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Group-Think Meets Individualism: The Saga of Dr. Masao Miyamoto and the Japanese Bureaucracy

by JPRI Staff and Masao Miyamoto

Dr. Masao Miyamoto was born in 1948 in Tokyo and graduated from Nihon University Medical College. In 1975, after a year of postgraduate work in pathology, he moved to the U.S., where he spent three years doing postgraduate work in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In addition to practicing psychiatry in New York, he also taught for six years at Cornell Medical College and New York Medical College. In 1986, he returned to Japan for family reasons and became Deputy Director of the Mental Health Division of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Not surprisingly, his eleven years' residence in the U.S., his psychoanalytic training, and his puckish sense of humor had ill-prepared him for the clannish, rigid world of Japan's bureaucracy. In 1992, he began to write a series of amusing and insightful articles about his experiences in and observations of the bureaucracy, which were published in the magazine Gekkan Asahi. These articles caused great outrage among his superiors and led to his first demotion: he was made director of quarantine for the Port of Tokyo, a previously nonexistent position. In April 1993, the articles were published as a book-Oyakusho no Okite (Code of the Bureaucrats)-and surprised the author by becoming a best-seller. He seemed to have hit a raw nerve of public irritation with officious, obstructionist, haughty bureaucrats. But even as he was being interviewed in the magazines and invited to air his views on Japanese TV talk-shows, his ministry was closing ranks against him. As he has subsequently written in various speeches he has graciously made available to JPRI:

One of the director generals [of the ministry] already told me that I should resign at once after I revealed the working conditions in the ministry in an article. He said, "Dr. Miyamoto, you and I have a different religion. I was fully aware of your long stay in America, and I thought that you just needed an adjustment period. But we are too far apart. You are an alien. Many people view you as a heretic." So I said to him, "Analyzing our relationship from a social-psychological point of view, you are absolutely correct. But that does not mean that I should resign. After all, the ministry is not the Kremlin. We are supposedly running a democratic administration." But the word 'alien' or 'heretic' quite rightly describes anyone who goes against the established traditions or group orientation of Japan.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare's position was also reflected in the fact that since the publication of *Oyakusho no Okite*, the ministry had evaded all comment on the contents of my book. It is a tragedy that as much as the book has received widespread support in the

mass media and from readers, it has not stimulated debate within the ministry. The ministry simply said that what I published was personal opinion. Instead of reflecting on the problems I pointed out, it just tried to get rid of me.

The pressure on me became relentless. In September of 1993, a ministry official asked a pathology professor from the medical school in Japan where I studied over 20 years ago, to take me on as a faculty member. While I had studied there as a graduate student, it would be ridiculous for me to become a faculty member in pathology, when my specialty is psychoanalysis.

In March of 1994, the order came for me to transfer to Kobe. However, given my family situation-the fact that my mother had suffered a stroke and needed daily supervision-I told the ministry that I could not accept the transfer. But if I did not obey the transfer order they could fire me. Therefore, since I wanted to continue my struggle to help the bureaucracy change, I decided to go to Kobe.

What was waiting for me in Kobe was harassment. I had been transferred many times before, but when I first went to the Kobe quarantine office, which is located in a remote, isolated area, I felt like I had entered a prison.

Let me describe my first day in the office. Not a single person smiled greetings at me, and I was given the following orders:

“Do not accept any incoming phone calls, and use a public phone for all personal calls.”
“Arrive promptly at 8:30 in the morning and do not leave before 5:00 p.m. Lunch is to be taken from 12:00 to 1:00 sharp.” “Do not leave for an appointment without first getting special permission.” “Any incoming faxes that are not related to quarantine work will be destroyed.” A few weeks after I arrived in Kobe, I recognized that several of my letters had been opened. I told my superiors that they had violated the law, and I threatened them with prosecution. They stopped opening my mail. Despite this harassment, which my lawyer claims is a violation of my human rights as embodied in the constitution, the ministry insisted that this was just a routine personnel transfer.

In September 1994, Kodansha published Miyamoto's book in English, under the title Straitjacket Society. The dust-jacket carries a blurb by James Fallows, who wrote:

[This] is an extraordinary book-funny, touching, and politically insightful all at the same time. Dr. Masao Miyamoto has uncovered crucial truths not just about Japan's modern predicament but about the larger struggle between big, rigid organizations and quirky, irrepressible individuals worldwide. This book will be an enjoyable if poignant read for anyone interested in the way individuals can fight back against the bureaucracies that often threaten to squash them.

For Miyamoto personally, life at his ministry became even more difficult. In November, 1994, he writes:

I was asked to be the keynote speaker at a conference sponsored by the U.S. Library of Congress the following April, but the Japanese bureaucracy expressed its concern that maybe I was not the most appropriate speaker for this conference. They tried to remove me as keynote speaker but failed. However, I was also supposed to speak at the annual meeting of the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching, but the organizer's funding was threatened by the Japanese government, and they cancelled my speech. Recently I spoke to the head of a Japanese TV production agency and she informed me that top TV executives had been pressured by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, a major sponsor of several TV stations, not to let me appear on their programs. These incidents indicate that the bureaucracy is fearful of having the reality of Japan known to non-Japanese, and it is a sign that the system's existence is threatened. Ironically, these incidents only strengthen the validity of my comments, contrary to the bureaucracy's intention of discrediting me.

Finally, in February 1995, the ministry fired Miyamoto. He is, today, a ronin on the world-wide lecture circuit, and JPRI plans soon to publish an article it has commissioned from him on Aum Shinrikyo. But until then, readers will have to be content with his book and this delicious anecdote from a lecture he first gave on June 15, 1995, to the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan:

In the last three years, I have been called a member of the revisionist school. The revisionists are known for stating that the Japanese are different from Westerners, socially, politically and economically. I do not consider myself a revisionist, but I must say that Japan as a system is quite different from the West. How different? Japan is a conformist society.

Let me give you an example. The following incident took place at the Akasaka Prince Hotel. It was around 6 p.m. and I was waiting to meet a friend. He had asked me to wait for him at the bar on the top floor. Since I arrived early I sat at the counter. A waiter came and asked what I would like to drink. I noticed an open bottle of white wine in an ice-bucket behind the counter, and the following was our dialogue:

“I would like to have a glass of white wine.”

“I’m sorry but we can’t offer you white wine. “

“Why can’t I have a glass of white wine?”

“It’s not on the drink list.”

“But I see an open bottle of white wine right over there.”

“I will bring you a wine list and you can choose a bottle from there.”

“But I only want a glass of wine.”

“I’m afraid you will have to order a bottle.”

“But all I want is a glass of wine.”

“ . . . ” (Silence)

“Why can’t I have a glass from the bottle which is already open?”

“I’m sorry, I will have to talk to my superior.”

After waiting for a couple of minutes, the waiter came back with a man in a tuxedo.

“Sir, I’m sorry but we do not offer wine by the glass in this bar.”

“If that’s the case, why is there an open bottle of white wine over there?”

He goes to the bartender, who whispers into his ear, then returns to me.

“That wine is used to make cocktails.”

“What kind of cocktails?”

“The cocktail is called Kir. We mix it with Cassis liqueur, sir.”

“I see. Okay, then give me a Kir without the Cassis.”

The floor manager thought about it for a second, with a slightly perplexed look on his face.

“I’m sorry but we cannot do that.”

“Why not?”

His look of perplexity increased.

“I will have to speak to the assistant manager of the hotel. Please excuse us.”

I waited for about five minutes, and a gray-haired man came. His first comment was, “We are trying to accommodate your request as much as possible, but up until now nobody has made this kind of request.”

“Well, you should be happy that I’m setting a precedent for you. Charge me for the price of the cocktail, but just give me a glass of wine.”

“You see, we’re happy to accommodate you with anything from the drink menu, but I regret to inform you that we don’t offer anything not on the menu. It’s our policy.”

“You just told me that your job is to accommodate guests’ requests as much as possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t think I’m requesting anything outrageous. All I want is a glass of white wine, and there is an open bottle right in front of us. I don’t understand your inflexibility.”

“ . . . ” (Silence)

“You run a first-class hotel.”

“Thank you sir.”

“I believe that the first thing you learn in hotel management course is to try to accommodate guests’ needs.”

“You’re absolutely right sir.”

“So don’t you think that granting my request would be staying within the principle of good hotel management?”

“That is correct, sir.”

“So if I’m correct, why can’t you offer me a glass of white wine?”

The assistant manager, with a strained smile on his face, replied,

“Okay, we will offer you a glass of white wine, but please understand that it will be only for today.”

I finally got what I wanted, but it took more than 15 minutes. This is just one example, but this kind of rigid behavior is rampant in Japanese society. This rigidity reminds me of patients who exhibit symptoms of frequent hand-washing, which is often diagnosed as obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is difficult to think that so many people in Japan have neurotic symptoms. In fact, most people I meet privately do not exhibit any signs of neurosis; they are normal individuals. The question then is why do these people become rigid in an official setting? My answer to this question is that it is not the people, but the system, that is neurotic.

The problem lies with the bureaucrats, the architects of Japan, Inc., since they are not aware of their illness and they continue to educate, or to be more fashionable, to “mind control” the people. Once people are in a group setting, they become disciples of Japan, Inc. In the case of the incident at the Akasaka Prince Hotel, the assistant manager’s job, instead of accommodating customers’ needs, is to keep customers within the bounds of the existing rules and regulations.