

SCENE

Questioning the idea of race

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When Japanese people dye their hair a lighter shade, is it simply an expression of fashion or part of a deeper desire to look more Caucasian? To what extent can the concept of race be used to examine such an act? Indeed, is race a meaningful universal concept or just a pernicious myth?

A whole range of questions arise when we think of the word "race" and many of them are due to the ambiguity of the concept. Race seems not only to refer to the biological traits of human beings but also to their cultural, social, political and religious identities.

The concept of race and the causes of racial discrimination were the main themes discussed by physical and social anthropologists from Japan, the United States, Britain and India in a cross-cultural symposium organized by the Institute for Research in Humanities at Kyoto University in September.

In 18th-century Europe, race was defined by the "degree of civilization," skin color and aspects of physical appearance, which were described with words such as "coarse" and "fine." In this context, the criteria for determining race were based on a Eurocentric point of view that placed Caucasians at the top of the racial ladder, with Mongolians and black people at the bottom. Such a model was used as a justification for colonization and the slave trade.

"In Judeo-Christian culture the color white was linked to good and black to evil," Kyoto University Associate Prof. Yasuko Takezawa said, trying to explain racial ranking based on skin color. "Some argued that black was inferior because children have a natural fear of dark places. (The distinction) may also be related to day and night."

But what scientific basis is there for the concept of race?

Most scientists today say there is no biological difference that corresponds to the concept of race. "Human diversity exists but this has nothing to do with basic biology," Prof. Loring Brace of the University of Michigan said. He argued that using local or regional groups as the starting point for analysis could not produce any meaningful understanding of biologically important human traits. After studying skin color, tooth size, abnormal hemoglobins and blood groups, he found that the distribution of each of these characteristics was completely unrelated to one other. Instead, the traits that cluster in particular regions should be thought of like aspects of family resemblance, as they have no other biological significance.

"Race is a four-letter word," he said.

As for intellectual capabilities, Brace argued that although individual differences exist, no such differences can be detected among sampled groups of people from around the world. Likewise, no biological factor can be associated with intelligence.

"Mental capabilities are of crucial value for human survival and therefore have been under powerful selective force control. But people have survived everywhere, and under all (kinds of) circumstances people have learned to speak a language," he said. "Expectations that populations should differ in intellectual capabilities are derived...from ethnocentric and racist assumptions."

The Enlightenment in Europe promoted beliefs about a universal human nature and was followed

by a period of rapid urbanization and industrialization.

"There was a need to reestablish community and a sense of belonging and tradition," said Robert Moore, professor emeritus at the University of Liverpool, referring to a psychological backlash to the changes of the age. "Wholesome prejudices were better than half-baked reasoning."

At the turn of 18th and 19th centuries, modern forms of nationalism were emerging in Europe that entailed the search for the origins of nations and the unique spirit of people in Europe. The celebration of myth and legend became an important aspect of this trend along with the search for heroic ancestors. The decline of order and community could be overcome by reference to a continuous historical identity that was the basis not only for order but the foundation of nations, Moore said.

Popular 19th-century literature written for young boys told stories of savages, cannibals and wild animals set in remote hostile parts of the world. Such material inspired young men to seek adventure in the British Empire. Moore said such literature constituted another factor that led to a rise in racism in Britain. Even the 1864 edition of the Chambers encyclopedia compared Africans to apes and judged them inferior to Europeans.

According to Moore, the concept of race is a tool for unifying and commanding the loyalty of a population—even for those placed at the bottom of a social hierarchy. It is also used to justify the subordination of the native people of a colony, Moore said. "Middle class people in Britain felt they had a share in the empire. Although he (the Englishman) was not an aristocrat, he wasn't Irish, Jewish, black or Chinese."

Western influence on caste

According to University of Delhi Associate Prof. Subhadra Channa, the caste system was not a tradition of India but an invention used by colonial rulers to justify invasion in the name of "civilizing" a region.

Despite denials by the Indian government, discrimination as a result of the caste system still exists to some degree today, she says. The fact that Indians with light skin color and thin noses were considered high caste was an adoption of Indo-Aryan myths created in Europe, said Channa, who believes that caste is used by politicians as an instrument to mobilize people at various social levels even today.

"Before the colonial years, a person who was too fair was considered inauspicious," Channa said. "My mother-in-law said that in Punjab, women with light-colored eyes suffered discrimination when it came to marriage." Colonial rulers who tried to learn about the Indian aboriginal structure did so from intellectuals or high Brahman scholars who took advantage of their position to elaborate a system that best suited their interests, Channa argued.

Mythological divisions in aboriginal India—known as *jati*—regulated marriage, social interaction, occupation and community life. But they were known to be regional and highly fluid. In a nonhomogeneous land that saw wave after wave of conquerors and settlers, these divisions were often reinterpreted by the hierarchy of the time, she said.

In fact, images of Hindu gods and goddesses are more often dark in color than light, she said.

Racism in U.S.

In studying racism in the United States, Prof. Audrey Smedley of Virginia Commonwealth University concludes race is not a universal concept, but an idea deeply rooted in North America

through institutionalization.

"Racism is a social mechanism for maximizing differences between people and for allocating privilege, power and wealth to some and degrading others," Smedley said.

In early American colonies in the 17th century, Africans were not the only people enslaved. Irish prisoners of war were also taken into slavery, she said. At that time, hardworking black slaves could accumulate wealth and own land. There were even slave-owning black landowners, she said, suggesting that the legal framework of the time was not as discriminatory as one might expect.

Later black and white slaves united to rebel against their oppressors, causing colonial leaders to attempt to find ways of dividing this marginalized sector of society and preventing further rebellions, she said. As they worked to institutionalize discrimination, they focused on obvious physical traits to achieve their goal, she said.

"From this inception the term 'race' was used to convey extreme social separation," Smedley said.

Racism, nationalism in Japan

In Japan, the European concept of race came with the arrival of modern knowledge and technology after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. However, the concept was later reinterpreted and distorted by the Japanese because European accounts viewed all Asians in the same light, Associate Prof. Ichiro Tomiyama of Osaka University said.

"(In the early 20th century) a (Japanese) study was published, claiming that the Japanese were the only Asian people who could successfully adopt Western civilization," Tomiyama said. "Scholars then had justification for ranking China and Korea as semicivilized countries."

Tomiyama argues that at the time the meaning of the word primitive overlapped with the concepts of mental disability, crime and idleness.

During the same period revisions in the penal code began to place more emphasis on social stability at the expense of individual rights, with criminals viewed as innately deviant and in need of supervision or segregation, according to Tomiyama.

"It became part of Japan's global policy of the 20th century to send Japanese people with 'sound ideas and strong bodies' to settle in various countries in the Great East Asia Coprosperity Sphere to become role models for the local people," he said.

Although Japanese expansionism and imperialism were primarily due to economic difficulties at home, their justification was dressed up in nationalistic ideology. Despite the nation's expanding empire, marriages between Japanese and local people were severely frowned upon because the imperial government believed that the stability of its society and power structure depended on its ability to maintain "racial purity."

Tomiyama argues that while the days of Japanese imperialism are over, use of the concept of race is still very much a contemporary issue. He referred to Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara's recent use of the term "sankokujin"—a description used to refer to people ruled by the Japanese empire before 1945.

In concluding the symposium, Prof. Shinichi Yamamuro of Kyoto University said: "Although race is not a universal concept, it will continue to exist."

With political movements favoring nationalism and anti-immigration policies growing stronger around the world, the ambiguous concept of race, which most people in the world assume to be a natural aspect of humankind, does indeed seem likely to live on.