

## A Revival of *Little Black Sambo* in Japan

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In the late 1980s, a popular children's book "*Little Black Sambo*" (hereafter, *LBS*) disappeared from all bookstores in Japan. The book was alleged to have racist characteristics such as the name of the boy, the way the illustrations caricatured blacks, etc. Mori (1997) revised the original story by changing the protagonist from a black boy to a black Labrador puppy, with eliminating the word "Sambo", which had a historically pejorative connotation in the US. Mori (2005) conducted an experiment to compare the entertainment value of the two versions of *LBS* using four-year-old children and found no difference. Mori (2005) also casted a suspicion that the real reason why the book was withdrawn in Japan was a matter of piracy rather than racism. All Japanese publishers at that time had not properly obtained the copyright. Nowadays there are several versions of *LBS* available in bookstores all over Japan.

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In the late 1980s, a popular children's book "*Little Black Sambo*" (hereafter, *LBS*) disappeared from all bookstores in Japan. The book was originally written by a Scottish woman, Helen Bannerman, who went to India to accompany her husband on a British military expedition. She wrote the story and drew the illustrations herself while she was in India and sent it back to amuse her small daughters, who had been left in London. It was an interesting story about an Indian boy, Sambo, who outwitted ferocious tigers he encountered in the jungle. One of the most famous episodes in the story was that the tigers chased each other in a circles at the base of a tree, eventually melting into clarified butter.

The Japanese translation was extremely popular among Japanese children. It sold more than a million copies from its first appearance in 1953 until its sudden disappearance in 1988. Why did the publisher withdraw it from the market? It was because the book was alleged to have racist characteristics such as the name of the boy, the way the illustrations caricatured blacks, etc. Coincidentally, there were some other unfortunate occurrences at that time, in particular an incident in which a noted Japanese politician naively spoke ill of American Blacks at a press conference and it was widely reported in the US media. The publisher quickly decided to withdraw all copies of *LBS* from bookstores (For further information on this issue, read the article in Wikipedia under the heading "The Story of *Little Black Sambo*," to which I contributed in part).

Children and their mothers, especially those who had loved reading the book during their own childhood, felt sad about the publisher's decision and missed the book greatly. They did not understand why the book was considered racist because they did not find any discriminatory characteristics in the book in and of themselves. They praised the courage and cleverness of

the hero. They simply enjoyed the fantastic and imaginative story and wanted to share it with their own children.

The *LBS* issue evoked a nationwide controversy in Japan. Was it racist? Was the decision of the publisher appropriate? What should we tell children? Would it be really a wise judgment to abolish all classical books that might happen to have certain aspects which have come to be considered discriminatory?

All these were political issues, but they were also closely related to psychology. However, no Japanese psychologist spoke about it to the media, wrote an opinion in the newspapers, nor commented in the extensive TV news coverage (At that time, the Internet was not yet widely used). It was because no Japanese psychologists, whether developmental, social, educational, clinical, had looked into, much less studied, these practical issues.

I was a lover of the *LBS* myself, and as a research psychologist, I felt ashamed about not having done anything to save this book. I had more than 20 papers published in academic journals at the time, but almost all of them were laboratory-based, theoretical ones. I could not comment about the issue with just my basic research background. Nor could I find any practical studies in the literature of Japanese psychological research that were even remotely related to this issue.

Overt racism is frowned upon or even taboo in most places, and in Japan as well. Although we do not have the tragic history of discrimination of blacks as practiced in the US and other parts of the Western world, we cannot deny or forget having had a similar history of discrimination against Chinese and Koreans and even against certain segments of our own native population. Researchers must be cautious when venturing into issues relating to racism; In reporting their research findings,

should they uncover any evidence that seems to support discrimination, they might be accused of being prejudiced themselves. Therefore, it was safer for researchers to avoid topics related to racism altogether, including the *LBS* issue.

In hindsight, this was my turning point, moving me from being simply a basic research psychologist to becoming an applied psychologist. I decided to commit myself to this *LBS* issue using whatever expertise I had acquired as a research psychologist. It would have been very easy to have just speculated or expounded on the issue without being backed up by reliable research data. However, as a research psychologist, as someone who wanted the respect of his peers, not just fleeting media attention, I was aware that I needed experimental evidence to support any comments I might make about the *LBS* controversy.

Therefore, I began work on a racism-free version of the book, which I intended to compare with the original version alleged to be racist. In order to produce racism-free version, I revised the original story by changing the protagonist from a black boy to a black Labrador puppy. I also eliminated the word “Sambo,” which had a historically pejorative connotation in the US. However, the basic story remained the same. Therefore, if readers were to rate both versions as equally interesting, then it would mean that the alleged racist characteristics had no significant effect.

Statistical tests can only show significant differences, but cannot assure their complete absence. However, the statistical power analysis developed by Cohen (1988) provided a solution. If the power of a statistical test is strong enough to reject the null hypothesis of the equality 95% of the time, its failure to reject the null hypothesis can mean the correctness of the null hypothesis with a risk of 5% (Type II error,  $\beta = .05$ ). In other words, if a strong statistical test fails to detect the difference, then we can consider the difference to be negligible, with the absence of difference having been proven.

I conducted an experiment to compare the entertainment value of the two versions of *LBS* using four-year-old children and found no difference (Mori, 2005a). I also developed a new method to assess implicit attitude and proved that those who had read *LBS* in childhood showed no difference in their implicit negative attitude against blacks as compared with those who had had no exposure to the book (Mori, Uchida, & Imada, 2008). Parallel to these experimental investigations, in 1997 under a pseudonym, I published commercially a picture book based on the non-racist version of *LBS* featuring my own computer-generated illustrations (Mori, 1997; See Figure 1).

Disappointingly, my experimental studies contributed little on this issue, probably because they were not promptly accepted to major Japanese journals. The amusement-comparison experiment was done in 1990, but the paper based on it was published fifteen years later in a minor journal (Contact me for further information on this). However, gratifyingly, the revised picture book itself enjoyed enormous success. It sold more than 50,000 copies, and I was invited to appear in on a national TV news program at the time of the book’s publication in 1997. It provoked controversy yet again, and it seemed have encouraged other publishers to put several versions of the original *LBS* back on the market.

In the course of this research, I came to know the secret reason why the publisher had withdrawn the book in 1988. It had little or nothing to do with overt racism. Rather, the real reason the book was withdrawn was a matter of piracy. The publishers



**Figure 1.** *Chibikuro Sambo*: A non-racist version of “*The Story of Little Black Sambo*” (Mori, 1997).

had not properly obtained the copyright. At the time of its first appearance in Japan, in the year 1953, only eight years after World War II, Japan was not yet “mature” enough to properly acknowledge the copyrights of foreign books or other intellectual property. Because the book was so popular in Japan, they continued publishing it even after Japan bounced back to become a leading nation in the world. When it was announced publicly that *LBS* was considered to be racist and therefore an uncomfortable amount of media and academic attention was suddenly focused on it, this provided a convenient excuse for the publisher to stop publishing it in 1988 (Mori, 2005b).

Nowadays there are several versions of *LBS* available in bookstores all over Japan, including a translation of Bannerman’s original little story. Whenever I see one, I feel a sense of pride at being an applied cognitive psychologist who has contributed to this issue.

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K. MORI

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