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 officially," 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 the world. He saw similar and varying reflections. He saw that Japanese people are "culturally conscious. They are respectful of the high ideals of controlling human relationships. They are determined to preserve a way of life amid dangerous 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 Japanese 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 (mid-urban center like Kinshu and Nara).

He went from local museums to a bee-keeping farm to research institutes and 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 land. 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.

As one local restaurant, he pointed with his finger to someone's fish at a nearby table. The waiter nodded and bought him the same food. But the drag came when it was time to pay. How much?" Mr. Mathu asked. Getting the language gap apparently there was a Japanese specialty that sounded like "omnomom. They brought him unagi, i.e. dish of eel.

Finally Mr. Mathu took out his rupee and made a guffawing gesture with his hands.

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

"When we won't only 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, Kinshu University is taught as a subject. Japanese Fellows are researching all parts of Africa.

At the Institute for the Study of Language and Culture, Tokyo University School of Foreign Studies, he found "numerous 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 30 students who did research in Kenya, many of whom plan to return here to do further research on liver disease.

"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 and students. I would express disappointment when forced by circumstance to return 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 was taken when the University of Nairobi, where a proposal was made, agreed to grant the Institute of African Studies with offices in Nairobi and Zaire.

"As 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."

Of course Mr. Mathu was not a running commentary, but a travelling scholar. Japan's academic ties with Africa are a major focal point of his visit as well as his personal assessments of the Japanese people.

During our interview, Mr. Mathu withdrew a large black notebook from his pocket. Turned in, scrape of paper slid out of the pages filled with handwritten notes.

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African artists in Japan, meanwhile, are a small circle within a huge population. Mr. Mathu notes that African art and culture might have a foothold in the visiting world and many Japanese are interested in the work of the first African to stop foot in this city."

"But nobody cares about you. The kids are curious but not so far as goes. In fact you just get the feeling that nobody is paying attention to you as you walk in the streets alone. You feel a little like a has-been, a has-been who's lost, from time to time, and you wonder what's going on in the world of the popula-

"When a Japanese man drinks, he doesn't drive," Mr. Mathu said. "And if you are a Japanese man being arrested by police, you see the pain on his face. It's considered an awful, shameful situation. He feels discharged."

Mr. Mathu's Japanese mother was a student at IAS. Language and food 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 ties between Kenya and Japan. In the past the exchange've been among high level scholars. Now Mr. Mathu would like to see exchanges among undergraduates as well.

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

As for human exchanges, Mr. Mathu and his notebooks speak. The Japanese on the most part, he found, are kind and considerate people. I had shoes with lace and I wish I hadn't. I know why Japanese men prefer the Japanese type shoes. Off the shoes come in tens. "I come a day, before entering a home, or office."

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