

# A Kenyan in Japan

**PLACE a Kenyan in the heart of Japan and what do you have? For Mr. George Mathu, who was on a 30-day study tour, Japan produced an "overwhelming" effect. Mr. Mathu, who is with the Institute of African Studies, tells NANCY OWANO why.**

MR. George Mathu, a research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, is back from a one month's visit to Japan, more convinced than ever that "we have more in common with Japan than we do with the West".

"It is difficult," Mr. Mathu said, "to explain what an overwhelming effect my trip to Japan has had on my outlook. My study of Japanese culture, the educational system, and my perspective on human conditions has broadened and deepened."

Kenya was his window on their world. He saw similar and varying reflections. He saw that Japanese people are culture-conscious. They are respectful of the high ideals of controlling human relationships. They are determined to preserve a way of life amid dizzying technical change. While the rituals and behaviour patterns are distinct, the motives ring an African

bell:

"Every person shares the struggle to improve himself and live a happy and fulfilling life."

His visit was through a grant from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. His host was a professor of the Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo.

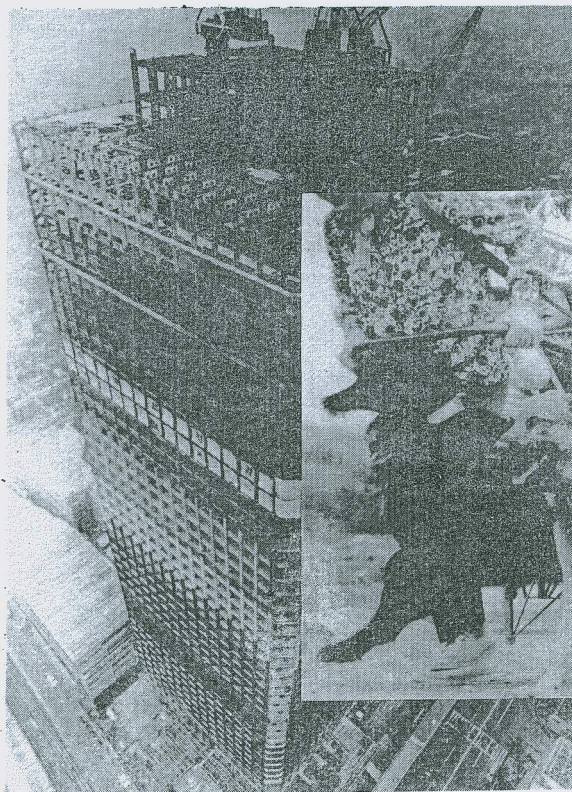
Mr. Mathu was on an educational tour. He trekked from cities to towns to villages (mini-urban centres like Kisumu and Nakuru.)

He went from local museums to a bear training farm to research institutes to out-of-the-way restaurants where English was as familiar as Japanese would be on River Road.

"I survived the ordeal, that feeling of being a stranger in a strange place. One sees oneself as small, next to nothing. No matter how many degrees or what the rank, you struggle for a glass of water."

It was the language problem.

At one local restaurant, he pointed with his finger to someone's dish at a nearby table. The waiter nodded and



**THE old and the new: A 40-stories skyscraper in the heart of Tokyo, while the fishing community of Susaki still uses a wagon powered by two dogs and a housewife to carry nursery children to school.**

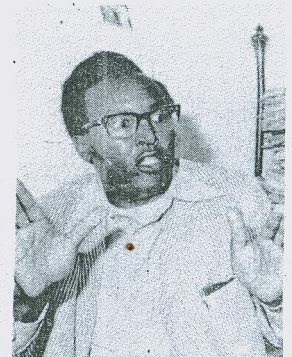


Africanists in Japan, meanwhile, are a small circle within a huge population ignorant about Africa's cultural heritage. (At one place, Mr. Mathu had the distinction of being the first African to step foot in that city.)

"But nobody cares about your colour. The kids are curious but that is as far it goes. In fact you first get the feeling that nobody is paying attention to you as you walk in the streets alone. You feel so tall and big and here are these busy, time-conscious people and you are the one in their way."

One refreshing departure for a Kenyan's eyes: In that month Mr. Mathu never saw a road accident. Despite the mammoth population and traffic accidents are few compared with other cities in the world of the same population density.

"When a Japanese man is drunk he does not drive," Mr. Mathu said. "And if you see a Japanese man being arrested by police, you can see the pain on his face. It's considered an awful, shameful situation. He feels disgraced."



"I wrote on anything available if I didn't have my notebook with me."

Where words were not enough, Mr. Mathu sketched interiors of homes and ceremonies.

A most significant development in Japanese scholarship is the growing number of Japanese "Africanists".

At the Institute of Developing Economics, Kiswahili is taught as a subject. Japanese Fellows are researching all parts of Africa.

At the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures, Tokyo University School of Foreign Studies, he found "enormous volumes related to African studies".

There he said he met "the first Japanese converted to Christianity while on his research trip to Kenya".

At the Institute of Tropical Medicine of Nagasaki University, he met 20 scientists who did research in Kenya, many of whom plan to return here to do further research on liver diseases.

"All over Japan, African studies are progressing very fast," he said, his eyes concentrating on a pair of Japanese chopsticks on his desk.

"I noticed an enormous amount of enthusiasm on the part of Japanese scholars. Unfortunately many expressed disappointment when forced by circumstance to run to the British Embassy to apply for a visa to come to Kenya.

"When will your government change its attitude and establish a diplomatic mission with Japan?" they would ask me."

Japan, he reported, is willing to train university students and to exchange scholars. Presently Japan has five Kenyan students, he added.

"And he reported that a significant step has been taken at Kyoto University, where a proposal was made to set up a Centre of African Studies with offices in Nairobi and Zaire.

"We at the University of Nairobi should welcome opportunities of participating in exchange programmes with Japanese universities. But it should be a two-way traffic and not where the majority of Japanese scholars dominate the entire show."

brought him the same food. But the snag came when it was time to pay. "How much?" Mr. Mathu asked, forgetting the language gap. Apparently there was a Japanese speciality that sounds like "How much?" They brought him another dish of food.

Finally Mr. Mathu took out his money and made a questioning gesture with his hands.

**MR. GEORGE Mathu of IAS: Language gaps and laced shoes did nothing to reduce his overwhelming impression of Japan.**

Mr. Mathu (who was former director of the institute) and others at IAS are interested in university ties between Kenya and Japan. In the past the exchanges have been among high level scholars. Now Mr. Mathu would like to see exchanges among under-graduates as well.

"Academic exchanges should not always be between Africa and the West."

As for human exchanges, Mr. Mathu and his notebook speak: The Japanese on the most part, he found, are kind and ritual-minded. "I had shoes with laces and I wish I hadn't. Now I know why Japanese men prefer the slipper-type shoes. Off the shoes come so many times a day, before entering a home, or office."