

RACIALIZING AFRICANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Racial categorization is a social phenomenon that impacts the way modern individuals and their societies understand their identity and location on personal, local and global levels. People of African descent have been and continue to be central in racializing processes on the global scale. This paper discusses the ways in which Africans have been racialized historically, in the 18th and 19th century as well as currently in the 21st century. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the ways in which racism is refracted as negative ethnicity among people of African descent. Unlike racism that depends on the black-white skin color binary, negative ethnicity employs a disparate combination of physical markers to distinguish ethnic groups. Finally, the paper suggests potential solutions to correct racist discourse and knowledge production that fuels the unnecessary human suffering of peoples of African descent in our modern world.

Key Words: Africans; Racial identity; Ethnicity

Introduction

Race and ethnicity are socio-cultural constructs of identity that have politico-economic underpinnings and implications. Although both categorizations depend on the characteristics of the physical body for identification and perpetuation, the categories in and of themselves do not have a scientific biological basis (Du Bois 1920, Pierpont, 2004). As such, race and ethnicity interpret the physicality of the human body through particular processes that are time and space dependent. According to Fenton (2003) race is a universal classificatory system of humankind that depends on explicit reference to physical or visible differences as primary markers of difference and inequality while ethnic groups typically depend on cultural rather than physical appearances in relation to an unmarked majority. Hence, in twentieth century America, race was used to emphasize the distinction between white Euro-Americans and African-Americans, whereas ethnicity emphasized the heterogeneity of white immigrants from diverse European nations.

Race and ethnicity not only create affinity within the defined groups, the insiders, but also antipathy, manifested as racism and negative ethnicity (Wamwere, 2003) respectively, towards outsiders. Negative ethnicity, as elaborated by Koigi wa Wamwere, is ethnic hatred and bias, and its attendant violence, between different ethnic groups that are subsumed under the same racial category, for example, anti-Semitism that was propagated by Nazi Germany against Jews during Second World War. In this paper, I argue that racism and negative ethnicity are not different but rather racism is refracted as negative ethnicity in different communities. The socio-political dynamics, dependence on bodily features and tendency towards genocidal violence render racism and negative ethnicity virtually identical. The aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which people of African descent have been and continue to be racialized on a global level as well as locally by means of negative ethnicity.

Contextual Background

“Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying that I am Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America does not care.” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, (*Americanah*, 2013, p. 222).

The aforementioned quote by Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian author living in the United States, rings true for virtually all newly arrived African immigrants to the United States. It testifies to the fact that: living in the United States is to live in a thoroughly racialized world. A new African immigrant, sooner rather than later, realizes that their ethnic or national affiliation does not matter as much as the fact that their skin happens to be dark. This issue is well articulated by Olufemi Taiwo, in his book chapter entitled, *“This prison called my skin”* (Hitzen and Rahier, Eds. 2003). In the chapter, Taiwo states,

“All my life in Nigeria, I lived as a Yoruba, a Nigerian, an African, and a human being. I occupied, by turns, several different roles (p. 41). As soon as I arrived in the United States of America, I underwent a singular transformation, the consequences of which have circumscribed my life ever since: I BECAME BLACK! As soon as I entered the United States, my otherwise complex, multidimensional and rich human identity became completely reduced to a simple, one-dimensional and impoverished nonhuman identity. In other words to become “black” in the United States is to enter a sphere where there is no differentiation, no distinction and no variation”. (p. 42)

However, one does not have to live in U.S. or the West in general to experience such racializing processes. Racism is a global phenomenon that has diverse manifestations and effects depending on one’s geographical and social location. This paper discusses

three main issues: (i) A couple of historical instances that illuminate the racialization of Africans in the West in the 19th and 20th centuries (ii) The racialization of Africans in Africa in the 21st century (iii) Disrupting racism and negative ethnicity.

Historical Racialization of Africans in the West 19th and 20th Century

In the early 1800s and forward “exotic” peoples from all over the world were displayed as public spectacle in various theaters, amusement parks, fairs and zoos throughout the America and Europe (Lindfors, 1999). One such human spectacle was Saartjie Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa who was exhibited in European metropolitan centers such as London and Paris from 1810 to 1815 (Holmes, 2007). Saartjie Baartman whose stage name was *“the Hottentot Venus”* was considered a freak of nature because of her steatopygia (an accumulation of fat on the hips and buttocks) and elongated labia. To the inferiorizing, racializing and sexualized gaze of both high and low societies in London and Paris, Saartjie represented the most primitive, hypersexualized wild peoples on earth, the Khoikhoi and by extension, all Africans. As such, the Khoikhoi were assumed to be the missing link between humanity and the simian world. Her physical presence validated, in the eyes of her audience’s, their own racial superiority. Upon her death, her brain and genitalia were preserved in formaldehyde and her skeleton and full body cast were put on display in France in the National Museum of Natural History. These body parts were continually used to discursively invent the racialized inferiority of African bodies, sexuality and intelligence. In 1994, President Nelson Mandela requested the return of Saartjie Baartman’s remains from France and she was finally put to rest in 2002 in her native homeland, in the Gamtoos valley in South Africa.

Another famous exhibition of an African in the West, specifically in the United States, was that of Ota Benga, a Congolese pygmy man of the Mbuti people. Benga was put on display in the monkey house at the Bronx Zoo in 1906 in New York. Benga's companion by day was an orangutan to emphasize to the onlookers the similarity between the two. Because of his diminutive stature and meticulously filed pointed teeth, Benga just like Saartjie, was understood to be less than human and to be the missing link between humans and apes (Newkirk, 2015).

Racialization of Africans in Africa 21st Century

Africans living in Africa are not shielded from global racializing processes. A case in point is Mayers ranch in Kenya (Bruner and Kirsheblatt-Gimblett, 1994). Kenya is a popular international tourist destination and the need to generate foreign exchange may obfuscate racial processes necessary for the maintenance of the industry. Mayers ranch is a tourist attraction located just outside Nairobi where supposedly primitive pastoral Maasai are exhibited as public spectacle before supposedly modern civilized tourists from Europe and North America. What do the tourists come to see at Mayers ranch? Maasai morans living in a manyatta, performing tribal dances, eating raw foods (blood and milk) and enacting the bravery of Maasai warriors. After the show, the tourists are treated to tea and scones on the lawn by the owners, the Mayers, a British ex-colonial family now Kenyan citizens. Mayers Ranch conjures up imaginations about "colonial tribal/primitive Maasai" and "colonial civilized Brits" who are fixated and unchanged by time. It's a re-play of colonial nostalgia that continues to rationalize the "necessity" of the civilizing mission of colonialism *vis a vis* neocolonialism. Furthermore, the performance that is Mayers ranch reifies the

racial dichotomy of modern, civilized white Europeans versus pre-modern, tribal, primitive black Africans.

These racialized dichotomies are recapitulated in the dynamics of negative ethnicity among Africans. In my research with Burundian refugees in the U.S., I have been intrigued by the negative tension that partly defines the social categories of Hutu and Tutsi. Unlike a majority of ethnic communities in Africa, the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa of Burundi and Rwanda share the same native language and culture yet the Hutu and Tutsi perceive enough distinctions between themselves to rationalize discrimination and even genocidal violence. Both countries have suffered genocides: 1972 in Burundi wherein the Hutu majority were massacred under the leadership of a Tutsi-led government and 1994 in Rwanda wherein the Tutsi minority were massacred under the leadership of a Hutu-led government (Lemarchand, 1996; Mamdani, 2001).

Unlike racism that depends on the singular distinction of skin color, negative ethnicity between Hutu and Tutsi depends on a combination of physical attributes. Stereotypically, Tutsi are presumed to be of Nilotic descent and to be physically tall, lean with narrow noses. On the other hand, Hutu are presumed to be of Bantu descent and to be physically short, stocky with broad noses. From my research, additional physical markers for Tutsi include but not limited to: soft hair, soft muscle tone, black gums and non-protrudent calves and anklebones. Conversely, additional physical Hutu markers include but not limited to kinky hair, hard muscle tone, pink gums and protrudent calves and anklebones. According to my research informants, if these physical attributes do not provide a definitive categorization of a particular individual, the physical attributes of the individual's parents are examined. On their own, such physical characteristics are

neutral. However, in the Tutsi/Hutu dichotomy they are presumed to index a myriad of oppositional characteristics between people identified as Tutsi versus Hutu such as: superior/inferior; lazy/hardworking; civilized/primitive and rulers/subjects respectively. Subsequently, the discrimination and denial of access to political-economic as well as socio-cultural resources based on the Tutsi/Hutu social identities leads to tension that sometimes erupts into genocidal violence.

Disrupting racism and negative ethnicity

Although human physical variations are inevitable, their signification is not. Different cultures determine their own unique meaning-making systems that are upheld by particular discourses, knowledge production and political-economic power. Subsequently, in order to disrupt racism and negative ethnicity, pertinent discourses and knowledge production processes have to be interrogated and altered accordingly. On this note, Kenyan author, Binyavanga Wainaina's (2006) satirical article entitled "*How to Write About Africa*" is instructive. In his article, Wainaina states,

"Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress". (2006)

Wainaina offers a searing critique on the knowledge production about Africa and its people by and for the West. Such knowledge is intentionally skewed or incomplete and perpetuates misinformation, ignorance and racist thinking about Africa and Africans. Wainaina's argument is shown to hold water by the explicitly illustrated photography book on Africa by Beckwith and Fisher (2009) entitled "*Faces of Africa*" that exhibits several modern day Africans in

African cultural regalia, some exposing the very body parts that Wainaina critiques.

Intentional ignorance about Africa and its people in the West and the world at large provides an eternal source of racist thinking on the same. Curtis Keim (2014) in his book "*Mistaking Africa*" delves into the ways in which misinformation about Africa and Africans is prevalent in America and offers much needed correction. In my own research with African refugees, the issue of negative ethnicity between African and African-American students in the public school system is an intractable problem. Due to lack of current and comprehensive information on historical and modern Africa, African-American students attack African students partly due to wrong imaginations about Africa and her peoples. In the summer of 2014, I conducted a short survey with African-American students in Alabama to determine their basic knowledge of Africa. The students had to answer ten true or false questions on Africa. Some of the most striking results were that 100% of the students who took the survey thought that some people in Africa live in trees and more than 80% thought that most Africans got their food mainly by hunting. Additionally, another 80% assumed that there are wild animals roaming everywhere in Africa. Misinformation about Africa not only affects relationships among the youth but also among adults. To that end, Kenyan artist and director, Peres Owino, has produced a documentary entitled "*Bound: Africans vs. African-Americans*" that delves into the tension and disengagement between the two groups due to ignorance on both sides about the each other's experiences in the world as peoples of African ancestry. Clearly, an update on Africa, both historical and modern, is urgently needed in the West at all levels of education as well as among the general public.

Conclusion

This paper discussed some of the historical and current racialization processes both in the West and in Africa that affect the ways in which Africa and African people are understood by themselves and others. Intentional ignorance and misinformation about historical and modern Africa in the West provides an inexhaustible source of racist thinking and action against people of African descent. Since cultural systems are socially constructed, differences among peoples do not necessarily have to be negatively interpreted. Human diversity can

be alternatively interpreted as a rich resource that is celebrated and creatively employed for the benefit of all. Hence, in order to counter racism and negative ethnicity, people of African descent have to continue their efforts to disrupt and decolonize racist discourses and knowledge production about themselves and in their relations with others. Such work is urgent and critical to the alleviation of the unnecessary human suffering experienced by peoples of African descent in our modern world.

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