



Abdin in Akihabara

A Sudanese Man's Tokyo Life

By Koichi Aizawa

In Japan, obtaining a license as a practitioner of acupuncture and moxibustion can pave the road to financial independence for the visually impaired. Such practitioners are specialists who use traditional Oriental medicine techniques to insert needles into the skin or burn moxa (dried mugwort) on or near the skin's surface to help restore health and relieve pain. Aspiring practitioners from abroad are also accepted, and one such person was Mohamed Omer Abdin, who came to Japan from Sudan in 1998 to study.

For three years, at a school for the visually impaired in Fukui prefecture, he studied Braille and acupuncture and moxibustion before receiving his acupuncturist/moxibustionist license in 2001. However, he did not choose this path. "I started wanting to study more," he says. "That was because I learned Braille here in Japan and discovered the joys of reading."

Abdin read a lot—mostly fiction—and that made him thirst for more knowledge. At the same time, he began to think more deeply about the problems in his home country of Sudan, which was beset by political instability and disputes. He says that he began to feel strongly about engaging in research that would lead to peace. That led him to continue his studies at the graduate school of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. He became a researcher at the university's World Language and Society Education Centre.

Over the 18 years since he arrived here, he has overcome many obstacles in Japan as a visually impaired person living in a land with a language and culture different from his own. What does Abdin think of Tokyo?

"Most foreigners who come to Tokyo are amazed by the rail network, which is so well developed and so on time. It must be one of the best in the world. For the visually challenged, however, the concern shown for our safety falls short. In recent years, progress has been made in installing safety gates on train platforms, so things are improving, but it looks like more time will be needed before we can really feel safe using the trains."

Having based his life in Tokyo for 15 years now, Abdin is more Tokyoite than foreigner. He is aware of Tokyo's problems as well as its good points. All in all, though, he has a high opinion of the city.

"Tokyo is a place where you can take on challenges. I don't think people, on the whole, are subject to pre-conceptions, and I have not felt socially excluded. People accept outsiders, without resistance. That is why I can take on challenges. The fact that I was able to become a researcher and engage in many kinds of activities is that this is the kind of place Tokyo is."

Abdin also plays football as a forward at Tama Hassas, a team that has won the Blind Soccer Japan Championship three times, but he's taking a break at the moment because of a knee injury.

Abdin has high hopes for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.

"I am the only non-Japanese on the team, but never once since joining the team have I felt any racial barriers. This is a team that really wants to win, and sometimes we lock horns, but we can do that because we have respect for each other as

players. I feel that I have been able to build those kinds of relationships because this is Tokyo."

Abdin has high hopes for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. "Recently, attention is focusing on not just the Olympics but the Paralympics as well. I can't say that Tokyo currently has a sufficient environment for disabled sports, but the city will be sure to build the environment over the next four years in preparation for the Games. The Paralympics present a great opportunity for such developments. I am looking forward to these changes."

Mohamed Omer Abdin was born in 1978 in Khartoum, Sudan. He lost his sight at the age of twelve. He studied law at the University of Khartoum, but he decided that studying acupuncture and moxibustion in Japan would offer him greater opportunities. He arrived in Japan at the age of nineteen. He is now a specially appointed assistant professor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. He has written a book titled *Waga Mousou* [Imagine Japan].

Koichi Aizawa writes about sports and business for a number of monthly news magazines. He has published several books about American football and golf.