

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of
Sciences and Affiliated Societies

Nebraska Academy of Sciences

1973

The Concept Of Caste: Cross-Cultural Applications

Bruce LaBrack

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tnas>

LaBrack, Bruce, "The Concept Of Caste: Cross-Cultural Applications" (1973). *Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies*. 383.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tnas/383>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Nebraska Academy of Sciences at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE CONCEPT OF CASTE:
CROSS-CULTURAL APPLICATIONS

Bruce LaBrack

Department of Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Present address: 2521 Kola St., Live Oak, California 95953

ABSTRACT: The concept of caste has undergone a thorough re-examination by social scientists in the past three decades. The result has been a redefinition of caste and the application of the term 'caste' to social situations found outside the Indian subcontinent. A review of some of the varieties of caste reported in Japan, Africa, Tibet, Korea and North America are outlined and brief historical summaries illustrate the differing conditions under which these systems arose. Utilizing a broad definition of caste, the structural components and concomitants of castes are compared using the features of birth-ascription, endogamy, ritual pollution and traditional occupation. These four criteria are structurally significant in the cross-cultural study of caste-like hierarchies.

Prior to the last thirty years the social stratification system known as 'caste' had been generally considered a uniquely Indic form of social organization which was symbiotically linked to a specific religio-economic base. By emphasizing the unique aspects of society in India, the common elements it shares with other systems of rigid stratification were obscured.

A major part of the confusion concerning caste stemmed from the contention that caste and class societies are in a kind of Levi-Straussian bi-polar opposition. However, this either/or view of "equilitarian" vs. "hierarchical" models of civilization (Dumont, 1967) is inadequate to explain the range of social interaction encountered in modern societies. Primarily this view categorizes behavior without explaining it; much as the unilineal evolutionist theories of Morgan or Tylor typed, but did not explain, family structure or religion. With reference to India this trend began with the earliest travelers' account by Greeks (McCrimble, 1877) and Chinese (Beal, 1969; Watters, 1904-05) who presented caste in India as a static, monolithic structure. This idea persists to the present with the French Indologist Louis Dumont (Dumont, 1967) assuming that caste and class are universal and diametrically opposed systems of social order. These views reinforce the idea that Hindu caste is a social event unlike any other in the world, a concept shared by sociologists Oliver C. Cox (1945; 1948) and Simpson and Yinger (1953).

Recent studies which have focused on the specific structures and concomitant attributes of caste-like situations clearly show that 'caste' is not limited to Hindu India (Tumin, 1952; Donoghue, 1957; Tuden and Plotnicov, 1970; Nadel, 1954; Berreman, 1960). Forms of a caste system or caste groups can be identified in such areas as the Near East, Oceania, Sub-Saharan Africa, East Eurasia, the Mediterranean and the United States.

Therefore the alternative approach to analyzing the different ways in which man organizes himself is to determine the structural features and the context of social behavior. In this way "Indian caste" can be divorced from 'caste as a social referent' and a working definition can be based on the 'real' structure and functions of the society and not the 'ideal' features of Hindu philosophic systems. This is not to say that what is culturally relative can be minimized, because ideas and values cannot be separated from structure; however, systems of caste are found in countries whose patterns of social organization, religion and economics are much different than India's. As a type of social system 'caste' is found in societies which espouse ideological equality and consider themselves to have a class system.

Hoebel has noted the distribution of caste systems by total and relative frequency in the Major World Geographic Areas (Hoebel, 1972, pp. 491-495). Analyzing data compiled from the *Ethnographic Atlas* (Murdock, 1967), Hoebel concludes that caste systems of social organization are relatively rare numerically, existing in 103 societies of the 819 listed, but in terms of the number of people living in a caste situation the total could be as high as five hundred and eighty million persons, nearly one-tenth of the present world population.

Caste systems are extremely variable but tend to be either relatively simple, having from one to three castes groups, or a complex system where there are numerous castes which comprise the entire society. An example of the complex type appears to exist only in India and is an extreme manifestation of the principle of social stratification. Of the simpler variety there are two sub-types: the pariah or "outcaste" populations of certain countries and the 'ethnic castes,' "in which a socially superior endogamous caste (usually composed of conquerors) subordinates and holds down a socially inferior caste of conquered people or of foreign immigrants of different race and/or culture, barring them from equal privileges" (Hoebel, 1970, p. 491).

When viewed comparatively and structurally, caste systems can be described as systems of stratification, rigid, birth-ascribed, with limited vertical mobility and often associated with a division of labor resulting in hereditary occupational specialization. Contrasting with more narrow views is a very broad definition by Berreman:

A caste system occurs where a society is made up of birth-ascribed groups which are hierarchically ordered and culturally distinct. The hierarchy entails differential evaluation, rewards, and association (Berreman, 1967a, p. 46).

This definition is useful because it does not require that the entire society be ranked as in India but only that a caste group exists within the

social system. Such a classification would allow the inclusion of the Negro populations in the United States as 'caste' during certain periods of American history. It also makes no stipulation concerning the number of people involved.

In India the entire population is involved in a continuum of rankings, whereas in countries such as the United States and Japan, caste groups exist within a class structure. The recognition that caste can exist in a larger framework of class structure is especially important in such areas as the Near East and Africa where an 'outcaste,' pariah or caste segment of the society may constitute less than one percent of the total population.

The following are capsule summaries of selected caste groups which illustrate the varied conditions under which caste groups arise and their temporal sequences.

The true origins of Indian caste are widely debated but regardless of genesis the religious sanctions for, and outline of, Indian caste can be traced to the Laws of Manu written towards the end of the Vedic period and dated circa 200 A.D. (c.f. Karue, 1961: 53-57). Archeological evidence (Wheeler, 1966) uncovered since the 1920's has led to inferences of a four-class, if not caste, system operating as early as 2500 B.C., but it appears that the Aryan invasions (circa 1550 B.C.) may have been the cause of a further rigidifying of classes to castes on the basis of skin color as well as occupation (c.f. Ghurye, 1952). Foreign travelers which include the Greeks, Chinese, Africans, Islamic peoples and eventually large numbers of Europeans found essentially the same Indian caste structure as exists today. The sixteenth century Portuguese merchants noted the importance of the family line in the Indian system and named it *castas* or the Portuguese term for family or clan. When caste is mentioned it is the Indian system which is considered archtypical. It is most probably its social system which provides the cohesion that gives India the claim to possessing the oldest continuing civilization on earth.

Compared to the Indian system the caste structures in other countries are relatively new, most being post-Christian and pre-Islamic in origin. In Japan a caste-like situation developed in the Ancient Period of Japanese history (ending circa 645 A.D.) and can be traced through the Classic, Feudal, Tokogawa, Meiji and Modern eras (Price, 1966). The *senmin* (lowly people) or *eta* (filth abundant) comprised separate communities by the fifteenth century and by the seventeenth century the *eta* designation became hereditary and permanent, as opposed to the earlier periods when such a title might be temporary. By the 1600's the *eta* were in all respects a pariah or 'ethnic' caste group which had as many disabilities and restrictions as the untouchables of India. Today there are an estimated one to three million *eta* residing in over six thousand separate areas (*buraku*) both urban and rural. Their social position is defined as "descendants of members or pariah groups"

and as an “untouchable group caste who are still socially and economically discriminated against as a result of prejudice by members of the majority class” (Wagatsuma, 1967, p. 118). This illustrates one of the essential features of caste structure – the concept of differential evaluation. Although the *eta* are not racially or linguistically different in any way from the majority Japanese and can be identified with certainty only by the registry of birth or residence, they are ranked in terms of ‘differential intrinsic worth.’

Korean groups with pariah status are known as *Paekchong* and *Chiaian*, and a Tibetan group called *Ragyappa* are included in this category. (Passin, 1955). All three date back to approximately the fourteenth century and probably considerably before, although records are fragmentary. As with other pariah groups, their occupations play an important part in their assigned role status within their respective societies. The importance of traditional occupations in defining caste groups is high-lighted by the crucial part it plays in African caste systems.

In Africa there are at least two distinct caste types falling into three geographical areas, roughly Eastern, Western and Southern varieties. The East and West African types appear to be well developed in pre-Moslem times and coincide with the rise of indigenous kingdoms and migrations of well-organized, warlike, stockbreeding peoples moving from the North who either conquered or subdued the Bantu populations. Nadel cites evidence from the Nupe of West Africa and the Beni Amer in East Africa as caste systems which have arisen as a result of ethnic heterogeneity and conquest (Nadel, 1954). Vaughan (1970) has noted the existence of caste groups among the Marghi of the Western Sudan on the boundary between Nigeria and Cameroun. Maquet (1961; 1970) describes a caste situation which is strikingly like the Hindu among the Ruanda peoples of central East Africa. Here the Tutsi cattlemen, Hutu hoe-cultivators, and the hunting Twa are rigidly ranked, endogamous, and held together by mutual economic interdependence. Functionally, a tripartite caste system developed, which could be classified as ‘ethnic caste.’

In South Africa the *apartheid* associated with European ascendance in Africa rigidified in the last one hundred years to the well-known, two-race, caste-within-a-class system. Dr. van den Berghe (1964: 1970) uses the term caste to describe relationships between the white population and the blacks in the Republic of South Africa. The Negro slave trade of the fourteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries in the Americas also resulted in a black/white hierarchy which existed, and still does to some extent, in the United States and Latin America. In the United States the institution of pre-bellum slavery simply took on the appearance of lower class citizenship when the reality was as caste-like as African blacksmiths or Indian butchers. The dynamics of Southern caste are described in Dollard’s *Caste and Class in*

a *Southern Town* (Dollard, 1952) while the structural aspects are noted in Berreman's article "Caste in India and the United States" (Berreman, 1960).

All the preceding examples, whether from Africa, Asia or the United States share certain features which can be analyzed comparatively and which are likely to lead to useful generalizations concerning 'caste' as a form of social structure. These components of caste are birth-ascription, endogamy, traditional occupation and a rationale which religiously validates the system and assigns members of the society on a similarly graded social hierarchy. Such justification is normally couched in terms of purity-pollution. When collectively examined in terms of the criteria mentioned, these groups exhibit a remarkable similarity.

BIRTH-ASCRPTION

The membership of all these groups is based on birth. They are all ascribed statuses and a change of status is ostensibly impossible. The Japanese, South and East African, Korean, and American systems are dual propositions in that membership is either in a caste group or in some level of the class structure. They all would be placed in the category 'simple ethnic caste.' The Indian system factionalizes due to the sub-divisions or *jatis* scaled along a caste continuum and is the example of 'complex caste.' The reasons for assignment to the particular caste is birth alone, but the criteria upon which assignment is based change considerably from system to system. In the United States and South Africa the criterion is primarily skin color; in Japan, Tibet and India the concept of ritual purity is central; in East and West Africa it is a combination of ritual purity, wealth (usually in cattle) and political power. In a study of a Northern Pakistan system in Swat, Barth noted 'honor' as the definitive criteria (Barth, 1960). In all these situations it may be feasible for a few to 'pass' as someone they are not, but in a caste situation, social mobility is theoretically impossible. The use of role in caste situations in Japan and America presents a problem due to two factors: first, the difference between caste in a class system and caste as a complete social system; and second, the confusion over what constitutes the basis for status. Two definitions help clarify these points. Bohannon notes that:

Caste systems are based on birth-ascription rather than defining membership and rank according to idiosyncratic attitudes and behavior as do class systems (Bohannon, 1953, p. 168).

Therefore, if the rank of an *eta* or a black, is based primarily on his birth, even in philosophically equilateral societies such as Japan and the United States, then these segments constitute a caste group which is more or less

articulated into the majority class system. Berreman sets up a contrast set as follows:

In a caste system an individual displays the attributes of his caste because he is a member of it. In a class system, an individual is a member of his class because he displays its attributes (Berreman, 1967, p. 49).

In all of the caste examples presented, birth-ascription largely determines the future of the individuals concerned.

ENDOGAMY

To understand the hierarchy of caste in any explicit sense, it is necessary to examine its effects on the family and to illustrate how the structure of caste operates within and upon the individual and the social group in the context of marriage. All the groups under consideration practice caste endogamy, with deviation from this pattern either difficult or impossible depending on the nature and strength of social sanctions. In the Indian context this means no marriage outside the sub-caste or *jati* sphere with the added stipulations of village exogamy and clan name considerations (Mandelbaum, 1972, pp. 31-158). In the United States and Japan the dual nature of the division of black/white, *eta*/non-*eta* fulfills technically this aspect of caste. Only recently have the miscegenation laws prohibiting inter-racial marriage been removed from the statutes in some areas of the United States, while the traditionally thorough pre-marriage investigation of the Japanese effectively excluded *eta* from marrying other Japanese. The South African enforcement of racial division is too well known to bear repeating. A non-*eta* or non-black has a free range of marriage possibilities (excluding the pariah group) as his limits are derived from class distinctions which may or may not be as restrictive as caste. These systems can be viewed simply as dual or triple systems of caste within a class society.

In Tibet no *Ragyappa* can marry anyone but another *Ragyappa*, nor can the Korean pariahs marry outside their groups. In many ways the Asian pariah groups are treated like gypsies although they often are sedentary rather than itinerant. The endogamous relationship of East African blacksmiths is another example of enforced marriage boundaries. All of these therefore exhibit another universal of caste in that each of the societies has segments within which caste endogamy is applied. This special feature of caste brings the caste communities' differential treatment and sanctions into focus. Marriage and sex relations are among the most stringently regulated areas of behavior in a caste system and this is not surprising in view of the fact that the likely result of marriage and/or sexual relations is offspring. As caste membership is determined by birth, if one marries or has sexual relations

inappropriately, one threatens the very foundation of the higher group's identity and claim to status. Sexual exploitation of the lower caste women by the higher group is another common theme in caste relationships and again reflects differential intrinsic worth. The purity of the higher groups' women must be guarded but that of women in low status is, by virtue of their position, low or non-existent.

TRADITIONAL OCCUPATION AND RITUAL POLLUTION

The last two components of caste, traditional occupation and ritual pollution, will be treated together as they form a nearly inseparable category in the minds of members of caste groups and generally constitute a major factor in assignment of status by the dominant group.

In many areas of Korea the two groups which form distinct caste communities are the *Paekchong* and the *Chiam* and their traditional occupations include slaughterers, butchers, and tanners for the *Paekchong*; and petty criminals, prostitutes, and diviners of various persuasions for the *Chiam* (Price, 1966). It might be enough to say that their status, and the status of most pariah groups, is derived from the low nature of their work, but this is probably the reverse of the real situation as it developed historically in some areas. For instance, the blacksmiths of Africa could not always have been low because they smelt metal, as the craft was not always known. Some groups perform certain tasks due to the interlocking nature of economic relationships such as in the *jajmani* system of India. It is generally true that occupations which are considered filthy or degrading, but necessary to the functioning of the community, are the duty of caste groups. There is, however, no one avenue to the arrival at caste status occupations. Some castes are assigned such labors because they are already in low status positions. In other situations a caste evolves because of the type of occupation with which it is historically associated. In India many *jatis* still carry a stigma although the kind of work for which they are looked down upon has not been performed for generations (i.e. water-carriers in a village with pumped wells or palinquin bearers who have given way to taxis or simply lost clientele when the local royalty economized). Clearly it is not just the overt aspects of a particular occupation which is of concern in caste situations.

The physical dirt of certain occupations has a spiritual counterpart which is ritual impurity and is a central concept in the theory of caste. It is known variously as the concept of uncleanness, ritual impurity and pollution. Whatever its title, the idea in India, Tibet, Korea and Japan and the United States comes partially from National belief systems, namely Hinduism, Tantric or Mahayana Buddhism, Shinto and Fundamental Christianity, respectively. The African systems are based more on purity of descent; the

blacksmith groups are not related to the king and therefore not divine, their low position is permanently insured and political power (and cattle) impossible to obtain. While religion and its sanctions on pollution play a larger part in India and Japan than they do in the United States, there is the claim that Negro status is a result of being a "child of Ham" or dark skin being a "mark of Cain." Donoghue characterizes Japanese attitudes which are supposedly objective, and even though based on observation, clearly show their intent. Any caste group name could be substituted for *eta*:

Look at the *eta* and their houses – they are dirty, they have dirty occupations and they are diseased. The *eta* always marry each other, so their strain is weak. They are an exclusive, intimate group that reject outsiders and any form of aid; I feel sorry for the *eta* because of their lowly position, but I will have nothing to do with them until they learn to live like other Japanese, that is, give up their occupations, marry outside their small community, clean up their villages, homes and themselves, and drop their hostile clannish attitudes (Donoghue, 1967, p. 139).

While these beliefs are based on observable circumstances they have the quality of a stereotype and, as in the Black/White relationships in the United States, they operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy to maintain outcaste status.

SUMMARY

Certain levels of society in Japan, Tibet, Africa, Korea, the United States and India share the common structural features of birth-ascription, caste endogamy, traditional occupation and are pollution based. Using these referents, all of the societies described qualify to have the term 'caste' applied to segments of their populations and the criteria discussed form an analytical basis for further cross-cultural comparisons of caste-like social structures.

REFERENCES CITED

- Barth, F., 1960. The system of Social Stratification in Swat, North Pakistan. In *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon, and Northwest Pakistan*. Ed. E. R. Leach. Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 2. London: Cambridge University Press, 113-145.
- Beal, Samuel, trans., 1869. *Travels of Fah-Hain and Sung-Yun*. London: Trubner.
- Berreman, Gerald D., 1960. Caste in India and the United States. In *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. LXVI, No. 2, 120-127.
- Berreman, Gerald D., 1967a. Stratification, Pluralism and Interaction: A Comparative Analysis of Caste. In *Ciba Foundation Symposium on Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches*. Ed. de Reuck and Knight, London: J. A. Churchill Ltd., 45-73.
- Berreman, Gerald D., 1967b. Caste as Social Process. In *Southwest Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, 351-370.

TRANSACTIONS OF THE NEBRASKA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

- Bohannon, Paul, 1953. *Social Anthropology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Cox, O. C., 1948. *Caste, Class and Race*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co.
- Cox, O. C., 1945. Race and Caste: A Distinction. *In American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. L, No. 5, 360-368.
- De Vos and Wagatsuma, 1967. *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Dollard, John, 1957. *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company.
- Donoghue, J. D., 1957. An Eta Community in Japan: The Social Persistence of Outcaste Groups. *In American Anthropologist*, Vol. LIX, 1000-1017.
- Dumont, Louis, 1967. *Homo hierarchicus: Essai sur le systeme des castes*. Bibliotheque des Sciences Humains. Paris: Gallimard.
- Ghurye, G. S., 1952. *Caste and Class in India*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Hoebel, E. Adamson, 1972. *Anthropology: The Study of Man*, 2nd Ed. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Karve, Irawati, 1961. *Hindu Society: An Interpretation*. Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institution.
- Mandelbaum, David G., 1972. *Society in India: Continuity and Change (Volume one)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Maquet, Jacques, 1961. *The Premise of Inequality in Ruanda*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Maquet, Jacques, 1970. Ruanda Castes. *In Social Stratification in Africa*. Eds. Tuden and Plotnicov. New York: The Free Press, 93-124.
- McCrimdell, John W., 1877. *Ancient India As Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*. London: Trubner.
- Murdock, G. P., 1967. *Ethnographic Atlas*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Nadel, S. F., 1954. Caste and Government in Primitive Society: *In Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, New Series VIII, 9-22.
- Passin, Herbert, 1955. Untouchability in the Far East. *In Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 27-47.
- Price, John, 1966. A History of the Outcaste: Untouchability in Japan. *In Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality*. De Vos and Wagatsuma, eds. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Simpson and Yinger, 1953. *Racial and Cultural Minorities*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Tuden and Plotnicov, Eds., 1970. *Social Stratification in Africa*. New York: Princeton University Press.
- Tumin, M.M., 1952. *Caste in a Peasant Society*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- van de Berghe, Pierre L., 1964. *Caneville: The Social Structure in Africa*. Eds. Tuden and Plotnicov. New York: The Free Press, 345-371.
- Vaughan, Jr., James H., 1970. Caste Systems in the Western Sudan: *In Social Stratification in Africa*, Eds. Tuden and Plotnicov. New York: The Free Press, 59-92.
- Wagatsuma, H., 1967. The Pariah Caste in Japan: History and Present Self-Image. *In Ciba Foundation Symposium on Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches*. Eds. de Reuck and Knight. London: J. A. Churchill Ltd., 118-140.
- Watters, Thomas, trans., 1904-05. *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, 2 vols. London: Royal Asiatic Society.
- Wheeler, Sir Mortimer, 1966. *Civilizations of the Indus Valley and Beyond*. New York: McGraw-Hill.