

A Woman's School-Creation Efforts Bear Fruit in Africa

Sayaka Kuriyama, a Japanese woman who has been active in Africa for 10 years, has set up schools in Mozambique and Malawi for orphans and other children who could not otherwise receive an education because of family circumstances, such as sick parents or poverty.

In her early twenties, Kuriyama worked at a popular clothing shop catering to young people in Shibuya, the district of Tokyo that leads Japan's fashion world. At the time, she says, she spent her nights partying and never gave a thought to the future. But then, when she was 25, a woman who had been her close friend for 14 years died of breast cancer. This loss made her ponder the meaning of her own life, and she began searching for something she could do for other people.

Kuriyama served as a volunteer in hospitals in India and Africa, trying to bring cheer to patients. And as she did so, her aspiration to conduct support activities overseas grew stronger. She visited a town in Mozambique where many people suffer from illness and poverty; in 2009 she established Achante Mama as a charity organization to operate there. She started by setting up a school to provide information about medical care to women from poor households. However, as she provided this education, Kuriyama realized that although knowing about medical care was important, it was even more important to give young children the opportunity to learn reading and writing. So she set up a classroom for this purpose. As she explains, "The school thus came to have two objectives. One was to teach local people the causes of illnesses and what can be done to combat them, as they were not accustomed to going to a hospital when they became ill. The other was to provide a basic education for those children not able to attend a regular school due to reasons such as not having official registration papers."

Kuriyama encountered many difficulties in managing a school all by herself in a foreign country whose language she did not know well. She talked to local people, going from door to door visiting poor households, and she invited women who were sick and children unable to receive regular education to attend the Achante Mama school. This school, which was first opened for women and has become a valuable place for children to learn, is now also serving as a workplace for local women. Meanwhile, Kuriyama has set up two additional schools, a second one in Mozambique and another in Malawi. The three schools have a total of 510 children in attendance.

The word about Kuriyama's activities has been spread in Japan via the Internet and through books she has written. Her sincere efforts to help women and children in Africa have gained considerable support, and now nearly all of the money required for Achante Mama's operations comes from donations from Japanese companies and individuals. Kuriyama notes that her schools also receive donations of pencils and notebooks from Japan, which are a great help. "The past eight years were a time of constant trial and error," she reflects, "but now people have become more aware that they need to go to a hospital and take medicine when they become ill, and the number of fatalities due to illnesses has been reduced."

Some of the children who learned how to read and write at Achante Mama schools have gone on to public schools and earned top grades in their classes. Meanwhile, Kuriyama continues to be devoted to her mission: "To whatever extent possible, I want to help reduce the number of children who are born into poverty and end their short lives in poverty too."



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1. The original school established in Mozambique now has 300 students. 2. Children are excited about studying as they receive notebooks and pencils for the first time. 3. Women working for Achante Mama were first students at the school, troubled by illness and poverty. The organization now employs 30 local staff members. 4. The school in Malawi has fields and a pig farm nearby that provide ingredients for the school's lunches.

Sayaka Kuriyama

After graduating from a junior college, she worked at a fashion shop in Tokyo. At age 25 she embarked on travels that took her to 60 countries. After volunteer work in Ethiopia, she established Achante Mama to assist women and children from poor families in Africa. She became the first Japanese to acquire qualification in Mozambique as a medical technician able to examine and diagnose patients and administer medication in place of a physician. In 2016, she received the Nippon Foundation Prize from the Foundation for Social Contribution.

