

## “Mindō” and the Matter of Black Lives in Japan

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**Abstract:** Representations of blacks in Japan continue to be problematic even when the media itself, a prime purveyor of racial misrepresentations, attempts to address the issue. This has become evident in its coverage of global Black Lives Matter protests for racial justice in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police in the United States. While protests have occurred in a number of Japanese cities, mainstream coverage has ignored them and remained focused on those demonstrations that have taken place abroad. While these demonstrations have prompted a reexamination of anti-black racism in the United States and Europe, the Japanese media has largely avoided introspective discussion of its domestic manifestations, despite its prevalence on the internet, social media, and television, including corporate mainstream news broadcasts that have feebly attempted to examine the issue.

On June 4th Japanese Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Aso Taro, commenting on the low rates of coronavirus infections in Japan, attributed it to the nation’s higher “cultural level,” or *mindō*. A controversial statement at best, but certainly in keeping with Japan’s penchant for cultural chauvinism in high places. However, in the wake of global protests against social injustice triggered by the police murder of George Floyd, doubts have been raised about how Japan has responded to another global pandemic – anti-black racism.

On June 7, NHK, Japan’s public broadcaster,

devoted 26-minutes of its popular youth-oriented current affairs program “Kore de Wakatta! Sekai no Ima” (Now I Understand! The World Today) to a discussion of the protests that featured [a one-minute and twenty-second animated clip](#) that purportedly “aimed to show the hardships, such as economic disparity, many African Americans in the U.S. suffer.” However, it was harshly criticized on Twitter for perpetuating black stereotypes. In the controversial clip, a mob of angry black people linger in the street as a dandyish black man sits atop a fire hydrant strumming a guitar. A muscular black man in a wife-beater T-shirt looms into view, exploding in anger as he recites in deep guttural tones the vast economic disparity between black and white America. Behind him, black men and women stomp their feet, little animated dust clouds appearing at their heels, and raise their arms in protest against America’s socio-economic injustice. The clip ends with the blacks looting.

After receiving numerous complaints about the animation, which NHK itself had uploaded to Twitter, the broadcaster took it down and apologized, explaining that it was an attempt to simplify the issues and suggesting that the full program had treated the issue more comprehensively. However, from the outset, the program’s focus was on the rioting and looting rather than the police killing of American Blacks. The fact that the majority of demonstrations have been peaceful receives scant mention. In fact, video footage of rioting opens the studio portion of the broadcast. Afterwards, the camera pans to a large map of the United States that is dotted with flame graphics containing the word “*bōtōka*” (riotous mobs), representing areas of the country where

rioting and looting have taken place. Little time is devoted to exploring the murder of Floyd and the unending succession of incidents of police brutality that sparked public outrage. Instead, the broadcast rationalizes extrajudicial killings as the result of white police justifiably fearing for their lives. Later, the program's resident expert gives an Arthur Schlesingeresque lecture on the disuniting of America in front of a blackboard on which cut-outs of white Antifa demonstrators and white supremacists face off against each other and blames Antifa for the violence. This despite the fact that an [FBI](#) report found no evidence to substantiate such claims. Conversely, no mention is made of the fact, also reported by the FBI, that white extremist groups have infiltrated enforcement (Speri 2017 and Carless and Corey 2019).

But the problem is not merely the NHK broadcast's apparent tone-deafness and reportorial disregard for facts. Generally, the Japanese mainstream media, particularly television news and infotainment programs, have consistently proven themselves ill-equipped to discuss racism in America and, in those rare instances when they do, Japan. Case in point: some five days before the NHK debacle, BS-TBS's "Hōdō 1930" aired an interview with Jared Taylor, the white nationalist founder and editor of *American Renaissance*, a white supremacist online magazine and, until recently, YouTube channel.<sup>1</sup> Taylor, who styles himself and his followers "racial realists" who would simply rather [live with their own kind without being misunderstood and labeled Nazis](#), spoke virtually uninterrupted for six minutes. During this time he dismissed the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown as justified acts of self-defense and argued that George Floyd resisted police, even though surveillance cameras in the area showed otherwise.

None of this is questioned, let alone rebutted, by the program's host and two commentators, Nakayabashi Mieko, a Waseda University

political scientist, and Miyamoto Yuji, a former ambassador to China, who in 1990s served as Consul General in Atlanta. In fact, Miyamoto ups the ante on Taylor, opining that "slavery robbed blacks of their culture"<sup>2</sup> and that, unlike Japanese, blacks are not "bound by tradition and values."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to illustrate his point by applying the broad brush of racial stereotype: Atlanta, he informs viewers, is populated by "single black mothers who live on welfare" and its "black men are all drug dealers", "leaving their children without role models."<sup>4</sup> Miyamoto closes out the segment arguing that, unlike Taylor, he does not believe the cause of American racial discord is "100-percent racism" and that blacks "should be saved."<sup>5</sup> The last utterance might possibly be misconstrued as a rebuttal of Taylor, were it not for the fact that, at no time during his interview does Taylor even remotely suggest that blacks experience racism or that they "should be rescued."

Taylor, the son of missionaries, who was born in Kobe and raised in Japan until he was sixteen, speaks Japanese fluently, has become something of the go-to-guy for Japanese news/infotainment programs. I've seen him on at least five different programs over an equal number of years, the first, an interview following Charlottesville, where he was introduced circumlocutously as the "godfather of the alt-right". Other programs have introduced him as a "white rights activist" and, in the tradition of Madison Grant and, more recently, the Tiki-torch wielding "white genocide" marchers of Charlottesville, voiced his concern over whether whites could survive the rising tide of color.

All this is darkly ironic. In 1983, Taylor wrote *Shadows of the Rising Sun*, a generally well-received<sup>6</sup> book on Japan which aimed to highlight the darker side of Japanese society at a time when it was being held up as the No. 1 paragon of a far-sighted management style that America was urged to emulate in order to

regain its competitive footing in the international marketplace. This was before Japan's economic bubble burst in the early 1990s and copies of [Musashi Miyamoto's \*Book of Five Rings: The Real Art of Japanese Management\*](#) and like-minded tomes were remaindered in bulk.

Equally ironic is the fact that one of the shadows Taylor pointed to was racism, particularly anti-black racism. Taylor, whose white supremacist bona fides would not become public until 1990 with the founding of *American Renaissance*<sup>7</sup> magazine, then a monthly print magazine, and two years later with the publication of *Paved with Good Intentions: The Failure of Race Relations in Contemporary America* (1992). The book calls out Japanese for their prejudice against Koreans, Ainu, Okinawans, and Burakumin, observing that "discrimination against minorities is one of Japan's most uncomfortable secrets" (Taylor 1983, p.62). Subsequently, however, Taylor would declare, in a 2016 interview with [TV-Asahi](#), that "black people are genetically inferior" and that consequently "even if you change the environment and endeavor to educate them it is impossible for blacks to achieve the same level as [North Asians]...This is not racial discrimination. It is biology." Taylor cited unnamed "serious" scholars, presumably those, like Arthur Jensen, William Shockley, J. Phillippe Rushton and Richard Lynn, whose research has been funded by the racist Pioneer Fund,<sup>8</sup> which has also funded Taylor's New Century Foundation that publishes *American Renaissance*, to back up his claims.

Taylor's *Shadows* was particularly critical of Japanese anti-black racism. While admitting that "Americans are no strangers to racism," he accused Japanese of having a particular fixation on purity and skin color, observing that Japanese have a fondness for the light skin of Caucasians and disdain for dark skin. He wrote that while Japanese go to considerable lengths

to look white and become the object of eroticized otherness, "Blacks or Latinos have no chance in the sexual sweepstakes" (Taylor 1983, p. 211). Moreover, since blacks are "rarer" and more "striking oddities in Japan to "the race- and hierarchy-conscious Japanese, they are not valid role models for anything" (p. 211). Later he quotes a U.S. government worker who explains that a Japanese diplomat had matter-of-factly confided to him that "Africans have no culture. "How do you argue with someone who says the Africans have no culture at all?" Some thirty-seven years later, judging from the non-response to Miyamoto, apparently you don't.

It shouldn't surprise anyone that some white supremacists would embrace Japan. After all, their Fuehrer entered into an alliance with Japan during World War II and was willing, if only as a matter of political expediency, to make them an exception to his theories of Aryan supremacy. In his interviews with Japanese television, Taylor goes out of his way to praise North Asians, pointing out that they out-score whites on IQ tests, a fact he strategically deploys to refute the white supremacist label. But it is not the "genetic superiority" of Japanese that attracts white supremacists. Rather, it is the myth of Japanese homogeneity. For while the Taylor of the 1980s sought to demystify the myth of the "Japanese miracle" and the Japanese exceptionalism that was thought to have sparked it, today's Taylor sees in Japan a model of what America once believed itself to be and should become again - a white ethno-state, a view that not only has sympathizers among white supremacists hell-bent on making America great again, some of whom are Japanophiles fascinated with Nazi regalia, [Japanese pop culture, and the wedding of the two](#), but also among Japanese who are reassured by whites who confirm the myths they tell themselves, particularly those who, like Taylor, do so in fluent Japanese.

However, Taylor and ill-conceived Twitter-

uploaded anime are only part of Japan's problem with racism. Its most pressing problem remains its refusal to recognize that such a problem exists and to deal honestly with it. Japan continues to see race and racism as a Western affliction. African slavery, racial segregation, and anti-black prejudice are typically presented as falling well outside of Japanese experience.

This selectively myopic view of its internal history overlooks several inconvenient historical truths. Among them: that western slavery arrived on Japanese shores with Portuguese traders who brought black slaves with them to Japan. It omits the embarrassing fact that the Portuguese also sold Japanese into slavery, a practice eventually banned by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the 1590s (de Sōza and Oka 2019). Although recent news that Hollywood will produce a film based on the life of [Yasuke](#), the Mozambican slave who would later serve Oda Nobunaga as a samurai, a story that some Japanese have used to celebrate Japanese colorblindness, it omits the fact that not all Africans in Japan were treated so magnanimously. During this period, Japanese themselves bought black slaves from the Portuguese as well as Korean and Chinese slaves from Asia, a fact whose consequences may still have a bearing on how Japanese today regard these groups. The Dutch and other western powers brought their slaves with them to Deshima when Japan ostensibly closed itself off to the western world. Black slaves were also observed in the port city of Yokohama in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

More significant, Japan has largely erased the history of its abandoned postwar "war orphans." It ignores the fact that Sawada Miki, founder of the Elizabeth Sanders Home for such children, was motivated to build the orphanage when the discarded body of a black baby wrapped in old newspaper fell into her lap when she was riding on a train in Gifu (Sawada 2001, 136-37). It glosses over the fact that

despite President Truman's 1948 executive order banning racial segregation in the armed forces, during the occupation, the Korean War, and well into the Vietnam War, the practice continued *de facto*, a practice which Japanese as hosts to American troops both witnessed and participated in. In fact, in 1951, when, despite interference from the State Department, then-chief consul for the NAACP Thurgood Marshall visited Korea and Japan to investigate segregation in the military, he found that "the rule of segregation was most glaringly apparent at the headquarters of the Far Eastern Command, to which no Negroes are assigned" (qtd. in Sun 2014).

The fact remains that today racism, including anti-black racism and the stereotypes that fuel and sustain it, are still in plain view. It isn't necessary to look for it abroad or even in Japan's own bowdlerized past. It can be found on such online Japanese retail sites as Amazon.co.jp, DMM.com, and HMV.com, where entering 黒人 (*kokujin*, black) in their DVD search engine will produce over a thousand thumbnails of Japanese-made pornographic DVDs with titles like "美女と黒い野獣" (Bijo to Kuroi Yajū, Beauty and the Beasts), "黒人レイプ" (*Kokujin Reipu*, Black Rape), "BLACK FUCK," and 黒人巨大マラ (*Kokujin Kyodai Mara*), the Japanese-language equivalent of "Big Black Cocks," that feature Japanese women posed with stereotypically priapic, enormously endowed black men ((Figure 1), whose stage names - Well Smith, Henzel Washington, and Teddy Murphy (Figure 2)- are as fake as the redacted 14-inch phalluses that adorn their covers. It can also be glimpsed in online advertisements for penis enlargement supplements that guarantee users "*kokujin*-size erections"<sup>10</sup> (Figure 3).



Figure 1. "Japanese fairy tales." Non, 2019

(Source: Amazon.co.jp)



Figure 2. DVD featuring "Well Smith" and "Henzel Washington." Non, 2019

(Source: Amazon.co.jp)



her complaint was equated with “oversensitive” Koreans who “always complain about their treatment in Japan.” Japanese posters have told Miyamoto, as they have told ethnic Koreans, that if she doesn’t like Japan, she should leave. Others have been more concise, telling her simply, “クロンボ、死ね” (*kuronbo shi-ne*, Die, nigger, Post #89).

and Yoneyama 1967) and 1990s (Kosakai 1996) have revealed that when Japanese are asked to rank various races and nationalities, blacks, black-Japanese, and Koreans are consistently ranked at the bottom (Figure 4), a pretty potent reality for a mythically racism-free society, one that many still Japanese embrace.

As even this small selection of posts reveals, the anti-black vitriol launched on these sites rivals that found on Stormfront and other white supremacist sites. While Japanese may not know much about African, African American history and culture and their own history of engagement with these groups, some of them are surprisingly conversant with the racist and [stereotypical iconography](#) (Posts #4, #19) that have historically been used by whites to describe black people.

Recent marches in Japan in support of BLM and tweets critical of racist media representations of blacks suggest that some change has taken place. Japanese netizens have increasingly expressed their outrage about the racism found both online and off. Those that have done so, have also found themselves the target of online racists and *netto uyoku* intimidation. None of this, however, has received much discussion in Japanese mainstream media, that itself fears the wrath of the right, and which, perhaps as a consequence, persistently present race and racism as a teachable moment, though one designed to educate Japanese about the long, turbulent historical legacy of western racism, while assiduously avoiding its own. It remains to be seen if the “high level of culture” that has brought to bear to combat one pandemic will be mobilized to battle another.

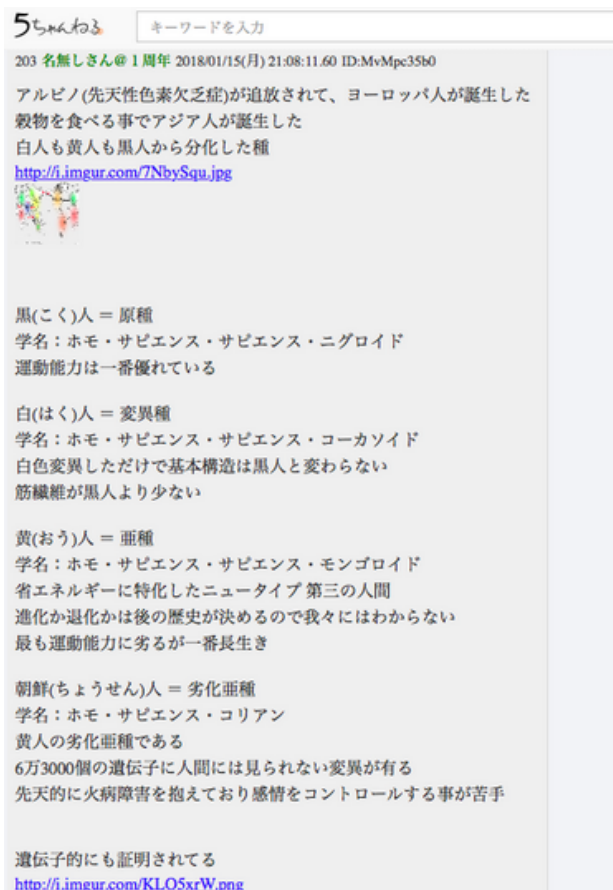


Figure 4. Online racist evolutionism

(Source: 5-chan)

This equation of blacks and Koreans in the calculus of Japanese disregard is nothing new: Surveys conducted in the 1960s (Wagatsuma

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**Readers of this article may also find [Okiyoshi Takeda's piece on the NHK blackface controversy in Japan](#) a great interest and we hope that the two articles will reinforce the message.**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In June YouTube removed Taylor’s American Renaissance channel, which included an interview Taylor had with the Japanese media, for violating its content policy against hate speech. See Jalan 2020. However, these interviews remain available for viewing on other channels, some with a distinctive spin as evidenced by their titles. See Dougho World 2018, tts 2018a. and 2018b and Studdard 2020.

<sup>2</sup> 奴隷制で黒人が連れられてこられてね□その結果自分達の文化とかすべて奪われたんです (*doresei de kokujin ga tsureraretekorarete ne, sono kekka, jibun-tachi no bunka toka subete ubawaretan’ desu*).

<sup>3</sup> 我々みたいに伝統や価値観を持った、そういうものが繋がってないんです (*Wareware mitai ni dentō ya kachi-kan wo motta, sō iu mono ga tsungatte inain'desu*).

<sup>4</sup> アトランタのダウンタウンは本当にお母さんもおばあさんも私生児を産み、そして社会保障で生きていくと。残っている男性たちは何かというと薬の売人 (*Atoranta no Dauntaun wa hontō ni okasan mo obāsan mo shi-seiji wo umi, soshite shakai hoshō de ikite iku to. Nokotte iru dansei-tachi wa nani ka to iu to, kusuri no bainin*).

<sup>5</sup> ここはアメリカの宿痾と言ったんですね。単に黒人だ、白人だという次元だけで、タイラーさんが言うように100%人種差別だとは思いませんし、だから黒人を救うべき、そういう議論には私が納得できません (*Koko wa Amerika no jukushō to uttan'desu ne. Tan ni kokujin da, hakujin da to iu jigen dake de, Tairā-san ga iu yō ni 100 pāsento jinshu sabetsu da to wa omoimasen shi, dakara kokujin wo suku-beki, so iu giron ni wa watashi ga nattoku dekimasen*).

<sup>6</sup> A blurb from the Preface to the book by Edward Seidensticker preemptively defends Taylor against the charge of being “anti-Japanese,” declaring it “overflows with affection for and understanding of the land in which he grew up” and expressing his hope that the book “will, like its famous predecessors, sell almost a million copies,” adding, “The Truth is too important that anything less should be allowed to control the field.” Would that the same community of scholars be equally concerned enough to speak out about his prolific Untruths.

<sup>7</sup> See ["American Renaissance" in the July 1998 issue of Searchlight, on the website of Institute for the Study of Academic Racism](#).

<sup>8</sup> See [Pioneer Fund](#), Southern Poverty Law Center.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of early Japanese contacts with Africans, see Boxer 1963 and Fujita 1987 and 2005, and Russell 2007.

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of the fetishization of black masculinity in Japan see Russell 2011 and Russell forthcoming.