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On the Socially Constructed Racial Categories of "White" and "Black": An Abolitionist's Case

Afisi, Oseni Taiwo & Macaulay-Adeyelure, Olawunmi

Abstract

The racial categorization of peoples using the symbolism of skin pigmentations dates back as far as ancient Greco-Roman times. Among these traditions the colors: black and white have not only been used to symbolize evil and good respectively but the ascription of each of these symbolisms (or qualities) over the peoples so denoted. Hence, to have a 'white' skin is to be good as opposed to the binary of 'black' skin, which reflects evil. Granted, the persons referred to by these colours are neither 'black' nor 'white' in the real sense of the terms. This color categorisation however, informs the class of the disadvantaged and privileged respectively. As a result, there have been those who call for the abolition of the use of color 'white' to refer to a group of people (abolitionists) whereas some others move that the concept be retained but reconstructed then redirected (reconstructionists). This study argues that both orientations do not address the real source of the problem. On the other hand, there is the valorization of 'black' as a term for political resistance against the 'white' opposition. This is the reconstructionist arm of the discourse on blackness. Similarly, there is also the abolitionist orientation which resists that 'black' as a referential frame for native Africans ought to be expelled. Of the four alternatives, this research proposes that the abolition of the term 'black' for native Africans is the most plausible way of expunging the imperialist and racist ideologies encapsulated by the blackness and whiteness. This is justifiable as blackness especially is an imposition on native Africans but not a self-affirmation.

Keywords: blackness, whiteness, race, Africa[ns], abolitionist, reconstructionist

Introduction

The categorisation of the human species into groups depending on the colour pigmentation of their skin has continued to generate a lot of problems in the world as we know it today, this is majorly dependent of the fact that these classification as allowed for some people in some quarters to ascribe qualities or the lack of some qualities to such skin pigmentation. In this study, we argue that the terms 'black' and 'white,' when employed to refer to a group of peoples are not only racially loaded but suggestive of imperialist and racist agendas that. In the section that follows, we shall provide an exploration of the origin of the use of 'black' and 'white' symbolically and categorically. We shall deduce in this section that this symbolical use of the terms fuels their categorical uses. The consequent is the binary opposition between the class of the disadvantaged and the privileged as replete in apartheid South Africa, Zimbabwe on other identified places on the planet. Owing to the disturbing nature of the benefits and advantages deriving from racial categorisation, based on qualities of these colours. There has been the abolitionist and reconstructionist traditions on the racial use of each of 'white' and 'black' for a people. The main arguments of each of the four orientations will be explored only to settle for one. This is the core of the third part of this research. The last section concludes the inquiry.

The Origins of the Racial and Symbolic uses of 'Black' and 'White'

Among the ancient Greeks, the terms 'black' and 'white' received both the symbolic and categorical connotations. We commence with the symbolic ascriptions of each of the terms before delving into their categorical uses.

The colour 'black' has been in use since classical times as a connotation for dark deeds, evil, sorrow, death, the underworld, deities with bad characters and it was used to personify "Kip" the goddess of death (Price 1883: 1). This is a fact that has also been affirmed by historian Frank Snowden (1983). The Greek word for 'black' which is "melas" is definitely used for things negative and derogatory (Chimakonam, 2018); (Tsri, 2016). On the other hand, the concept, 'white' which is "leukos" expresses or symbolizes the expression of light and life (Price, 1883: 1). White discerns all things positive, cheerful and superior. Tsri (2016b) makes a historical examination of the symbolic notions of each of 'white' and 'black' only to arrive at the conclusion that the colour 'white' signifies superiority, moral excellence, etc., and the colour 'black' used in categorizing the African stock signifies that which is demonic, evil, savage, barbaric and morally inferior. It is from this symbolic use of the terms that the one was ascribed on black Africans when the other was reserved for the European stock. According to Tsri (2016: 148) "available historical evidence shows that the ancient Greeks used both the terms Ethiopians and black interchangeably for Africans." It is also instructive to state that the term 'Ethiopian' which translates literally as "burnt face" or "sun-burnt-face" to categorise black Africans may be traced to the Greek poet Homer (Snowden, 1971); (Hannaford, 1996); (Thompson, 1989). It is also true that "by

the time of Xenophanes (570-480 B.C.E), Ethiopians were identified a bit more precisely as black with Negroid flat noses and woolly hair" just as "fifth century B.C.E literature located Ethiopians in the vague hinterland called Africa" (Hood, 1994: 36). When and how then did it become dominant, the use of the concept 'black' for Africans? This is one of the core contentions of Kwesi Tsri (2016a: 148) who informs that:

> As early as their initial encounter with Africans, the ancient Greeks, followed by the Romans, conceived of and differentiated Africans, not on the basis of culture, language or self-ascribed identities, but instead on the basis of the perceived colour of their skin and other physical features. The Greco-Roman knowledge of Africans was considerably enlarged through detailed descriptions of their skin colour and other physical characteristics and this resulted in the creation of particular images of Africans which in turn differentiated them from other non-Greeks and non-Romans. Henceforth, the terms 'Ethiopians', 'black' and their related created concepts became the framework through which Africans were conceived of and depicted.

What we have been able to do thus far is to show that there is a connection between the symbolic and categorical understandings of these concepts. It is also clear that the former fuels the latter. Consequent of the interchangeable use of 'black' for native Africans, "a link was established between the humanity and cultures of Africans and the negative symbolisms that the term 'black' evoked" (Tsri, 2016a: 148). The consequences of this linkage are grave since all the negative symbolisms of the term 'black' was exported to the native African. The symbolic connotation of black to categorise Africans found Africans being described as savages with natural tendency to evil, harbingers of bad luck and disaster (Bernal, 1987); (Snowden, 1971); Tsri (2016a/b); Chimakonam (2018a). Similarly, Benjamin Isaac (2004) refers to Aristotle who makes the analogy that in the same way that the heat of the sun shrinks a piece of wood, the body and nature of Africans are affected by the heat of the sun. The end result of the symbolic and categorical use of 'black' for Africans is their depiction as inferior to those passed as 'white.' This contention was fully blown in the early Christian literatures which also renders the native African as necessarily sinful by nature. There is a tradition traced to Origen wherein he states: "At one time, we were *Ethiopians* (*Aethiopes*) in our vices and sins. How so? Because our sins had *blackened* us' (Byron, 2002: 43 emphasis in original). Jerome, another prominent early Christian exegete, refers to the people of Ethiopia as 'black and cloaked in the filth of sin" (Byron, 2002: 55).

Christian church fathers and literatures use the term 'black' to refer to Satan and 'white' for God. In the *Epistle of Barnabas,* an early Christian literature, Satan is referred to as the Black One (Byron, 2002). In the *Life of Melania the Young,* it was recorded that the devil metamorphosed into a young black man and was misleading Christian women (Byron, 2002). In the Bible itself, a reference is

made to the skin of Ethiopians and evil in the same context. For example, "can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer 13: 23). The leopard is used in this context as a symbol of unchangeableness, which figuratively expresses the indelibility of the sin of Ethiopians (Ferber, 1999). In the end, it is clear that "the early Christian exegetes did not only describe and categorize Africans as black, but they also found it appropriate to present them as black in a symbolic sense. They considered the colour black and the term 'Ethiopian' as synonyms, and used both as religious terms for demons, evil, sin and carnal lust" (Tsri, 2016a: 149).

The symbolic use of these colours has also come down to the present times where people are categorized and rendered as either disadvantaged or privileged. The stories of apartheid in some parts of the world attest to this fact. The colour categorization 'black' and 'white' also justifies colonialism and imperialism. This is aptly captured in the words of Claude Ake thus:

> ... more emphasis was placed on the justification of colonialism as a service to the colonized people. What service? Essentially the service of civilizing them. That is why colonialism was 'popularly' referred to by colonizers as a civilizing mission. According to the theory, the civilization of the native, includes among other things, bringing them Western Education, the benefits of Western technology, bringing them into the stream of human history, getting them to discard their 'barbaric culture' and generally redeeming a way of life captive to ignorance, poverty and disease. (Ake, 1981: 83)

The foregoing has perhaps evolved into the urgency of examining each of the colour-concepts 'black' and 'white' anew with the aim of correcting the misleading and derogatory symbolisms that influence the categorisation of peoples. The parties to the discourse, and the thrust of their investigations will be the crux of the section that follows.

The Abolitionist and Reconstructionist Debate on 'Blackness' and 'Whiteness

We have already established that the use of the term 'black' and 'white' are never in isolation but as a binary where there is a necessary opposition between the one that is disadvantaged and the one that is privileged. Perhaps as a result of the recent findings in genetics that all humans are identical irrespective of skin colour, the anti-racists theorists seem to have been empowered or motivated to debate on the existing and binary of 'blackness' and 'whiteness.' It is important to discourse very briefly the results of genetics on race before the debate.

Within the last century, Richard Lewontin found that human populations were even more diverse than initially thought. Through molecular genetic techniques in gel electrophoresis, Lewontin (1972: 381) discovers that race had "virtually no genetic...significance." His finding shows that since genetic diversity

persists even more, within a racial group than between or among them, then racial categorisation on genetic differences will be defective. As a result he concludes that "The use of racial categories must take its justifications from some other source than biology. The remarkable feature of human evolution and history has been the very small degree of divergence between geographical populations as compared with the genetic variations among individuals" (Lewontin, 1972: 383). By the end of the 20th century, geneticist Luca Cavalli-Sforza affirmed Lewontin's findings via contemporary DNA techniques. For Cavali-Sforza et al (1997, 5419): "the subdivision of the human population into smaller number of clearly distinct, racial or continental groups…is not supported by the present analysis of DNA." In the 21st century, Francis Collins and Craig Venter, after extensive and rigorous laboratory efforts, conclude that human genetic diversity cannot be captured by the concept of race. They revealed as well that all humans have genome sequence that are 99.9% identical (Yudell 2011, 22). For Venter, the concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis (Wiess & Gillis 2001, A1). In the same vein, Collins and Mansoura (2001, S224) chronicle: "those who wish to draw precise racial boundaries around certain groups will not be able to use science as a legitimate justification."

Since it is established that genetics, which many had thought is responsible for the racial categorisation of peoples has affirmed its incompetence, it is therefore important to break the barricade of 'blackness' and 'whiteness.' As a consequence there has been a deluge on the ontological significance of 'white' especially. Allen (1994); (1997), Brodkin (1999), Frankenberg (1993); (1997), Warren (2000), Dyer (2002), Wise (2002) are some of the prominent minds that have questioned the idea of whiteness for reflecting a people. One of the key contentions raised by these minds is the "critical question about the history, meaning and ontological status of whiteness" (Leonardo, 2009: 91). It was even made more manifest that white people are not literally or symbolically white, yet they are called white (Dyer, 2002). They have long recognized that white is a socially constructed category, that no one is literally white, and that the social question of who is construed as white is a matter of social convention and social power (Tsri, 2016a: 150). This finding resulted into the binary perspective of abolitionism and reconstructionism of the colour white as it refers to a people.

The abolitionists request for the outright eradication of whiteness (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996), Roediger (1994). The main contention for the abolitionist is that being conceived as black or white derives from power and politics but not naturally. In addition, it is the thrust that people are categorized into any of these colours have been assigned thereto. Roediger (1994: 13) is clear when he insists that "whiteness is not only false and oppressive, it's nothing but false and oppressive." The abolitionists therefore finds it unjust and derogatory' thereby calling for the disuse of 'whiteness' in referring to people and the privilege enjoyed by these people so classed.

On the other hand however, there is the call that 'whiteness' should not

be abolished. Apple (1998), Giroux (1997) Winant (1997) have argued that the term should be retained but reconstructed. The reconstructionist arm of the discourse respond that if the recommendation of the abolitionist on 'whiteness' is followed, it will make those who fall within the category of whiteness perceive themselves as a people to be exterminated. The reconstructionists therefore maintain that outright abolition of these terms is not the solution to the problem. The abolitionist approach they observe, will make whites become even more defensive and protective of their stock and the privileges attached to the colour. Owing to this, the reconstructionists offer that the panacea to the white problem should instead be (1) the alteration of "whiteness, and therefore white people, into something other than an oppressive identity and ideology" and (2) the rehabilitation of "whiteness by resignifying it through the creation of alternative discourses" (Leonardo, 2009: 92). These reconstructionists' approaches are intended to project "hope onto whiteness by creating new racial subjects out of white people, which are not ensnared by a racist logic" (Leonardo, 2009: 92).

It is clear that the discourse on 'whiteness' among these scholars admits that whiteness is the main contention of the race problem (Leonardo, 2009: 92). Their reflections have the misleading outlook that whiteness is problematic whereas blackness is not. This is why this study implores that the blackness discourse may also be perceived from the abolitionists and the reconstructionists even when there is no literature that is explicit of this. It is however the case that publications and discourses, which we concern with shortly, on the notion of blackness are suggestive of the presence of this divergence on blackness too.

The valorization agenda by minds such as Steve Biko (1978) as well as attempts to decolonize blackness, are clear instances of the retention and reconstruction of the notion for native Africans. On the other hand, there is the call by Chimakonam (2018b) and Tsri (2016a/b). We consider the case of the reconstructionist-valorization perspective before exploring the abolitionist contention, which this research endorses.

The Black Consciousness Movement is one of the liberation movements that emerged in apartheid South Africa. The movement did not find anything wrong symbolically with the use of black. The aim however is to use the concept for the restoration of the dignity of the native African "whose pride, life and humanity had been taken from them by apartheid in South Africa and more generally by colonization of the African continent" (Tsri, 2016a: 153). In the words of Steve Biko (1978: 48) blackness in Black Consciousness "is not a matter of pigmentation—being black is a reflection of a mental attitude." In this regard, the essence of being black is not located in the experience of racial oppression and relation to skin pigmentation (Tsri, 2016a: 153). The Movement has three cardinal ideas. Firstly, it maintains that "blacks were made to fit into patterns determined by whites" (Biko, 1978: 18). Secondly, it contends that "most of the so-called African intellectuals lacked a depth of insight into what can be done to radically transform the unenviable state of existence of the majority of Africans" (Biko, 1978: 18).

Thirdly, it is of the admission that "the same questions are asked and the same naiveté exhibited in answering them" (Biko, 1978: 23). The Movement therefore seeks to put blacks in their rightful place. The Movement does not find anything wrong especially with the symbolic use of the colour to characterize the African nature and personality.

The Negritude movement is also a form of reconstructionist-valorization perspective. Prominently represented by Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, whose underlying idea of negritude informs the "definition of 'African personality' and a 'Negro essence'" (Adi & Sherwood, 2003: 22). The central theme of negritude is "the acceptance, affirmation and pride in "Blackness"; it also denounces colonialism" (Adi & Sherwood, 2003: 23). It is clear again that the negritude do no perceive the symbolic undertone of 'blackness' from classical antiquity. Perhaps they understand they do not have a very deep comprehension of the consequences. A similar attempt is present among scholars who attempt a decolonization of blackness.

Bell Hooks (1992) is popular for her attempt at transforming 'black' into a positive idea via decolonization. To decolonize the term 'black' for Hooks means that one must appreciate the inherent value in the term as used to refer to native Africans. For her, to decolonize does not mean to "negate the value of blackness" (Hooks, 1992: 17) or "to have contempt for blackness." Similarly, to decolonize is "to define black positively, to reclaim black identity that has previously been denied and to hold the conviction that black is beautiful" (Hooks, 1992: 18).

The reconstructionist-valorization project, as briefly articulated does not take into consideration, the symbolic usage of 'black' and 'white' from classical antiquities. This form of valorization therefore, fails to discern that the symbolic meaning of black which initiated the use for Africans in the first place cannot be erased through the mere decolonization and re-orientation of the colour for positive qualities. The reconstructionist-valorization project fails to discern that their liberation cause makes Africans to remain "imprisoned in the idea of blackness which denigrates (blacken) and dehumanizes them" (Tsri, 2016a: 156). It is therefore the position of the abolitionist that black stop being used to refer to Africans.

The abolitionist perspective to blackness informs that the symbolic uses of these terms have not been tackled by the reconstructionist-valorization groups and scholars. This makes their assessment void of historical consideration of how blackness has rendered Africans inferior from classical times. Most of the analysis of the reconstructionists on blackness take cue from the era of colonization. Hence, it is the position of the abolitionist "that so long as the symbolic use remains, the categorical use of black will be derogatory that the categorical use of black is an imposition of a definition of a subordinate group by another dominant group and that the categorical use of 'black' and the associated black/white dichotomy supports a privileged self-understanding of the people who label themselves as

white and in turn sustains privilege and oppression" (Tsri, 2016a: 158). As a result of these, some maintain the thesis that Africans are not blacks.

Since it has been sustained way before now, how the symbolic notions of blackness and whiteness inform the categorical use, it is therefore pertinent to offer an alternative. This study promotes the abolitionist agenda but proceeds to inquire how Africans perceived themselves prior to the symbolic and consequent categorical ascription of 'black' for them by Europeans. According to Lake (2003: 1), "before the arrival of Europeans in Africa, Africans referred to themselves by many different terms that represented their cultural and geopolitical statuses." Similarly, Diop (1987: 215) points out that the names of different groups of Africans were derived from geographical locations including Gao—inhabitants of high places or high plateaus, *Kaukau*—inhabitants of the interior and *Lebou* – inhabitants of the coast. Regarding so-called Ethiopians, Diop (1987: 13) states that "in antiquity, the Ethiopians called themselves *autochthon*, those who had sprung from the ground." In Africa today, many groups are identified by the names of the languages they speak, such as Ewe, Ga, Fante, Krobo, Wolof, Ibo, Yoruba and many others. Thus, in general, geographical location and language continue to be available as the core elements around which group identities can be constructed. The renaming and homogenization of peoples of Africa and their cultures by reducing them to the term 'black' and its objectionable symbolisms were not of their own making, but were imposed on them by others (Tsri, 2016a: 152). Hence, it is the abolitionist position of this study that the interchangeable use of black for Africans should be out rightly denounced. The reconstructionist-valorization agenda admits the uncritical imposition of black and its derogatory and dehumanizing consequences for the purpose of liberation. This however, does not absolve or change the long held and accentuated view that to be black is to be evil and inferior to the people passed as white.

Conclusion

In this research, we have been able to sustain that the use of 'black' and 'white' to refer to a group of people is not a recent idea but goes as far back as classical Greece and Rome. The ideas appear to also have been instilled in Christian literatures and passed back to Africans to justify not only their inferior nature but their need of salvation, civilization and colonization. The discourse on whiteness does not solve the quandary and does not put Africans in the proper place for not addressing the classical origin of the negative symbolism of blackness for Africa. It also fails to take cognisance of the established fact that each of the peoples in the various parts of Africa has its indigenous tag or nomenclature before contact with foreigners. It is therefore not justifiable, the use of a tag imposed by non-Africans upon them. This shortcoming is also played out in the reconstructionist-valorization attempt on discourse on blackness. Most of the scholars who perceive something positive in black have already accepted the imposition of blackness. It is therefore the onus of this study that the concept 'black' as a term for referring to

Africans must be abolished. Either the African peoples return to their indigenous nomenclature or call for a 'polygogue' to expel blackness as a referential frame for them and also initiate a worthy and dignifying nomenclature for themselves.

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