Kyoto International Cultural Association, inc.

34th KICA Essay Contest

Japan in the International Community, My View

Being a Black woman in Japan: Both Invisible and Marked

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"I am an invisible man [...]. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me. " - Ralph Ellison

One day in the late 1980's while I was living in England, by chance I turned on the TV and happened to see a Japanese Sumo match airing. What was this strange attractive sport called Sumo that had suddenly entered my living room and enticed me to want to start watching it regularly? It was not only the sport itself that caught my eye, but before the end of each Sumo program, glimpses of Japan were shown which piqued my interest even more about this distant country. Prior to this experience, Japan didn't exist for me in any way, shape or form.

Back then, for me Japan was a country "somewhere near China" and not much else. Of course I had heard of "samurai", "geisha" and other things that were typical or tereotypically "Japan" but other than that, Japan could have been Mars. Then suddenly through the window of Sumo, I began developing a strong desire to visit Japan and experience this amazing, attractive country with its rich culture and tradition. These feelings grew stronger and stronger over time.

In my eagerness to make my way to Japan, I never stopped for a moment to think about what it would be like for me as a Black Nigerian-British woman to live in an Asian country. The fact that I could not speak Japanese did not concern me, although this was one of the many things that my family and friends were the most concerned about. "How will you communicate?" "What will you eat?" My friends and family thought that Japanese people only ate sushi. Having eaten out at a few Japanese restaurants in London, I knew there was more to Japanese cuisine than just sushi. Nevertheless, it never crossed my mind to do any research about the country I was going to live in. All I knew was that I was moving to Japan and that was that. I figured I could find out all I needed to know about Japan upon arrival. That is how drawn I was to Japan. I just wanted to get there as soon as possible, as if a magnet was pulling me there beyond my control.

That was over 12 years ago and my approach to travel has completely changed. If I were to go to Japan now for the first time, I would do a very comprehensive internet search where I would try to learn as much as I could. Then I would purchase a travel guide even before I bought my plane ticket. But back then, my desire to be in Japan and to experience all that the country had to offer left little room for second guessing or doubting myself. Without knowing what to expect and with little more than a job waiting for me, I booked my ticket to Japan.

My arrival in Fukuoka in January, 1998 was both a weird and wonderful experience. It was weird in the sense that I was suddenly in this new country that I knew very little about but I had been dying to visit for so long. At the same time, I was suddenly confronted with the "foreignness" of my surroundings. I found the sounds, smell and the hustle of people as they went about their business to be very confusing. Without warning, the enormity of my decision to move to Japan finally hit me. And it hit me hard. "What am I doing here?" I was no longer in England and that was very clear. But at the same time, I found myself walking around in amazement as I took in my surroundings. My first impression of Japan was that it looked so Westernised. Men and women walking around in kimonos with traditional hairstyles being transported by rickshaws were nowhere to be found. Even still on that first day, as I walked around Tenjin seemingly in a daze, I could not believe that I was finally in Japan. One thing became very clear for me at that time. The fact that it took almost ten years from the first time I saw Sumo on TV until I actually arrived in Japan was, for me, positive proof that dreams do come true.

Very soon, friends back home started to barrage me with questions about my experiences in Japan and chief among them was, "Are there any Black people there?" Until I came to Japan, I never really had to think about the colour of my skin. Although I was born in England, I grew up in Africa (Nigeria) where I lived for twelve years from the age of 10 to 22. There my skin colour was never an issue as I was "one of them". The only ridicule I suffered came from classmates who teased me about my English pronunciation calling it, "funny English". Although I looked like other Africans there, I didn't speak like them as I had a British accent. But very soon, as I began to learn the African language, Yoruba, I came to lose my British accent and was able to better fit in with my peers at school.

On my return to England at the age of 22, I lived in a multicultural city which had a large West Indian (Jamaica, Barbados, etc.) community where I assimilated well. Of course, in school before I moved to Nigeria, I had experienced some racial name calling such as "Blackie" but it never really bothered me that much as I usually responded with some name calling of my own and as such, I was able to go through my initial schooling relatively unscathed.

Unquestionably, racism does exist in England and I did experience it firsthand. My applications for various jobs were sometimes rejected unfairly, and I was even told blatantly to my face that a particular career choice was not available to me as a consequence of being a Black woman. These were all very demoralising experiences to be sure, but as I knew that this wasn't particularly about me per se and was more about people's attitude to people of colour as a whole, I licked my wounds and went about the business of living. It was when I came to live in Japan that I began to rethink who I was as a Black woman. Given that Japan consists of a predominately homogeneous population, foreigners, especially non-Asians, stand out. As a Black woman in Japan, and at the time of this writing, as one out of only a handful of Black people living in Kyoto, I have experienced the anxieties of trying to fit in when one is different. At times this struggle made me feel very isolated. 'Standing out' is traditionally something that one tries very hard to avoid in Japanese society and is expressed in the popular Japanese saying, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down" (*deru kui wa utareru*). Thus standing out from this context carries with it negative connotations of being strange, weird and a host of other things. Of course, not fitting in (literally and otherwise) has always been a fact of life for displaced Black women. And here in Japan, as hard as I tried to not stand out, I consistently failed in my endeavors.

Being a Black woman living in a culture like Japan, that is so different from cultures that I had been familiar with, was at times quite stifling and even oppressive. When I first arrived in Japan while still in the 'Honeymoon Stage" of loving everything and everyone here, although I noticed people staring at me, I was too enamored with just being here to be bothered by a few stares. But as time went by, and the novelty of being in Japan had worn off, the constant staring, finger pointing, bag clutching, and many other things made me feel very uncomfortable, as central to my existence here was the clear message that, indeed, *I stood out*.

In Japan, I have often thought of myself as being both 'invisible' and 'marked' simultaneously. Like the quotation at the beginning of this essay, in spite of the blackness of my skin, I constantly feel as if I have been "white-d-out". Basically, I don't exist. People see what they want to see and don't see what they cannot easily understand. For many Japanese people it is inconceivable for a Black woman to take up a seat next to them on a train, or worse yet the thought of them taking the empty seat next to a Black person. In spite of the tired look on everyone's faces at the end of a long day, the seat next to me on the train often remains empty. At the same time, that I am made invisible in Japan, I am also constantly 'marked' here in ways that never occurred in Africa and only rarely occurred even in England. In England, I am unmarked as another citizen of a multicultural society, a person of colour. In Japan, I am not only marked as *'gaijin'*, but as an *extreme* (that is, *Black*) *gaijin*.

How have I come to adapt to this *invisibility* and *markedness* that I carry around with me all over Japan, everywhere I go? In many ways, I feel like a walking 'social studies lesson' for Japanese people to learn. I want people to see that Black people are just like them in many ways. They don't need to clutch their bags thinking that all Black people are thieves. Black people have polite manners just as Japanese people do. We also have feelings, dreams and hopes, just like they do. We have friends and families. We laugh, cry and love.

Through my work as a university lecturer of English I feel that I have touched my students by merely being myself and teaching with integrity as any teacher would. Students have given me feedback saying that while at first they found me to be "scary", after coming to know me they learned that I was kind and sensitive. I am sure that I taught those students much more that just English.

Before concluding this essay, I want to leave my readers with a very important message. What I really want to express here is not so much what I have shown the Japanese people, but rather what the Japanese people have taught me about myself. This has been a life-changing experience for me that I will always treasure.

Throughout the years I have resided in Japan, I have come to realize that I am much more than what my passport indicates, as a ‘British Citizen’. Japan has taught me that I am a Black woman with a rich African background which I am extremely proud of. While wanting to be unmarked and visible, Japan has lead me back to my roots, not England, but Africa. This nurturing journey that I have gone through has increased my love for Japan. Japan has been like a mother to me: strict and realistic at times, but also warm, nurturing and always there for me. I will always appreciate Japan for this.

As I continue my life’s journey I am not sure where I will be lead. However, this exotic Asian culture of Japan, so different from my own, that began to attract me as a young adult in England who happened upon a TV program about Sumo, will forever travel with me. I annot imagine ever totally leaving Japan, although I may do so in a physical sense as Japan is such a part of me. “Thank you, Japan. I love you.”