



Photo Courtesy of First Run Icarus Films

Scene from *Sensō Daughters* by Noriko Sekiguchi.

women; and the images of aging Japanese women outside the Imperial Palace in Tokyo mourning the death of the Shōwa Emperor, bring some understanding of how such crimes came to be committed in the first place, and how refusal to acknowledge these crimes publicly contributes to on-going racism and xenophobia. One of the most telling revelations concerns a New Guinea mother who is embarrassed by her affair with a Japanese officer, which resulted in a daughter, a true "sensō" (war) daughter whose patrimony was kept a secret from her until the production of this documentary enabled the mother to finally reveal her shame.

This video production attains its most subtle brilliance precisely by allowing the New Guineans to speak for themselves. The pidgin English spoken by the women as they relate their tales of Japanese op-

pression serves to highlight the nature of imperialism, whether militaristic or cultural, in a particularly acute manner. The Japanese deprived them of their land, food, sexual desires, their very freedom, but American domination of much of the former Japanese territories has served no less to deprive them of a strong sense of identity and self. Thus, the bilingual title has a real symbolic force. That the women also relate to the narrator, almost in passing, the cruelty of the Australians who helped liberate them from the Japanese, serves to remind us that guilt is not exclusive to the Japanese when it comes to dealing with third-world peoples.

Finally, however, the most telling and chilling character we meet is not a "sensō daughter" at all, but a New Guinean man who proudly reveals to the video makers his total recall of Japanese songs he learned during the war. On two separate

occasions, he sings in quite passable Japanese the war songs he heard the soldiers sing. Their lamentations for home or their paeans to soldierly camaraderie are eerily displaced when sung by a middle-aged New Guinea man. That he should remember these songs is not only a tribute to his intelligence, but also that he should try to impress a Japanese video maker in the 1990s with these memories is testimony to the powerful effects of imperialism on the mind as well as the body. Most disturbing of all, however, is the moment when he sings not a militarist lament, but a song of haunting sadness sung by women, Japanese women, forced prostitutes, brought to the island by the Japanese military. It is the song of these oppressed Japanese women sung by a New Guinean man fifty years later that ends the video on a truly haunting note.

Recommended for advanced high school classes and above.

David Desser

DAVID DESSER, Professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is currently the editor of *Cinema Journal*. In addition to his extensive work on Japanese cinema, he has published materials on American films of the Vietnam War from the point of view of race, racism, and cultural conflict.

ORDERING INFORMATION

Contact First Run Icarus Films:
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Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan

PRODUCED BY REGGE LIFE

MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS FUNDING OF
THE CENTER FOR GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP OF THE JAPAN FOUNDATION,
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DISTRIBUTED BY STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS FILM LIBRARY
22-D HOLLYWOOD AVENUE, HOHOKUS, NJ 07423
1993. 85 minutes (55 minute version also available)

Are you a young African-American professional who would like to go to Japan for an extended stay? Are you anxious about how you will be received and how well you will be able to function once you get there? If you answered yes to these questions, then you should watch Regge Life's *Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan*.

Struggle and Success is a documentary film that focuses on the experiences of thirteen African-Americans who have lived in Japan for extended periods of time. Despite what appears to be a singular focus on one ethnic group, this film includes a wide range of demographic and geographic experiences. Ten of the subjects are men. Three of them are women. One of the subjects is a paraplegic; two of them are married to Japanese women, and one of the couples has three children ranging in age from twelve to infancy. Their places of residence are scattered from the northern island of Hokkaidō to more well-known cities such as Osaka in the east, Fukuoka in the west, and the Tokyo metropolitan

area. Their careers are also diverse. The occupations of the subjects include English instructors, a partner in an import company, fashion designers, a securities broker, a broadcast executive, and a musical composer and television personality.

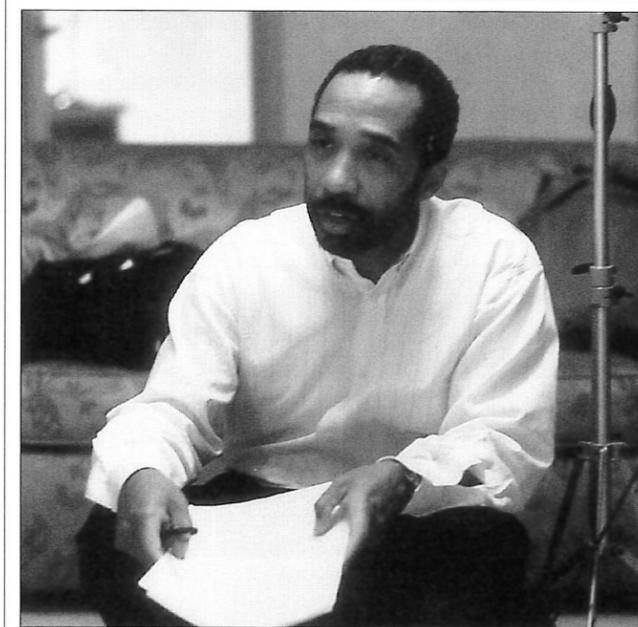
After a picturesque opening scene in a Japanese garden with a flutist playing in the rain, this film carries the viewer through a range of situations that progress from the simple to the complex as it portrays the struggles, successes, and yes, the failures, too, of African-Americans living in Japan. On the less complicated end of the scale is the portrayal of life for a single person on a temporary teaching assignment. At the other end of the spectrum are the dilemmas faced by a man who has married a Japanese woman and chosen to raise his family in Tokyo. Between these two poles are the situations of the single woman who learns to overcome some rather obvious gender discrimination, and the paraplegic who must cope with an obvious lack of accommodations for his physical limitations.

This film quickly departs

from the obvious and basic notion that foreigners in Japan must make cultural and linguistic adaptations. It also demonstrates that there are special aspects of life in Japan, both positive and negative, that are uniquely part of the African-American experience there. One of the strengths of this film is its smooth transition from the experiences that are common to most foreigners to those that are unique to African-Americans. It does so in a way that teaches us about Japan and also makes some frank statements about life for African-Americans at home, too.

The first example of this binational examination is a discussion of the fact that initial interactions with most foreigners, African-American or not, are shaped by the perception of their professional *position* rather than color. It was that common experience that allowed Bill Whitaker, a network executive, and most of the other subjects to automatically

Regge Life on one of the sets for *Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan*.



acquire a status and the assumption of competence that is not universal in working situations for African-Americans in America. Rodney Johnson, an Osaka importer for the past twelve years, was also a beneficiary of the formal side of working life in Japan. Both he and Panziella Lee, a fashion designer, were frank in their opinion that this aspect of life in Japan has given them access to business opportunities and financing that would not have been possible had they lived in America.

Although Whitaker, Johnson, and most of the other subjects had some unusual benefits in the formal world of work, they were also clear about the fact that, outside that controlled and formal environment, they encountered many situations where their foreignness, their color, or both factors, worked to their disadvantage. The most common of those situations was in the search for housing. It became painfully clear to some of the subjects that in Japan there are no legal or institutional barriers to housing discrimination. More importantly, the film points out that the

problems the subjects encountered in this area were largely based on the export of racial stereotypes from the U.S. to Japan, and the persistence of those stereotypes over time.

Three academics discussed stereotypes in the film. The first, professor John Dower of MIT, said that his review of Japanese art shows a differentiation of status by color with lightness equaling higher status. John Russell, an anthropologist, has traced this phenomenon to the staging of a minstrel show, with white men in black-face makeup, by Admiral Perry at the conclusion of the Kanagawa negotiations that opened Japan to the West in 1858. Mitsuo Akamatsu of Tokashimabunri University noted that the construction of a color-status hierarchy in Japan preceded Perry, but he also said that the Japanese accept white, Western culture too uncritically. The result, clearly shown in the film, is that "Dacco Chan," a term perilously close to "Darky," is present in stores, the media, and the minds of many Japanese when they encounter African-Americans.

Clearly, the most complicated of the problems portrayed in this film were the interracial relationships. The first of these situations was that of Rodney Johnson, the Osaka importer. He and Wakako, his fiancée, both felt that they had been subjected to social and official opposition to their marriage. He was verbally harassed on the street. Then came numerous official difficulties. They both felt that the application process for a marriage visa was unnecessarily long and complicated. They were also subjected to calls to her parents' home on a Sunday afternoon to be sure that they knew her fiancée was black. They felt these actions were anti-black, rather than antiforeign.

The most complex, and inspiring, study of an interracial relationship was that of the composer and TV personality, Ronnie Rucker, and his wife, Yoko. They have been married for twelve years and have three children. Mr. Rucker says Yoko's brothers' initial reaction was motivated by antiforeignism rather than racism. Her parents did not attend the wedding. Since that time, Mr. Rucker and his eldest daughter have become a regular feature on the Tokyo equivalent of Sesame Street. That fact, and his record as a devoted father of three children, the last of which is a son, has led Yoko's father to accept Mr. Rucker completely. Yoko's mother, however, still tries to send her grandchildren out for candy when her neighbors come to visit.

As I reviewed this film, I discussed it with African-Americans who have been to Japan,

and those who plan to go there. To a person, members of the former group say that the film rings true to their experiences, and articulates things which they often misunderstood at the time. Those who plan to go to Japan felt that *Struggle and Success* is a timely, useful vehicle for calming their uneasiness and preparing them for both the common and the unique experiences of living in Japan. Given the increase in Japanese studies among African-Americans, whether they are at major universities or those that traditionally serve African-Americans, I think the officials at these schools would be well advised to show this film.

James T. Gillam

JAMES T. GILLAM is Associate Professor of History at Spelman College.

[Struggle and Success was awarded a Bronze Apple from the National Educational Media CINE Network and a Golden Eagle award and was selected for this year's Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival. It also has been aired on PBS nationwide. Ed.]

ORDERING INFORMATION

Contact the Struggle and Success Film Library: 800-666-9970



Members of the crew in Japan: (from left to right) Panziella Leslie, formerly of Fukuoka, Japan; Yoshinori Komiya, soundman; Hisazumi Shimazu, videographer and Mina Monden, translator.