

Problems with the Terms: “Caucasoid”, “Mongoloid” and “Negroid”

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Introduction

Terms such as “Mongoloid” and “Caucasoid” continue to be reproduced in Japanese high school textbooks and encyclopedias with all the intellectual authority that entail¹. Especially, the term “Mongoloid” has built a type of currency through its use as a catch phrase by experts and its dissemination by various book series and TV documentaries². It is little known, however, that the origin of the term “Caucasoid” traces back to the Old Testament story of Noah’s Ark and that the term “Mongoloid” has discriminatory connotations.

In this paper, I will examine the origins and development of these terms, especially focusing on the worldviews of those who initially formulated racial classifications in modern science, in an attempt to explore the relationship between terms such as “Caucasoid” and “Mongoloid” in the Japanese and Euro-American contexts. It is not the purpose of this paper to censure the prejudices of those who lived in earlier ages and different social contexts. Rather, I conduct this examination in the belief that it is important for those of us living today to understand the problems associated with the connotations of these terms.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was first published in Japanese as Section 4 entitled, “‘Kokasoido’, ‘Mongoroido’, and ‘Neguroido’” in my introduction chapter of *Jinshu Gainen no Huhensei wo Tou* (Takezawa 2005). The present paper is a revised and updated version after the original article was translated.

² Brace (1995) comments upon the use of terms such as “Mongoloid” by a group of Japanese scholars at an international academic conference in 1989. His comment served as a catalyst for one of the physical anthropologists present at that conference to propose alternative terms (Saitō 2005). Nevertheless, “Mongoloid” has been widely employed by leading physical anthropologists and has graced the titles of academic books in Japan.

Race classification in modern science

The terminology which laid the foundations for the terms Caucasoid and Mongoloid was coined by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the founding father of craniometry. Before we examine the historical background of his discussion, first briefly take a look at a few figures in the dawn of modern science who influenced the classification of Blumenbach.

Race classification in the modern sense was pioneered by the French physician, François Bernier. On the basis of his personal travel experience he considered that a classification system based on facial features and body types would be more effective than the geographical system in use at that time, which “only divided the earth according to its different countries and regions.” Bernier proposed that humans should be classified into four or five “species or races (*espèces ou races*)” (Bernier 1864 [1684]: 360–362; 2001 [1684]: 148–155). This approach of classification according to physical characteristics can be regarded as a typical product of the Age of Discovery.

Carolus Linnaeus, one of the founding fathers of modern science, attempted to classify humans in the animal world into varieties (*variétés*) in his *Systema naturae* (The System of Nature). His classification and description of their features provides a glimpse into the worldview of the time. In the first edition of the book (1735), he divided the human species into four categories and defined their characteristics as follows. The “white European” (*Homo Europaeus albescus*) is pale-skinned, active and creative; the “red American (American Indian)” (*Homo Americanus rebescus*) has reddish skin and patience; the “pale yellow Asian” (*Homo Asiaticus luridus*) is yellow-skinned, melancholic and lacking flexibility; and the “black African” (*Homo Africanus niger*) is dark-skinned, crafty, lazy and careless in nature (Linnaeus 2001 [1760]: 153–168; Scheidt 1950 [1924–1925]: 357; Nishimura 1999: 28).

There are four important points to note in Linnaeus’ classification. First, it follows the classical theory of physiology of the time when it was believed that human temperament and constitution were determined by the mix of four humors or body fluids (blood, yellow bile, phlegm and black bile), the thesis that was first claimed by Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and remained to be the major theory until the development of pathological anatomy in the eighteenth century. Secondly, it refers to the European classical worldview that all beings in this world are linked by a hierarchical chain, i.e., the Great Chain of Being. Thirdly, skin color occupies the same position of importance in this classification as it did in other racial classification methods of the time. In this regard, Mark Keevak has pointed out an interesting change in Linnaeus’ color term in reference to Asians: from “*Homo Asiaticus fuscus*” to “*Homo Asiaticus luridus*.” “While it is frequently claimed that this is the true origin of the idea of a yellow race, it is a suggestion that needs to be treated with considerable care,” argues Keevak. He calls attention to Linnaeus’ choice of the word, “*luridus*”, the yellow color usually associated with pejorative connotations of horror and ugliness and pallor in

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classical Latin as in the English word “lurid” rather than much more common or more neutral terms such as “flavus,” “fulvus,” or “gilvus” (Keevak 2011: 51).

Another leading figure of eighteenth century natural history is George-Louis Leclerc Buffon. In *Histoire naturelle* (Natural history) (1749–1788), Buffon classified humans into six varieties: Laplander, Tartar, South Asiatic, European, Ethiopian and American. The term Tartar (*les Tartares*; 鞑靼) here—which was widely known in both Europe and Japan at the time—refers to the Mongolian, or more broadly, the Asian. Buffon argued that all human beings had come about from a single species of Caucasian on the basis of his belief that the “Garden of Eden” was somewhere near Paris. According to Buffon, as humankind moved farther from Paris and migrated to other regions, they degenerated from the archetype due to the effects of climate, diet, lifestyle and diseases and their degeneration was transmitted to subsequent generations, producing variations (Buffon 2001 [1749]: 371–372; Gossett 1963: 36; Torii 1976 [1930]: 20).

Blumenbach’s classification of *humani varietate*

Although there were numerous influential typologies of this type, it was Blumenbach, who coined the terminology which laid the foundations for the terms Caucasoid and Mongoloid in a classificatory scheme which had an enduring impact on racial classification. He advanced previous philosophical speculation through empirical research by grounding his racial classification theory on measurements of his collection of human skulls.

In *De generis humani varietate nativa* (On the natural variety of mankind) (first edition 1775; third edition 1795), Blumenbach proposed the categorization of five human varieties (*varietatis*), namely: Caucasian (*Caucasiae*), Mongolian (*Mongolicae*), Ethiopian (*Aethiopicae*), American (*Americanae*) and Malayan (*Malaicae*; added in the 1795 version) (Blumenbach 1865; 2001 [1795]). Although in the English translation of his work, Blumenbach is said to have defined their skin colors as “white”, “yellow”, “black”, “red” and “brown” respectively, and it is generally understood that this became the underlying idea for racial classification based on “color” such descriptions as “the white race” and “the yellow race”, it is not that simple. For example, in the original Latin version, he used the expression, “copper-colored”, not “red”, to refer to Americans. Furthermore, Keevak has shed light on another interesting change in the color term associated with Mongolian, this time the one by Blumenbach: from “*subfuscus*” (dark) in the original 1775 version to, “*gilvus*”, a clearly negative term meaning “pale yellow” in the 1795 third edition (Keevak 2011: 57–65).

Blumenbach stressed that these were “varieties”, not “races” and argued that it was impossible to mark out clear boundaries between human varieties³. Although Blumenbach originally coined the terminology, we must remember that it was scientists of later generations such as Samuel George Morton, who distorted this schema into the contemporary un-

derstanding and usage of the term, races.

It is worth noting, in the context of the time, that we can trace some of the major arguments of Blumenbach to both Linnaeus and Buffon. As he acknowledges that “I have followed Linnaeus in the number, but have defined my varieties by other boundaries,” he inherited the classification into “four” in his 1775 original version from Linnaeus (Blumenbach 2001 [1775]: 99). On the other hand, he was apparently influenced by Buffon in his ideas of “degeneration”, “varieties”, and environmental influence upon skin color.

Eurocentrism and racial terminology

If we are to carry on using terms such as “Caucasoid” and “Mongoloid” in today’s world, we need to be aware of two points. One is the association between the term Caucasoid and the Judeo-Christian worldview. Many of the European scholars in the beginning of modern science showed tremendous interest in the Caucasus Mountains, and Johann F. Blumenbach, who coined the terms of “Caucasian” and “Mongolian”, was no exception. Mount Ararat, 5,123 meters high on the south side of the Caucasus (along the eastern border of Turkey today), is a holy place associated with “Mount Ararat” on which, according to the Old Testament (Genesis 8: 4), Noah’s Ark came to rest after the Flood. In Blumenbach’s time, the Caucasus Mountains, which include Mount Ararat, were considered to be the birthplace of humankind, which meant only Europeans in their thought. This is why Blumenbach named Europeans Caucasians based on a skull discovered in the Caucasus (Gossett 1963: 38; Barkan 1992: 125).

The other point is that the Caucasian was the archetype of all humans in Blumenbach’s mind. He thought that the Mongolian and the Ethiopian had diverged from the Caucasian in two different directions and positioned them at the opposite ends of a continuum, then positioned the American (native Americans) between the Caucasian and the Mongolian, and the Malay between the Caucasian and the Ethiopian. It is well known that Blumenbach described the Caucasian as having “the most beautiful form of skull” among men (Blumenbach 1865 [1775]: 34–36).

He describes a Georgian female skull (found close to Mount Caucasus) as “really the most beautiful form of skull which ... always of itself attracts every eye, however little observant.” He then defends his European standard on aesthetic grounds: “In the first place, that stock

³ Blumenbach was a liberal scientist, who emphasized the unity of all human beings. He states: “I have written this book quite unprejudiced, and I have desired nothing so much as that the arguments which I have brought forward for the unity of the human species, and for its mere varieties, may seem as satisfactory to my learned and candid readers as they do to myself.” (Blumenbach 2001 [1775]: 98)

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displays ... the most beautiful form of the skull, from which, as from a mean and primeval type, the others diverge by most easy gradations. ... Besides, it is white in color, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive color of mankind, since ... it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white.”

Turning to the term “Mongoloid”, which is the most familiar term to those of us living in Japan, we should begin by noting that discomfort with using a single term which homogenizes all of the people of Asia is not limited to our contemporaries. For example, Ryūzō Torii, one of the founders of Japanese ethnology, introduces Blumenbach’s five classifications in his “Mōko jinshu no meishō to Burūmenbahha (The name of the Mongolian race and Blumenbach).” While commenting that he “feels strange” about using the term “Mongolian” he observes that the “term has become a convenient and common appellation” (Torii 1976 [1930]: 19). More than a century earlier, in 1825, J. Klaproth, an early-nineteenth century scholar of Asian languages, objected to the use of the term by arguing that “the Mongol is just one tribe of the Tatar nation” (cited in Torii 1976 [1930]: 20–21).

It has been suggested that Blumenbach named Asians “Mongolians” because the might of the Mongol military in the era of Genghis and Kublai Khan was widely recognized in Europe at the time (Buxton 1925: 56–57). However, the term Mongol evoked much more for Europeans of that time than merely military might. Marco Polo, who visited China when the territory was ruled by Kublai Khan, created a very powerful imagery of the East in Europe in his famous book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Similarly, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (1356), the most widely read book on Asia from its publication until the eighteenth century, exhibited sexual curiosity about Asian women as well as displaying strong bias and a sense of superiority over Asian men who were represented in many places as single-eyed headless beasts and monsters (Mandeville 1964; Okihiro 1994: 14–15).

A further problem with the term “Mongoloid” is that it had long been used to refer to people with the chromosomal condition known as Down syndrome. The term came to be used to refer to this condition because symptoms such as a developed bridge across nose, yellowish skin color and cognitive impairment in children with the condition coincided with European stereotypes of East Asians (Brace 2000: 291). That this characterization is mistaken is beyond question, but its pervasiveness is evident in the publication of a book which stated that an epicanthic fold of the eye lid known as a “mongoloid fold” was a sign of cognitive impairment (Crookshank, F. G. (1924) *The Mongol in Our Midst: A Study of Man and His Three Faces*. London: Kegan Paul). This derogatory expression was eventually criticized and replaced by “Down syndrome”, named after the first researcher of this condition (John Langdon Down).

We have seen that Blumenbach coined the terms “Caucasoid” and “Mongoloid”, but where did “Negroid” come from? Blumenbach used “Ethiopian”, which was a common reference term at the time for African people. “Negroid” is derived from the Latin word *niger*,

which literally means “black”. The increased amount of melanin pigment leads to not only darker skin color but also an increased protection from ultraviolet rays. A high concentration of melanin is present in the skin of Southern Asians, Australian Aborigines and Fijians as well as Africans. Yet, these people are distant from one another in terms of population genetics. For example, Fijians are closer to East Asians than to Africans. These populations are too diverse to be bundled together on the basis of the darkness of their skin (Brace 2000: 288).

Toward cross-disciplinary dialogue

As we have seen, the terms “Mongoloid”, “Caucasoid” and “Negroid” heavily reflect Euro-centric values which treat skin color as an important criterion for differentiation and the European skull as the archetype. Today, these terms are rarely used in international arenas. Japanese scholars who actively use the term “Mongoloid” have varying views on race, ranging from those who believe in rigid biological racial distinctions to those who, while denying the distinct boundaries between continental populations, use the earliest scientifically established terms for expediency. There are others who claim that the term is more convenient than regional names such as Eastern Asians, or Asians. However, what kind of people “Mongoloid” is meant to refer to differs significantly depending on scientists. It is clear that the continuing usage by the Japanese of these terms with their inherently Eurocentric world-views and connotations that race concepts reflect biological realities is in sharp contrast to contemporary international norms.

Furthermore, despite the advancement of genomic studies, the 19th century’s racial classification still leaves its trace in the name of “European,” “Asian,” and “African” in our time. What each of these terms refers to differs depending on scientists, and yet only a small number of studies define the meanings of these terms. In order to share and discuss these problems for the possible alternative terminologies, there must be more dialogue and cooperation between scholars in the humanities and science, including biological anthropology, medical research, and genomics.⁴

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⁴ The author and her colleagues in a variety of disciplines have held a series of workshops to discuss the issues of categorizations and population descriptors in the joint research project, “Japan Based Global Study of Racial Representations.” Currently we are in the process of preparing a statement in regard to these issues.

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