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The Scriptorium: Visual Culture
On External Boundaries
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Tooth Blackening Ritual and Sociocultural Boundaries

I remember when I was small, I was really curious about my grandmother's black set of teeth. My little sister, however, was so scared that she thought her "nana" was a witch and ran away from her whenever grandma wanted to hug her tight. My parents always told me grandma was beautiful, and her black set of teeth was her pride of beauty, femininity, and integrity, but I could never understand that notion of beauty. As I grew older, I learned that blackened teeth, which is now only seen in old people as a symbol of longevity, was a beauty standard of my country in the past. Through this feature of appearance, I started discovering an essential part of my culture and my history, which conveyed more than just a ritual of body decoration.

Every culture has its own status symbols that delineate the definition and categorization of social structure. In many societies now and then, body image serves as the most noted indication of a person's economic or social status, just as Mary Douglas stated in chapter 42 "External Boundaries" of her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The function of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures" (Douglas 1968). The Mayans referred crosseyedness and flattened foreheads of high-born infants to permanent noble status; in Europe in 19th century, obesity was a sign of wealth and prosperity, while slenderness or paleness is a sign of poverty and manual labor (Kindes 2006); the Samoan culture notified body symbols such as hair

of women as important indicators of sexual relations (Mageo 1994). In Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam until late 20th century, a blackened set of teeth, which comes from the ubiquitous ritual tooth blackening (tooth lacquering), determined traditional beauty standards, gender roles, social structure, and national identity.

Tooth blackening, or tooth lacquering, is a custom of dyeing one's teeth black with a special mixture of various botanical ingredients. It was believed to originate in Japan until the Meiji era, where the ritual was called "Ohaguro" and known as a method to enhance sex appeal and maintain healthy teeth (Culture Magazine). In Vietnam, this tradition emerged thousands of years ago since the Hung Vuong period in the first kingdom Van Lang, and became widely practiced in Northern and Central regions of the country (Ho Dac Duy 2005). The custom came from a belief of ancient Vietnamese that visible canine teeth associated with animality, savageness and demon (Zumbroich 2009). The filing and blackening of the teeth assured that one would not be mistaken for an evil spirit. It is also the measurement for one's integrity and civilization. The Vietnamese proverb "Teeth white as those of dogs" aims at criticizing the primitive who do not blacken their teeth.

The tooth blackening ritual of the Vietnamese is a complex, multistage, and extremely painful process that can take weeks to complete. The dyeing process and mixture could take several forms varying accordingly to different regions. The most sophisticated method belonged to practitioners in Hue imperial capital whose products were held in high esteem (Zumbroich 2009). People who wished to dye their teeth had to clean their teeth entirely from the root, rub them with dried betel peels and raw salt, and wash their mouth with acidic liquids such as lime juice or rice alcohol to soften the texture of the teeth. Then the practitioners would apply a long-lasting coating with an intense black color on their teeth from a mixture of iron sulfate, gall nuts, pomegranate rind or areca nuts, shellac powder, and dried coconut shells. The finishing sheen was created by applying a layer of empyreumatic oil. After that, people whose teeth are dyed would possess a shiny, dark, orderly, 'as black as custard

apple seeds' set of teeth (Zumbroich 2009). The most extravagant method using elephant tusks was performed in royal Hue court of the 19th century. That's why initially tooth blackening was merely a ritual for the aristocrats and high-class individuals, such as king and queen, imperial concubines and beauties, mandarins, ladies and gentlemen from wealthy families, and intellectuals, who wished to express their social status by inviting the best practitioners to dye their teeth. In special events such as wedding or festival, attendants needed to have blackened teeth in order to participate. Vietnamese people believe that "cái răng cái tóc là gốc con người" (literal meaning: teeth and hair are the root of a human being). The idea that the outside body image of a person can reveal who they are is very powerful and dangerous since it shapes the mindset of an entire culture on individuals and communities. It establishes the first internal societal concern—social boundaries between different classes. It allows body features to represent personality, and external appearance to symbolize integrity and social standing, just like the notion that a book could be judged by its cover.

In Vietnam, tooth blackening is widespread among the Viet and ethnic minorities such as Muong, Thai, Si La, but mostly among women. First of all, it represents a belief of aesthetics that closely related to another essential tradition of the culture: chewing areca nuts with betel leaves, which makes teeth stained. A blackened set of teeth hides the stains, and helps women become more elegant, graceful, and not too appealing or exposing to strangers. It creates a contrast between their white skin and black teeth, and makes their smile more radiant, which catch the attention of men. Blackened teeth also last longer, strengthen the gums and prevent 'tooth worm' which was believed to cause cavity and decay (Zumbroich 2009). Thus, the Vietnamese feminine beauty standard used to base on a healthy and shiny set of blackened teeth—a traditional beauty that lasts and surpasses the power of time and other forces. Second, the tooth blackening ritual certified that a woman was grown up and ready for marriage. The procedure usually took place after

menarche or at the age of 10 when the child has all her permanent teeth. After dyeing their teeth black, she transformed from childhood to maturity, and became capable of attracting the opposite sex (Zumbroich 2009). It was widely believed that a blackened set of teeth could improve one's chances of finding a suitable partner (Zumbroich 2009). Many women recalled that their mouths swelled up or their gums burned and stung for days during the procedure. However, since this is an obligatory ritual that everyone had to follow, they couldn't do anything but obey it. If someone offered a young girl a teeth blackener, they directly expressed their sexual interest in her. In the past, Vietnamese women got married at an early age; many young girls got married at the age of 12 or 13 after the tooth dyeing ritual. A blackened set of teeth became a cultural signal that measured a woman's readiness to have sexual interaction and give birth. This tradition could be associated with the way animals are sacrificed in many primitive cultures: they are chosen as 'ready to be slaughtered' based on their categories, gender, age, and physical state (fat or thin; corpulent or pale), as Douglas said in "External Boundaries." She also denoted: "We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast, milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body" (Douglas 1968). The tooth blackening tradition is precariously omnipotent since it deeply influenced the way women were treated within a culture. This also gave rise to the second internal societal concern: the ritual marginalizes women by taking away their power to make decisions on building their own appearance and finding partners. Their beauty was linked with their sexuality, and their sexual function was determined upon culturally forced physical attribute not individual mentality. Meanwhile, men didn't need any sexual signal to tell that they're ready to mingle; they also had the right to choose their own women by offering her a tooth blackener.

Tooth blackening was considered a cultural weapon to fight the mergence of different nationalities in Vietnam in the past. It helps articulate ethnic boundaries

within Southeast Asia and create a sense of “otherness” (Zumbroich 2009). A blackened set of teeth can distinguish between Vietnamese and other foreign people, especially Chinese since Vietnam has been reigned by Imperial China for more than a thousand years. Chinese descriptions from Qin dynasty (221-207 B.C.E) remarked on the blackened teeth of the inhabitants of the Red River Delta. In 1695, when the Chinese monk Shilian Dashan traveled along the coastline of Vietnam, he noticed that the inhabitants of Cù Lao Chàm ‘speak a pigmy tongue and blacken their teeth’ (Wheeler 2006). During the span of history, the Vietnamese body ritual tooth blackening has played an important part in building national identity against the colonization and cultural merger crisis. It distinguishes the internal from the external. It formed ethnic boundaries among different nations and protected the origin culture from exotic invasion and spoliation.

It was not until the French colonization had this cultural ritual lessened and was eradicated almost entirely in the last few years of the 20th century accordingly to the beauty standard of the West. “Outside influences, in particular Christianization and the global propagation of a Western ideal of white teeth, have overtime led to the abandonment of the practice in the great majority of indigenous societies as they experienced significant outside contact” (Zumbroich 2009). The Western culture had robustly influenced the cultural scene of Vietnamese people since 1862, especially at the beginning of the 20th century (Ho Dac Duy 2005). This has been a common scene in colonized nations and around the world where the Western beauty standard took place and narrowed down the range of variation in beauty. In Vietnam, a lot of women refused to blacken their teeth while others scraped off the black coating on their teeth to transform into modern women of the new era. They created a new identity that no longer limited them within conservative and sexist Eastern cultural and societal boundaries. They participated in a series of cultural reform, women’s rights movement and liberation movement, which were rampant during the reform and innovation period. There were two extreme oppositional parties at that time: one consistently

claimed that people who had white teeth and adjusted hairstyle were traitors and followers of the Western enemy; the other believed those who blackened teeth and followed traditional fashion were fogies and barbarous people. The tooth blackening ritual abated as soon as people appraised and focused too much on the external appearance rather than internal values such as ethics and intellectuals (Ho Dac Duy 2005).

Nowadays, tooth blackening is considered a lost tradition. Many Vietnamese experts are trying to revive this ritual. I understand their motives, but I have several reasons to prove that this is not a very applicable idea. First of all, this is the 21st century; the span of history brings along many changes in cultural mindsets, especially the idea of beauty. Most people no longer adhere to the standardized beauty of black teeth and the painful process to achieve them. It's time for new traditions that can adapt to the present culture to form, and beauty method needs to be a personal choice, not an obliged cultural practice. Second, since Mary Douglas demonstrated that the body stood for any bounded social structures, the idea of fostering rituals that make use of appearance peculiarities to categorize the society has to be abandoned. With regard to a more equal, liberal, and safer world, no human beings should be marginalized if they don't stand within the boundaries of the standardized system. Besides, integration and globalization is the orientation we are striving for, which means no external signals is needed to tell people of different cultures apart. We respect and preserve our national pride and ethnic idiosyncrasies, but won't choose to broaden the gap between nations by creating boundaries, whether external or internal.

References

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