

“Black” or “African American”: What’s In a Name?

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Within the United States the African American¹ community has again reverted to the problem of ethnic identity and the question, "Who are we--'Blacks' or 'African Americans'?" is now being debated. It will be recalled that a similar debate was carried on in the 1960s, and the history of this identity question extends to the 1920s and beyond.

In the 1890s, Booker T. Washington advanced the ethnic identity debate when he impressed upon blacks the importance of race consciousness. Following the death of Booker T. Washington in 1915, in the 1920s black people throughout the African Diaspora witnessed a rekindling of interest in embracing their ethnic heritage. The Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey is credited with having stimulated this new sense of racial identity, placing a positive value on "blackness" and the African heritage generally.

Marcus Garvey foreshadowed the teachings of the Trinidadian-born political activist Stokely Carmichael. In 1966 Carmichael popularized the slogan "Black Power," repudiated "Negro," and in its stead insisted on the appellation "Black." Carmichael, who many regarded as the father of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, has now adopted for himself the personal name Kwame Toure and has repudiated "Black" in favor of "African American." Toure and others argue that "African American" is preferable to any other term denoting ethnic identity because "African American" heightens among people of the African Diaspora the sense of affinity between themselves and the people on the continent of Africa. Thus, African Americans have a history of constant name shifting, along with

its underlying ethnic identity shifting and the concomitant crises, precipitated in part by the ever-recurring social processes. On certain occasions, the crises are spin-offs from the assertions and counter-assertions arising out of the dynamics of black and white relations. On other occasions, as will be seen, such recurring social processes, that include the assertions/counter-assertions, impeded ethnic remolding, and its concomitant name changing.

The object of this paper is not to debate the merits or demerits of "Black" or "African American." Rather, I will be concerned with the following: (1) examining the ways a people ascribe meaning to the above terms, and (2) attempting to shed light on the underlying social dynamics that tend to precipitate or impede the ethnic changes and transformations that a people constantly undergo. In doing so I will draw on the works of the African American philosopher Alain Locke (1886-1954). Specific attention will be devoted to Locke's "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture" (1924), where he examined race within the social context. The application of his notion of "social race" to the "Black or African American" controversy will enable us to shed some light on this matter. To get a clearer picture, however, of the issue, one needs to turn to the philosophy of language, certain results of which will complement Alain Locke's analysis of race, which he conducted by focusing on cultural matters almost to the exclusion of language. One of his Harvard classmates, however, C. I. Lewis, made great contributions to the philosophy of language and epistemology and Lewis's works, it should be noted, were inspired by the views of Josiah Royce. In the latter part of this paper I will consider Lewis's view of linguistic meanings to shed greater light on the meaning of "Black" and "African American." In this connection I will also allude to one of the teachers of both Lewis and Locke, namely Royce, whose view of interpretative meaning will be employed to supplement the meaning of "Black" or "African American."

At the turn of the century, it was quite common for anthropologists to support a biological theory of race, according to which races were said to be endowed with certain fixed tendencies and mental capacities. Employing an evolutionist hypothesis, many authorities held that the European race, because of its "superior" brain capacity, had advanced beyond the African and other non-European races. The assumption was widely held that race was the determining factor of culture; that the Europeans who constituted the most advanced race had, by virtue of evolution, achieved an advantageous position of power

and that such a position was fixed by nature, since race itself was a fixed, unalterable entity.

Alain Locke's "The Concept of Race" was directed against the above position. Denying that race had anything to do with biological, hereditary tendencies, Locke devoted much attention demonstrating that race is to be understood in terms of social dynamics, or culture, or ethnicity, the existence through which a people achieve their identity. Instead of speaking of race, Locke spoke of cultural group or ethnic group; and, if one is to persist, Locke maintained, in employing the notion "race" it is to be understood only in the social or cultural sense.

Locke was anxious to point out that cultures are constantly undergoing transformations, from which it follows that an ethnic group is also constantly undergoing transformations. Hence, the ethnicity of blacks, or any other ethnic group, is not fixed. Ethnicity here might be regarded as a perpetual process, always in the state of becoming. But it should be noted that the process of becoming is not something over which members of the ethnic group have no control. In fact, Locke identified certain factors as keys in the process of culture or ethnicity making. Among these Locke regarded what he called *stressed values*, the factors which constitute the dynamics of culture and ethnicity. By "stressed values" he meant the factors in the culture--objects, events, or symbols--that are highly emphasized by members of the culture. The stressed values that the group entertains are the ones that motivate the group to take actions and assume attitudes that contribute to the preservation of the stressed value, and of the culture generally, if the stressed values are regarded by the group in question in a positive light. Or, Locke suggested that the such stressed values may motivate the group to take actions to route the values in question, if they are regarded in a negative light. So these stressed values are the determining factor in the formation of culture or ethnicity. Thus, the stressed values are in part the elements that constitute the ethnicity of a people. They are responsible for relative stability as well as the changes that an ethnic group undergoes. An ethnic group harbors stressed values that allow it to resist certain changes that may arise internally or are introduced externally by contacts with other cultures. Among those stressed values, according to Locke, is the factor of race itself:

Race accounts for a great many of the specific elements of the cultural heredity, and the sense of race may itself be regarded as one of the operative factors in culture since it determines the stressed values which become

the conscious symbols and tradition of the culture. Stressed values are themselves factors in the process of cultural making, and account primarily for the persistence and resistance of culture-traits.²

This attempt to explain the social aspects of race has almost forced Locke into a paradoxical position: on the one hand, culture is that which determined race or ethnicity; on the other, inasmuch as race or ethnicity is a stressed value, it determines culture. So ethnicity is a factor contributing to its own social construction. This nearly amounts to saying that something is its own cause; or that something is at the same time and in the same respect both cause and effect.

Thus, in view of the fact that race enjoys the process of self-creation through the dynamics of culture, it should come as no surprise that black Americans, as any other ethnic group, especially those of minority status, intermittently seek to examine their ethnic identity. Such examinations occasionally, but not inevitably, result in the changing of their ethnic group name. A name is obviously a social convention. Names are not fixed only to a particular ethnic group. Throughout history the Jews have been called by various names, including "Hebrews," "Israelites," "Judeans" and "Jews" in that historical order.

Earlier in the history of the U.S., whites forced blacks to assume a negative attitude towards Africa, and this might explain in part why there was resistance to the adoption of "African American." But obviously the stressed values upon which the above attitude rested, together with the ethnic name which the attitude expresses, are not fixed. As has been noted all along, ethnic groups occasionally change their cultures. Locke clearly stated: "Culture is not related functionally to definite groups or races, but varies independently. Races change their culture on many historic occasions and various culture advances are made independently by different racial stocks."³ The stressed values, a shifting in the stressed values, as was noted, are the factors that bring about culture changes, including name changes, since race is a symbol constituting the "racing of the races." Prior to the 1920s "Negro" which was forced upon blacks by Europeans, was among the stressed negative values, forced upon black culture. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, following the death of Booker T. Washington, witnessed an effort on the part of blacks to define themselves, and "New Negro" was introduced. Following the brief Renaissance era, until the mid-1930s, there was the return to "Negro." Then came the 1960s and "Black" became the stressed value, reversing the old attitude, imposed by whites,

that associated blackness with evil. Now we are in the 1990s and "African American" is becoming more widely acceptable.

It is too early to identify the underlying social factors that are motivating this shifting in stressed values, inspiring elements of the black community to seek to adopt "African American." A perceptive observer can at once discern that with the 1984 and 1988 presidential elections, where the African American Jesse Jackson participated in a serious struggle for the highest political office of the land, African Americans are experiencing a new political awakening. Then within the past decade or so world attention has focused on the South African racial crises. Such crises coupled with other factors may be needed to induce a paradigm shift as Thomas Kuhn would have us believe. Seen from another perspective, the world is beginning to celebrate the eve of the new century, the 21st century. That factor together with certain crises within the culture, may be a sufficient condition to prompt blacks, as an ethnic minority, to re-examine their ethnic destiny. It may be that their contemplating their collective future--thinking about the next century--has led them to return in their imagination to their collective past: Africa, including South Africa's on-going crises. Such factors may have led members of the black community to raise the inevitable question, "Who are we, 'Blacks' or 'African Americans'?"

Here we may pause to consider why certain names ascribed to or adopted by blacks "catch-on" and become widely accepted by the larger community and certain names enjoy only a brief career. "New Negro" was employed mostly among black intellectuals and it survived for only about a decade (1920s-1930s). The term "Colored" in North America seems to parallel the history of the term "Negro," both of which were forced upon blacks by whites. W. E. B. DuBois and a few other black intellectuals would often employ "Negro," "Colored," and "Black" interchangeably. As progressive as DuBois was in his thinking, he apparently did not see the need to reject "Negro" and replace it with "Black" or "African American." Marcus Garvey exalted the virtues associated with blackness, but he shifted back and forth between "Black" and "Negro," and rarely did he use "African American." Apparently, Alain Locke found "Negro" acceptable, and he embraced "New Negro." Like Garvey and DuBois, Locke constantly impressed upon blacks the need to identify with their African heritage, but rarely, if ever, did Locke employ "African American." What psychological or sociological factors blocked these African American leaders from making this conceptual shift? It took a Stokely Carmichael

to bring about this total shift, conceptually and psychologically, away from "Negro" to "Black." But, it is interesting to note in passing that Carmichael did not in the 1960s move on to make the connection that he now makes with African culture and insist on the adoption of "African American."

Now we may pause to consider the nature of meanings connected with the employment of such terms as "Black" or "African American." Certain results that C. I. Lewis achieved may be useful here. In his *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* he distinguished between two types of meanings: linguistic meaning and sense meaning.⁴ The former has to do with the meaning assigned to words through our syntactic convention. The linguistic meaning of "car," for example, is discursively exhibited by the meaning we ascribe to "automobile" and "vehicle," by which it is meant a machine used mainly for transporting human beings. One could substitute "vehicle," or "automobile" in a sentence that contained "car" and in doing so would not alter the meaning of the sentence that contained "car"--that is what Lewis had in mind by linguistic meaning.

A question worth posing is what is the linguistic meaning of "Negro," "colored," "Black," Afro-American," or "African American." But, we will not attempt to decide that here. For our purpose, the most illuminating notion has to do with what Lewis called "sense meaning." By "sense meaning" Lewis had in mind the Kantian schema, a condition or modality of the mind, in according to which order, and meaningfulness is imposed upon experience. Lewis, of course, had a greater interest in sense meaning than linguistic meaning, as the former was the basis for philosophy of science, logic, and epistemology, and for the way we make sense out of our experience in general. Sense meaning is deeper than and independent of the conventional usage of language, of linguistic meaning. Now, we might be in a position to respond to the question as to why DuBois, Garvey and others failed to make the shift to "African American." It may be that the sense meaning of "African American" was not established by the culture, at that time.

Now the question naturally arises, what is the sense meaning of "Black" or "African American"? Before we can answer this, we need to note the difference between Kant's and Lewis's usage of the above schema, by which sense meaning is derived. Kant held that such schema was an *a priori*, formal condition of knowledge. The schema does not have its origin in experience, and is not conditioned by experience or culture. Lewis did not deny this *a priori* nature of the schema; but,

unlike Kant, Lewis held that the source of all *a priori* knowledge was derived from experience, that is, shaped by the culture of which one is a part. How does the above schema relate to the "Black" or "African American" debate? It relates in the following ways. "Black" or "African American" may be regarded as a modality of the mind, as constitutive of the schema, culturally determined but which, nevertheless, is an *a priori* condition, through which experience became organized, rendered meaningful. "Black" or "African American" is a rule or concept that prescribes the manner in which black people value, interpret and impose meaning on their culture or ethnicity. So, if "Black" or "African American" is an *a priori* concept, constitutive of the schema, and if the schema is culturally determined, molded in part by what Alain Locke called the stressed values, then it follows that the sense meaning that black people ascribe to "Black" or "African American" would differ from, and no doubt conflict with, the sense meaning that white Americans would attach to the above names. The reason is that the ethnicity or culture of whites differs from that of blacks, so much so that the difference in itself throws light on the reasons of the controversy in the first place. Blacks are repudiating the names and experiences that whites forced upon them. White American culture owes its origins to a society of slave owners; black culture owes its origins to a society of slaves and descendants of slaves. Therein lies a major difference; from which it follows that blacks and whites ascribe different sense meanings to "Black" and "African American." Many whites nowadays are perhaps indifferent to the whole controversy and thus this element of their schema is without content. Or, the modality of "Black" or "African American" insofar as it is included in the schema of the larger society, may and often does elicit interpretations that are at odds with the larger element of the black community. Often the larger society tends to be divided within itself about its interpretations of the black experience.

Besides, the black community, as most other ethnic groups, is a composite entity, with diverse cultural strains and conflicting attitudes, conflicting stressed values. In the 1960s, Martin L. King, Jr. advocated nonviolence, and the Black Panthers advocated violence, for example. Today, while certain blacks, as was noted, are advocating the adoption of "African American," the NAACP includes "Colored People" in its organization's name. Similarly, the United Negro College Fund still includes, "Negro" in its organization's name. This in itself is evident of the self-contradictory attitude within the black

community on this name or ethnic identity question. Apparently, these various elements of the black community are assigning interpretations to the above names that are at odds with the interpretations assigned by the larger black community. It, therefore, follows that the black community within itself is not in total agreement as to what sort of interpretations should be assigned to terms signifying their ethnicity. A more adequate explanation of this problem of interpretation leads us to a closer examination of Royce's view of interpretation.⁵

Royce's theory of interpretation was inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce's view which the latter discovered through the analysis of logic and epistemology. Peirce called this view of interpretation the "Doctrine of Signs." Royce broadened Peirce's theory to include metaphysics and the social realm. Words, deeds, objects, events--that is, every element of experience--in Peirce's view, is to be regarded as a sign requiring interpretations, by which the meaning of the item in question is established. Royce introduced the metaphor "sign-post." Items of the universe present themselves as sign-posts, pointing the way for the wayfarer traversing unfamiliar terrain to establish bearings. To make sense of the sign-posts, the wayfarer has to interpret the sign-posts, an adequate interpretation of which requires a community of interpreters. If Peirce held that the pragmatic meaning of beliefs are established through a community of inquirers, Royce held that meaning is established through a community of interpreters. It does not require much to extend Royce's view to the "Black" or "African American" debate. "New Negro," "Black," "Afro-American," or "African American" may be regarded as sign-posts that point the way for wayfarers, especially the African American wayfarers, as they beat paths in the fulfillment of their destiny. The sign-posts demand re-interpretations by each generation of wayfarers, because the social reality, the ethnicity within which the sign-posts are grounded, the stressed values, are constantly undergoing transformations. Sense meaning, of which C. I. Lewis speaks, in spite of its limitations,⁶ provides a relative degree of permanence to the knowledge bases of a given culture; yet, interpretations and re-interpretations of the sign-posts are needed in order to grasp the significance of the broadest ranges of experience that involves both permanence and changes, eternity and time. These two modes of reality, eternity and time are the ultimate sign-posts around which a people, any people, work out their individual and collective destinies. To interpret these sign-posts, including the ultimate ones, it is imperative

that blacks constantly interpret their ethnic experiences which flow from the stressed values, from which it follows that members of the black community have constantly to reinterpret the names by which they wish to answer in response to that cosmic roll-call.

Notes

¹In this paper I employ "Black" and African American" interchangeably.

²Alain Locke, "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture," *Howard Review* 1 (June 1924): 290-299.

³Alain Locke and Bernhard J. Stern, eds., *When People Meet: A Study of Race and Culture Contacts* (New York: Committee on Workshops, progressive Education Association, 1942), 3-11.

⁴C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1946); also cited in Barbara MacKinnon, ed., *American Philosophy: A Historical Anthology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1985), 536-540.

⁵John K. Roth, ed., *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971), 388-402.

⁶Although I have been suggesting that sense meaning will enable us to get a handle on the name controversy, Henri Bergson has brought to our attention the inadequacy of intellectual knowledge which hinges on sense meaning whose foundation involves concepts and analysis. The problem with concepts, in Bergson's view, is that it falsifies reality by denying the dynamic, progressive unfolding of reality. If Bergson's position is applied to the above discussion, and if Bergson is right, and I think that he is, then we are forced to admit that sense meaning of which Lewis speaks, harbors certain difficulties and limitations, the ramifications of which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Critique

Aside from examining the ways people ascribe meaning to the terms "Black" and "African-American" and possible