Solidarity Between The American Civil Rights Movement And Buraku Liberation

by Erika N. Turner

(Editor’s Note: Erika was one of a group of 11 students from Wellesley College in Massachusetts who came to Japan in January to study Japanese religions, particularly as they relate to human rights issues. Led by Professor James Kodera, a native of Japan, they spent one day at BLC Activity Committee Chairperson Tanimoto’s church to learn about Buraku issues, and Erika contributes this fascinating article reflecting on the connection she felt between the experience of Buraku people in Japan and “burakku (black) people” in America.)

Japan is the land of freedom in the eyes of many young Americans. In my own observations, I can even attest to the fact that many young black folk in particular seek to adopt Japanese culture as their own. Caught between the atrocities of American racial prejudice and an often narrow view of what black American culture should entail, there are many black youth who feel disconnected from their culture. At times they feel abandoned by it and other times they seek to abandon it, due to a feeling of imprisonment by black stereotypes and expectations. When presented with the diverse and fantastical world of Japanese entertainment, such as anime, manga, and music, these youth feel an indelible connection. Feeling like outsiders themselves, they are drawn to the sometimes outrageous and often anarchical worlds of Japanese media. To them, these forms of entertainment are representative of a culture that appreciates diversity and would be willing to nurture their desire to be recognized as unique and even contrarian.

Indeed, it is not only Japanese media that may lead a foreigner to these expectations. Having traveled there recently, I was struck by the technological advances I encountered, especially in Tokyo. At the airport, automatic walkways were designed to start and stop depending upon whether or not a passenger was present, a smart process that was both economical and environmentally sound. The more expensive trains were designed like airplanes, to gain the greatest speed and momentum. To the untrained eye, Japan is clearly the picture of progress.

Of course, progress in one area does not necessarily lend itself to progress in another. While many American youth, and black youth in particular, may see Japan as an alternative utopia for all their rebellious dreams, the truth is that Japan is a society based on uniformity. This is not to be taken lightly – it is not enough to simply say that Japan is uniform merely because both nationality and ethnicity are one in the
same. Rather, Japan’s leadership has cast a mask over its society, portraying a
country of perfect unity while neglecting the nature of the actual population, which
truly is diverse. Thus, it is safe to say that the media that we love because of its
uniqueness is not a reflection of the culture from which it came but rather a reflection
of all of those within its society who wish it were different. The creators and the
consumers share the same mentality, but we are not aware of the reality.

The reality is this: Japan is not perfect. It is not Eden. It is not free of prejudice – even
beyond “innocent” prejudice, a defense made by American Japanophiles on the
behalf of the majority of Japanese who have little personal contact or exposure to
non-Japanese. Japanese society, like every society, has a population that is
discriminated against. And, like every society, Japan pretends that the problem does
not exist, while the oppressed population is forced into silence and submission. It is
shameful that many Japanophiles can name the top dramas and songs on the media
charts by Japanese artists, but could not tell you what a Burakumin was, if ever they
had heard of the term. I was not exempt from this ignorance. I was even more
humbled when I learned that many Japanese who were interested in human rights
had studied the American Civil Rights Movement and heeded the lessons of leaders
like Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, Tanimoto-sensei studied at a Historically Black
College in America. Meanwhile, black youth are looking at Japan as a sign of hope
and freedom.

This is not to discourage a love or interest in Japanese culture. Quite the contrary. In
fact, it is with a love and interest in Japanese culture, and concern for the
international community at large, that we must act. These comments are meant to
recognize that, far from being untouchable and foreign to us, Japan and its issues
are far more similar to what we know than we realize. The uniqueness of Japanese
society should not be downplayed. Certainly, its complex history and relationship with
the ideas of purity and conformity are not to be ignored. Rather, I merely wish to shed
light on our human commonality and, in doing so, I wish to draw attention to how we
may be of use to those in the Burakumin community who may benefit from our
acknowledgement and assistance. Japan is not so different that its struggles cannot
be affected by foreign sympathy. We may not be scholars of Japanese culture, but
we are knowledgeable of our own. Deriving what we know about the American Civil
Rights Movement and, keeping in mind that it is being used as basis of anti-
oppression movement in other cultures, just as it was inspired by the work of Gandhi
in the Indian independence movement, we can recognize that the fight for equality by
the Burakumin people is rather familiar. In doing so, we can act in solidarity, beca

We must show active concern for our fellow men and women in the Burakumin
community and recognize our power to lend our voices and actions to their cause. I
may never fully understand what it is to be Burakumin in Japan, but I do know what it
means to be black in America. Knowing the struggles that my ancestors went through
for over 300 years and the struggles we still face as a culture, I understand the
struggles these people face, because they are the same. Indeed, the word “black” in
English would be pronounced as “buraku” in Japanese. In a globalized world, fighting for the rights of one means fighting for the rights of all. Knowing that it is right and morally just to fight for the rights of the black man, woman, or transidentified individual, it should follow that it is equally imperative to fight for rights of the buraku.