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# **LASU Journal of Humanities (LASUJOH)**

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# Contents

1	“Heaven Helps Only Those Who Help Themselves”: Ladipo Solanke and the WASU Hostels in London—Ochiai, Takehiko, .....	1
2	Polygamy and the Rights of Women: Reflections on Religious Feminism —Fayemi, Ademola Kazeem .....	18
3	Beyond Racism: Language Use, Raciolinguistics and the Cognition of Africa —Adegbindin, Omotade, PhD. ....	31
4	Referencing and Academic Integrity and Excellence: An Evaluation —Onyemelukwe, Ifeoma Mabel .....	42
5	A Constructivist Critique of Gene Editing—Macaulay-Adeyelure, Olawunmi .....	53
6	Referring Expressions in Nigerian Stand-Up Contexts—Filani, Ibukun & Bambose, Ganiu Abisoye .....	63
7	José Luandino Vieira: Marcas de Africanidade, Inovação E Autenticidade No Texto Literário—Bamisile, Sunday Adetunji, PhD .....	83
8	Analysis of <i>Gangbe</i> Music of Badagry Ogu Community, Lagos, Nigeria —Loko, Olugbenga Olanrewaju, PhD .....	95
9	The Fanti Carnival in Lagos and its Message of Morality—Ônádípè-Shalom, Títílayò....	106
10	The Life and Times of Musa Ajagbemokeferi: 1933-2000—Bello, Mufutau Olusola, PhD & Balogun, Badrudeen Adesina.....	113
11	Ìmọ Ìjnlè Èro Yorùbá Nínú Orin Fuji Saheed Òṣùpá—Taiwo, Adekemi Agnes .....	125
12	A Study of Lexical Priming in Newton Jibunoh's <i>Hunger for Power</i> —Hunjo, Henry J., PhD & Ajakah, John Chukwuma .....	137
13	Fifi àṣà Ìṣelú tipá Tikúùkù yiiri Ìpolongo Ìbo ni Ìpilè Èkó—Olómù, Oyèwolé Olamide .....	156
14	L'Implication de la Theorie du Skopos dans la Traduction des Anthroponymes —Oye, Adetola Olujare, PhD .....	168
15	Traduire le hanló ou la chanson satirique fon en français: Dilemme identitaire, défis et fonctionnalité—Houenon, Casimir & Umah, Paulinus .....	177
16	Conversational implicature and Politics in Achebe's <i>A Man of the People</i> —Ndeche, Chinyere, PhD.....	191
17	Nehemiah's Strategy of Fighting Corruption and Injustice in Neh. 5: 1-19: Implication for Incorruptible and Just Leadership in Nigeria's Democracy—Apuuivom, Daniel B., PhD, Inyaregh, Abel A., PhD & Aande, Simeon I., PhD .....	202
18	Salman, Hakeem, PhD— الموشحات الأندرسية : ثورة فتية اجتماعية على الشعر العربي الكلاسيكي .....	214



# 3

## Beyond Racism: Language Use, Raciolinguistics and the Cognition of Africa

*Adegbindin, Omotade, PhD*

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### Abstract

*This paper interrogates the cognition of Africa from a linguistic perspective by drawing on raciolinguistics, a concept in sociolinguistics and anthropology which analyses the continued re-articulation of colonial distinctions between Europeaness and non-Europeaness and the interplay that exists between language and race. The paper stresses that in perpetuating racism, some radical Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists have formulated certain terms to describe Africans in a derogatory manner; thus, Africans are not only conceived as inferior by mere gene and trait, but also by linguistic description. This paper shows that, although language and race are mutually constituted social realities and social constructions of race are inextricably bound to language, the fact remains that the radical Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists have formulated or reconfigured the etymologies of most racist terms used in describing Africa or the Africans.*

**Keywords:** *raciolinguistics, racism, Africa, language, thought*

### Introduction

**T**RADITIONALLY, LANGUAGE IS UNDERSTOOD TO BE AN INSTRUMENT OF communication. Beyond this popular understanding, most researchers in the fields of philosophy and anthropology have shown that language can be used for asserting one's cultural identity. They also popularize the opinion that language can serve as an instrument of thought. In this regard, it is argued that language can be used, one, for practical need which is to fill a lexical gap and, two, for prestigious reasons. This means that people are likely to use or contextualize a word to express a term that may not be readily available in their conceptual framework or they may decide to use a particular term in order to suit

their description of a certain group of people or an object. The second disjunct is central to this paper. According to Fallou Ngom, “lexical borrowings reflect the social stratification of speech communities, the power and the prestige relations between individuals, social classes, social groups, the cultural and ideological forces that shape human interactions.”<sup>1</sup> This can be further understood if we consider what Frantz Fanon says about language in understanding the social stratification that exists between an American and a Negro. Within the context of racism, Fanon says:

I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. That is why I find it necessary to begin with this subject, which should provide us with one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of *the other*. For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, beyond the racial cognition of Africa in terms of biologically-predetermined traits like skin colour and other bodily traits, some radical Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists have described Africa and Africans using some linguistic terms which suggest that Africa is a dark continent and Africans (who represent the black race) are irrational. For instance, terms like “dark continent,” “fetishism,” “primitive,” “paganism,” and so on, have been used to describe the Africans. In racist teachings, therefore, Africa has been depicted as a continent that is inferior to the West and the terms listed above are a few of the terms used in the description of the continent or its people. The important point to note here is that the etymological meanings of these racist terms do not refer to Africa or Africans; the terms, however, show that there is a linguistic approach to racism. Thus, this paper attempts to explicate these terms as they represent a total deviation from their etymological meanings, partly because the derogatory description of Africa as a backward continent did not end with the obvious intrinsic features that distinguish Europeans from Africans. The paper shows that Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists deliberately embarked on the configuration of these terms with a view to demonstrating a sharp difference between “whites” and “blacks.”

### **On Language as an Instrument of Thought**

Traditionally, language is seen as an instrument of communication. However, raciolinguistics reveals that language serves much more as an instrument of thought. Noam Chomsky corroborates this as he writes that: “people's use of language does not tightly serve utilitarian goals of communication, but is an autonomous competence to express thought.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, language as an instrument of thought simply counters the communicative roles of language. According to Eran Asoulin:

There are two ways to construe the claim that language is an instrument of thought: a weak and a strong claim. The weaker claim is that language is used primarily for the expression of thought, whereas the stronger claim

is that language to some extent *structures* thought (or at least a subset or particular types of thought). The stronger claim is a Whorfian one; thought is certainly independent of language and what can be expressed or thought by a speaker of one language can certainly be expressed or thought by a speaker of a very different language.<sup>4</sup>

The weak claim conveys language as an instrument of thought at the peripheral level, involving mere expression of thought using words or sentences. The strong claim goes beyond mere expression of thought through words or sentences. This implies that the use of a particular language performs an action. This can be understood further if we take into consideration the colonialists' subjugation of Africans and the xenophobic attacks in South Africa. In his attempt to expose the psychology of colonialism, Fanon contends that language is one of the most important instruments which the colonialists used to conquer their colonies. In particular, Fanon says that a black man is mostly subjugated by means of the colonialists' language. This submission by Fanon resonates the argument that the imposition of foreign language on Africans gave rise to a philosophy of double consciousness. On his part, Jean-Paul Sartre, in the "Preface" to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, argues that the Europeans "manufactured" a native elite by imposing their cultural values on the native and this manufacturing was made possible by language. As he puts it:

In the [African] colonies...the European *elite* undertook to manufacture a native *elite*; they picked out promising adolescents... branded them, as with red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture;... stuffed their mouths [and brains] full with high-sounding phrases, grand-glutinous words that stuck to the teeth [and the intellect]. After a short stay in the mother country they [the native *elite*] were sent home, white-washed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers and sisters; they only echoed... from Paris... London... Amsterdam.<sup>5</sup>

Although Sartre did not use the term "language," a discerning reader can decipher from his stress on "principles of Western culture" and "high-sounding phrases" that language was the instrument used by the Europeans to bring about "a native elite." Consequently, it can be argued that most, if not all, of the racial and anthropological descriptions of Africa and Africans can be distilled to a deliberate manipulation of language by the European colonialists. As a carrier of cultural identity, language encompasses a people's being in the world. According to Daniel Bell:

[P]articular languages embody distinctive ways of experiencing the world, of defining what we are. That is, we not only speak in particular language, but more fundamentally become the person we become because of the particular language community in which we grew up... language, above all else, shapes our distinctive ways of being in the world. Language, then, is the carrier of a people's identity, the vehicle of a certain way of seeing

things, experiencing and feeling, determinant of particular outlooks on life.<sup>6</sup>

Language here affirms people's cultural identity and to speak a language is to belong to a particular civilization. This is the reason why Fanon explicates that "to speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."<sup>7</sup> Within the context of power over the *other*, Fanon shows how the black man, for instance, is considered authentic by the virtue of his ability to master the French (colonialists') language. Fanon argues that:

The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter -that is, he will come closer to being a real human being in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. I am not unaware that this is one of man's attitudes face to face with being. A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power.<sup>8</sup>

## On Language and Raciolinguistics

Raciolinguistics is a term commonly used in sociolinguistics and anthropology to show that the use of language is consequential in perpetuating racism. While raciolinguistics seeks to explain the relationship between language and race, it also by implication seeks to show the unhealthy relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans, especially Africans. According to Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores:

Central to our raciolinguistic perspective is an analysis of the continued re-articulation of colonial distinctions between Europeanness and non-Europeanness—and, by extension, whiteness and non-whiteness. These distinctions anchor the joint institutional (re)production of categories of race and language, as well as perceptions and experiences thereof.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, raciolinguistics can be understood within the context of one race dominating the other, especially as it relates to Europeans and Africans. This simply shows that the role language plays in the formation of race and the reconfiguration of colonial distinctions – with reference to post-racial, post-colonial and post-apartheid settings – cannot be overemphasized. As such, in the words of Rosa and Flores "contemporary raciolinguistic ideologies must be understood within this broader history of European colonialism."<sup>10</sup> Raciolinguistics brings to the fore the interplay that exists between language and race, especially how language promotes racial formations.

In view of the foregoing, let us examine some terms that have remained popular in the racial configuration of Africa and the African man, namely, "dark continent," "fetishism," "primitive," "paganism." It is argued that these terms "were ... generated by the anthropological studies and intended to provide the

European administration and missionaries with useful categorical information for the psychological conditioning and repression of the African peoples.”<sup>11</sup>

The linguistic description of Africa as a dark continent, no doubt, presupposes a continent that is backward when compared to Europe. This point is appreciated if we consider Trevor-Roper’s assaulting comments on Africa:

Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness. I do not deny that men existed in dark counties and dark centuries, nor they had political life and culture, interesting to sociologists and anthropologists.<sup>12</sup>

Trevor-Roper’s description of Africa as a dark continent suggests that Africa had no history and is, in fact, a continent that is dark. The term “dark” as used by most European anthropologists and philosophers conveys the idea of something mysterious. Thus, it is easy to see that the idea of a “dark continent” was configured to justify the European exploration of Africa as seen in the events of slave trade and colonialism. Here, the question that readily comes to mind is this: why is Africa called a dark continent? Henry Morton Stanley, a Welsh journalist and explorer, who was famous for his exploration of central Africa, argues that the “Dark Continent” entered European vernacular as a way to paint Africa as wild, savage, untamed land. By the singular act of dehumanizing the continent, colonizers and missionaries alike could justify their sometimes brutal actions. With this in mind, the idea of “darkness” connotes an untamed land for people that were considered wicked and unenlightened.<sup>13</sup> This historical background reveals, among others, why some people would want to object to the use of this term, especially when it is done colloquially. Put differently, the phrase “dark continent” does not refer to continent whose inhabitants have dark skin color, rather, it refers to some racial description of Africa and also has to do with the savagery position that Africans have been granted by the colonialists.

The term “fetishism” is another term that is used to describe Africa and its inhabitants. The etymological meaning of this term has a Portuguese origin *fético* and Latin word *facticius* which means “artificial” and “to make” respectively. However, the contemporary usage has it that it is the worship of some material objects in West Africa; objects that are related to witchcraft, sorcery and or bewitchment. Hegel, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, argues that Africa is a land characterized by fetishism. A fetish object, in this Hegelian sense, is therefore anything that is arbitrarily imbued with imaginary powers.<sup>14</sup> Even as it is obvious from its Portuguese origin that fetishism does not connote the mysterious or the magically artful, the European anthropologists have distorted the etymological meaning of the term in order to suit their description of Africa as a continent of inhabitants who attach their beliefs to supernatural objects. In fact, Edward B. Taylor traces the origin of the term fetishism and explains that “Modern French and English adopted this word from the Portuguese and spelt it

*fetiche, fetish*, although curiously enough, both languages had already possessed the word for ages in a different sense, Old French *fatis*, “well made, beautiful,” which Old English adopted as *fetys*, “well made, neat.”<sup>15</sup> Tylor made reference to August Comte’s use of fetish to mean “a general theory of primitive religion, in which external objects are regarded as animated by a life analogous to man.”<sup>16</sup> By this definition, “fetish” is a term that encompasses “primitive.” According to Bolaji Idowu:

The fashion that perpetuates the incongruous use of the word stems from the notion that anything that does not conform to a certain cultural pattern as the norm by the Western investigator is regarded automatically as primitive; that is, that which belongs to the category of those things which have somehow been left behind in the race of cultural sophistication. “Primitive” in this connection means, categorically, “backward,” “rude,” or “uncouth.”<sup>17</sup>

The import of this is that the African is regarded as “primitive” simply because his cultural pattern does not conform to that of the West. However, the use of the term “primitive” has been defended from anthropological, philosophical and sociological perspectives with a proviso that a cultural pattern that does not conform to the Western scientific paradigm is illegitimate. For instance, Lucien Levy-Bruhl holds the opinion that the African or, to use his racist term, the primitive “moves in a world where innumerable occult powers are everywhere present and always in action or ready to act.”<sup>18</sup> He adds that the primitive possesses a “poverty of vocabulary.” Accordingly, he writes that:

Until quite recently, the word “primitive” evoked the figure and customs of some obscure *pithecanthropus*, more occupied with his food than with “mystical participations.” Only limited means of expression were attributed to this savage, whose language seemed close to the onomatopoeia of the gibbon, and this alleged poverty of his vocabulary was viewed as one of the marks of the “primitive” mind. Nowadays, the languages of the non-civilized are... both rich in words and varieties of forms; and this very abundance, in its turn, has become the sign and shortcoming of the “primitive” state.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, by putting a premium on language as a veritable means of assessing rationality, Levy-Bruhl suggests that the African mind is different from the European mind as the latter’s mind is scientifically oriented while the former’s mind is mystical.

Another term of interest to this paper is “paganism.” The word has a Latin origin, *panagus* which means a village-dweller or country man. According to Idowu:

the word was a sociological term, a mark of distinction between the enlightened, the civilized and the sophisticated, on the one hand and the rustic, the unpolished, and the unsophisticated on the other. The word must have travelled some curious distance in order to become a term with

an exclusively religious connotation. In the world to which it originally belonged, what came under the term now was all the religion that there was. And yet, the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* appears to be unaware of this when it defines “pagan” as “acknowledging neither Jehovah, Christ nor Allah; non-Christian.” The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* in a passing reference links the term with “primitive peoples.”<sup>20</sup>

The use of the term paganism thus goes beyond a “village dweller” as it can further be understood within the context of African traditional religion. As argued by Idowu, it does not have a religious connotation, but European anthropologists often argue that any religion that does fall within the matrix of the Abrahamic religions is paganistic. By this understanding, the worshippers of African traditional religion are regarded as pagans, an idea which presupposes a sharp deviation from its original meaning. Considered from another perspective, the word “paganism” is said to emerge as a derogatory term due to the usual claim among religious adherents that one religion is superior to the other. In this sense, an “inferior” religion is said to be characterized by paganism. Idowu succinctly puts this:

With particular reference to African traditional religion, there is no doubt that the word “paganism,” whenever or wherever it is used, carries primarily a mark of racial and social discrimination. Even though the discrimination is now tinged with a religious overtone, the basic assumption is sociological. There are varieties of cults in Africa, but one could not speak here of the kind of chaos imagined by Cumont. If we accept his final definition of paganism as it arrives at a theological and philosophical stage, one might say that there is a sense in which the word would apply in Africa. That would be true also if we accept Boas’ definition. But while there is something of these elements of variety and magic in African traditional religion, there is no honest way of using “paganism” as the name for the religion.<sup>21</sup>

From the point raised by Idowu above, it is clear that the claim that “paganism” has a religious connotation which suggests that religion, especially African traditional religion, is pagan religion is baseless. In the words of Idowu, “Whatever may have been the original meaning or connotation of this word, there is no doubt that it has departed from anything decent and honourable and has come to bear exclusively the connotation of a dirty, ragged, disreputable fragment of humanity.”<sup>22</sup> It is therefore worthy of note that the aforementioned terms have fuelled racism, colonialism and other events that the Europeans use to justify their degradation of Africa. This is more evident in Paget Henry’s articulation of racialization. According to him:

The process of racialization turned Africans into blacks, Indians into browns, and Europeans into whites. The process was most extreme between blacks and whites. In the origin narratives, stories of conquest, civilizing missions, and other legitimizing discourses of European

imperialism, the blackness of the Africans became their primary defining feature. In these narratives, color eclipsed culture. The latter became more visible as Africans were transformed into Negroes and niggers in the minds of Europeans. This racial violence shattered the cultural foundations of the African self, causing the latter to implode. Race became the primary signifier of Europeans and Africans and of the differences between them.<sup>23</sup>

As these terms are used, the intention surrounding their use—especially, by Eurocentric philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists—is only meant to describe Africa and Africans in a derogatory sense. These racist scholars achieve their goal by generating new meanings for terms that are already in existence to stigmatize Africa and its inhabitants.

### **Transcending Raciolinguistics and the Cognition of Africa**

We have shown that the terms generated by the Eurocentric philosophers to describe Africa and its people have to a considerable extent succeeded in imaging the African as inferior to his Western counterpart. We have also shown however the erroneous analysis of African conceptual scheme using Western paradigm. According to L. Brown:

Most of what has been made known through literature about traditional African philosophical thought emerged through Eurocentric characterizations of African cultures. Those characterizations emerged primarily from the perspectives of Western anthropologists and Christian-trained African theologians and clerics, who interpreted and translated traditional African conceptual idioms into Western conceptual idioms. The process was either poorly informed or self-serving.<sup>24</sup>

In response to the crude descriptions of Africa by radical Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists, it is important that there should be growing voices which call for a positive reportage of Africa. It is certain that this positive reportage may take time to get to a larger audience, but the point is that it should go beyond the negative stories about Africa. It is important to reject what Chimamanda Adichie calls “single story,” a kind of story which portrays a group of people in a manner that is unpleasant to the extent that it is believed that nothing good can come from this group. The consequence of this, if applied within the African context, is to transcend race. Transcending race is simply “not an invitation to the oppressed to abandon resistance to racism, but rather a suggestion that this resistance must also be seen to include efforts to overcome the master narrative of race itself. It is to imagine a future when no one is forced into a position in which one must automatically bear the privileges or the costs of racialized tags.”<sup>25</sup>

The racial subjugation and cognition of Africa became most prominent during the Enlightenment period as some philosophers argued that the European race was superior to other races, especially the African race. This, in turn, gave rise to slave trade and colonialism. While, today, we air the facile assumption that the era of slave trade is over and we are in a postcolonial state, the fact

remains that Africans are still held by their European counterparts as inferior in racial classifications. Of course, today's radical Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists have embarked on what is referred to as linguicism, a subjugation of a group of individuals on the basis of language. For instance, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze recounts his early days in graduate school in New York, where he was given a social security number and he had to indicate the race which he belonged to. He writes: "Thus, despite travels in West and Central Africa where my status as "foreign" was always on display either through my physical features or inability to speak the local languages, it is outside of Africa that I learned the modern meaning of "blackness" as a racial identity."<sup>26</sup> The question here, therefore, is: what does the future hold for Africa and Africans in the writings of Eurocentric philosophers? Put differently, how will Africa and Africans be portrayed in the writings of these philosophers? We can say boldly that the racial cognition of Africa from a linguistic perspective does not appear like an issue that will soon be confined to the dustbin of history. This is because the description of humanity these days, for instance, suggests that humanity is divided into two colours: white and black. The white color represents a superior race, while the black represents an inferior race. It is important to state here that this distinction, although an erroneous, is still being used to propagate racism till date. This position is succinctly captured by Kwesi Tsir as he writes:

The use of the terms "black" and "white" as human categories, together with the symbolic use of these terms, help to sustain the perception of Africans as inferior, because their categorical use was accompanied by a long-standing set of conceptual relationships that used the terms symbolically to connote a range of bad and good traits, respectively. This set of associations creates an underlying semantic system that normalized the assumed superiority of those labelled white and the assumed inferiority of those labelled black. The use of this dichotomy as a human categorizing device cannot be separated from its symbolic use.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Obviously, discourses on racism might take unprecedented dimensions in years to come, but what is clear is that Africans are going to be at the receiving end. The question that looms large here is: how are Africans supposed to conduct their lives in a world that is evidently hostile towards black history? The answer to this question can be sieved from "the idea that in every human subject, there is something indomitable and fundamentally intangible that no domination—no matter what form it takes—can eliminate, contain, or suppress, at least not completely."<sup>28</sup> Thus, a different Africa, no matter how the radical Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists try to paint, is possible. But we are warned that this different Africa will continue to elude Africans "until we have eliminated racism from our current lives and imagination, we will have to continue to struggle for the creation of a world beyond race. But to achieve it, to sit down at a table to

which everyone has been invited, we must undertake an exacting political and ethical critique of racism and of the ideologies of difference.”<sup>29</sup>

From all that we have discovered so far, it is evident that the conundrum of racism goes beyond biologically-predetermined traits like skin colour. Beyond the argument that racism can only be understood by virtue of being black, there exist an interface between racism and how language is used in the description of the *other*. This shows that, although language and race are mutually constituted social realities and social constructions of race are inextricably bound to language, the fact remains that the radical Eurocentric philosophers and anthropologists have formulated or reconfigured the etymologies of most racist terms used in describing Africa or Africans.

## ENDNOTES

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