**Japanese Teeth Blackening (Ohaguro)**

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What is the most popular and widely used sign of nonverbal communications used in our everyday lives? A person’s smile is the most popular and widely used sign. The symbolism of a smile expresses happiness and joy. It was believed that the whiter the teeth, the prettier the smile. Many people in Western countries practice teeth whitening as a sign of oral hygiene and beauty. However, not all people practice teeth whitening. Countryside, namely Japan, practice teeth blackening. Japan had their beliefs and practices for which teeth blackening were beneficial for them. Their culture raised many questions as to why teeth blackening were used as opposed to white and natural teeth.

Before we start, we need to know the common understanding of what culture is. Culture not only indicates the beginning of civilization, but describes the ways of life for a particular group, society, or nation. The idea that Japanese teeth blackening is just a cultural form makes us believe that there are a couple of reasons why they do it and how it became their overall routine. Japanese referred their process of teeth blackening as Ohaguro. The Ohaguro trend began under the Heian Era (794 - 1192). The word Ohaguro is derived from the Japanese word, ‘kuro’ which “expresses darkness after the sunsets” (Fukagawa, 2008).In ancient times, night was considered as the “time when evil spirits rampant. Black was ill-omened and hated as a color which means to be wrong” (Fukagawa, 2008). However, the Japanese, whom practice Buddhism, referred black as an unchanging color for which cannot be dyed with another. “Color has many symbolic properties and is often adapted in many societies around the world” ("The black teeth," 2010). The reason why one chooses a particular color have their own reason and meaning behind it. This is why Buddhism had a great influence and impact on choosing the color black because they believed it was a static color that visually symbolizes constant strength and dignity.

What are Ohaguro’s made out of and how are they used? The Japanese have a unique way of handling and making the ingredients of Ohaguro. They have a large round container called ‘mimidarai’. Sitting on top of the container is a thin tray called ‘watashigane’. On top of the tray is the ‘kanewan’ which is the bowl that the dye is mixed. A feathered tip brush was used to paint the teeth, the brush stick is made of bamboo. A porcelain bowl was used as well as a small box of fushi powder. The fushi powder is made from the “gallnuts of the Japanese sumac tree…, and kanemizu, which was made by fermenting iron filing in an acidic mixture of tea, vinegar and rice wine” ("Ohaguro - beautiful," 2011). Having all these ingredients mixed together, should produce a black dye which could then be applied to the teeth. Unfortunately doing this process will not make teeth blackening stay permanent. They would quickly fade and the whole process would have to be done again. It is a labor intensive work to start everything from scratch. Not only that, but also the dye emits a foul smell. The dye had to be applied once a day or once every few days depending on the color left intact to the teeth. According to the Japan times from the Japan Society of Aesthetic Dentistry, they believed the reason why they do teeth blackening was because “Ohaguro had the effect of protecting teeth from cavities and periodontitis” (Fukue, 2010).They also believed that this “technique could potentially prolong lives” (Davis, 2011).

In the Heian Era (794 – 1192) Ohaguro became popular among males especially court nobles and commanders. Samurais also use Ohaguro as a custom to show proof of loyalty and that a samurai does not serve two masters within a lifetime. The custom is said to have ended around the Muromati Era (1558 – 1572). During the Edo Era (1603 – 1867), the practice was followed by women. Women blacken their teeth to enhance their appearance when they are ready to find a husband. At that time blackened teeth was a trend and was thought that it made the women look beautiful. It signified unity and fidelity. They possibly believed that teeth were a visible part of the skeleton, which as a symbol of death, was unclean. It was also thought to believe in the Buddhist idea that white teeth reveal the animal nature of men and women and that the civilized person should conceal them, thus using teeth blackening. Because of the use of Ohaguro, it was quickly spread all over the country and became the symbol of married women. Ohaguro was also used for unmarried women who already passed their prime time which is eighteen years of age, as well as Geisha and prostitutes. “The color of teeth reflects the social conceptions of beauty, social status and age” (Fukagawa, 2008). On February 5th of 1870, the government banned the practice of Ohaguro, and the tradition was ceased.

There is not much of a difference when compared with Japanese and modern American ideal dentistry. Americans however, do not practice teeth blackening. They believed that exposing the color of the enamel and dentin part of the tooth is what makes us feel natural. The anatomical features of both cultures of the Japanese and Americans are the same. The Japanese didn’t make any modifications in its structure and function of their teeth. Judging the lack of dentistry provided in ancient Japan, they probably left their teeth the way it was grown. That means tooth alignment could be deformed. Although they lack dental practices, one painting from ancient Japan indicated practices of full and partial dentures. Americans today use full and partial dentures too however, if there is a slight deformation in tooth alignment, it can be guided back to its natural form with the help of braces. Japanese practices of teeth blackening are strict compared to Americans. Japanese teeth blackening help judge a person by rank, age, and marital status. Americans do not have such things. They leave their teeth natural as others would do the same. Despite the fact that Americans expose the color of the enamel and dentin part of the tooth, there is a trend now where bleach would bring up the whiteness of their teeth. They believe that bleaching their teeth would bring a whiter, brighter smile. Every billboard and advertisements you see in magazines and streets today deal with people smiling, exposing their white teeth. It attracts people, basically telling them that they can look younger and beautiful if they bleach their teeth.

In every part of the culture, color plays a huge role. There is a reason why one would choose a particular color as opposed to the rest because they have their own reason and meaning behind it. When one finds doing something to their teeth can make them look beautiful, others would do it until everyone within the region does it as a practice. We can now tell that although Japanese practices of Ohaguro teeth blackening are different from the American teeth whitening by appearance, they all have one same goal; making themselves look beautiful.

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