

# The Practice of Tooth Darkening in Southeastern Asia and the Pacific

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In western cultures, it is becoming more and more common for people to take extra time and effort to whiten their teeth. For some it has become an obsession, likely perpetuated by the impeccable smiles seen on the faces of the rich and famous. While the notion of 'the whiter the teeth, the better' prevails in the western half of the world, the process of darkening the teeth is commonly practiced in Southeastern Asia and the Pacific Islands. There exist a couple of methods that can achieve the desired darkening effect, often differing depending upon the region. While it predominately functions as a cosmetic enhancement, tooth darkening is also believed by some to improve the health and spirituality of the individual practicing the technique.

The Vietnamese have been chewing *trau-cau* for thousands of years, beginning in 2,879 BCE. *Trau* is a betel, a leaf with a bittersweet taste from the piperaceae tree, while *cau* is an areca nut, a seed from the areca palm. Chewed together, the leaf-nut concoction stains the teeth with prolonged use. This staining is due to the red pigment that acts like a dye found in the flavorful juice that is released when dissolved in the mouth. To quicken the desired effect of black teeth, some Vietnamese apply black lacquer, though this technique is primarily used by older women.<sup>3</sup> Similar to *trau-cau* chewing, many of those living in Southeastern Asia and the Pacific chew *pan*, consisting of a mixture of betel nut, betel leaf and lime. *Pan* chewing is said to be a custom with more than 200 million adherents. The psychoactive effects it produces, coupled with the red saliva it makes in the mouth, makes *pan* a popular method of staining the teeth a reddish-black shade.<sup>4</sup>

*Trau* is considered a sort of counterpart to our fluoride, and is prized for its teeth-strengthening properties and the good breath and healthy colored lips it

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<sup>3</sup>The Vietnam Project: California State Fullerton, 2011.

<sup>4</sup>Kadam, Ganacharu, Mahendra Kumar and Gurunath, 2009.

gives the user. The Japan Society of Aesthetic Dentistry has been quoted as saying, “*Ohaguro* had the effect of protecting teeth from cavities and periodontitis,” with *Ohaguro* being the Japanese term for the darkening effect.<sup>5</sup> It has been speculated that in Laos, the usage of black lacquer on the teeth protects from the damaging ingredients present in betels.<sup>6</sup>

Tooth blackening occurred in Japan beginning in the Heian Era (794- 1192 CE) and was practiced by the various classes of nobler men as a visual display of their respect and loyalty to Buddhist spirituality. Black was considered to be a color exhibiting strength. While men blackened to show their nobility, women chose to darken their teeth for aesthetic reasons. Women used *Ohaguro* to enhance their beauty and their desire to marry. The black color indicated devotion and unity.<sup>7</sup> This practice began around 1000 CE and originated as a symbol among young girls who had reached maturity. Young men began blackening centuries later, starting around 1400 CE. For them too, it indicated their maturity and transition towards becoming an adult. Beginning in 1700 CE, women who were considered to be of the marrying age used *Ohaguro*. Women of a lower social class would wait until they were engaged before blackening their teeth. Within the next two hundred years, *Ohaguro* would become outlawed by the government.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere in Asia, the shade of the teeth is considered by some to be indicative of determining your soulmate, as is common in many rural areas of Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

In Japanese culture, *Ohaguro* was practiced by lacquering the teeth with black ink. This black ink was produced when iron dust was burned and dissolved in tea, along with a rice soup called *kayu*, sake, as well as *ame*, a sweet type of candy. Though the mixture had an unpleasant odor, it became useful for dying teeth, as well as textiles.<sup>10</sup>

Thai dancers who danced for the court also chewed betel for their teeth to exhibit a striking contrast against their skin. The “burnished gold” look was an alternative to another tradition, the whitening of the skin through the use of chalk. To give the body a golden color, turmeric was applied to the body. The pigment in turmeric is responsible for giving commercially produced curry its golden color. Teeth that were already dark from betel chewing would appear to compliment the bronzed color of the skin.<sup>11</sup>

Researching the custom of tooth blackening may lead one to question whether its purpose extends beyond cosmetic reasons. While it is well known that tooth whitening has no true health benefits and often times damages teeth, it would be fascinating to determine whether the blackening technique practiced in

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<sup>5</sup> The Vietnam Project: California State Fullerton, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ballit, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> The Vietnam Project: California State Fullerton, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Snow, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> The Vietnam Project: California State Fullerton, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Snow, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Lim, Smith and Dissanayake, 1999.

Southeastern Asia and the Pacific islands lives up to the qualities it is said to possess. Examining various tooth darkening processes allows us to recognize that desirable traits can vary greatly among different cultures.

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