

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BLACK STUDIES IN JAPAN\*

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It is probably one of the prime concerns of the conference “Japan and African Americans: A Comparative Perspective” to give an answer to the question why in Japan there is so much literature devoted to the Blacks. In other words, why have the Japanese been interested in the Black people and how have they explored them? This paper aims to consider these questions by examining the historical background of Black Studies in Japan.

### I

The Japanese encounter with black people dates back to 1546, when three Portuguese ships arrived in Japan, carrying a Mozambican in three *Namban* ships on board. A Catholic priest reported the incident in a letter to his colleague. “Many,” he wrote, “came to see the Negro all the way from as far as a distance of sixty miles. The Italian Padre Gneccchi-Soldo Organtino who came to Japan in 1570 also wrote in a letter that Japanese were very inquisitive and “they would pay money to see slaves from Ethiopia. Anybody could make money around here merely by showing a Negro.” He also suggested in another letter that Jesuits, who found themselves in financial difficulties, in addition to choirs and organs, should also bring Negroes with them.

Another episode showing the curiosity of the Japanese regarding the Blacks can be gleaned from *Shincho Ko ki*. When Padre Alessandro Valignani brought a Negro to Kyoto, Oda Nobunaga, the prime mover of Japan’s 16th-century reunification after a hundred years of strife, could not wait until the designated date to meet with the missionary. The news about the black man’s arrival instantly spread throughout Kyoto and its vicinity. Hearing the news, many people congregated in the city, threw stones, and pulled down walls and gates to get a glimpse of the Negro. When Nobunaga saw him, he ordered the kokudo (black fellow) to take off his clothes suspecting that his black skin color was painted. After a short conversation with the missionary, he decided to take the kokudo with him and gave him a Japanese name Yasuke.

The perception of the Negro in mid-16th-century Japan, however, cannot be judged as totally full of contempt for the Negro. It is true that Yasuke was regarded as a beast and not a human being. But he was nevertheless released after the assassination of Nobunaga. In general, black people were viewed with curiosity rather than contempt rooted in the belief of racial hierarchy. In fact, Yasuke was described in *Shincho Ko ki* as follows:

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A black man came from a Christian country. His age seems somewhere around 26 or 27. He is as black as a cow, and looks healthy and talented. He is stronger than ten powerful men.

This passage simply refers to the external appearance of the kokudo with allusive admiration and without representing his nature as inferior. It would be, therefore, wrong to understand 16th-century Japan through race and racial stereotypes invented in the 19th and 20th century. The concept of “color line” in early modern Japan too was so uncertain that people did not distinguish black Malayans from black Indians and Africans. The term “Negro” (kokujin, kokudo) was very often used to describe all kinds of dark-skinned people. The Whites, on the other hand, were classified by their national origin. If they were Iberian or Italian missionaries, merchants or sailors who frequently visited or even worked in Japan in the late 16th and early 17th century, they were described as nambanjin, literally, “southern barbarians;” and if they came from the Netherlands and England, they were known as komojin, literally, “red-haired men.” The Whites were also viewed as long-nosed goblins or giant monsters.

The Tensho Mission, the first Japanese mission to Europe, which left Nagasaki in 1582, travelled via Africa to Europe, observing at first hand Blacks and Whites in their own countries for the first time. The mission returned in 1590, introducing some European views on Africa and Africans. One of the influences that characterized the European perspective can be found in namban byobu-e (screen pictures). Negroes are portrayed in those pictures as poorly dressed, bare-footed servants of white people. This perspective played a significant role in shaping the Japanese belief (prejudice) that the Negro is inferior to the White. The Negro, always depicted alongside of the exotic animals such as elephants, giraffes, zebras, and camels, separated from the White who are invariably shown wearing luxurious garments. This European-influenced view of African inferiority persisted even after the anti-Christian edict in 1587 and its culmination, the Sakoku edict (the National Seclusion policy) of 1639.

Confucian scholar Nishikawa Joken, for example, published *Kai tsusho ko* (1695), in which he wrote that the Zimbabweans were caribals. He heard this tall story from the Dutch merchants in Nagasaki who bought African natives as their servants. Arai Hakuseki, influential adviser to the Tokugawa shoguns, wrote *Seiyo kibun* (1715), an account of the West based on his interrogations of the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Battista Sidotti, from whom he learned the Western customs and geography. He also uncritically repeats the European prejudices of Black inferiority.

After Matthew Calbraith Perry, the US naval officer, brought the Sakoku policy to an end in 1853, Japan strove to modernize by studying and usually imitating the West. The mission to the US in 1860 and the Iwakura mission to the US and Europe in 1871–73, among other things, were the first missions in three hundred years that directly observed black people in Africa and America. It is notable, however, that they rarely evinced racist impressions against the Africans in Luanda, for example (*Kobei nichu roku*, June 1860). The ambassadors described precisely the black people as they saw them, observing mainly their clothes and color of their skin; in short, their external appearance. They did not seem to have acquired (at that point in time at least) the quasi-scientific racist views that were characterized by the conviction, typically found in the United States in the 19th century, that the Blacks were innately inferior to the Whites. Thus, when the Japanese ambassadors to the US saw Black ex-slaves in the

Reconstruction era, they attributed their plight to slavery that had hindered the development of human abilities. They even hoped with optimistic conviction that some Blacks would save money and be successful in the near future (*Bei ou Kairan jikki*, 1878).

The interest that the Japanese showed in the Blacks remained basically unchanged for about three hundred years primarily because Japan had no practical relationship with the outside world. The lack of race contacts in Japan such as existed between Blacks and Whites in the US perhaps best explains why the Japanese had relatively optimistic views regarding the future of the Blacks in America. It means, in other words, that the Japanese lived in a world where they, as a colored nation, did not have to recognize themselves in racial terms (racial order).

## II

After the Meiji Restoration, however, Japan came to realize that it was imperative to renegotiate immediately the unequal treaties forced upon Japan at the end of the Edo (Tokugawa) period. Thus the Japanese, forced to be aware of their own skin color due to their international position, learned race theories developed in Europe and America. They now found themselves “yellow” in the studies conducted, for example, by Charles Darwin who elaborated the scientific theory of evolution and natural selection. The Japanese translations of Darwin’s *Descent of Man* came out in 1881, only ten years after the publication of the first English edition and in 1909. It was through these translations that the Japanese became indoctrinated in the notion of racial hierarchy that prevailed in the West as if the theory of superior and inferior races was a biologically proven fact.

Under these circumstances, Takahashi Yoshio proposed in his article “Jinshu Kairyōron” (literally, proposal for racial improvement) that “in order to improve physically the Japanese race, the Japanese men marry Western women in addition to adopting the custom of eating meat.” This controversial proposal generated heated debate among Japanese intellectuals. Jurist Kato Hiroyuki, for example, whose major concern was to preserve the purity of the Japanese blood, fiercely opposed this intermarriage plan. “If the idea of the Japanese marrying Western women is put in practice,” he argued, “Japan will end up as being ruled by the West.” (*Kojun Zasshi*, Vol. 112, March 1883).

I shall not discuss here this debate, which could be examined from many modern fields such as gender and sexuality. I shall only note the fact that these intellectuals, regardless of the position they argued, took for granted, at least, the physical superiority of the West and the “White race to the Japanese.” They may have believed the traditional Japanese spirit was sacred, but they could not resist the introduction of the hierarchical race order, which originated from the West. Given the three hundred years of seclusion, which ended abruptly due to the opening of Japan by force by predominantly white powers, Japan could no more defy the Western racial order than it could resist signing the unequal treaties with the Western powers. The conflict between the desire to preserve the purity of the Japanese stock race and the humiliation of being discriminated against in international society indicates the difficulties the Japanese intellectuals faced in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The same conflict can be detected in Japanese reactions to the Russo-Japanese War, when Japan, a small non-white country, defeated a white empire and to anti-Asian agitation in the

US which intensified in that period. The way out of this ambivalent situation was sought in diplomatic discussions at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 when the Japanese proposed introduction of the principle of racial equality into the charter of a projected League of Nations. When this Japanese proposal was rejected by Japan's Western allies, the Japanese delegates berated the Western allied countries for their callous attitude toward the racially oppressed around the world.

At that time, some Japanese scholars abandoned the idea of gaining equal treatment in international society, and turned to the study of African Americans in the name of solidarity with the colored peoples of the world. Kitazawa Shinjiro, for example, condemned "the Americans, who had built their country with a view to enhancing freedom and equality, but [who] deprived the colored people of their natural rights, by regarding the white race as superior and the colored as inferior."

Some of these scholars in due course, set up a new goal for Japan: "the colored man's burden" that is a mission to destroy white racism. What the advocates of "the colored man's burden" had specifically in mind in the United States were the African Americans and the Japanese who were treated as "aliens ineligible for naturalization." Kitazawa reiterated that "it is absurd to judge human beings by their skin-color as Americans do. The White is not necessarily a superior race. The Negro is not necessarily an inferior race. Although the cultural stage of the Negro today is as low as that of an infant in every respect, one cannot believe that this state of affairs will continue forever. In fact, it is striking how much progress they have made over the last fifty years. They are now developing just like little kids." (pp.446-47; Kobayashi Masasuke, *Beikoku to Jinshuteki Sabetsu no Kenkyu*, 1919, p.41.)

In 1921 Watanabe Ryokuko proposed that the Japanese immigrants in the United States "share a strong sense of fellow countrymen, defend themselves against abuse (by the majority) just as the Jews did in this country" (*Yushoku Minzoku no Dai Fuhei: Hakushoku Minzoku no Dai Hanmon*, 1921, pp.349-52). Mitsukawa Kametaro, author of *Kokujuin Mondai* (1925) enumerated the names of famous Negroes in the world and highly praised their accomplishments and contributions. Among the great names listed were: Crispus Attucks, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Kelley Miller, W.E.B. DuBois, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ira F. Aldridge (a leading Shakespearean actor of the 19th century), Edmonia Lewis (sculptor), Charles Waddell Chesnutt (novelist), Phyllis Whitney (novelist). This rich list reminds us of the arguments of Afrocentrism, which flourished in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Here, we cannot detect any prejudice or disdain for Blacks. Rather, what we sense here is Mitsukawa's enthusiastic praise for them. This straight affirmation of the Negro race is not based simply on the sense of commonness as people of color. For, in Europe, World War I was perceived as a race war in a newly emergent context [of arguments]. The "race war" meant that the European civilization was at the brink of its collapse because of the rise of the colored people. The German philosopher Oswald Spengler, author of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918-22), and the American sociologist Lothrop Stoddard, author of *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* were, according to Mitsukawa, two outstanding examples reflecting this view of world history (1920, pp.305-06).

Based on the recognition that "the next world war would be the war between the Blacks and the Whites, Mitsukawa believed that the (American) Negroes would side with Japan. "The nursery for race revolution to open up a new era in the world is, without doubt, black

Africa." "The Japanese people, holding the sun as their ideal and shining on everything on the earth, should hope that seedlings grow from it [black Africa] for the happiness of all mankind (*ibid.*, p.311)."

These ideas eventually led to the Japanese attempt to establish a "Great East Asian Coprosperity Sphere," based on new Asian principles that would replace Western imperialism. This politics of race was seen in Japan as a challenge to white Europe and white America based on "color." It certainly sought solidarity with the Black people as long, of course, as it suited the Japanese national interest.

### III

However, Japan was forced to abandon its quest for a new Asian order when it was defeated by America in the Asian-Pacific War. As a result, Black studies in Japan were reopened in a totally different context. Instead of arguments which perceived race or Blacks from the perspective of Japanese ethnocentrism and the notions of Japan as the leader of Asia, which is in itself a particularism, the black liberation movement and abolitionism of the United States were studied in the context of the ongoing democratization of Japanese society. From this perspective, the landlord system of pre-war Japan and the slavery of the ante-bellum South were perceived as analogous. Thus, we now have great accumulation of studies on American slavery, the Civil War and black liberation movement. The Blacks attracted scholars' interest as subjects of abolitionism. In this process, the view of the Blacks which stressed commonness and solidarity as the same people of color almost disappeared. The Black liberation movement was understood from the perspective of democratization of Japan, that is, from the perspective of enlightenment and universalism.

Marxism, which had become greatly influential in [the area of] social sciences in post-war Japan, is based on the interest on transformation from feudalism to capitalism. Under the Marxist paradigm, the problem of Negro slavery was discussed as an economic problem, and the study of race relations was transformed into the study of industrial relations. Thus it was hoped that the task of solving the issues of equal rights and abolition of discrimination would be accomplished by economic means such as post-war recovery and rapid economic growth. The news of the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the independence of nations in Asia and Africa in the 1960s helped to generate views in Japan about race discrimination.

But, under the stagnant economy and the conservative atmosphere in the 1970s, such optimism was betrayed. Black studies in this era shifted, on one hand, to the study of daily lives and family from the perspective of social history, and on the other hand, a deconstruction of the concept of the "race" was attempted from the perspective of post-structuralism. These phenomena can be understood, in broad terms, as expressions of the demise of enlightenment. Today, it is difficult to foresee a new direction of the development of Black studies in Japan. To-date the tendency has been to interpret the situation of the Blacks in America in reference to the Japanese situation. Such an approach cannot be denied in itself. What we can say for sure now is that we can no longer keep looking at each other, based on the assumption that Japanese and Black Americans are mutually apart, as a point of reference to see ourselves. What we need from now on is to exchange our inquiries and research basing them on ideals

and experiences that we can mutually share.

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