

Being 'Black' in a Post-slavery, Post-Darwinian World: The Persistence of Victimage

Michael Odichi-Dan UGORJI

PhD Candidate (*Performance & Media Studies*)

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Germany.

Abstract:

Being a 'minority' in a race-divided world and being Black among that 'minority' automatically places one at the receiving end of the prejudicial hierarchy of race relations. My paper reviews the pervasive stereotypical portraiture of *Africanness* by the others, its fallacious offshoots and consequences for the burgeoning global village. Hence, drawing on a reading of Burke's *Dramatistic* concepts of *original sin* and *victimage* among other paradigms, my paper studies the Black-Other racial hierarchy, makes linkages to racist theories, slave-history, colonialism and its neo, among other factors that structure African perception in the Western media and society. It conceives this hierarchical relationship and blame-game as a self-redemptive groping to assuage own guilt by a remorse-resistant aggressor.

Is it not curious that man in his profound civilization has blurred various barriers and traversed geographical borders across continents and planets, but has consistently failed along certain human social borders? The history of the Western society, and indeed of human society, is a history replete with hierarchies and their predatory expediencies. That history could not be complete without an account of the detailed interaction of the Western world with the 'others' of its reality. So is the Western identity incomplete without explicit reference to its present diversities. However, the extent to which these diversities define that identity and shape human-human relations from within is a matter of sincerity, acknowledgements, denials, distortions or restorations. Among the hierarchies of human society, the most prolific site for tension and social disharmony remains race relations. It is on this ubiquitous site that most unresolved social dramas play out their extremities. The

'Black'-Other relationship has been constructed and moderated on this same site. Owing no apologies to anybody for being dark-skinned and markedly racially different, peoples of African descent have continually been confined to the lower rungs of the human social hierarchy. Being born racially 'Black' appears to confer an instant guilt of an 'original sin' on African peoples. This is a condition that has persisted in clear negation of the illustrious advances made in human civilization.

In his 'Dramatism' and study on social order, Kenneth Burke identifies binary moments of relationship (or *hierarchical identification*). These include; the *moment of 'mystery'* which is an ideal moment of deep communion or 'hierarchal euphoria' when we feel like we are one; and the *moment of 'guilt'* which represents 'social disrelationship' and complete alienation or rejection (Burke, 1945 & 1969; Duncan, 1962 & 1985). That ideal moment of mystery in our world marked by Burke's idea of hierarchal euphoria and which in this context means racial communion has remained elusive as it is illusive. How did the human society miss it? Who and what are the culprits in the failure to attain that elusive ideal? How can we achieve that feat of deep social communion in our racially-divided world? If ever achieved, can the racially-classified 'Blackman' ever be part of that mysteriously harmonious world? My response to these nagging questions is that we must first trace the origins of the anti-African bias; review certain attitudinal roadblocks to harmonious race relations between peoples of African descent and others; and attempt a re-imagination of the Burkean moment of 'mystery' when all races including the 'Blackman' will be able to deemphasize all differences and coexist harmoniously in deep social communion.

The 'Black' or African identity stereotyped and misrepresented as it were in the Western media and society has endured as much of an adverse history as the peoples that it represents. Beginning with the first encounter between African territories and European explorers, to the slave-trade and slavery era and on to the colonial and present times, being 'Black' has been erroneously portrayed in derogatory terms. Consequently, African populations in the homeland and in the Diaspora have suffered immeasurable indiscretions and various forms of apartheid in the hands of other races, particularly the Caucasians. This

condition has been instituted and nourished by certain dogmas and theories of racial supremacy most of which were products of expedient philosophizing. Afro-phobia, the social distancing from and abhorrence of Africans, is an unfortunate social reality that has continued to defy good reason and one that mocks the civility of our present global village. It is a condition that could be traced back to the debacle of the slave-trading and slave-holding misadventure of the last few centuries. Perhaps shocked out of their skins at meeting people of more intense complexions and a certain physical stature, the first Europeans who came in contact with West Africans did not think long before they imagined one of the most atrocious enterprises in human history; the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The discovery of the Americas by an expedition led by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the promise of cultivating agricultural produce to serve the economies of the involved European nations provided the essential impetus for slave labour and in turn slave trading (Thornton, 1998: 40-41). Thus began the Atlantic systems, the trade in human cargo at about 1502. This activity known as the *Maafa* (the Swahili word for 'Holocaust') continued until long after 1807 when the trade was officially abolished by the British parliament (Anstey, 1975: 5). Although, the initial targets of slavery were people of the Native American tribes, the natives' resistance and the slave-labour that these natives afforded could neither support nor sustain the increasing appetite of the European economy for more overseas produce (Thornton, 1998). Hence, Black African slave labour became necessary and attractive to the slave-taking merchants who in collaboration with their African accomplices raped the homeland and took away over ten million African indigenes including many who were thrown off the unbearable slave ships and made to drown helplessly in the Atlantic Ocean. The harrowing experiences of the slaves that made it alive to the 'New World' still reverberate in the tensions that have persisted in the Black-White relations in the Western world ever since.

Although Charles Darwin may not have explicitly promoted racial extermination in his theories, certain elements of his thought had inspired and escalated the xenophobic tendencies of many Caucasian people who may have misapplied them. The emergence of an evolutionary scheme that ranked the people of the world along a scale of savagery, barbarism and civilization in the nineteenth century fuelled the prevailing racist discourses

of that period. In his work, *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin had insinuated a future when the 'civilized races of man' will likely exterminate and replace the 'savage races' all over the world; associating the Caucasian to his civilized man, while associating the Negro and the Australian to the gorilla. When sociological and political theories of white racial supremacy emerged in the aftermath of Darwin's theory in the 1870s, it was only natural for them to draw their premise from his controversial ideas of human evolution (Weikart, 2004; Raymond, 2000; Claeys, 2000). In the words of Joan Gross (2003: 2) "this 'scientific' discourse served colonialism as a loyal handmaiden and enabled Europeans and Americans (the keepers of civilization) to subjugate and eliminate millions of people around the world". Hence, *Social Darwinism*, which would later degenerate into more pronounced antisocial racist policies and ideas such as *eugenics*, *imperialism*, *scientific racism*, *Fascism*, *Nazism*, and many other dangerous isms, emerged and vehemently pursued the racial supremacist agenda to the detriment of the ideals of a shared common humanity. Certain other affiliate theories such as *the Nordic theory* also emerged to justify man-to-man cruelty which stemmed from the concept of 'a pure superior race' that must subdue others in order to manifest. Of particular relevance in this discourse is the much prejudicial inhumane legislations in the United States of America which were targeted at people of African descent who had been under the yoke of slavery in that country. For instance, in Virginia prior to 1924, the determination of an individual's race had been governed by an 1882 legislation in the state which stated that for a person to be classified as mulatto, they had to have at least one-quarter (the equivalent of one grandparent) African ancestry. With the passing of the *Racial Integrity Act* of 1924 by the Virginia State Assembly, the absolute *one-drop rule* classified a person as legally "colored" (a black) if that individual had *any* African ancestry at all (Whisnant, 1983; Rothman, 2003). Other Afro-phobic legislations include the *Anti-miscegenation laws* of the United States, Apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany, etc; as well as the discriminatory *Jim-Crow laws* of the late 19th century and early 20th century United States south. These racial-segregation legislations were either informed or reinforced by Social Darwinists and proponents of *racial hygiene* such as Charles Davenport, Harry Hamilton Laughlin and Margaret Sanger who believed and propagated the idea that lighter skinned races were superior to darker skinned races (McCann, 1999: 150-4; Bruinius, 2007). In Nazi Germany, this tendency took a dangerous dimension with the Adolf Hitler-led National-Socialist movement pushing its *völkisch* and supremacist ideologies too far.

Although the primary target of the Nazi agenda was the Jew or *Geltungsjuden*, the ripple effects of the *Nuremberg Laws* also had their toll on Black-African populations. These laws implied that for a non-Aryan person including an African to have sexual intercourse with a German, it would be a matter of *Rassenschande* (racial disgrace or abomination) (Fleischhauer, 2011; Rhodes, 1976: 20). The racial supremacists could be said to have drawn further inspiration from Charles Darwin's probably-innocent science. Darwinian evolution may not have resolutely set out to encourage racial supremacy and its continued affront on Africanness, but it surely set the tone and reinforced that atrocity in profound ways. In making the above assertion, one must equally acknowledge the fact that certain advocates of 'Black supremacy' have also emerged in the past century (mostly Islamic scholars) with vexed theories of the impending extinction of an 'inferior' and 'leprous' White race, which they describe as 'part man and part beast' (Gardell, 1996; Tsoukalas 2001, pp. 23–24).

Slavery and its dehumanizing dimensions morally stifled, socially gagged and stigmatized the unborn 'Black' child in the Americas. Branded at birth and enslaved from the womb, it remained unthinkable to imagine that child being of equal humanity with the slave masters. Slave-driving and commandeering of 'Black' lives became a little more than mere economic exploitation and also served as sport among sundry other things. It was only natural for Western philosophy and social science to largely gang up with the natural sciences to justify the rather shameful excesses of their patrons in the cruel treatment of the perceived 'inferior' humans. While slavery continued to ravage African slaves in the Americas, colonialism superseded slave trade in the homeland and took its adverse toll on Africa and Africanness. Adherents of racial and cultural supremacy foisted and superimposed the 'superior culture' over the African, which was then branded barbaric, savage and diabolical. To complete that assault, the accompanying Christian religion propagated the imagery of God and Satan as representing the black-white dichotomy. When appropriated to lived experiences, everything evil and repulsive is associated with black, while everything good and desirable is associated with white. Devils became black, angels became white and the African was called black while the European was called white. Little wonder why Joseph Conrad wrote his *Heart of Darkness*, which could have been inspired by a fascination with the 'Blackman' or even by the contradictions that colonialism opened up to him. The

ruthless extraction of natural resources (Gross, 2003: 3), mass amputation of millions of African limbs and other horrors of the Congo River created by the Belgian King Leopold II who killed and maimed the natives while enlarging his economic coast remains a good instance of the colonial mindset and its repercussions on African populations. One would imagine that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was a befitting metaphor for Leopold II, the human-butcher King of Belgium. The pogroms of German South-West Africa in a bid to collect African human heads for a supremacist-induced anthropological study has just been recently revisited by Namibian tribal chiefs who visited Berlin late September 2011 to recover tens of skulls of their kith and kin for a descent burial. The case of the *Hottentot-Venus*, (Sarah Baartman), whose outstanding sexual features were publicly displayed in Britain and France from 1810-1815 and whose remains were preserved and exhibited in a French museum until 2002, is an open wound that reminds all of us of the hierarchal office allocated to the 'Blackman' in the racial pyramid. By the end of the twentieth century, African peoples had been liberated from direct colonialism, but the geographical and sociocultural relics of that domination still wreck havoc on the continent. First, the original pre-colonial nations had given way to cosmetic states comprising strange bedfellows. Ethnicities that shared little or nothing in common had been merged, while wholesome ethnic groups were dismembered and helmed together with those of conflicting cultures at the Berlin conference of 1884-85. Ever since then the ethnic rivalry, cultural intolerance and the resultant conflicts and wars that have bedevilled African advancement took shape and took off. Amazingly, all these atrocities have been explained out by pro-colonialism theorists such as Karl Kautsky, John Hobson and Immanuel Wallerstein among others, under the *accumulation theory* and the theory of *world systems*.

In the face of the stigmatization and stereotyping of African images which have persisted in contemporary Western media, it becomes unimaginable that African or 'Black' perception in the Western world could ever become positive. There appears to be an orchestrated and concerted effort to misrepresent, misinform and 'disinform' the unsuspecting world outside of Africa about the continent and its realities. Only the bizarre; horrors of wars, poverty and hunger seem to appeal to media producers and managers whose gaze on Africa permanently tilts to the grotesque and ridiculously spectacular. Despite the fact that African

political rulers have summarily let down their peoples, there has been overemphasis of the mainstream media on those stories and plotlines that perpetually cast the African stereotypes on the Alps. A Rwanda or Somalia is conveniently captioned 'genocide in Africa' or 'famine and hunger in Africa' respectively, whereas a Bosnia-Herzegovina is what it is and never totalized as 'genocide in Europe'. Whose purpose does this reductionism (of Africa) serve? Positive stories about Africa and its peoples seem to be largely ignored and when they are eventually narrated, they come with certain romanticized perspectives; such as would mask the good in them and finally reinforce long-held racial prejudice. Hence, the reinforcement of racial hierarchy is therefore boosted in the minds of people with a very narrow but horrifying gaze on Africa when all they are fed with is only the gory versions of the story.

The existence of hierarchy inadvertently presupposes social disorder. As Joseph Gusfield (1990: 337) puts it, "If there is hierarchy and social order, there is also the rejection of order and consequent guilt". Beyond race and ethnicity, hierarchies can also manifest in gender and other social spheres. In any case they violate order and instil social disrelationship or rejection which indicates the need to expiate that Burkean guilt. The foundation of Burke's society could be described as a dynamic of social *drama* indicating *conflict*; which indicates *hierarchy*, then *guilt*; and if *guilt*, then *redemption*; if *redemption*, then there is *victimage* (Gusfield, 1990: 337). *Victimage*, a manifestation of *scapegoatism*, is the means by which a group cleanses itself of tribal or "inherited guilt". According to Duncan (1962: 121-2) Burke's *hierarchal psychosis* can be said to have taken place "when the enactment of hierarchy becomes so dogmatic and the stages of development so rigid that doubt, question, or creation of new hierarchies are no longer possible, and, indeed, are *punishable*". Therefore when we approach others with an attitude of mental reservation or intellectual dishonesty, when we confer an 'original sin' on people based on race or other primordial paradigms, we are undeniably enacting that psychotic condition. Similarly, when one encounters persons of presumed inferior status demonstrating capacities that surpass theirs by their own standards, they could drift into *hierarchal embarrassment*.

With all the grouses, manipulations, defences and self-righteousness; how then can we ever attain that cathartic Burkean 'mystery' of deep communion between Black and other peoples? Are we perpetually confined to the other extreme (that of 'guilt')? Is it what Burke calls *hierarchal embarrassment* that has kept us bound to that 'guilt'? If a person is still considered 'Black' because he has one drop of African blood in him, even when he is 99% White, is the classifying society suffering a form of Burke's *hierarchal psychosis*? Is Barack Obama Black, White or simply American? Born 50% White, 50% Black and raised almost 100% White; is the American president simply an American or African-American? Is someone sitting on a self-appointed high hierarchal office embarrassed to accept certain realities? If being born racially 'Black' confers an 'original sin' on peoples of African origin; is the world attaining its *redemption* by sacrificing this 'perfect victim'? Isn't this *victimage* adding to the racial distress, distrust, angst, hatred, hypocrisy, strife and tension currently bedevilling our global village? Why do we have this persistent irresolvable social drama of racial bias? I think it is because *victimage* has persisted.

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