Eastern poetry includes all the depth and the contrasts that one can find in the traditional Japanese Zen garden. In the traditional Eastern garden, a pine tree standing behind an artificial hill suggests a far away forest. Samely, a winding brook half hidden by the

surrounding vegetation suggests the infinite because of the reflections of the surrounding plants in it. And the particular attention the Japanese gardener gives to the alternate reflection of the sun and the moon into a pond suggests the meeting of two opposite worlds: the spiritual world and the terrestrial world.



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The impression of vastness, of vacuity present in the Zen garden reflects, in a sense, the Japanese writing. The shape of the letters evoke a tree, a brook, a pebble. The hand reproduces windy lakes as the brush plots inky stains and splashing tiny lines. There is at the same time a sense of the relieve and a sense of the correspondence between the real and the unreal, the brush stroke and the material world.

If one looks closely, it appears that the Japanese script tries to reproduce flowers' posies and abandoned fences. And no wonder since the ideograms actually represent natural objects in a extremely

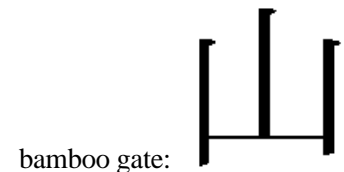
simplified way. The Zen garden is ornamented with wild Azaleas growing in thousands along trellised vines. These plants are usually gathered into three to four feet high salmon bushes. Very striking! The fences made of bamboo and of braided reeds, secured by straw shoots and tree barks are always loosely aired, allowing a large view over the background landscape. Can't anyone imagine the bamboo barriers forsaken on purpose like numerous calligraphies?

For example, the representation of the mountain



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in the Japanese mind became a symbol that looks like a barrier or a



Man (rèn)				
Woman (nǚ)				
Sun (rì)				
Moon (yuè)				
Above (shàng)				
Below (xià)				

Examples of the evolution of the Kanji through time

This evolution was not inherited by chance. The writer-artist of Kana is very much valued for his ability to KUZUSU, i.e., for breaking the characters, for his running handwriting. Sometimes, the scrolls are even illegible. In the same spirit, the Zen garden is not concerned with geometrical lines and is expected to inspire the scattering. The elusiveness has become in a way a virtue through the calligraphy."

I wandered about in Ibrâhim's flat. I paid attention to the great cultural encounter that took place between its walls. Here, the Arabic

calligraphy created to represent falling leaves, fruits, intertwined lianas had met the Kanji spiritual world.

A friend from China gave him an oval piece of wood trimmed with a red and coarsely-threaded weaving. On the pine wood, an upper pen plot represents the Bonzai; an inferior tracing represents rice grains. The ideogram reads: 'Peacefully'. 'Peace' in Japanese is written down

平和

with two compound characters reading: *heiwa*



Left:

(A calligraphy of the Arabic word 'peace,' -- salam)

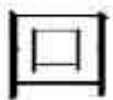
In a room nearby, Ibrâhim has hanged a calligraphy meaning to represent 'the Peace'

Calligraphy courtesy of Nihad

Dukhan: <http://www.ndukhan.com/>

It is the same word 'salam' that every Muslim say to each other upon meeting; it is the same root word for 'Islam'. He informs me that Islam is based upon the peace, the return to the peace. Interestingly, the

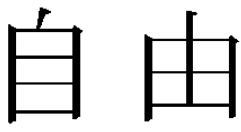
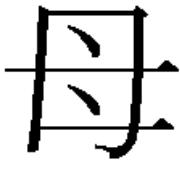


word *Hui*, describing people of the Chinese Muslim community --the Huighurs-- means 'return':



Hui

I finally decides to reproduce the different calligraphies I found in Ibrâhim's house. They are twin projects he has realized a few years ago for his friends.

The calligraphies read:

FREEDOM	MY MOTHER
<p><i>Jiyuu</i> </p>	<p><i>haha</i> </p>
<p><i>houryah</i> </p>	<p><i>ummi</i> </p>

Both Arabic calligraphies are courtesy of Nihad Dukhan:

<http://www.ndukhan.com/>

Most interestingly is the fact that there are two Zen gardens in the Japanese culture, one trying to reproduce the asymmetry of nature, and the other devoid of trees and of anything alive. Ibrâhim explains:

“What is the most important thing in one of the the Japanese gardens is the ground floor, strictly limited by walls, enclosed in a bigger garden or a grove. Inside a border of tiles, a square space is filled with white, small pebbles. We can see the evident scratches, one or two big rocks scatter the monotony of the geometric design, and people come to meditate on these scores. Looking at the scene, one travels through the Time and loses himself. This garden is like the features of the hand. Some people pretend they can read the past of a person just by looking at the palms of their hands. When we take the by-road to a Zen garden, it is like we take the footpath that leads to ourselves. And there, somewhere inside polluted climates, the race towards the economy without mercy, stands this world Zen. In it we are obliged to find a balance, to find ourselves and to recover our road. I find it beautiful! In people, what I always found, whether they were racing or not, the moment Zen was still alive; this instant Zen was shared inside, in silence. In the depth of this culture there was this garden, the garden of the heart!”



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Looking at his pictures of Japan where he was a stranger, ignorant of the culture, I have the feeling he captured something inexplicable. Now I ponder more about Japan. Is it not exactly this universe of contrasts, of rest that Ibrâhim describes, that one can perceive in the picture of geishas walking across a flux of cars, their head bowed down and their tiny fingers lifting the hem of their kimonos. Nobody is ever able to look into their face if they do not want to, and their time belongs to them. They are the butterflies of Japan, yet more and more ignored and brushed back in the past.



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I gaze at the yellow iris and coral rose and purple of the silken garment glistening in a world that did not see it anymore. They contrast so much with the modern world that time itself seems to stop abruptly when they pass. Even if women of entertainment, women of pleasure, one can but feel intimidated or touched by their dispense of purity, of

cleanliness, of grace and easiness. When I was there, in Japan, I did not see geishas as symbol of luxury, but as a necessity in a society that was slowly losing its values and traditions.

“The first time I saw a geisha, it was for me a world apart, a world I could have understood without acknowledging it. A geisha is at the same time this mild woman who reads poetry and this woman accompanist with whom you spend time. The Japanese worked so much on the notion of orientation, of eyesight and image that they became oversensitive to it. The kimonos of geishas are very bright, and they wear a thick white layer of paint over their face as in the *Noh* theater.

This make up was too much for me. I thought that even if I admired the notion of being entertained by an intelligent and knowledgeable woman, I could never be in contact with a Asian woman because they usually use a lot of make up. I feel personally aggressed by the Oriental colors, by the purple color so recurrent in the eastern cultures, and by everything that is dazzling brilliant and mingled. You go to their place, and even the smell of the cuisine is aggressive. Several odors mix garlic and boiled oil, and something else. I could never get used to it. In Morocco, the colors, the sun make them fade away. The fact that they live in a society, in a culture where clarity is very important, Arabs focus on making vanish everything aggressive to the senses. This is

expressed in all the way of life. An Arab would not tolerate strong odors or vibrant colors in his house. In food, spices were not known in the Occidental countries or in the Arabic countries for a long time; they were imported from Asia. Spices are also something strong brought from the East.”

And it is a fact that the colors in Japan seem to be endowed with life, with the notion of high status or dignity. Even the heroes of the *Noh* theater use them to parade like birds.

The interpreters move very slowly on the scene as in order to give only the faintest hint of movement. They recite mainly poetry pieces, but also prose from the 14th century upper class Japanese, inflected in such a way as to be comprehensible only to the scholars.

The first *Noh* plays were written during a time when complete self-annihilation in death was considered absolutely necessary in order to reach Nirvana in the Buddhist asceticism. Thus, many *Noh* plays are concerned with ghosts or spirits of people who are detained upon earth by their memories, unfulfilled passions or jealousies. It is only by giving up the self completely that they can reach eternal peace. Sutra read or prayers offered by priests were thought to help send straying ghosts to Nirvana. It was also believed that a person could be what he thought himself to be. Usually, only three actors play on the scene. Three pine sapplings are planted a little apart along the front of the bridge,

suggesting on the one hand the close approximation to Nature, and marking on the other the actor's progress between heaven, earth, and mankind. There is a narrow space on the ground along the side and front of the stage covered with sand and gravel; we are almost in the Zen garden again.

This because this art, inherited from the Japanese fourteenth century, is imbued from the start with a serious Buddhist tone. It is in a sense a theater of meditation; it compares to the Zen garden.



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I continue to look though Ibrâhim's photos.

Here and there, I saw people who spend days painting silk, arranging flowers (ikebana), people who pinch musical strings unriveted by a stream (a shamisen), a boat being ornamented with dazzling ribbons swinging in the wind, all these pictures talked about the old Japan, the cultural Japan. And all talked about the silence... about a thumping immobility."

This back side seems to be constantly present in Japan, this despite high technology and westernized habits. I see it also in the pictures of fossiles Ibrâhim brought back from the country of the Levant. They are beautiful, but fix, looking like seahorses mastered with three stems, so silent in their nudity! They seem to have been painted by ancient calligraphers. Marked by vibrant undertones --yellow, orange, blue and white-- marbled shellfishes caught the light of the photographer like the gentle colors of the geishas silken dresses.

This thumping immobility is again perceptible in the Zen garden of Kyoto where the temple Kinkaku-ji made of pure gold stands forever unruined amongst the scaled trees and the hundred colors of autumn.



金閣寺 *created in 1394.*

Kinkaku means 'Golden Pavilion.'

Author Unknown/DHD Photo Gallery

<http://www.hd.org/Damon/photos/index.html>

The edifice and the surrounding trees are perfectly arranged so that they reflect in the moving waters of the lake, sparkling and changing like in the mirror of a fairyland. Through the image of the golden temple, Japanese fishes so glisten, different in shapes and colors. They

come numerous to beg for crumbs of bread. Their mouths is gasping slightly as if to speak.

Ibrâhim took pictures where the shadows of Kyoto's garden were invaded by the beams of light crashing among the trees. There, flatted vine arbours ensure a few pine trees.

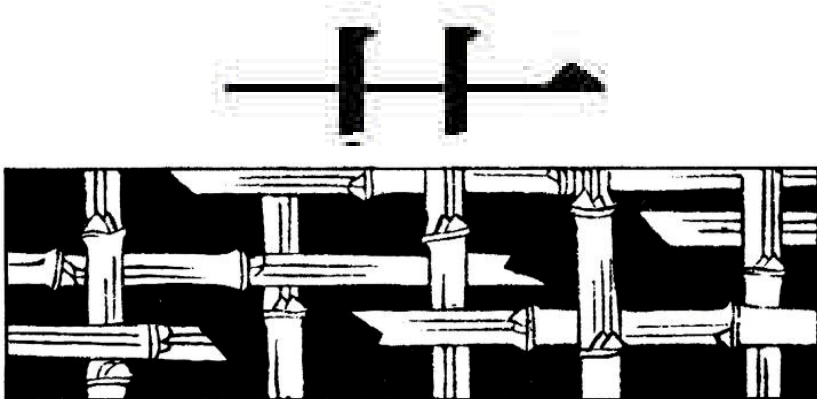


A several hundred of years old pine

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The bridges have staircases shaped like wheels or are settled with wooden planks. The gardeners have made sure one can admire the

landscape from its every angle. There, the most apparent stone is the one completely hidden by moss and symbolizing a protector spirit. There again tender rose flowers split on the roofs, adding to the gradations of green dark and fair green of the trees. The pebbles are washed daily, the paths swept out, weeds cut and the sick trees attended. The fruits are cut early to let all its vitality to the tree. A lot of stones are arranged to form birds flying patterns, giving a terrestrial answer to the sky. Flat rocks show the road. Under the freshness of the waterfalls, the willows lay on pillars, the fresh air breathing at ease all around. A range of bowed reeds leads to the paper made temples, stressing the emotion from a far distance ahead and elevating the spirit inch by inch. The reeds seem to have been shaped to form Chinese character such as the one representing either the flower, the leave or the grass.



Bamboo fence



Japanese script



Arabic (Islamic) script saying:

“There is no deity but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah”
 All three images are ? 2000-2001 <http://www.arttoday.com>

Ibrâhim concludes:

“I watched all in that garden and I spent a beautiful moment because I wanted to know what was hidden behind all this. Is the Zen no more or less than a vibration of something inner? When you utter the word Zen, it resounds Z, there is the *zzze* and the *nnne*. The word begins by a resonance and ends by a resonance, it is really the sense of the Buddhism, of this Oriental culture where someone beats something

and we hear the harmonics. I asked myself about the harmonic. Isn't that sound that we propagate, that is spreading and that we repeat, a confined vision, a vision purely physical of the harmonics, a periodic phenomenon? It is as if ourselves we need to go to and fro, to turn and return to find again the road, to know the way by heart, in order not to get lost. This periodicity of the memory, this periodicity of the soul, this periodicity even of the concept and of the feelings... And what I experienced... I spent moments in this Zen garden looking at the visitors coming and going and I often asked myself the *question Can I have the courage to take pictures?* but in that case, my harmonics are breaking down! What a dilemma! I was looking at the visitors and I was looking at myself. It was no more no less than a form of Zen, of a turn and return between two worlds, a means to find oneself again.”



A Japanese traditional penmanship.

It appears very similar in shape to an Arabic calligraphy.

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For further research, see:

Kouichi Honda, international Arabic calligraphy artist since 30 years (article CNN: August 24, 2000)

In traditional works, lines from a poem or the Koran are surrounded by colorful, arabesque designs.

But Honda's works have little decoration, much like Japanese calligraphy, and focus more on the swooshes and swirls of the Arabic letters themselves. Honda's works are often large enough to cover entire walls while traditional works are smaller wall-hangings.

Unlike classical Japanese calligraphy, which is written on a plain or pastel background, Honda's work is often set on vivid backgrounds.