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Is It a Small World After All?

Cultural differences between Japanese and Mexicans

By Kat Avila | Web Published 8.5.2003

"What contrasts and/or similarities do you notice between Japanese / Mexican / Chicano cultures?"

-- L.A. Chicano soon to be stationed at a U.S. military base in Japan

"The Japanese are repressed," my father would say. "Mexicans have too many children," my mother would say. And I would think, well, you could argue the Japanese were not repressed but disciplined. As for the "too many children" thing, tell that to the Pope.

I grew up in a multicultural/religious family, but many of my observations of cultural differences between Japanese and Mexicans/Chicanos are drawn from my experiences as a teacher of English to immigrants and foreign students in California. The largest groups I have worked with are Mexicans, Vietnamese, Japanese, Koreans, and Brazilians. In Guadalajara, Mexico, I did a limited amount of practice teaching. Presently I'm working in Tokyo, Japan, for an English conversation school.

When I'm around Chicanos/Mexicans, I stand closer and I'm unafraid to express strong emotions. Being loud is not a problem, though it's not considered ladylike. It feels good hugging my friends to say hello and goodbye.



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Being in Japan, I've had to remind myself not to stand so close and to keep my hands to myself (no friendly backslapping or patting on the arm). You'll be reminded of the proper social distance when you notice your new Japanese friends backing away from you. If you forget yourself and hug a Japanese person in appreciation for a kindness, you'll be rewarded with a look of horror as I was.

Being a person who likes to be direct and honest in my communication, I don't like having to rein in my emotions. However, in Japan, a person who is richly expressive -- vocally, facially, and gesturally -- is viewed negatively. Such a person is looked at as having lost self-control, or even worse, that he/she is crazy. (Tsk! Tsk! That's a "gaijin" [foreigner] for you. They're such barbarians!) It's expected that protestations of personal inconvenience be swallowed to preserve the ever precious social harmony.

Periods of silence in a conversation or the breaking off of eye contact should not make you think the other party has lost interest. If you're intuitive by nature, you'll pick up that much communication in Japan is subtle and takes place on a nonverbal level. This can be very frustrating, sort of like a guy not being able to figure out what his girlfriend wants from him.

Hand gestures are a bit different. Our O.K. sign is the Japanese shorthand for money. Their gesture for "Come here" is waving with the palm downward, not palm upward. They count on their hands differently. Also, Japanese businessmen sometimes use their middle finger to point out things on a page or to adjust their eyeglasses,

and I've had to resist feeling like I was being flipped off.

You might be stared at a lot. It depends. If you look indigenous Mexican, you may be able to pass as Japanese. (Surprise! Japanese don't all look alike, and their skin is not yellow but more on the translucent side.) Even if no one is staring at you, you will still feel like someone is, probably due to self-recognition that you are a "gaijin" intruder in a relatively homogeneous society.

Latino time is not in use in Japan. If you have an appointment with a Japanese salaryman at 12 noon, then your arrival at 11:45 a.m. is considered punctual. To give you another example, I was docked in pay at work because I punched in exactly when my shift starts. In California, it's considered on time; in Japan, you're late.

No tipping in Japan! Hurray! But occasionally you'll see a service charge automatically added to a bill at a posh place. That's normal.

If you are an English-Spanish bilingual speaker, the pronunciation of Japanese words will come easily as Japanese uses the same vowels as Spanish and is a syllabic language. You'll sound much more like a native than your average American speaker.

"Pan" in Japanese means "bread" as it does in Spanish, but "kasa" is Japanese for umbrella while "casa" with the same pronunciation is "house" in Spanish. Useful to know is there are a number of English words that have been adapted into the Japanese language. Many signs, such as train station signs, are in both Japanese and English.

There are many other things that I can mention on this subject of cultural differences. However, part of

the fun is uncovering them for
yourself.

*Kat Avila
(buscandocalifornia@yahoo.com) is
looking for another job and trying to
stay out of trouble in Tokyo, Japan.*

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(323) 259-0388 Fax (310) 496-2972 info@latinola.com

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