7. SPIRITUALITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES: STUDY OF KOTOTAMA AND DECOLONIZATION IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

INTRODUCTION

The ability to acknowledge, understand and feel wholeness and connection within oneself, as well as interconnectedness with other creatures, nature and the universe, might be one of the abilities that we have forgotten over colonial history, throughout which we have been compelled to focus enormously on our body and mind. The human mind registers like and dislikes based on the information that we receive from seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting. I do not deny this characteristic of the mind. In fact, through this process our minds can enjoy various pictures, drawings, music and food, which can cause us to experience happiness and relaxation. However, it is also the mind, an unbalanced mind, which labels likes or dislikes based only on what it can perceive. For example, when we see a beautiful flower (by own perception) that has an unpleasant smell (for us individuals), how many of us understand that the object is a manifestation of the Creator before judging whether we like or dislike it? Can we understand or even try to understand the manifestation beyond what we can sense? This unbalanced mind also may create the spaces which make discrimination justifiable based on race, ability, sex, sexuality, and age. How many hours in a day do we usually focus on what we cannot see, hear, smell, or taste? Have we even learned how to focus on something that we cannot perceive? Ancestors in Japan maintained their balanced mind with “cosmic consciousness” which came through their understanding of the principle of “Kototama” (Shimada, 1993, 1995).

Regarding “Kototama”, I refer to a study by a Japanese researcher, Emoto Masaru,(2004a; 2004b; 2007) in order to explore the impact of vibrating energy on oneself, others, and other creatures. I argue that Emoto’s experiments with water crystal, which I will refer to later in this chapter, open up a possibility of making the Indigenous knowledge of Kototama appealing to a wider audience, despite the fact that it has been taken as illegitimate knowledge, as can be seen in the many criticisms about it. I hope this chapter will be read as a possibility and a reflection on ourselves and our society, rather than a claim to the “truth”. I write this in order to avoid a discussion which would further create the space for any “colonization of truth and the creation of an edifice of power, control and privilege” (Fernandes, 2003, p. 20).
The Japanese Indigenous worldview is based on the idea that everything, including animated and inanimate beings, has a soul or spirit, and emphasizes living with oneself, others, other creatures, nature, and the universe in harmony. Japanese ancestors understood that human beings are all part of and nurtured by nature. Those ancestors knew that they could not control nature, rather they found expressions of the creator in nature. The understanding that we are all part of and nurtured by nature and that collective works by community members sustain our lives are evoked in various practices in daily lives. For example, in Japanese culture, before we start eating every meal, we say “Itadakimasu” (いただきます), by which we give thanks for all the food,” and when we finish, we say “Gochisousama” (ごちそうさま), which in addition to the food we give thanks for all the processes, and the work that we have done in the preparation for food, with our hands in the prayer position. These gestures express the understanding that what we eat is provided by nature and will be part of our bodies. We never forget to give thanks for the connections among human beings and among nature. The energy produced through each thanksgiving from the hearts to each other and towards nature important components to sustain a community in harmony.

The worldview that is grounded in the idea that everything is alive is often called “animism”. E. B. Tylor originally coined the term (as cited in Clammer, 2001). Tylor suggests that animism contains the essence of spiritualistic philosophy and that this is the primitive form of religion. However, his naming, categorizing, and defining of the belief is arguably problematic. His perspective ignores the complexities and diversity within the worldview. It is not a primitive form of “religion”. This Indigenous worldview has been embedded in our daily lives for thousands of years as part of our understanding of ecology. In relation to Japanese Indigenous worldview, “Shinto” (the way to the Creator) as a belief system is often seen as a “religion” by many scholars today. Although “Shinto” is generally categorized as a religion of Japanese origin, the word Shinto (神道) itself means “the way to the Creator” in Japanese.

Systematized and bureaucratized “State Shinto” was strategically brought in during the Meiji period (since 1866). In the late nineteenth century, as the Meiji restoration started, the Japanese government imposed it upon the localized and diversified forms of Shinto known as “Ko-shinto” (old Shinto or folk Shinto) and Shrine Shinto, expressed and seen, for example, in the various local festivals, arts, forms of healings. According to Clammer (2001), the Japanese government sought to unify people’s consciousness in order to aid their fight towards global competitiveness, socially, politically and economically. Thus, a belief system was used to create a national collective identity based on a common belief system and everyday practices, and thereby colonize the minds of Japanese people, rather than enrich their understanding of their lives (Clammer, 2001). It is important to keep in mind that while the belief system has been used to construct the organized religion, the belief systems with local diversities within it can be still found in communities. Before I go into further discussion about Kototama, I would like to define my understanding of the concept of spirituality, as the mechanisms of Kototama and