Tooth Color in Japan:
A Cultural Study

by
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INTRODUCTION

Several studies in Japan have recognized that tooth color reflects cultural belief and practices. Mitumasa Hara studied the custom of black teeth with regard to adornment of the body in his work, *A Study of 'Ohaguro.'*[1] However, very few attempts have been made to support the idea that tooth color is part of culture.

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Graeme Turner states that, "culture, as a site where meaning is generated and experienced, becomes a determining, productive field through which social realities are constructed, experienced and interpreted."[2, p.14] Historically, in Japan, there was a custom, called *ohaguro*, of dyeing white teeth black. The custom of *ohaguro* disappeared with the influx of foreign culture during the Meiji Era (1864-1912). Today, it is fashionable not only to restore discolored teeth to their natural color, but also to make them even whiter.

Color in fashion changes with time. It sometimes has been influenced by the culture of other countries. In order to have a deeper understanding of the cultural specifics of "representation" (the practice of making meaning by using signs and language, and their meanings with regard to the color of teeth), it is necessary to look back on the changes of conceptions of color. This article discusses tooth color as a cultural form in relation to the following topics: Culture, identity, and globalization. I will explore applications of these topics to the specific cultural practices of *ohaguro* (tooth-blackening) and tooth-whitening.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

The concept of culture has changed over time. According to Raymond Williams, the word's original meaning was "the idea of the tending or cultivation of crops and animals."[3, p.87] During the Enlightenment Period, the words *culture* and *civilization* were used to describe the process of human development. *Civilization* was added because the upper-class societies thought that they were more civilized than the lower class.

During the nineteenth century the concept of culture changed further. Under the influence of the Romantic movement, it changed from the idea of "civilization," to ways of life of particular groups, peoples, nations, or periods. In the late nineteenth century, "culture" referred mainly to refinement associated with the arts, philosophy, and learning. The word is still used in this sense today when "culture" is used to refer to the "higher" arts; this is different from the "popular" or "mass" culture.[4]

"Things" do not have meaning until they are placed into societal context.

In the twentieth century, the idea of culture changed to the concept called *signification*; with this, the meaning of culture shifted from "What is culture?" to "How does culture work?"

According to Williams, "culture is a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior."[5, p.19] The study of culture, if we follow this definition, is to describe a lifestyle that is not exclusive, but ordinary. Its objects of analysis are orders in people's ways of life in which they produce meanings by symbolic operations. Williams' definition emphasizes that, "Culture is closely connected with the role of 'meaning' in society."[4, p.11] That is to say, social practice is organized through meaning.

"Things" do not have meaning until they are placed into societal context. Today, the concept of "culture" has expanded to include everything from society to politics to the economy. It has changed from a singular meaning to a plural one.

TOOTH COLOR AS A CULTURAL FORM

Human beings have the ability to think of things that are not present at the moment. This is made possible by constructing a representation of that thing in the mind.

The cultural context of whitening is put into the minds of people unconsciously through advertisements. All models' teeth are white. What do their white teeth represent? The objects of analysis in cultural studies are regularities in people's ways of life in which they produce meanings by symbolic operations. Social practices are organized through meanings. Meanings are not just 'sent' by producers and 'received' by consumers; rather, meanings are actively made by consumers, through the use to which they put these products in their everyday lives. Things do not have meaning until they are represented by social practices.

I will now elaborate on the concepts of *signification* a little further in relation to advertisements. Advertising practices show the processes of signification clearly. It follows from what has been said thus far that advertising could also be said to work by fitting a "signifier" to a "signified," "both cooperating with and intervening in the semiotic process. Advertisers typically deploy a signifier, already conventionally related to a mental concept they wish to attach to their product as a means of providing their product with that meaning."[2, p.20]

Tooth-whitening advertisements aim to translate the meaning through using a "code" system. Most people today would prefer to have dazzling white teeth like those of young models and actors seen on magazine covers, on television, and in the movies. Consumers see these glamorous people and think, "I want to be like them."

Consumers unconsciously try to identify with young models in advertisements by whitening their teeth. Because young models who appear in advertisements already signify images such as purity, health, beauty, and youth, they can, in the code system, be used to advertise whitening. Thus, if they did not have such an image, the relation between their faces and whitening would be meaningless. In the code system it is the images of their perfectly beautiful faces, not their actual faces, that is important.

THE ESTHETIC SENSE OF TOOTH COLOR: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Color has become a symbolic expression in a society. Even the way we "see" the world is "determined by the cultural conventions through which we conceptualize the image we receive."[2, p.13] Colors have been conceptualized during the history of human development and have been used symbolically in society. A *symbol* is a concrete material thing that stands for an abstract entity. For example, a dove is often used as a symbol of peace. This link is constructed through the process of *symbolization*, which connects an abstract entity with a material thing that is in some way thought to be related to the symbolized. Note that the relation between the two is not necessarily in terms of meaning; an associative relation is enough.

The symbolism of colors also holds true for the color of teeth. Historically, in Japan, the esthetic preference for tooth color has changed from black to its opposite, white. The color of teeth reflects the social perceptions of beauty, social status, and age. Connotations of a color depend upon esthetic senses, nature, and the social situation. The esthetic sense of color in Japan has been influenced by Buddhism;

thoughts from ancient times; and the Yin, Yang, and five elements combination theory.[6, p.220] According to Nagasaki, the esthetic sense of color started from one person's simple impressions when they saw natural phenomena, and human beings represented their impressions about such natural phenomena using color.[6, p.34]

OHAGURO AS CULTURE

The Japanese word *kuro* is connected with night; it expresses darkness after the sun sets. In ancient times, night was considered to be the time when evil spirits were rampant. Black was a bad omen and hated as a color. In the Buddhist faith, however, black is considered the "unchanging" color, which cannot be dyed with another. Its visual weightiness was believed to represent "robustness" and "dignity," which is why the high-ranking Samurais were fond of using it.

The representation of things is different from culture to culture, even from period to period within a particular culture. The impression that the color of teeth gives changes in each era depending upon its customs. It may be helpful to consider the fashion of *ohaguro* in terms of some other important factors of culture.

Tooth-whitening is a cultural act because it has been constituted by society through a range of meanings and practices.

According to Hara, black teeth were an esthetic symbol from ancient times.[1, p.190] In the Heian Era (794-1192), *ohaguro* became popular among males, especially court nobles and commanders.[1, p.131] Among samurais, the custom of *ohaguro* was a proof of loyalty, indicating that a samurai does not serve two masters within a life-

Figure 1: Hina-ningyo: Doll for the Girls' Festival.

time. The custom is said to have ended among men around the time of the Muromati Era (1558-1572).[6, p.234]

It was thought that black teeth made a woman look beautiful,[1, p.190] and so the practice came to be followed by young women, who first blackened their teeth as a way of enhancing their appearance when they were ready to find a husband. As a result, the custom of *ohaguro* spread throughout the country, especially during the Edo Era (1603-1867). From this time, *ohaguro* became the symbol of married women.

DARKNESS AND BLACK

In Junichiro Tanizaki's *Ineiraisan*, one of whose themes is the traditional Japanese esthetic sense, the reason why a married woman practices *ohaguro* is to emphasize the *oshiroi* (white powder) that she wears. During the Edo Era, women of the middle class lived in dark houses; only candles lit the rooms. The room was dark, a woman's kimono was also dark, as were her teeth. And women applied *oshiroi* to their faces in order not to show their expression.[7, pp.46-48] It was thought that *ohaguro* effectively created an expressionless face. The black of *ohaguro* was in sharp contrast with the *oshiroi*, and had the effect of emphasizing it. We see in Figure 1 that the doll shows a women's face after makeup has been applied. By shaving her eyebrows and dyeing the teeth black, changes of feeling do not appear in her expression—

expression is extinguished. Therefore, one may say that *ohaguro* is the culture that hides expression.

Ohaguro came to distinctively represent age, occupation, and marital status. This meant that a woman became obedient as a subordinate to her husband, because black cannot be dyed with other colors. It is clear from this that black has a deep connection with the idea of fidelity.[1, pp.97-98]

'WHITENING' AS CULTURE

The Latin word *candidus*, meaning white, comes from the Sanskrit *candro*, which means *light*; the English *white* also is related to light.

The Japanese word *shiro* comes from the state in which the form of a thing is clearly seen when the day breaks; it is related to sunrise. White is the color that represents purity and innocence. Therefore, it is thought to be a sacred color. In the era of Empress Suiko (554-628), a white flag was used on the battlefield as a sign of surrender. This is a representation of "the clean heart."

In Japanese, there is an expression, *Meibo Koshi*, which emphasizes white teeth. It translates in English to "Bright eyes and pearly teeth." *Meibo Koshi* comes from the poetry of Tu Fu, a famous poet during the Tang Era in China. This expression is used to describe Yang-Kuei-fei, one of the most famous beauties of China.

According to John Tomlinson, "culture can be understood as the order of life in which human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation."[8, p.41] Tooth-whitening is a cultural act because it has been constituted by society through a range of meanings and practices. It is "culture" because we have constituted it as a meaningful object and it connects with social practices that are specific to our culture or way of life. It is also cultural because it is associated with certain kinds of people, such as young women.

At first, dentists (producers) advertised tooth-whitening as treatment to lighten discolored enamel and dentin. However, consumers gave whitening a different meaning. They want to make their teeth white to give the impressions of purity, health, beauty, and youth. Tooth-whitening is the easiest way to obtain a beautiful smile. At the moment, white teeth is the fashion for people who want to look beautiful, so many practices have been created and commercialized. Whitening as culture has turned into something that is bought and sold. Therefore, one may say that whitening is a part of culture that shows one's expression clearly.

IDENTITY

THE ADVERTISEMENT OF WHITENING USING THE CODE SYSTEM

According to Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, "Identities and differences can shift over time and in changing circumstances and places."[5, p.54] Our identity often changes as our surroundings change. Identity is the self-definition, "Who am I?," and is self-proof of a person's existence. The identity of a person is essentially "what is inside," but is determined by many outside influences. These influences include language, meaning, and relationships with others.

One of the most important functions of advertising is to establish an identity between the consumer and the product. An advertisement reflects our lives and also helps us to live our lives. Social practices are organized through meaning. Meanings are not just sent by producers and received by consumers; rather, meanings are actively made in consumption through the use to which people put these products in their everyday lives. We are unconsciously influenced by advertisements in the media.

"We signify ourselves through the signs available to us within our culture; we select and combine them in relation to the codes and conventions established within our culture, in order to delimit and determine the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate when read by others."[2, p.17]

One of the most important functions of advertising is to establish an identity between the consumer and the product.

Here, the idea of a *sign* may be useful. A sign can be a word, a color, a tooth, a face, a gesture. The sign has been divided into its constituent parts, the *signifier* and the *signified*. According to Williamson, "the Signifier is the material object, and the Signified is its meaning."[9, p.17] Turner also states that the signifier is "the physical form of the sign: the written word, the lines on the page that form the drawing, the photograph, the sound." The signified is "the mental concept referred to by the signifier."[2, p.17]

"Language is the use of a set of signs or a signifying system to represent things and exchange meaning about them."[4, p.13] We live in a linguistic society in that our social relationships are often determined on the basis of language. This whitening advertisement

is using the sign system. This appropriates a relationship that exists between the signifier (white teeth) and the signified (health, beauty, and youth).

Esthetic dentists, in trying to sell the product (whitening), try to build an identity between the consumer and tooth-whitening through advertisements. Through advertising, whitening is represented as a device for purity, health, beauty, and youth. Thus whitening becomes a metaphor, a signifier, of "youth."

FASHION AND IDENTITTY

White teeth may be thought of as a fashion in present-day Japanese society in that some choose to be a member of a group of people who are viewed as healthy or youthful.

According to Giles and Middleton "Social and material effects follow from the symbolic marking of one group as different from another."[5, p.54] The authors also state that identity is organized through classification systems that divide social relations into opposing groups, in that if you belong to one you cannot, by definition, belong to the others. Each person belongs to a specific culture, and that culture plays an important role in the formation of a person's identity. A common identity is forged among those who have a similar culture, therefore a common identity forms a group, though there may be contradictions within identities, both at the collective and the individual level.

Since the Meiji Era, fashions in Japan have derived from the desire to be like Westerners. Consider the latest fashion in Japan, of dyed hair. Japanese people have black hair. A study of 500 women aged 20 through 59, conducted by Tokyo Survey Research, Inc. in 2000, showed that 74.2% of them have dyed their hair. The fashion in which young people dye their hair yellow or brown evolved because of a yearning

to emulate Europeans' lighter hair. Those who dye their hair yellow or brown do so because they want to show that they belong to the group marked by that style. The same can safely be said of white teeth, which did not become popular until the Westernization of Japan began.

Culture plays a central role in shaping an individual's identity. In other words, culture is the basis on which its members' identity is built. Those who share an identity form a group, and its members draw a distinction between themselves and those who do not share their identity label. Thus, at the core of group identity is the notion of difference from others. In the case of fashion, an identity is based on identification with the leader of a group, which brings about the sense of belonging to, and therefore sharing the same fashion with the other members of that group. This sense makes them feel distinct from those who don't belong to the group and who therefore, in their eyes, are not sophisticated in terms of fashion.

"Identity is clearly defined by 'difference' that is by what it is not."[10, p.2] Identities are frequently constructed in terms of oppositions. That is, identity depends more on what it *is not* than what it *is*. We can no more have a will or desire without relating to others than we can define our identity without contacts with others. People have the desire to be different from others: That is, they want to be unique.

At the same time, however, people also want to look similar to others. For example, in the case of fashion, there is a tendency to imitate the appearance of men or women who appear in the mass media. If the fashion leader's way of dress, makeup, and manners changes, the public tries to imitate it, so that they are not different. In the Meiji Era, the general public saw the aristocracy's trend, and gradually came to stop wearing *ohaguro*. This change is discussed further below.

GLOBALIZATION AND REGULATION

GLOBALIZATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS

According to Anthony Giddens, "Globalization is the process in which human activities are integrated and being shared to the extent that the planet is becoming 'one world.'"[11, p.77] Globalization standardizes and homogenizes the local products and cultural forms. In the process of globalization, the indigenous cultures of particular localities become homogenized. Global economic integration breaks down borders between cultures and thus puts cultures in constant change. Globalization permeates and changes local economies, cultures, and orders, which are restored by local people to something different from what they used to be. Herein lies the crisis of vanishing local identities.

Actually, Japan during the Meiji Era went on to adopt not only science and technology but also literature, fine arts, and ways of life as well, thus losing some of its identities. The custom of *ohaguro*, which was one of the identities of Japanese society then, dropped out of fashion as a result of the adoption of Western ways of life.

European culture came to Japan in the last stages of the Edo Era. In the Meiji Era, Japan went through a profound change in terms of education, thought, and culture, for example the abolition of the topknot, the importation of Western clothes, and educational system reform. In these circumstances, the influx of Western culture accelerated.

Cultural imperialism is understood as Western dominance, which is 'Westernization' of world culture. Western culture has a profound influence over other cultures through such evident cultural instances as teeth whitening. Uniform Westernization is progressing under the name of globalization. The Europeans considered that Japanese culture was inferior to theirs at the end of the nineteenth century. The West's dominant culture oppressed Eastern culture; this oppression produced an inferiority complex among Eastern people. Cultural imperialism is understood as the relationship between "the West and the Rest."[12] When the Japanese came into contact with Western culture, they were overwhelmed and fascinated by it, losing confidence in their own cultures. With the foundation of their identity shattered, they faced an identity crisis, which led to the worship of Western culture, which has continued up until now.

Ohaguro continued until the late 1800s. The idea that *ohaguro* was not so civilized spread, and the custom disappeared. That is, the idea that *ohaguro* was outdated circulated among young women, and it then became stylish to have white teeth. Here, one of the identities was lost.

Each person belongs to a specific culture, and that culture plays an important role in the formation of a person's identity.

There is a tendency for all countries to have the same ideas about fashion and beauty. Besides having a chewing function, teeth have a very important role in giving the impression of beauty and youth to others. Now the whitening culture has been introduced to Japan, with the same values as in

America, white teeth are beautiful. This is an example of the Japanese ways of life being Westernized.

REGULATION AND POWER

I earlier mentioned that the public tries to imitate fashion leaders. If a person does not follow a fashion when it becomes dominant in a society, the common reaction is to try to exclude him or her. Regulatory forces work against those who are left behind the fashion.

In the process of globalization, the indigenous cultures of particular localities become homogenized.

This is the kind of regulation or power described by Michel Foucault, who explains the concept of power as follows: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everywhere, but because it comes from everywhere." He also states that power is not an institution but comes from below."[13, p.476] He explains that individuals exert power on each other in their everyday lives. That is, power exists as a relationship between individuals. What he means by the term 'power' is that someone tries to control others' courses of action and at the same time he refuses or chooses to be controlled by them.

Douglas argued that human societies require classification systems that symbolically mark the differences among categories in order to construct boundaries between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.[4] For example, it is 'out of place' for young people today in Japan, where brown hair is in fashion, to have black hair. The same thing may be said of whitening. Those who do not have white teeth are excluded as 'out of place', as Douglas says.[14] Hall states that identities

emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are the product of the marking of difference and exclusion.[15] People feel that they have to keep up with the fashion of white teeth so that they will be the same as their friends.

Ohaguro, was banned among aristocrats in the Meiji Era. There were some who did not follow the regulation; they wanted to have their own identity. The tradition of *ohaguro*, which had continued for so long, could not be easily abolished. It was not until the Empress Shouken appeared in public without *ohaguro* and women followed suit that the custom died out. She succeeded in spreading the idea that *ohaguro* was not so civilized, and the custom disappeared.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed tooth color as a cultural form in relation to the following four topics: culture, identity, globalization, and regulation. The color of the era is a mirror which reflects its culture. The color of teeth is 'cultural' because we have constituted it as a meaningful object, and it connects with social practices which are specific to our culture or way of life. From what has been discussed above, we can conclude that tooth color is a cultural form. *AᴇD*

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