Beautiful Blackened Smiles

by Gina Collia

We ladies put so much effort into maintaining a beaming white smile these days that it can come as a surprise to some to discover that our Japanese counterparts used to put so much greater amount of effort into maintaining a glossy black one.

During the Edo period, *ohaguro*, or teeth blackening, was a common practice amongst married women as a symbol of marital fidelity, with a young bride collecting the ingredients from seven close friends and relatives and dyeing her teeth for the first time just prior to her wedding.[1] It was also practiced in the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter, where an apprentice courtesan would receive the ingredients from seven friends and dye her teeth for the first time when she was on the verge of making her debut and accepting her first customer.[2] It remained a common practice until, in 1873, the Empress of Japan appeared in public with white teeth, creating quite a stir and setting the trend for her fellow countrywomen from that point onward.[3]

The dye was produced by combining iron acetate, in the form of *kanemizu* (lit. 'metal water'), with tannic acid, in the form of *fushi* powder.[4] The process of making *kanemizu* began with the heating of scrap iron, such as old nails. To the red hot iron was added a mixture of water, vinegar or rice wine, and strong tea.[5] This mixture was then allowed to

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[1] Teeth blackening dates back to ancient times in Japan and was practiced by both aristocratic men and women during the Heian period, but by the 18th century *ohaguro* was a practice mainly associated with women.

[2] De Becker, J. E. (1899), *The Sexual Life of Japan: Being an Exhaustive Study of the Nightless City*. New York, privately printed, p. 55

[3] Shibusawa, K. (1958), *Japanese Life and Culture in the Meiji Era*. Tokyo, Obunsha, pp 34-35. The practice had been previously prohibited amongst men since 1870; see Chamberlain, B. H. (1891), *Things Japanese: Being Notes on Various Subjects Connected with Japan*, second revised and enlarged edition. London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co. Ltd., p. 57. Following the appearance of the Empress without blackened teeth, the practice of *ohaguro* was frowned upon, but advertisements for ready-made blackening products continued to appear in Japanese newspapers; see Miller, L. (2006), *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics*. CA, University of California Press.

[4] *Fushi* powder is a powder made from the gallnuts of the Japanese sumac tree (*Rhus javanica*).

[5] Some recipes call for the addition of glutinous rice jelly. In his personal journal of the expedition to Japan in 1852-1854, Commodore Perry, who wasn't a great admirer of blackened teeth, listed the ingredients as including urine. See Beasley, W. G. (ed. 2002), *The Perry Mission to Japan, 1853-1854*. Surrey, Curzon Press Ltd., Volume I, p. 181.

ferment in a cool, dark place in as airtight a container as possible. Following fermentation, the scum that had formed on top of the mixture was removed and heated until boiling. This liquid was then poured into a bowl, to which iron filings and *fushi* powder were added, creating a hydrophobic solution. When ready, the dye was applied to the teeth in layers until a rich black coating was achieved.

There were various specific tools required when carrying out the teeth blackening process, and these were given to a young bride just before her wedding, or to an apprentice courtesan just before her debut. The *mimidarai* (lit. 'ear tub', named after its two ear-shaped handles) was a small basin which was used when rinsing the mouth. On top of the small basin was placed a long, thin tray called a *watashigane*, onto which were placed a ewer, which contained the *kanemizu*, and a small bowl in which the dye was mixed. The gallnut powder was kept inside a small box called a *fushi-bako*.[6] And, of course, a brush was required to apply the dye; this was usually a soft tufted toothpick, though feather toothpicks were also used.

Aside from the fact that the process of preparation and application was time-consuming and labour-intensive, the mixture itself was incredibly foul-smelling; we must also assume that it was incredibly foul-tasting. And the dye was not permanent; it faded quickly, so the woman who had gone to so much trouble to acquire a set of glossy black teeth was soon sporting a set of streaky grey ones. If a lady wished to maintain her black lacquered smile, she faced reapplying the foul concoction every day; she certainly could not have gone more than three days without repeating the process. Prior to reapplying the tooth blackening, it was necessary to rub the teeth with the rind of a pomegranate, or something very similar, in order to produce a key to which the dye could adhere properly, and a married woman had to complete all of this before her husband awoke in the morning. A well-groomed and fashion-conscious lady,

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[6] The large mimidarai (or 'ear tub') is shown in the image above. On top of it is placed the *watashigane* and a small bowl for mixing the blackening mixture. The small black box in the foreground is the fushi-bako, which would have contained the *fushi* powder. Image: Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), *Beauty at Her Toilet*, from an untitled set of prints of figures set against a yellow background, published by Uemura Yohei, c. 1794/1795.

especially one not long married, could not have her husband getting up to find foul-smelling tooth dye about the place, or a wife with unsightly, streaky teeth.

Ohaguro was not just about keeping your teeth looking good, though; it also had positive effects from a dental health point of view. The dye provided a protective coating to the teeth, in the way that sealants used in modern dentistry do today. Coating a tooth that had decayed or been damaged in some way could provide relief from toothache. And scientific evidence has shown that *ohaguro*-treated teeth were less likely to develop cavities to begin with and were resistant to demineralisation.[7] *Ohaguro* did not just produce beautiful blackened smiles; it produced healthy ones.

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[7] Lewis, W. H. and Elvin-Lewis, M. P. F. (2003), *Medical Botany: Plants Affecting Human Health*, second edition. Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons, p. 448. According to the Japan Society of Aesthetic Dentistry, *ohaguro* was also effective in preventing periodontitis.