

AURA Contemporary Art Foundation
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1 From the Seabed - Osaka and Zomia -

I have always been drawn to the mountainous regions of the Mekong, to the ethnic minorities who are today's "Zomia", to their animistic ideas and beliefs, and have continued to collect their artwork as my intuition dictates. The mountainous region is connected by the Mekong River, to the fertile Mekong Delta, sandbars, and finally the sea, which in turn connects to Osaka, Japan. Meanwhile, the delta formed by the Yodo and Yamato Rivers spreads out in front of Osaka Bay. I am convinced that the reason why artists from the Mekong region, and I, are drawn to each other is because we are connected through our ancient genes.

The term "Zomia" refers to the mountainous areas of mainland Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar), southern China and their people. It was defined by the Dutch historian Willem Van Schendel after the Tibetan and Myanmarese word "Zomi" (highlanders). They are a small group of people who live in an egalitarian society, believe in animism, and escape any kind of state control such as taxation, military service, or slavery. There are theories that some of the ancestors of Zomia are modern Zomians who were forced to leave the plains and migrated to mountainous areas, while others fled to the sea and continued to migrate as the "Water Zomians" .

The ancient city of Osaka is described in Shinichi Nakazawa's "Osaka Earth Diver" as starting from the bottom of the water, and the center of Osaka, such as Semba, a place that sprang up from the bottom of the sea. Osaka can be said to be the easternmost place in the world of "Zomia" which was created from the bottom of the sea by the Water Zomians, who left the monocultural world of the Asian continent on the foundation created by the Jomon people at the foot of Mount Ikoma. The vitality and strength of the people of Osaka may be a remnant of the wildness that Zomians possess as descendants of the Water Zomia.

Osaka, born from the bottom of the sea, is a collection of sandbars created by the sediment of the seashore. The sandbars created a "world of great compassion" . According to Hajime Nakamura's book, "The Words of Buddha - Suttanipata", Buddha said the following about sandbars:

"No possession.
Don't get attached to it.
This is the sandbar, of course.
I call it nirvana.
It is the annihilation of old age and death."

Osaka has been tolerantly accepting the unrelated people since ancient times. In the Middle Ages, Prince Shotoku attempted to unite with the defeated Mononobe Moriya in Osaka, and since the Warring States period, Osaka has had a broad-minded attitude to accepting generals of defeated armies. The depth of Osaka's broad-minded attitude and the softness and gentleness of the "flexible" Osaka people are still evident in modern and contemporary Osaka, as described in "Teibon Semba Monogatari" by Kikuo Koumura and "Osaka Semba - Okami no Saikaku" by Yasuyo Araki. This characteristic of Osaka and Osaka people may have originated from the "world of great compassion" created by the sandbar.

On the other hand, the amount of water in the Mekong River fluctuates greatly depending on the wet and dry seasons, and sandbars are born and disappear. The aforementioned characteristics of Osaka also have something in common with the people of the Mekong who live in such a world.

Osaka, as a commercial capital, created the soil for the establishment of capitalism in such a "great compassionate world" . Ocean currents and money continue to flow together. The genes of the "Water Zomians", who were skilled in controlling the flow of tides in ancient times, exert their strength in the world of capitalism, where commodities and money flow. The center of the capitalism for these "Water Zomians" was Semba. You can get a glimpse of Semba's unique world of apprentices and Osaka merchants in Mataji Miyamoto's vast documents, and experience its unique world vividly in novels such as Sakunosuke Oda's "Semba no Musume" and Toyoko Yamazaki's "Bonchi" . Osaka Tanimachi culture is also unique. Osaka people such as Konosuke Matsushita, and today, Takero Obayashi, have inherited the lineage of Tanimachi culture, and created the philosophy of Semba merchants, which do not use money for personal gain, but use it for the "harmony" of society. The philosophy of Prince Shotoku, "harmony is to be valued", has been passed down from generation to generation in Semba, Osaka.

2 A New Ocean Current: Semba Capitalism and Globalization

With this context in mind, can we present Semba Capitalism, from Osaka, to the world as a new concept? The hint for this may be found in the exhibiting artists of the Mekong, the "Zomia people".

Serge Latouche, a French philosopher who has done fieldwork in Laos, in his book "Degrowth" says: "to argue against the idea of growth from the fundamental is a ridiculous idea", and he is right. In order to maintain the foundation of society, economic resources are necessary.

In this respect, globalization, which is deeply connected to modern capitalist society, is often the subject of criticism. However, for the artists of the Mekong, who are constantly subjected to restrictions on their freedom of expression, such as censorship by the state, without a global world they would not be able to express themselves freely in the first place.

Mekong artists have been successfully crossing the vanishing boundary between the local and global worlds, connecting them in equal measure. For example, fortunately or unfortunately, there is no contemporary art market in Cambodia, so their works are destined to live in the global world from birth. They are touring the world and exporting their value to the whole world as a life-sized storyteller of Cambodia.

However, what is common in all of their works is localism. They spend more time on this than anything else, extracting the essence of the locality, digging up the local climate, history and culture, etc., down to the level of thousands or tens of thousands of years. Then, they make it strong enough not to deteriorate in the global world, and export it to the world as it is. They do not modify their works to fit the market. They do not compete for the market. They are not even interested in competing in the market. Their market is worldwide, and it is based on an economic cycle founded on universal sympathizers somewhere in the world.

These artists continue to support the foundation of their communities by giving back their consideration to the local communities represented by "Ruangrupa" in Indonesia and "Sa Sa Art Projects" in Cambodia. For example, the artists in this exhibition, Lyno Vuth, Khvay Samnang and Lim Sokchanlina, are founding members of the Sa Sa Art projects. The project organizes exhibitions, residencies, and workshops; produces alternative media such as magazines and online journals; and, has established an art lab to conduct research and studies on urban issues and phenomena. Furthermore, it is also involved in business and educational programs such as commercial gallery functions, artwork management, and production. It is interesting to note that the group is not limited to those with traditional art education, but also includes people with experience in other fields such as economics, law, and cultural anthropology. Although the organization is small, the Cambodian international artists return the proceeds from the global world to the activities of the community, thereby creating a self-sustaining community and a cyclical ecosystem.

I believe that the worldview of the community formed by these Mekong artists is exactly the same as that of Semba Capitalism. It is inevitable for the world that Ruangrupa will appear as the artistic director of Documenta 15 on behalf of the Asian art collectives, and there are many seeds of this in the Mekong region. I am convinced that Osaka, which has the same soil, sense of the world, and genes, will also plant such seeds.

3 Conclusion

Shouldn't Osaka send out ideas and philosophies that go beyond this kind of capitalism and globalization/localization?

The aforementioned Latouche says of the role of art that "all art has a power similar to magic", and that "animism is the only ideology that respects things and the environment, and what is important is to regenerate the intuition and ability to be astonished and moved by the presence of the beauty of the world." I strongly sympathize with the content. The idea of animism is embedded deep in our genes. In this sense, we, the Zomia people can play a key role in what Latouche calls the "re-magicization of the world" (rediscovering the value of the sacred things and restoring the ability to be moved and amazed by beauty), and it can be the existence to create the ocean current in the world once again.

I was born in a hospital in Nishisanjo, Osaka in 1988. My grandfather on my mother's side worked for Matsushita Electric Industrial (Panasonic Corporation) in Kadoma, and my mother moved to Nanki-Shirahama in Wakayama Prefecture as an orca trainer, perhaps because of her Osaka "Water Zomia" blood. I also grew up there. After graduating from university, I was led to Cambodia by a good friend of Korean descent who was of traditional Osaka merchant blood. My wife, whom I met in Cambodia, is also from Tanimachi in Osaka.

A little more than ten years later, I am deeply moved to be able to hold a collection exhibition with young international artists from the Mekong River Basin countries in Semba, Osaka, the core of the commercial city of Osaka and the easternmost place in the world of Zomia, and feel a sense of destiny as "Zomia" .

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