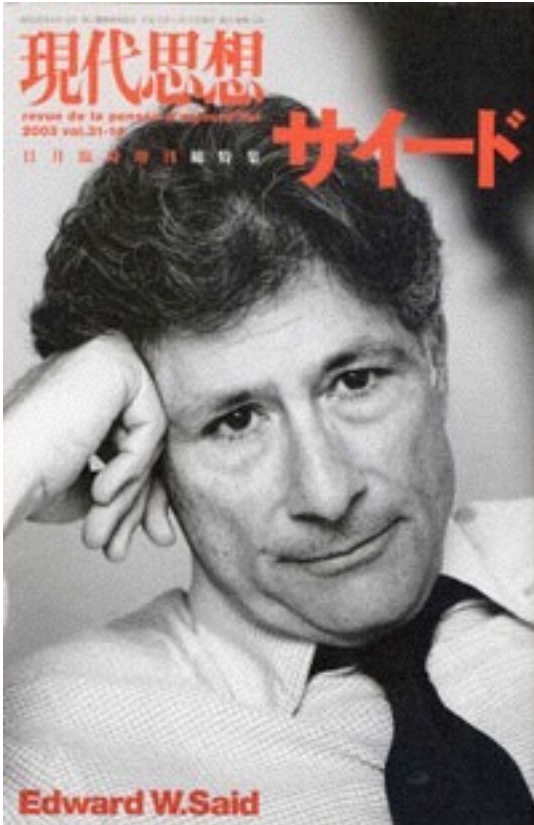


Vladimir Tamari talks about Edward Said and their meeting in Tokyo. An interview with Yuzo Itagaki



Following the passing away of Edward Said in September 2003, Professor Yuzo Itagaki the well known expert on the Palestine Question and a friend, interviewed me on October 30 2003 about our friendship. My answers were translated into Japanese for publication in Tokyo:

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Vladimir and his wife Kyoko, with Edward and his wife Mariam at Tamari's home in Tokyo in 1996. Edward was in Japan at the invitation of Kenzaburo Oe, the Nobel-prizewinning writer, who Vladimir met in the early 1970's. As an outspoken Palestinian, the Japan Afro-Asian Writer's Association which Oe headed, invited Vladimir to be an honorary member and sponsored his first exhibition in Japan. Later Vladimir toured Japan with the renown poets Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish when they were invited to the country by the Association.

ITAGAKI: Please disclose the progress of your friendship with Edward, if you don't mind.

TAMARI: Edward Said (*Allah Yirhamo*, as we say in Arabic of the recently dead, *May God Rest His Soul*) was of a slightly older generation than mine, and because Palestinians were scattered after the 1948 war, I did not have the chance to meet him except during his visit to Japan. I went to university at AUB with two of his sisters; his wife Mariam was also a student there. His younger sister Joyce was a good friend in our group. My sister Tania Tamari Nasir was a close friend of Edward's, particularly in musical matters in the

West Bank. During our meeting in Tokyo we talked about our many common acquaintances!

ITAGAKI: I know that he once wished to see you first in Japan just on his arrival at Narita airport. How was the meeting at Tokyo?

TAMARI: My sister introduced us. I found him warm, sincere and interesting - and wonderful to talk to. We did not talk much about politics but enough to understand that we had a slightly different perspective on the tragedy of Palestine. He said that the required Palestinian leadership needed to 'soar' ... but I felt that we as a people were so overpowered by events and that our enemies are so much more powerful, that it was a miracle we can just 'float' and merely survive. Even keeping our hopes alive for a better day required heroic efforts. I did not say all that but felt it.

ITAGAKI: What are your estimation and analysis on his career and background?

TAMARI: I have great admiration for his integrity, intelligence and originality. The more of his works I read the greater my estimate of his genius. He had a very clear vision of his role as an intellectual 'engaged' – as Sartre put it- in the affairs of our his daily life in New York, yet chose to direct all his energies to express his experiences as a Palestinian and interpret them to the West. His success can only be measured by the worldwide recognition he gained. Forty years ago the West looked only with disgust or pity at Palestinians, and totally misunderstood or ignored our cause. The Palestinian revolution brought attention to our just demands, but it was Edward Said who explained that cause best in a language the West could understand. In turn his clarity of vision and courageous political stance inspired many Arabs with renewed pride and confidence.

ITAGAKI: What are your views on his literary works and accomplishments?

TAMARI: I was impressed by his wide scholarship the intelligence and lucidity of his writing. I have read and enjoyed most of the novels of Conrad, and learning that Edward was an expert on this author was an added attraction. It is hard for me here in my isolation in Japan to judge the impact of Edward Said on the intellectual thinking of our time, but by all measures he has made

a great impression in intellectual and political circles. The world is appalled by the aggressive neo-imperialism of Israel and the US, also by the violence of the reaction from some groups in the Third World. People turned to Edward Said's writings for an explanation of what is happening and in hopes of finding a solution to what appears to be a confrontation between disparate worlds. He was a sort of bridge between East and West that many trusted.

ITAGAKI: How did he appreciate your works?

TAMARI: He saw my paintings in Tokyo and one I presented to him. I feel very proud of his appreciation of my artworks.

ITAGAKI: What is your opinion about the relationship between politics and music for him?

TAMARI: I think he did a wonderful thing in supporting the activities of his friend the Israeli musician Daniel Barenboim to give concerts in the West Bank and establish an Israeli-Palestinian youth group devoted to friendship through music. My sister Tania was very active in these efforts and published a long essay about that.

ITAGAKI: You are painting while listening to Western classical music. For you, what is relationship between painting and music?

TAMARI: In the early 1960's I experimented with making a short film of 'visual music' where colors move in time to a passage in Bach's Brandenburg concerto. I wanted my art to move like music. I did not realize that this dream has a history hundreds of years old. Recently I spent more than two years making about 25 paintings, made while listening to about two dozen composers. Bach in January, Brahms in November and so on. I also wrote an essay about this wonderful experience, with a short history of visual music.

ITAGAKI: Could there be any difference between you and Edward on the idea or method of criticism?

TAMARI: There could be no comparison! He is very scholarly and systematic, while my own comments tend to be emotional and sarcastic. He stood at a podium and took a position of responsibility as an intellectual leader. I escaped

to Japan to be able to 'hide' and work in peace on my art and research. Of course I never forgot Palestine. For some time I tried to make more public contributions to the telling the story of Palestine, but I am now convinced my being an artist is enough by itself.

ITAGAKI: How did you look at him as a Palestinian intellectual in exile from your standpoint alike?

TAMARI: Until I read the writings of Edward Said there were very few Palestinian voices that could express what I was going through as a fellow exile. I feel grateful that he made the effort to explain our condition of living in one country while our heart is partly in another.

ITAGAKI: What do you think is the most important message he left the intellect worldwide?

TAMARI: For people in the West he showed that people in the Third World, particularly Palestinians, Arabs and other Moslems, have their own narrative that deserves to be heard with their own voice, not merely as a subject for Western study and curiosity. For people in the Third World he showed that not everyone in the West is an aggressive imperialist oppressor, but that many people there understand our issues and wish things to change. He put current events in their correct historical context: that of the continuing onslaught of imperialism by the powerful upon the powerless

ITAGAKI: What do you think was the future vision of the humankind to be relieved for Edward's deliberation in facing such a renewed catastrophe as befalling to the Palestinians now?

TAMARI: I think he was a fighter who saw injustice and tried his best to show how to overcome it here and now. He was enough of a realist, however, not to make long-range plans or predictions. He preferred a bi-national State shared by Israelis and Palestinians to the two-State solution most people speak about nowadays. The danger of a single bi-national state, in my opinion, is that the Israelis could interpret an annexation of the West Bank of Palestine as a unification of Israeli and Palestinian hopes for a homeland, while the Palestinians

lose even more rights. Edward was as frustrated as everyone about the new catastrophes visited upon our people.

ITAGAKI: What could be Christianity for him in your view?

TAMARI: Although he was born of a Christian family, he hinted in several of his writings that he was practically an atheist. I respect his opinion of course, but I felt this is unfortunate because Jesus Christ, who was born and was crucified in Palestine, is a perfect symbol of the sufferings of the innocent present-day Palestinians. The Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish and the painter Ismail Shammout, both Moslems, expressed in their works the relationship between Christ's Cross and the sufferings of the Palestinians today.

ITAGAKI: What do you think Jerusalem meant for him?

TAMARI: Of course he knew of Jerusalem's importance for every Palestinian, but I do not know what he felt for the city on a personal level.

ITAGAKI: There were so many statements of mourning for the passing of Edward Said all over the world. What were the most impressive passages among them in your observation?

TAMARI: It was not any particular passage that I remember, but the fact that all the major newspapers and newsmagazines East and West, even Microsoft's online news publication, announced or commented on his death. I did not realize that he had become such a prominent international figure.

ITAGAKI: In Japan, Edward Said has been commemorated as an intellectual of integrity and conscience. However, it is a pity that those who sympathetically memorialize him neglect a gaze at the actualities in Palestine. Please tell frankly about your impression on the Japanese attitude in commemorating Edward after his death.

TAMARI: The Japanese live in an island far away from events in the Middle East; their efforts to survive after the Second World War took all their energy. With the success of contemporary Japan people now have the leisure to look around and study world affairs more closely. The fact that Edward Said is a Palestinian is important in itself. Thirty years ago Golda Meir the Israeli pre-

mier insisted that 'there are no Palestinians'. With the fame of Edward Said in Japan people will inevitably pay attention to our cause in some way or other. I feel proud and thankful that you and many other Japanese friends and others I do not know, are devoting all their efforts to developing the bridge between Japan, this great nation, and the Palestinians, at a time of their need.

ITAGAKI: Could you suggest how feasible the understanding of the Palestine Question is through the commemoration of Edward, his life and death under cultural strife against imperialism?

TAMARI: The religious coloring of Zionism complicates the Palestinian problem, but in essence Israel is the last remaining vestige of European imperialism that began with the Age of Discovery hundreds of years ago. Unfortunately the US government now feels free to start a new phase of world imperialism. The case of Palestine is central to both phases of this history. What happens in Palestine will happen to the whole world so it is important that justice and peace is made to prevail there.

ITAGAKI: Please give some briefing of your own personal history and background for the readers' information

TAMARI: I was born in Jerusalem in 1942 in a Palestinian Arab family and lived in Ramallah till my early twenties. I studied physics and then art at the American University of Beirut. I met my wife Kyoko during one year of study in the US and we got married in Beirut just after the 1967 war. We came to Japan in 1970 and have lived here ever since. I tried to pioneer a cultural bridge between Palestine and Japan, concentrating on exhibitions of Palestinian refugee children's paintings. However extremist activities in the seventies made the word Palestine and terrorism, and political pressure hindered our activities to inform the Japanese about Palestine. I am proud of the support and friendship of Professor Yuzo Itagaki from that time until now. Like Edward Said, he is a truly inspiring example of the active intellectual. Itagaki Sensei and his colleagues and students have succeeded in developing bridges not only between Japan and Palestine and the Arab world, but other regions as well. In Japan, supported by my dear wife Kyoko, I tried to contribute to this cultural exchange, but have concentrated more on my painting and inventing a 3 Dimensional Drawing Instrument, and more recently on my research in physics. Our two daughters Mariam and Mona were born here, and now it is

their time to contribute to building this bridge of understanding, peace and friendship between Japan and Palestine and the great world beyond.

