

# ASIANetwork Conference 2001

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Throughout the year we will feature selected papers and highlights from the ASIANetwork Conference 2001.

**Film Review: *Race, Ethnicity and Quest for Cultural Identity: The Films of Regge Life***

Yoko Ueda, Spelman College

***Preparing a Successful Fulbright Scholar Application*** David B. J. Adams, Council for International Exchange of Scholars

***National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA)***

***Asian Arts in the Liberal Arts*** Kevin Wetmore, Denison University; Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, Mills College

***India's Globalization Experience*** Susan Oommen, Stella Maris College, Chennai, India (UBCHEA at Rutgers University)

Editors' note: Regge Life, in his keynote address, showed clips of his films and talked about his work in Japan. The following is a review of the three films which he discussed.

### Race, Ethnicity and Quest for Cultural Identity: The Films of Regge Life

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Regge Life has produced three well-researched and fascinating documentary films which explore important themes—race, ethnicity and a personal quest for cultural identity. All three films deal with the complex relationships between Americans and Japanese who have lived across the boundary of the two societies.

Life's first film, entitled *Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan* (1991), documents the lives of African-Americans who have chosen to make Japan their home. This film sets the stage for the next two films, forming an excellent trilogy on the topic of racial and cultural interactions between Americans and Japanese.

Success or failure of an individual in a foreign country can be measured by the degree of his/her adjustment to the new society and also by how he or she is accepted by the host society. *Struggle and Success* exposes numerous contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the racial prejudice of

Japanese people. First, it shows the most common form of discrimination African-Americans encounter in Japan when they seek housing. Like many others, Bill Whitaker, CBS foreign correspondent, was denied the right to rent an apartment when the prospective landlord learned that he was Black. However, as soon as his professional position as a TV network executive was revealed, his blackness became a non-issue. In fact, Japanese automatically give foreign professionals a certain status and prestige, assuming that they possess abilities and competence which are useful and unique to Japan. In this sense, many African-Americans benefit from being different and are given greater access to business opportunities, which is hardly the case in their own country. Secondly, the film introduces many stereotypical images of Blacks, ranging from comments made by prominent Japanese politicians to *dakko-chan* dolls, to Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston, and points out that the problems of prejudice are largely based on the export of racial stereotypes from the US. The film also traces back the origins of racial hierarchy by skin color which existed even before Japanese met Westerners for the first time in the mid-sixteenth century. Historian Mitsuo Akamatsu has noted that the Japanese too often accept White Western culture uncritically. A commentator has noted, "The Japanese are treating you as you are treated in your own country."

Japan, then, is presented as a closed and exclusive society. No matter what you do, no matter how fluently you speak Japanese, and no matter how long you live there, you are forced to remain a *gaijin* (foreigner) forever. Because of this some feel ambivalent about their future career advancement in Japan and contemplate changing careers. The more

competent they become in life in general, the less interest the Japanese show in them. Many foreigners in Japan gradually give up trying to be Japanese. Writer Karen Hill-Anton has been living in Japan for seventeen years with her Jewish husband and three teenage children. She says that they cannot be Japanese as they always physically "stick out." Clearly racial characteristics determine who you are in Japan. However, Karen says that their teenage children are "socially Japanese." Lastly, the film exposes the most contradictory nature of Japanese racism by examining interracial relationships. While a foreigner, Black or White, is accepted based on his/her professional talent and/or social position, the same person encounters strong opposition once he or she tries to cross the racial boundary by marrying a Japanese. Ronnie Rucker, a composer and TV personality, gets along with his Japanese in-laws. However, his mother-in-law feels ashamed of her grandchildren being mixed of blood despite the fact that she is proud of her son-in-law's success.

Regge Life examines this most complicated race relation in his second film. Introducing voices of mixed blood individuals, *Doubles: Japan and America's Intercultural Children* (1996) gives new dimensions to the understanding of interracial relationships, and the ethnic and cultural identities of mixed-blood people. Intermarriage or interracial relationships present a major challenge to existing social order and consensus which are closely associated with kinship ties, shared culture, history and tradition. Shared culture or kinship ties play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's ethnic identity, while moral consensus is internalized through early childhood socialization. Having intercultural individuals talk about their experiences growing up in the two worlds, the film points out that a person's ethnic and racial identities are also shaped by other's perceptions of them. Toshikazu Kiyonaga (Japanese and African-American descent) says, "Americans think I am Black, but the Japanese think that I am not Japanese." Similar experiences were shared by several other mixed blood individuals. Ellen Hasegawa (Japanese and Caucasian American descent) says, "I feel 'white' inside." However, because of her appearance, Americans categorize her as Asian, a person of color. Clearly these individuals' identities are determined by the perception of others regardless of their true feelings.

The experiences of intercultural people born as a result of American Occupation are particularly difficult. Many children were born out of wedlock and were often abandoned by both their American fathers and Japanese mothers. In addition to the obvious economic hardships they endured after the war, these children were often the targets of bullies. Hitomi Ishiyama's comment, "I was not born to be called *ainoko* (half-breed)" highlights the racism found in Japan. Some were fortunate enough to leave war-torn Japan for better lives in the US; however, many of these children were not totally accepted as American because of their mixed heritages. They are *gaijin* in Japan, but in America they are either Black or Japanese.

Intermarriage between Japanese and European foreigners can be found as early as the late 19th century. *Doubles*

shows that generations of inter-cultural individuals trace back their roots and find richness and strength in their biracial and bicultural heritages. In contrast to the first half of this film, the rest is a presentation of the triumph and pride of inter-cultural individuals who are re-defining what they are. Scott Watanabe, interested in learning about his roots and heritage, says, "We will define ourselves. This is a privilege we keep to ourselves. Only we can tell you who we are." Statements such as this represent a significant departure from the experience of his father, Don Watanabe, who was abandoned by both parents and raised by a Caucasian couple in the US during the war.

Since the post-occupation era, Japan's economic advancement has brought Americans into more frequent contact with Japanese. Many Americans have married Japanese and vice-versa, creating a new generation of intercultural and interracial children. Unlike the wartime generation, whose identity was shaped by unfortunate historical circumstances, these younger generations of mixed blood individuals, enriched by being the products of two cultures, claim to be citizens of the global community who transcend ethnicity and race.

The last film of Regge Life's trilogy, *After America . . . After Japan* (1999) examines promises and difficulties of re-entry for individuals who return to their native country after a long stay in a foreign land. While Life's first two films focused on societal experiences of cultural and racial interaction, this film examines experience of individuals at more personal level focusing on the impact of culture on people's identities.

*After America . . . After Japan* begins with a scene at Tokyo International Airport where a middle-aged couple happily meets their son and his family returning from America. Scenes like this are becoming very familiar on both sides of the Pacific; however what is not known is the experiences these individuals have after they actually return "home." The film documents the lives of a select group of returnees who attempt to readapt to and re-establish themselves in their country of birth. The experiences of these returnees vary depending on their circumstances in terms of lengths of their sojourns, family situations, professions, career goals, etc, but what is common to all these returnees is that "life is never again the same."

The film shows several types of re-entry experiences. One is a relatively smooth re-entry for people whose stay in the foreign country was short. These individuals quickly overcome the initial "culture shock" and find ways to utilize their newly acquired cultural knowledge and language skills. They have even acquired the ability to see their home country critically, and yet maintain the cultural identity of their birth. Re-entry for people who stayed overseas for many years seems more difficult, as they are more likely accompanied by the family that they made in the foreign land. As soon as they arrive home, they must deal with their family's integration into a new society in addition to their own readjustment. Life introduces two similar families representing this situation. Gary Abrahamsen, an English teacher, brought

back his Japanese wife and their two-year-old daughter to Portland, Oregon where he attempted to rebuild a life with his parents' support. From day one, he faces many challenges, such as helping his family integrate into a new society, taking care of his wife's emotional needs as she is expecting their second child in a "foreign" land, and more importantly, finding a job to financially provide for his family. In the middle of this chaotic situation he tries to redefine who he was before and who he is now. In contrast, Mitsuo Ishikawa, seems to be getting on with his life immediately after his return, although he, too, has to help with his American wife and their daughter's adjustment process and find a job. He, however, does not seem to exhibit a so-called identity crisis. This is perhaps because he had a purpose for returning home. He says, "I came back to Japan to challenge a new field."

The film clearly shows that "the longer you stay in a foreign land, the harder it is to readjust." Becoming a "native" in a foreign country represents a threat to the social and cultural order of the person's country of origin. In fact Japanese companies overseas routinely send men back to Japan to "re-Japanize" them (cited by Fukushima in the film). The film also suggests that a person's strong sense of cultural identity and purpose for returning home are important components for his/her successful re-entry. As the eldest son, Koya Azumi, a sociologist, went back to Japan after a 35-year sojourn in order to take care of his parents. So did Hiro Iwasaki, who returned to take over his parent's publishing business

even though he had to leave his own family in the US to do so. On the one hand these individuals show a strong sense of commitment and obligation to the culture and tradition of their birth, but on the other hand they seem to possess a bicultural identity which enriches their lives rather than creates conflict for them.

A person's cultural identity, which is shaped by his/her country of birth, may be reinforced in a foreign environment. This is particularly true for foreigners who have lived in Japan for a long time. Regge Life again brings up the issue of the exclusive nature of Japanese society, which was described by many Americans in his first and second films. Alan Brown, who lived in Japan for seven years, says, "You can be comfortable as long as you are a foreigner. . . . The most comfortable is to be an outsider in Japan." It is ironic that this exclusiveness helps Americans realize their strong sense of identity. Nonetheless the impact of a foreign culture on people's lives, whether it to be positive or negative, is powerful.

Regge Life's trilogy calls for re-thinking race, ethnicity and cultural identity. All three documentary films should be shown not only to students and educators who are engaged in Asian Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities, but also to those who are and will be in both business and personal cross-cultural settings. These three films confirm that Regge Life is one of the most important documentary filmmakers, and we cannot afford to ignore him.



Regge Life