

Are you a “*ningen*”? The *kanji* for *ningen* or human translates to ‘person (*nin*)’ and ‘between (*gen*)’, meaning we are not human without connection. I would like to share with you my story about a connection I have formed with a special group of people.

“It is as if I never even existed.” said a 93-year-old woman. How could I respond when I knew she was right?

Oku-Komyoen is on Nagashima which is a small island on the Seto Inland Sea. It is a National Sanatorium for Hansen’s disease. This woman was only 15 when she was brought to the island, never to return.

The enforced isolation of Hansen’s disease patients is said to be one of the biggest tragedies of modern Japan. In the 1940s, development of medication and treatment led many foreign countries to change policies and to release the former patients. However, it was not until 1966 that Japan finally abolished the Leprosy Prevention Law, a staggering 50 years behind the international trend.

Why? Because not enough people cared about them. We have continued to standby and refuse to acknowledge their century-long sad history.

About 140 people still live in Oku-Komyoen. Their average age being 82, the population is getting smaller rapidly. When they are all gone, who will remember them? That 93-year-old woman is one of the tens of thousands of people who were deprived of their right to go home. She is one of the brave souls who abandoned their names so that they wouldn’t be a burden to their family. She is one of those who lost their identity to history. Imagine what such a life would be like?

Every summer after becoming a junior high student, I have visited Oku-Komyoen together with a group of Kobe University volunteers. This was my third summer there. About 40 of us are working together to complete a square for gathering where people can view cherry blossoms, have barbeque parties, enjoy festivals and so on.

Oku-Nagashima Ohashi is a bridge which stretches across Okayama and Nagashima Island. “*Ningen Kaifuku no Hashi*”, or “The Bridge of Humanity Restoration”, is another name for it. Whose humanity or *ningen* status are we talking about here? Their humanity? I say no. I would say OUR HUMANITY.

Some people say that the bridge is a symbol of human rights, but I think that is yet to be determined. If we continue to keep the island isolated, it would be a symbol of deprivation. So, how do we regain our “*ningen*” status?

Next summer I will cross the bridge again to tell that 93-year-old woman that I will be the proof of her existence. I would love you to visit one of the 14 sanatoriums throughout Japan and connect with these forgotten people so that we can be the proof of their existence.

Are you a “*ningen*”? Now, what is your answer?