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ILLUSTRATION BY TIM O'BREE

ISSUES | JUST BE CAUSE

Don't let ANA off the hook for that offensive ad

BY DEBITO ARUDOU

ARTICLE HISTORY | JAN 24, 2014

A commercial for All Nippon Airlines, one of Japan's flagship carriers, has been making headlines recently. Released last Saturday, the 30-second spot shows two Japanese men (one a comedian named Bakarhythm, but let's call them A and B) standing by an airport observation-deck window, speaking English with Japanese subtitles.

Looking out at the jets, A says, "Haneda Airport has more international flights nowadays." B replies, "Finally." Their exchange goes on: "Next stop, Vancouver." "Next stop, Hanoi." "Exciting, isn't it?" Then B says, rather oddly, "You want a hug?" When A only gives him a nonplussed look, B continues, "Such a Japanese reaction." When A explains, "But I am Japanese," B counters, "I see. Let's change the image of Japanese people." And A, smiling broadly, agrees. (Ad archived [here](http://www.debito.org/ANAHanedaAd2014.mp4) (<http://www.debito.org/ANAHanedaAd2014.mp4>).

All right so far. Except that A is now wearing a strapped-on long nose and a big blond wig. Off they fly to their destinations.

This ad has occasioned considerable debate and media coverage. Many commenters in English-language online forums have called it "racist" (one even said "Debito bait"; I'm chuffed) and have made moves to take their business elsewhere. Others have said the advert isn't racist, just

lame. A few managed to find a deep pocket of latent irony, saying it's actually poking fun at the Japanese people and their insular attitudes. Meanwhile, within Japanese-language forums, according to a Yahoo Japan poll, 82 percent of respondents see no problem with it.

It will probably come as no surprise to learn that JBC objects to this ad. If ANA had really wanted to “change the image of Japan,” it should have avoided racializing its product. Instead, it's just business as usual.

Consider some other racist marketing strategies from not so long ago (visuals and reports archived at [here](http://www.debito.org/?p=12077) (www.debito.org/?p=12077)) [↗](http://www.debito.org/?p=12077)
(<http://www.debito.org/?p=12077>:)

Last year, Toshiba marketed a bread-maker with an obnoxiously overexuberant Japanese girl speaking *katakana* Japanese, wearing a blond wig and a big nose. (Ad archived at [↗ here](http://www.debito.org/Toshibasuiipanda.mp4) (<http://www.debito.org/Toshibasuiipanda.mp4>).)

In 2010, Nagasaki Prefecture promoted its “foreign” buildings by showing Japanese tourists wearing — you guessed it — blond wigs and big noses. (Ad archived at [↗ here](http://www.debito.org/?p=7523) (<http://www.debito.org/?p=7523>).)

In 2005, Mandom sold men's cosmetics with a Rasta-man motif, juxtaposing black people with a chimpanzee. (Ad archived at [↗ here](http://www.debito.org/mandomproject.html) (<http://www.debito.org/mandomproject.html>).)

Dare I mention the resurrection of the book “Little Black Sambo” in 2005 for children, which inspired a racist nursery-school song in Saitama about “black butts”? (See “[Sambo racism row reignites over kids' play](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2010/04/13/issues/sambo-racism-row-reignites-over-kids-play/) (<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2010/04/13/issues/sambo-racism-row-reignites-over-kids-play/>),” by Matthew Chozick.)

And how about the Choya plum sake commercials in 2008, featuring three girls (two Caucasian, one Japanese), the latter sporting a big plastic nose and stick-on paper blue eyes? Although most of these ads were soon pulled after complaints, you can still go to Amazon Japan or Tokyu Hands and buy “*gaijin*” stick-on blue eyes and nose (with the caption “*Harō gaijin-san*”) to sport at parties!

Har har. Can't you see it's all just a joke, imbued with a deep sense of irony subversively directed at Japanese people? Except that, as I've pointed out in JBCs passim, ironic humor is not one of Japan's strong suits.

Moreover, remember when McDonald's Japan was using a nerdy white guy to hawk newfangled burgers? JBC argued (“[Meet Mr. James, gaijin clown](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2009/09/01/community/meet-mr-james-gaijin-clown/) (<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2009/09/01/community/meet-mr-james-gaijin-clown/>),” Sept. 1, 2009) that stereotyping of this nature only works as humor if, among other things, it passes a “switch test” — i.e., if everyone is fair game for parody.

But in Japan it's not fair game. Japanese society and its media are quick to take umbrage at being lampooned by the outside world, especially in a racialized manner. Put succinctly: "Our big-nose humor is OK, but your buck-teeth humor isn't."

Case in point: To commemorate the publication of "Little Black Sambo," I drew up a parody called "[Little Yellow Jap](http://www.debito.org/chibikurosanbo.html) (<http://www.debito.org/chibikurosanbo.html>)" to put the shoe on the other foot, I made the protagonist as stereotypically exaggerated as the ink-black golliwogs in the book: bright yellow skin, round glasses, buck teeth, and clad in a *fundoshi* loincloth. I pointed out on every page that this was a parody of Japan's "Sambo," and contextualized it with a full explanation in Japanese of why racialized books for children are bad.

Yet for years now in the Japanese version of Wikipedia's entry on me, this parody is cited as an example of my "discrimination against Japanese." Clearly turnabout is not considered fair play.

Or take the case of British TV show "QI" (See "[Cultural insensitivity no laughing matter](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2011/01/30/news/cultural-insensitivity-no-laughing-matter/)" (<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2011/01/30/news/cultural-insensitivity-no-laughing-matter/>) by Philip Brasor). Producers were forced to apologize for a joke about a recently deceased Japanese man who, in 1945, experienced the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and was then unlucky enough to travel to Nagasaki in time to catch the second one. A panelist had dryly quipped, "He never got the train again, I tell you."

That's not funny — that's insensitive! And insulting! And racist, according to the more unified online communities in Japan, backed up by protesting Japanese government officials, all of whom clearly understand irony. (For the record, I'm being ironic. Please laugh.)

Back to ANA. In tepid apology letters, ANA used a standard disclaimer: "We didn't mean to offend anyone." OK. And I'm sure many of your potential customers didn't "mean" to be offended either. But many were. And if you have any pretensions to being an international company, you wouldn't have found yourself on a sticky wicket like this in the first place.

To be fair, this campaign was probably cooked up not by ANA, but by one of Japan's advertising behemoths (my guess is Dentsu, which has nearly a third of Japan's market share). Anyone with an eye on the Japanese media knows how they make silly amounts of money on silly stereotypes (including the one that Japanese don't hug), while reaffirming the binary between "Japan" and "the rest of the world."

Nevertheless, ANA deserves its lumps, because its reps simply don't know what they're apologizing for. In fact, they clumsily reinforced the binary in their press releases, stating that complaints have "mostly come from foreign customers" (as opposed to real customers?) before finally pulling the ad on Tuesday.

Now consider this: Gerry Nacpil, supervisor of ANA's Sky Web site, wrote in his apology, "The intention of this commercial was . . . to encourage Japanese to travel abroad more and become global citizens."

So, "global citizens" equals white people? Now the ad is even more problematic.

Look, Japan, if you want to host international events (such as an Olympics), or to have increased contact with the outside world, you must be prepared to face increased international scrutiny of your attitudes according to global standards.

For one of Japan's most international companies to reaffirm a narrative that Japanese must change their race to become more "global" is a horrible misstep. ANA showed a distinct disregard for their non-Japanese customers — those who are "Western," yes, but especially the majority who are "Asian."

There will be no change in marketing strategies until Japan's business leaders (and feudal-era advertisers) see non-Japanese as a significant customer base they could lose due to inconsiderate behavior. Non-Japanese should vote with their feet and not encourage this with passive silence, or by second-guessing the true intentions behind racially grounded messages. Clearly the Japanese public, brought up on "big nose" and "black butt" humor, won't pressure them to stop.

Don't let ANA off the hook. This is a prime opportunity to act. Otherwise the idea that foreigners can be ridiculed for their racial traits (which also affects Japan's multiethnic children) will become normalized, and tackling Japan's racialized commodification will remain a perpetual game of "whack-a-mole," with Japanese society looking ever more hypocritical and bigoted.

Just Be Cause usually appears on the first Thursday of the month but will be taking a break in February. Send comments to community@japantimes.co.jp (<mailto:community@japantimes.co.jp>).

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