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## **RACE SHOULD BE DISCUSSED AND UNDERSTOOD ACROSS THE GLOBE**

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### **Introduction**

Promoting global dialogues is necessary to fully understand race and fight against racism across the world. While the need to globalize anthropology is now recognized in the field—and *Anthropology News* this past fall had a special series on the topic—the discussion should be extended to studies of race and human variation. Not only will cross-cultural research on these issues by anthropologists in many nations help us academically understand the concepts, but these studies are necessary in informing socially just policies in international politics.

To date there is an unbalanced understanding of the idea of race: the predominant academic concept of race, established primarily by Western intellectuals, has unevenly paid attention to perceived physical differences. This is largely because in the past, theories of race have been heavily based on European and American colonial experiences, most typically conceived as “white”-“black” relationships.

Because of this history, theories and scholarly discussion about race have often centered on two questions: Is the idea of race a modern Western product? Or is it universal? My argument is that race is *neither universal nor a modern Western invention*. There are a number of fascinating ethnographic examples to support this, including the history of the *burakumin* in Japan.

## ***Burakumin* in Japan**

Not all scholars agree on the origin of the *burakumin*. Currently most accept that this group has been continuously recognized in Japanese history from medieval and early modern times to after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, although the group was called *eta* (literally “much polluted”) in pre-modern days. *Burakumin* were officially designated as outcastes in the Tokugawa, or early modern period in Japan, although caste systems were abolished a few years after the Meiji Restoration. *Burakumin* are, in reality, physically identical with other Japanese, and the only distinct markers have been residential districts and occupations, socioeconomic variables of political economy.

For centuries, and among some even today, many in Japan assume the *burakumin* have an alien racial origin, despite no scientific evidence for this. Such beliefs can be traced all the way back to medieval literature. For example, one document in the early 18th century states, “*They are polluted due to being different in species (race) origin [from us]*” At the same time there are medieval sources that show the institutionalized discrimination through codified laws. It was not just that there were many discriminatory laws against “*eta*”. A law in the mid 16th century even stated that anyone who associated with *eta* would be “punished by stones being piled on top of them.”

So, clearly both ideas about alien racial origin and practices of institutionalized discrimination *already existed in the pre-modern period in a society outside the West*, namely Japan, though they were later greatly transformed in the modern period. Let me emphasize though that this does not support a universalist claim about race,. Scholars of *buraku* history today agree that the history of *eta* does not trace back to the ancient period.

### **Discrimination or Racism?**

There are many other cross-cultural, ethnographic examples of groups that have certain features in common with the *burakumin*: for instance, the *pekuchon* of Korea, *quho* of Sichuan Province in China, and the low caste people of the Toba Batak of Southeast Asia, the Yap of Micronesia, and the untouchables of India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. All of these groups have been

socially stigmatized, discriminated against and ranked low in social hierarchy based on a folk belief that they are “impure,” and each is then recognized by both themselves and others as having different descent. Further, the discrimination against them is institutionalized, involving how land and other kinds of resources are distributed.

Many of these groups have been traditionally recognized by state and international governments only as religious minorities or former outcasts. At least that is the justification the Indian government used when it refused a proposal to include the historically discriminated Dalits, or in the past known as “untouchables,” into the agenda of the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa. The Japanese government has also taken the same position in the past, acknowledging the “discrimination,” but not “racism,” the *burakumin* have suffered. Because these groups do not fit the established concept of “race” primarily defined by Western scholars, it allows governments and policymakers an excuse not to recognize them as having experienced “racism,” and thus, to keep them from participating in global discussions to address social injustices and how to institute better practices.

### **Three Dimensions of “Race”**

All these groups mentioned above, I argue, are socially constructed “races.” I distinguish three, interconnected historical dimensions of the idea of race: lower case “race” (r); capitalized “Race” (R); and “Race as Resistance” (RR).

What I call lowercase “race” (r) are cases when the concept has emerged indigenously (but not universally), where differences between socially differentiated groups are understood as those inherited and unalterable by the environment and represented in political, economic and social institutions accompanied by a clear hierarchy, and manifest an exclusive nature.

Capitalized “Race” (R), I define, as the circulation of the belief that it is possible, in the name of science, to classify and map people around the world in terms of universal languages and principles, including the one constructed first by Westerners in modern, colonial times and the one reconfigured in some

genetic studies today.

“Race as Resistance” (RR) is a newer concept of “race,” constructed with positive meanings. It is the result of proactive resistance against hegemony and social domination. RR indicates the use of race as a discursive strategy to expose existing (or contemporary) racial discrimination and to operationalize identity politics.

### **Whether and How to Recognize Race**

The distinction of “race” into these three dimensions helps us to understand the concept in different forms across time and space, without falling into the binary opposition of whether race is universal or a modern Western product. It also elucidates the inseparable nature of these three dimensions of race, without falling into the “color-blind” v “color-conscious” debate, another binary opposition. Even if race-as-resistance (RR) is seen as a threat to social integration to some people, who instead seek a color-blind society, as long as racism is grounded in either “race” (r) or “Race” (R), these ideas will continue to exist.

In today’s age of the genome, the three-dimensional theory of race also traces historical continuities between scientific discourse in some genetic studies and classical racial science. Even if the term “race” is rarely used, in a number of genetic studies, “genetic differences” are scientifically discussed in relation to groups labeled as “Africans,” “Europeans,” and “Asians”—this is so even when the actual genetic samples were collected through specific methods from more precisely described geographic locations—such as Ibadan—within larger continents—like Africa. This is a form of capitalized “Race” (R) today.

On the other hand, there is growing awareness and efforts among some scientists to attempt to represent their samples more accurately, to avoid any possible misuse of their findings by racists. For example, at a recent international press conference I attended, the completion of the International HapMap Project was announced. In the newly released findings of this human DNA study project, scientists have employed such labels as “YRI,” “JPT,” “CHB,” and “CEU” to refer to samples collected from Yoruba in Ibadan, Japanese in Tokyo, Han Chinese in

Beijing, and Utah residents with ancestry from northern and western Europe, respectively. These labels replaced “African,” “Japanese,” “Chinese,” and “European” origin, which scientists were using even just a year ago. These new labels are far more precise in naming particular genetic samples, for they consider far more than simply the geographic continents from which they were derived. One powerful way to further deconstruct capitalized “race” (R)—without simply saying “race is a social construct”—would be to systematically collect and label genetic samples through even further defined analytic dimensions, such as gender, class, age and culture-related diet.

As global, collaborative scientific projects like the HapMap Project develop, and as social injustices become international issues, it is all the more important for anthropologists to promote our cross-cultural understanding of “race” by discussing the ideas with colleagues across the disciplines and across the globe.

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